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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 20, 2016
TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
FROM: MARK B. JINKS, CITY MANAGER /s/

DOCKET TITLE:

Consideration of the Receipt of the Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan.

ISSUE: City Council receipt and discussion of the Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan, a multi-year public process to develop a plan for the City's parks that are between 0.5 acres and 10 acres, municipally owned, and have multiple uses, including: Angel Park, Beach Park, 3550 Commonwealth Ave, Chambliss Park, Ewald Park, Goat Hill Park, Hoeff's Run Park & Greenway, Hume Springs Park, Landover Park, Lee Center, Luckett Field & Schuyler Hamilton Skate Park, Montgomery Park, James Mulligan Park, Powhatan Park, Stevenson Park, Taney Ave Park, and Timberland Park. The plan provides a framework for gradual improvement to these six parks subject to the future availability of funding.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council receive and discuss the proposed Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan.

BACKGROUND: In the summer of 2012, the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities

(RPCA) began a multi-year process to develop a series of Park Improvement Plans. These plans will support continued implementation of the Department's 2002 Strategic Master Plan for Open Space, Parks and Recreation. Each plan will cover a collection of parks categorized by typology, and will ensure a system of open space that equitably responds to the City's recreational and natural resource needs while efficiently utilizing available resources. The Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan is the second of the Improvement Plans. The Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan will guide budgeting priorities and recommendations for both short and long-term incremental improvements, ensuring that public parks serve Alexandria's needs now and into the future.

Neighborhood Park Plans are concept plans such as the Large Plans approved by City Council in 2015 and only need to be accepted. Master Plans require Planning Commission and City Council approval including any subsequent amendments. The concept plan level allows the department greater flexibility in responding to citizen needs, working on collaborative implementation, and other means of fundraising. Most elements when implemented require SUP approval which ensures further resident input.

DISCUSSION: As the City is growing increasingly dense and land is less available for acquisition of new open space, the City should take full advantage of the existing parks to ensure that they offer a variety of recreational opportunities. Community identified needs for our parks, as identified in our Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment, include passive relaxation, organized sports, early childhood development, family fun, and individual athletic activities. The City must also make investments in the parks to simply maintain them for years to come. Many of the park fixtures, such as utilities and furniture, and features such as playgrounds and dog parks, are reaching the end of their useful life. Rather than merely replace them in-kind, the Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan seeks to ensure that the City is currently offering the appropriate mix of uses in the right location and based on community identified needs.

To determine the park needs, Park Planning staff approached the plan in two ways: 1) an active public outreach strategy and 2) by conducting a statistically accurate Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment. The public outreach on this project included six public workshops (two for each planning district), online surveys, and "graffiti boards" which allowed park users to provide on-site feedback. Staff also attended numerous community association and stakeholder meetings. Secondly, RPCA, working with a consultant, conducted a 2011 and 2013 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment by sending a survey to demographically and geographically representative households (the 2015 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment was not complete in time for the Neighborhood Park Planning process).

This plan strives to improve existing open space, positively impacting both the health of Alexandria's natural environment and its people. The City's current Strategic Plan aims to ensure that the City's natural and built environment is healthy and that its residents are thriving. With implementation of the recommendations in this plan, the City can move towards meeting these goals by providing the best outdoor recreational opportunities and natural resources possible for its residents. To reinforce this effort, this plan aims to meet the following objectives:

1. Increase accessibility to the City's neighborhood parks and their facilities;
2. Design public spaces that meet multiple community needs and balance passive and active uses;
3. Steward and cultivate the parks' many natural resource assets; and
4. Strengthen the network of Neighborhood Parks and its role in connecting the community.

As discussed above, the planning process included a robust civic engagement strategy. Beginning in the fall of 2014, the summary below outlines the development timeline for this plan:

- Fall 2014: Public feedback on Neighborhood Parks

- Winter 2014/2015: Development of draft plans
- Spring 2015: Public feedback on draft plans
- Summer/Fall 2015: Refinement of plans based on feedback
- Fall/Winter 2015:
 - October 9, 2015, Release the draft Plan to the public
 - October 15, 2015, Public Hearing at Park and Recreation Commission
 - November 17, 2015, Held additional community meeting on Montgomery Park, as requested by Park and Recreation Commission
 - November 19, 2015 Park and Recreation Commission endorsed plan
 - January 26, 2016, City Council formal receipt of the Plan

To gather a sense of the park character, RPCA staff observed park uses during various times of day and spoke to park users while on-site. RPCA staff then collected park information from the community by holding three public workshops to discuss park needs and also distributed an online survey asking for feedback. Information was gathered based on the following set of questions: What would you like done with existing features in the park? What is missing from the park? What else can you tell us about the park? The survey also asked park users to identify their usual point of access into the park, the mode of transportation they use to get there, their typical park activities and what they like about the park. Survey participants also prioritized their improvement needs. Over 700 Alexandria residents responded throughout the process. Staff also placed a “graffiti board” with a pen attached in each park. Park visitors could write their vision for the park on the board. RPCA also attended numerous community association meetings throughout the City to present the plans.

The level of detail included in each park plan is dependent upon the range of needs as determined by:

1. Park user safety;
2. Community prioritization feedback and the results of the 2011 and 2013 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment;
3. Life span of the existing conditions;
4. Potential for non-city funding sources;
5. Level of user impact; and
6. Relationship to other projects

This plan uses citizen input and considers other external considerations to determine how to address park improvements incrementally over time. Most of the recommendations in the plan can be implemented independent of other projects as funding is available, whether through City or non-City funds. The cost estimates (in 2015 dollars) do not include operating costs. Prior to the implementation of any recommendation, operating costs and further detailed design, if any, will be considered. The plans will also inform future small area planning.

FISCAL IMPACT: The total cost for implementation of all of the recommendations in this plan is roughly \$14 million. As such the plan is aspirational. The items in this plan range in cost from \$5,000 to \$4.3 million to repurpose the now closed Lee Center pool. Given the City’s financial constraints, however, this plan uses citizen input and considers other external considerations to determine how to phase park improvements incrementally rather than seeking capital funds all in the short and medium term. It also serves as a guide for seeking non-city money such as grants and community group partnerships. The majority of the recommendations in the plan can be implemented independent of other projects. The plan can also be used to inform future required open space contributions often provided through the City’s Small Area Plans and development process. Staff will use the cost estimates in this plan to inform future CIP decision making. Given the high level of competing needs in the City’s 10-year CIP in comparison with funding availability, it may be

some time until many of the improvements in this Neighborhood Parks Plan can be implemented.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan Report
2. Neighborhood Parks Improvement Plan Presentation
3. Park & Recreation Commission Endorsement

STAFF:

Emily Baker, Deputy City Manager

James B. Spengler, Director, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (RPCA)

Dana W. Wedeles, Park Planner, RPCA

Laura D. Durham, Open Space Coordinator, RPCA