

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: OCTOBER 11, 2013

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES B. SPENGLER, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION,
PARKS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

DOCKET TITLE:

REQUEST TO ADOPT A PLAYSPLACE POLICY FOR THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA.
STAFF: DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION, PARKS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

ISSUE: Public Hearing and consideration of a request to adopt a Playspace Policy for the City of Alexandria

OCTOBER 1, 2013 PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION: On a motion by Vice Chair Dunn, seconded by Commissioner Lyman, the Planning Commission voted to recommend adoption of the public Playspace Policy. The motion carried on a vote of 7 to 0.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council:

- (1) Receive and review the proposed Playspace Policy (Attachments 1); and approve adoption;
- (2) Direct staff to proceed with the Playspace Policy Implementation Plan.

BACKGROUND: In the last five years, the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria and the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network (A-COAN) have undertaken several initiatives to encourage healthy eating and active living in order to address the rising problem of childhood obesity. Some of these initiatives include a focus on increasing access to health foods through gardening, pre-school programming and education, breastfeeding promotion, and an investigation of Alexandria's food system. In addition, in 2010, Alexandria City Council passed a Healthy Foods Resolution that emphasized the importance of increasing access to healthy foods for all City residents.

According to 2010 U.S. Census data, children age five years and under make up 8.1% of Alexandria's population; a 23% increase compared to 2000 U.S. Census data. Alexandria's youth population growth rate is now more than twice that of the total population. Supporting healthy and active lifestyles at an early age is one approach to prevent childhood obesity.

Play and playspaces are vital to child development and health. In 2012, the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria and A-COAN released the Alexandria Playspace Assessment, funded by a Kaiser Healthy Eating Active Living grant. The purpose of the playspace study was to assess the current condition of playspaces in Alexandria, and gain insight on how access and socio-cultural influences may impact their use. An inventory of over 80 public and semi-public playspaces under public and/or private ownership were identified and evaluated. Focus group sessions and a photo voice project provided candid feedback on playspaces from parents, child care providers and other service providers including City agencies. The study made three key recommendations:

- Improve the quality of playspaces,
- Increase the quantity of playspaces and ensure they are well distributed, and
- Improve awareness of the importance of play, the general understanding of where to take children to play, and how they can gain the most benefit from playing.

Project Play, a committee of A-COAN, was formed in 2012 to mobilize the community to improve play in Alexandria. Project Play has been advocating play by awarding grants, sponsoring play events, and assisting in the development of the Playspace Policy.

DISCUSSION: Currently, the City is lacking a unifying document specifically addressing the unique needs, importance, and benefits of playspaces. The Playspace Policy is an innovative approach affirming the City's commitment to improving the health and development of Alexandria children through play and playspaces.

The goal of the Playspace Policy is to provide high-quality and accessible playspaces for all youth and families in Alexandria. The policy brings to the forefront consideration of playspaces into relevant City policy and planning processes. The City-wide policy enables a strategic and collaborative approach and seeks to engage City departments and partners that need to be involved: the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, Planning and Zoning, Transportation and Environmental Services, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), community partners (such as A-COAN, Project Play, and ACT), and private multi-family property owners and developers.

The desired outcomes of the policy include an increase in quality, improvement in distribution to areas of need, and improved access to playspaces. Improved play opportunities are intended to result in an increase in the number of children using playspaces, and a decrease in the rate of overweight children.

The implementation plan provides a general framework to achieve policy goals by assigning roles and responsibilities to respective City departments. Key areas of the implementation plan include:

- Placing priority on areas and age groups identified in the Playspace Assessment,
- Establishing a Playspace Technical Advisory Team (PTAT) to provide strategic and technical guidance to City departments, and
- Developing Playspace guidelines to support greater quality and access.

Project Play has drafted the Playspace Policy with extensive input from City departments, commissions, and other key community partners. This includes meetings with the Park and Recreation Commission, ACPS, the Public Health Advisory Commission, NAIOP Northern Virginia Alexandria Government Relations Subcommittee, and other key stakeholders.

FISCAL IMPACT: The intent of the Playspace Policy is to more efficiently allocate and direct resources. Additional public benefits would be gained through development review and development conditions, so that these resources can also address identified playspace needs.

While there is no single source of funding to implement the policy, existing City resources will be leveraged such as the CIP Playground Renovation Program and Complete Streets Program. External resources will be leveraged with private development and redevelopment of property according to Small Area Plans and the development review process, and other private partnerships or grant opportunities.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment 1: Proposed Playspace Policy
- Attachment 2: Playspace Policy Letters of Support
- Attachment 3: Proposed Playspace Policy Implementation Plan
- Attachment 4: 2012 Alexandria Playspace Assessment

STAFF:

- James B. Spengler, Director, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
- Faroll Hamer, Director, Planning and Zoning
- Pat Mann, Urban Planner, Planning and Zoning
- Judy Lo, Park Planner, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities