

City of Alexandria Playspace Policy
Last updated: September 4, 2013

Implementation Plan
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Implementation Plan

A. Introduction

The Departments of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (RPCA), Transportation and Environmental Services (T&ES), and Planning and Zoning (P&Z), and Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), will undertake the actions necessary to incorporate the Playspace Policy into departmental planning and practice and to achieve the goals of the policy.

The Playspace Policy's implementation will provide a comprehensive, cross-departmental approach to improving playspace quality, access, and distribution in the short and long term.

Within one year of policy approval, progress will be reported to City Council by the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) recommended for establishment.

In addition these efforts will be supported by the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria.

B. Implementation Priorities and Flexibility

Existing playspace access and quality varies for children in different areas of the City and for children of different age-groups. Policy implementation should place priority on areas of the City where significant numbers of children and youth reside, but currently have limited and/or low-quality playspace or have significant barriers to accessing playspaces. Priority should also be placed on addressing the playspace needs of children within age groups that are currently underserved.

The policy implementation plan can be supplemented with more specific guidance to address particular playspace needs and priorities over time.

C. Roles and Responsibilities of City Departments

All Departments will identify how to best incorporate the improvement of playspace quality, access, and distribution in existing and future master plan documents, development of public facilities, strategic planning processes, negotiations with relevant stakeholders, and in developing departmental expertise and training, among other areas of work.

The Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities will serve as the lead implementing agency for improving playspace quality, access, and distribution on City

parks. **The Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities** shall accomplish the following specific actions in implementing the policy:

- Amend existing strategic plans and master plans, as well as existing and future park planning policy and documents, to reflect the guidance outlined in this Playspace Policy, namely the improvement of playspace quality, access, and distribution.
- Ensure that internal processes consider equipment and play opportunities for children and youth of all ages in the design of new playspaces and in the enhancement and renovation of existing playspaces.
- Ensure the following components are considered when planning for new playspaces and/or enhancing and renovating existing play areas:
 - Access: Proximity of playspaces to the homes of children and youth, following guidelines for reasonable proximity based on children’s ages.
 - Distribution: Equitable distribution of playspaces across the City, with a priority on areas in the City that are currently underserved; and
 - Quality: Accommodations at playspaces that reflect needs of playspace users, i.e. a playspace for children ages 2-5 should also include caregiver accommodations.
- Create micro-level (neighborhood) playspace plans for underserved areas, including play opportunities for children and youth across each age-group (2-5 years, 5-12 years, and teens).

Plans could include enhancing existing playspaces within the area that are intended for one age group to also accommodate children of other ages; adding play elements to existing pocket parks; working with T&ES to find creative solutions to significant barriers to playspace access; and creative use of small spaces such as non-functioning alleyways, rights of way, and other land as parkland.

- Along with P&Z, seek to identify and acquire appropriate land, in accordance with existing policy and procedures, for future City playspaces.
- Facilitate communication and collaboration between P&Z, T&ES, and ACPS in planning for and determining location, design, access to, and distribution of playspaces.
- Participate and provide leadership for the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT), incorporate the Team’s input into departmental planning and other relevant processes, and convene the group.
- Seek grant funding and additional opportunities to promote play and physical activity for children and youth.

The Department of Planning and Zoning will serve as the lead agency, in collaboration with RPCA, in advancing the playspace needs of children and youth in private development and re-development plans and negotiations. In adherence to the Playspace Policy, **the Department of Planning and Zoning shall:**

- Develop and implement processes to consider playspaces in its land use planning processes, thereby improving playspace access and distribution.
 - Playspaces are to be considered for inclusion in all new City funded projects and in the re-development of existing built environments, unless a playspace is specifically deemed as an inappropriate component of a particular environment.
 - Appropriateness of including playspace in development should be based on guidelines established by the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT), and in coordination with P&Z, that take into consideration demographic projections and factors, such as household and family size expected to fill housing.
- Along with RPCA, seek to identify and acquire appropriate land for parks or open space that include playspaces.
- Collaborate with RPCA and T&ES to identify potential areas for playspaces on existing City properties such as rights of way, non-functioning alleyways, and parkland.
- Participate, through at least one staff representative, on the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) and incorporate the Team's input as appropriate on playspace quality, distribution and access.

The Department of Transportation and Environmental Services will:

- Implement recommendations in the Pedestrian and Bicycle Mobility Plan, with an emphasis on bicycle and pedestrian connections to schools, parks, and playspaces.
- Coordinate with RPCA to plan for and provide safe pedestrian routes to new and existing playspaces, especially for playspaces designed for children ages 2-5, who rely heavily on pedestrian access.
- Coordinate with P&Z to ensure the effective planning and design of safe routes to playspaces in new developments and re-developments.
- Participate, through at least one staff representative, on the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT), and incorporate the Group's input into relevant departmental processes.

D. Roles and Responsibilities of the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, ACOAN and Project Play:

- Assist RPCA in developing and implementing a strategy to recruit members of the Playspace Technical Advisory Team.
- Assist RPCA in developing a workplan for the first year of PTAT's operations, and assist in the facilitation of PTAT meetings.
- Identify and recruit a subject matter expert who can train members of the PTAT on best practices related to playspaces.
- Provide support to multi-family property owners regarding the age-appropriate and developmentally optimal design of playspaces for young children, in an effort to improve playspace quality on private land.
- Participate and provide leadership for the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) through at least one staff or ACOAN representative.
- Assist in seeking grant funding and additional opportunities to promote play and physical activity for children and youth-

E. Role and Responsibility of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS)

ACPS is an important partner in providing playspaces to youth in Alexandria, as substantial areas of available playspaces are on property owned or managed by ACPS, and are used by ACPS exclusively during school hours. Coordination with ACPS could potentially improve access to playspace for children in the City and therefore greatly impact the effectiveness of the Playspace Policy.

In order to align with the goals of the Playspace Policy, ACPS is encouraged to seek ways to provide public access to a portion of playspaces located at elementary schools on future school sites, following the example of the future Jefferson Houston site. In addition, planning for future elementary school sites should include consideration for playspaces for children ages 2-5 and 5-12, as an increasing number of elementary schools are serving preschool students.

F. Public Input

Finally, each department involved in the Playspace Policy should build in methods to seek and incorporate public comment in the planning phase of playspace design, enhancement, and/or destruction. Special consideration should be given to those residents who are directly affected by proposed playspaces and/or playspace changes.

Implementation Plan APPENDIX I

Recommendations for Enacting the Playspace Policy

I. Establishing the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT)

The Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) would be charged with providing strategic and technical guidance and advice to RPCA and P&Z on the quality, access and distribution of playspaces in Alexandria. The first goal of the PTAT would be to support the implementation of the Playspace Policy by developing more detailed guidelines to support greater quality, access and distribution of playspaces.

The PTAT would also provide guidance and advice on planning for diverse and creative playspaces and Cityscapes across the City, working with RPCA, T&ES, P&Z and other community partners to implement a comprehensive approach to playspace design, maintenance, renovation, access, and distribution. This could include advising on outdoor parks and/or playspaces, natural landscapes, pop-up playgrounds, indoor spaces and other sites that include, or could include, elements intended for children and youth to play.

The Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) would be a voluntary body representing a joint effort among City departments involved in the implementation of the Playspace Policy, including P&Z, RPCA, and T&ES, as well as collaborating partners. ACPS would also be encouraged to provide a staff representative to the group. Leadership and convening roles will be determined by the PTAT once convened. The PTAT would meet on a quarterly basis or as needed.

In addition to City staff, the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) should include a broad spectrum of play and/or playspace experts. This may include representatives from the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network, Project Play, residents from the three Alexandria planning districts, members from relevant Alexandria boards and commissions, as well as a member with expertise in arts, recreation, and access and play for children with disabilities among others. The RPCA and ACOAN will take leadership in identifying and recruiting expert members to the team and providing necessary training to group members about the elements of quality play and quality playgrounds.

The PTAT would work with participating departmental staff to develop annual goals and work plan objectives. Thereafter the PTAT would serve as a technical resource group to departments and partners involved in the provision of playspaces. The Team would annually report to City Council on progress on achieving the policy's goals.

Through their departmental representatives, RPCA, T&ES, P&Z, and other participating City departments, should invite the PTAT to provide feedback on plans and projects in order to implement and enable a more comprehensive vision for play.

II. Creating Incentives for Private Development and Maintenance of Playspaces

Greater access to playspaces for children and youth throughout the City is likely only through increased provision of playspaces by private multi-family property owners and developers. It is imperative that the City engage with these stakeholders to build and maintain high-quality playspaces if goals for playspace access and equitable distribution are to be achieved.

Development negotiations and agreements, as well as requests for zoning changes, provide opportunities for the City to offer incentives to these private stakeholders to develop and maintain playspaces. The City can look to the following suggestions when considering potential incentives:

- a. Expanding public access easements on private property to include the construction and/or availability of publicly accessible playspaces.
- b. Negotiating higher FAR for developers who include high-quality publicly accessible playspaces to their development plans.
- c. Enhance/continue DSUP requirements in conjunction with open space requirements to include certain types of qualifying playspace, such as natural play elements (boulders, tree stumps, and berms) in new developments and re-development likely to house young children.

III. Leveraging Existing Funds and Seeking Additional Sources of Revenue

In order to achieve the desired outputs and outcomes of the Playspace Policy, the City will need to increase resources to playspaces for children and youth.

To aid in this effort, RPCA could identify methods to leverage existing funding streams for the development of new playspaces and identify new or unique funding streams from non-traditional sources (e.g., public-private partnerships, grants, playground fund, etc)

Funding for the purposes expressed in the Playspace Policy could come from a variety of sources, including:

- a. Allocating revenues for RPCA from the City's Capital Improvements Program to playspaces and unstructured recreation.
- b. An expansion of the continuing program for rehabilitation of recreation and parks facilities, within the CIP, to include the development of new playspaces in areas of need.
- c. Leveraging external partnerships with partners and foundations, to be used for the purpose of developing and enhancing playspace.

IV. Encouraging Additional Opportunities to Enhance Play

Partnerships with Non-profit and Community Organizations

There are many organizations in Alexandria that can be leveraged to enhance play, in addition to City resources and potentially private development. Several non-profits and coalitions in the City include the promotion of physical activity and healthy lifestyles as part of their core mission. Still others are focused on the well-being and healthy development of young children and on the accessibility of recreational outlets for children with disabilities.

These organizations and coalitions can be seen as natural partners in promoting play and playspace for young children. They often have access to grant funding s as well as staff, expertise, and volunteer resources.

- The Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network (ACOAN), a workgroup of the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, received grant funding from Kaiser Permanente to conduct a Citywide assessment of playspaces for young children. The 2012 Playspace Assessment is a powerful tool for understanding deficiencies in playspace quality and distribution in the City, as well as areas of strength. ACOAN has also conducted parent and child care provider focus groups regarding perceptions of playspaces in the City and a Photovoice project to document the key elements that families value in a playspace and to evaluate the status of playspaces in the City through the perspective of caregivers. Currently, ACOAN and Project Play are implementing recommendations from the 2012 Playspace Assessment. In collaboration with ACOAN and ACTion Alexandria, the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority (ARHA) received substantial financial and volunteer assistance from KaBOOM!, a national organization that supports and funds high-quality playspaces, to build a playspace on one ARHA site. ACOAN and ACTion Alexandria also sponsored a Spruce Up Contest where that benefitted three City playspaces and one ACPS playspace.
- ACOAN also recently awarded funds to improve two playspaces in two apartment complexes, and received funding to improve two ACPS schoolyards to make them more attractive places for children to play.
- The establishment of a Playspace Fund/Foundation to collect contributions for installation of new playspaces, and maintenance of playspaces.

Continued partnership with ACOAN, ACTion Alexandria, KaBOOM!, and other organizations can have a significant impact on playspace quality and access in Alexandria.

Creating Demonstration Playspaces

To provide healthy playspaces for children and youth in the City, it is recommended that a program be established for the City to develop three exemplary playspaces in different parts of Alexandria. These demonstration playspaces would be examples of optimal playspaces for children and youth and could serve as laboratories for exploration of design ideas for development of other playspaces throughout the City.

The design and development of these three playspaces could be undertaken through a well-publicized competition or other process that invites a variety of firms and designers to compete for recognition in the City.

Implementation Plan APPENDIX II

Best Practices in Creating High-Quality Playspaces

Not all playspaces are created equal. Researchers agree that when evaluating children's environments the best approach is to look at the environment's ability to support the development of the whole child.

Physically active play has a direct link to healthy growth, but play has the innate potential to improve all aspects of children's well-being: physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. It is important for each of these "domains" to be addressed in the places where children play. This requires a play environment with a good mix of activities and features that support children's intellectual, social, and physical development, as well as exposure to nature.

These components provide a great platform for enhancing children's health and learning, along with their connectedness to nature and to other children and adults. Individual play activities on a playground can support one or more developmental domains, depending on the quality of the play structure or the natural features found in the environment.

Increasingly, research and best practices regarding play for young children have noted that optimal playspaces include features and elements that address five domains of play:

1. **Physical** – The playspace should offer opportunities for physical activity appropriate for young children. Active physical play has a positive effect on children's physical development and coordination and helps prevent obesity. Examples include climbing, crawling, walking, running, sliding, climbing through, throwing, skipping, hopping, jumping on/off, lifting, and balancing. Vestibular stimulation that trains the sense of balance is experienced in activities like rolling, swinging, rocking, sliding, twisting, turning, and swaying. Pathways and wheeled toys offer opportunities to move at different speeds. Play structures offer the opportunity to climb up, down, through, and over and to experiment with large motor skills.
2. **Intellectual** – The playspace should offer appropriate opportunities for intellectual development, including language skills, problem solving, perspective taking, memory, and creativity. Loose materials, moveable objects, and props stimulate imagination, discovery, and imaginative play. A sand play area is great for constructive play. Navigating a climbing structure or exploring the topography of a multipurpose, open grassy area develops spatial understanding. Age-appropriate risk and challenge are important elements in an intellectually stimulating environment for young children.
3. **Social** – Play has shown to contribute to the development of social skills such as taking turns, collaborating, and following rules, as well as empathy, self-regulation, impulse control, and motivation. Outdoor environments designed with

social activities in mind for child- child interactions and adult-child interactions include quiet spaces for both solitary and parallel play. Small-group play and larger-group play can occur on decks, stages, and sitting and gathering places. Pretend play features include playhouses and other imaginative props or natural objects.

4. **Natural** – Including elements from the Natural Domain provides opportunities for children to be in physical contact with the natural environment. Nontoxic garden plants, hedges, bushes, enclosures, raised-bed gardens and planters, ground covers, multipurpose lawns, hills, and natural objects like logs, leaves, sticks, water, and sand all contribute to this domain.
5. **Free play** – A Free Play area consists of an open space that offer opportunities for lots of movements and social interaction in unstructured play activities, i.e., open areas with appropriate surfacing for larger group play, running, games, and dramatic play.

In implementing the Playspace Policy, the City and private partners should strive toward the goal of incorporating all five elements of play when designing, building, enhancing and maintaining places for young children to play.

