

# SIX BIG IDEAS

1

Link the Fort Circle Parks by implementing a greenway and making the parks destinations.

2

Improve public schoolyards to help relieve pressure on nearby parks and better connect children with the environment.

3

Enhance urban natural areas and better connect residents to encourage urban stewardship for natural resources.

4

Improve playfields to meet the needs of residents, workers, and visitors.

5

Enhance Center City parks and open space to support a vibrant downtown.

6

Transform small parks into successful public spaces, forming a cohesive urban network of green spaces.



Fort Reno

**T**hrough the many community parks spread across the city, the extensive stream valley corridors, forest preserves, the sweep of the Fort Circle Parks, the formal Center City parks, and the National Mall, parks and open spaces have defined and set Washington apart from other American cities. To their users, however, Washington's parks and open spaces are often fragmented, not clearly discernable, and are not meeting their full potential as the treasured places they can be. For example, many triangle parks along L'Enfant's grand avenues have lost much of their greenery, ecological corridors have become reduced in size, and trail systems have significant gaps that limit their use. Throughout the city, parks suffer from both under- and over-use.

CapitalSpace examined federal and District parks and open space comprehensively and found that within Washington's park system, the wide variety of park types, sizes, and traits, coupled with shared jurisdiction between local and federal authorities, presents challenges in meeting both local and national needs and difficulties in park planning, enhancement, and maintenance.

CapitalSpace also found that there are tremendous opportunities with Washington's park system as a whole to ensure that parks are accessible to everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the city; that they help connect various communities; that they provide a diversity of passive and active recreation; that they offer myriad natural, cultural, commemorative, and historic spaces; and that they contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and livable city.

The Six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and seize upon existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, additional physical improvements and alternative uses, and approaches to operation and maintenance.



Schoolyards provide diverse opportunities for learning, healthy living, and recreation, and are recognized as a vital part of Washington's open-space system.



PLANNING CONCEPTS



Weave a Greenway through neighborhoods



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Protect, Connect, and Restore Natural Resources



Expand Park System Capacity



Link the City with Green Corridors



**OBJECTIVES**

The Fort Circle Parks are appreciated, both locally and nationally, as historic, cultural, natural, and recreational treasures, providing opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize their history.

Public access is increased through improved connections between the Fort Circle Parks and other parks, schools, and civic destinations.

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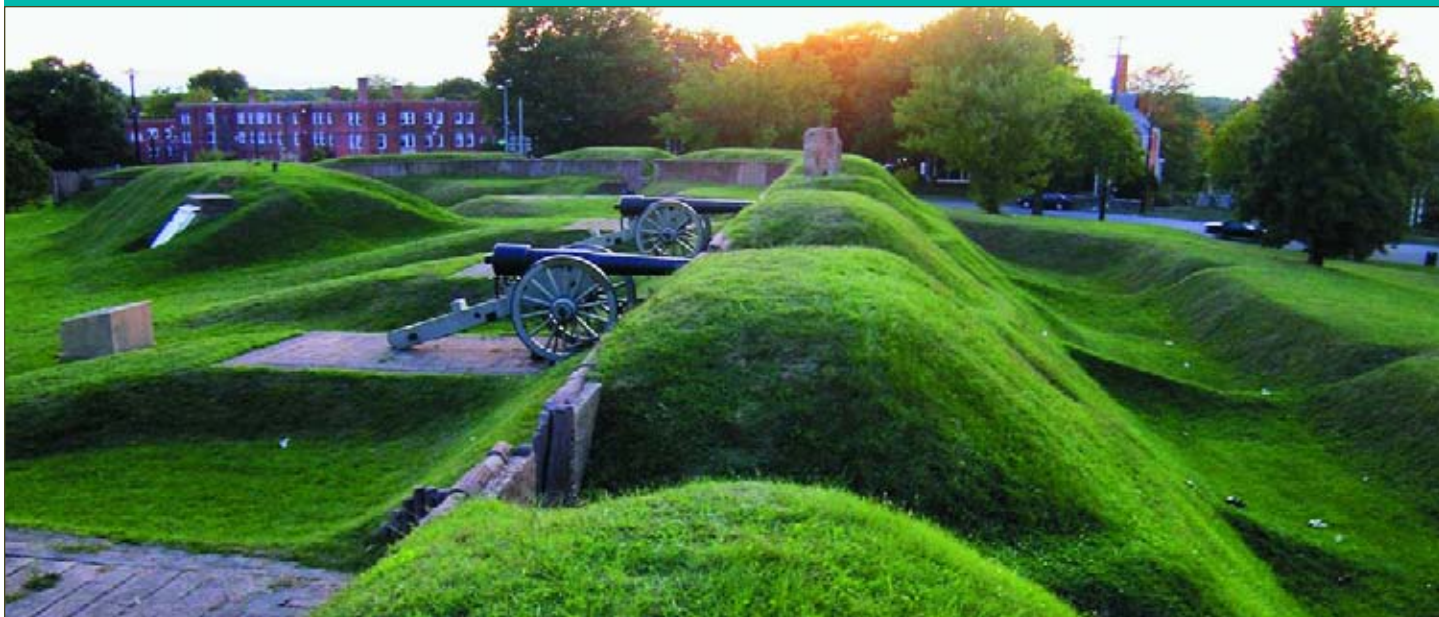
*Guns at Ft Stevens. 3<sup>rd</sup> Mass A*

Fort Stevens, 1865

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## 1

# Link the Fort Circle Parks



Fort Stevens

## Big Idea in Action

**A** ring of forts was erected around Washington during the Civil War to protect the nation's capital. In the early 1900s, the McMillan Park Commission proposed that the Civil War forts be memorialized in a unified system connected by a scenic, uninterrupted parkway. Ultimately, the forts and many of the adjacent connecting parcels were acquired, and the sites were placed in the National Register of Historic Places and became part of the National Park System.

In the future, the Fort Circle Parks will be connected by a picturesque, lush Greenway that links Washington's neighborhoods with adjacent communities, the Anacostia riverfront, and diverse recreational opportunities, including an extensive regional trail system.

Residents and visitors will find within the Fort Circle Parks a myriad of opportunities for recreation, leisure, enjoyment of natural resources and wildlife, historical interpretation, and cultural education. Individual fort parks will have features that attract the interests of tourists, local historians, and Civil War enthusiasts. They will also provide much needed green space for activities and recreational opportunities for local residents, workers, and visitors.

In 1937, the Civilian Conservation Corps partially reconstructed Fort Stevens. The fort is the only battleground on which a United States President, Abraham Lincoln, came under enemy fire in war while in office. It is also the only restored fortification in Washington and offers a unique opportunity to begin interpretation of the history of the Fort Circle Parks.





## Brief History of the Fort Circle Parks



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Fort Totten, ca. 1865



### The Civil War Defenses of Washington

In 2004, the NPS released *A Historic Resources Study: The Civil War Defenses of Washington*. This narrative history and accompanying historical analysis provides a comprehensive study of the Fort Circle Parks and includes detailed research on subjects such as non-federally owned sites related to The Battle of Fort Stevens, logistics, roads, day-to-day activities within the forts, relationship of minorities, pre-Civil War background, the Fort Drive, and the post-Civil War history of the fortifications.

One of the legacies of the Civil War in the Washington region is a system of forts and defensive earthworks. Stretching over 37 miles, with 68 enclosed forts and batteries, 93 unarmed batteries, three blockhouses, and 20 miles of trenches, the original system of fortification extended into Virginia and protected the capital from Confederate attacks. When the Civil War ended, the forts were abandoned and the original landowners reclaimed much of the fort property. By the 1890s, organizations and neighborhoods began to advocate for the preservation of these war defenses. The War Department ultimately kept eleven forts and one battery for historical interest.

In 1902, the McMillan Plan proposed a regional park system that included a parkway. The “Fort Drive” would memorialize the remaining forts, maintaining them as parkland and linking them with a scenic ring road. In accordance with this proposal, two significant federal initiatives created what is now known as the Fort Circle Parks—the Capper-Cramton Act and the New Deal. Congress approved funding for the system through the 1930 Capper-Cramton Act. The legislation included a specific requirement that the forts should be recommissioned as parks if they were no longer needed for military purposes.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Capper-Cramton Act provided the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (predecessor of the National Capital Planning Commission), with the authority and funds to acquire many of the Civil War forts and adjacent land parcels for the parkway. By 1937, the Commission had acquired all but one of the 23.5 miles planned for the parkway. Under the New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps completed a section of Fort Drive at Fort Dupont, south toward Good Hope Road. The Works Progress Administration completed a section of Fort Drive in the Fort Reno area. Other segments, such as Military Road through Rock Creek Park, were also completed in the 1950s, but there was no further progress on Fort Drive following construction of these segments.

After World War II, support for the Fort Drive shifted from developing it as a pleasure drive to a limited access highway. However, critics claimed that this idea was too expensive and impractical, and by the early 1960s, the idea of connecting the Fort Circle Parks with a continuous roadway was abandoned because citizens and planners were concerned with neighborhood and traffic impacts of the proposed roadway. As a result, in 1965 NCPC issued *The Fort Park System: A Re-evaluation Study of Fort Drive, Washington DC* that proposed that the Fort Drive be renamed the Fort Park System and the scenic drive concept be abandoned in favor of a Greenway trail connecting the forts. This plan resulted in construction of a short section of a bike and pedestrian trail between Forts Stanton and Mahan.

Although there was increased interest in the forts at the one-hundred-year anniversary of the Civil War, development pressure on the parks increased, and encroachment upon the spaces for public uses other than recreation became a continuing reality. For example, Fort Reno over time became the site for a reservoir, Federal Aviation Administration monitoring equipment, a Secret Service K-9 Division facility, and a Department of Public Works storage yard.

Following a period of jurisdictional transfers between federal agencies, the National Park Service (NPS) was given jurisdiction over the fort parks in 1933. In 1968, the NPS released a master plan for the Fort Circle Parks. The master plan envisioned the forts as neighborhood parks offering a broad range of recreational and interpretative programs, including day and overnight camps. The parks would be connected by a 23-mile bike and pedestrian trail. However, few of the recommendations and plans from the 1968 plan were ever implemented. In 2004, the NPS completed *The General Management Plan: Fort Circle Parks* to provide a unified management concept for the significant cultural and natural resources associated with the specific NPS fort parks, now referred to by the NPS as the Fort Circle Parks. This was done because of the lack of implementation of the recommendations in the earlier master plan, and because the management of these sites is divided among three separate NPS units—National Capital Parks-East, Rock Creek Park, and George Washington Memorial Parkway.

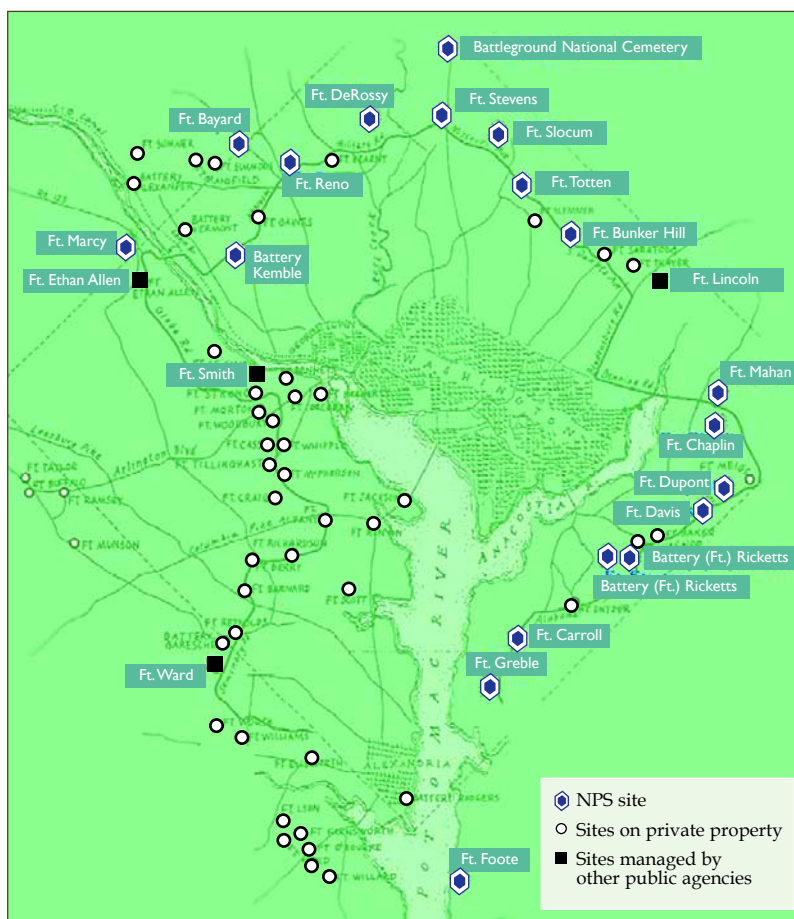
This plan will guide the management of the parks over the next 10-15 years, and sets a general vision for the management of the fort parks as a system, without setting site-specific management objectives for individual park forts.

The plan has three stated goals:

- ◆ Preserve and interpret the historical resources.
- ◆ Conserve the urban green space linkages.
- ◆ Provide compatible recreational opportunities.

The management plan also provides a direction for visitor use of the fort parks by describing in detail the resource conditions and visitor experiences that should be maintained in each of the park's management (or use) zones.

Implementation of NPS's management plan for the Fort Circle Parks is underway. In 2009, the NPS hired their first full-time site manager whose primary focus is to coordinate improvements and programming for all the Fort Circle Parks. Linking the Fort Circle Parks creates opportunities for federal and District agencies and the public to promote the management plan's recommendations. It also builds upon these opportunities through ideas for better use of the fort parks as community assets by linking them to surrounding communities, waterfronts, and local and regional trail systems.



This 1919 topographic map shows the strategic location of the ring of Civil War forts around Washington. The dots, signifying elements of the fortification system, were spaced to ensure that no part of Washington was vulnerable to enemy penetration and were located at natural high elevations. The high vantage point of the forts that surrounded Washington commanded unobstructed sweeping views of the city, inspiring the McMillan Commission in later years to recommend their incorporation into the park system.

The resources of the Fort Circle Parks are not fully appreciated due to inadequate programming, maintenance, and signage. This image shows the DPR section of Fort Mahan prior to a service clean up day by the DC Building Industry of America in September 2009.



## Challenges

As the forts were abandoned after the Civil War, many were deemed surplus and the surrounding land returned to its original owners. Most forts were abandoned to the elements; as the forests and native vegetation rapidly reclaimed the land, the earthworks were oftentimes completely obscured. Now the forts' stunning views toward the capital city have been blocked.

Unfortunately, today few residents know about the forts, the role that they played in defending Washington from attack during the Civil War, or the unique role they played in the city's African-American history. Many freed or escaped slaves sought refuge at the forts, where they found safe haven and work. After the war, many settled in the surrounding areas, establishing early African- American neighborhoods.

The residents who do advocate for the Fort Circle Parks today are passionate, yet diverse in their interests and visions. Some believe that restoration and preservation of the historic elements are paramount. Others believe that the fort parks should provide more active recreational opportunities, especially in the areas of the city that do not have enough recreational facilities. Balancing the various interests are challenging, especially given the shortage of funding available for capital improvements and maintenance.





Trails throughout the Fort Circle Parks provide a connection to natural resources in the urban setting of Washington.

## Opportunities

Together, the Fort Circle Parks represent a significant landscape element that played an important role in Washington during the Civil War. The NPS is committed to improving cultural and natural resources and recreational opportunities to create parks that tell the stories of the Civil War Defenses through interpretation, educational programs, and other experiences.

Each individual fort park has tremendous potential to provide both national and local amenities to attract the interests of tourists, local historians, and Civil War enthusiasts. They also have the potential to provide much needed green space and activities for local residents and workers. Cultivating diverse and passionate users of the Forts Circle Parks will help to protect and sustain the parks and the Greenway in the future.

While each fort park is unique, the ability to link together the major fort parks into a cohesive system is its greatest potential strength. A united system would provide activity hubs with their own appropriate uses, creating a verdant connected Greenway around the city. The Greenway could then have a series of loop segments that thread together surrounding neighborhood parks, recreational facilities, and other important cultural, historical, and community features like schools, community centers, transit, and other local and regional trail systems.



## Fort Circle Park Model Project

### Fort Mahan and Fort Stanton

Model approaches to link the Fort Circle Parks were studied at Fort Stanton and Fort Mahan. These fort parks were selected because they are in communities that currently have comparatively less access to parks and are experiencing significant new development. Challenges specific to each park were researched and analyzed, and opportunities were identified. Together, these informed the recommendations to link the Fort Circle Parks at the end of this chapter.



#### *Fort Mahan—The Gateway to Fort Circle Parks East*

Fort Mahan is an NPS park consisting of a cleared, grassy plateau with a multi-purpose recreational field that is surrounded by heavily wooded hillsides. Along the eastern edge are small, flat grassy areas. Historic fort earthworks are near the top of the eastern edge of the hillside. The park receives limited use, even though it is adjacent to a redeveloping commercial corridor and is situated between the Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road Metro stations. The park has the opportunity to be a vibrant community connector rather than a barrier, as it is now.

Specific issues and opportunities include:

- ◆ Increase the limited interpretive and visitor resources associated with the Civil War and fort, including enhancing the incredible views to the United States Capitol that are currently obscured by trees, while respecting existing forest resources.
- ◆ Improve existing on-site sidewalks, and install new ones as needed, along the perimeter and on trails throughout the park.
- ◆ Improve connections to Marvin Gaye Park, Miller Park, the Metro stations, bus routes, nearby schools, and the Boys and Girls Club.
- ◆ Capitalize on nearby residential development and the redeveloping commercial corridor adjacent to the site by positioning the park as a true community asset and east side gateway to the Fort Circle Parks.
- ◆ Improve and connect the park's active recreational facilities to the adjacent DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and DC Public Schools (DCPS) properties to better serve neighborhood recreational needs.

## Fort Circle Park Model Project

### Fort Stanton—*A Grand Vista in the Nation's Capital*

Fort Stanton is located on a heavily forested ridgeline site, most of which falls under NPS jurisdiction. A reservoir and active recreational facilities are located on the site and are under the jurisdiction of the DC Water and Sewer Authority and DPR. DPR has both outdoor and indoor active recreational facilities at Fort Stanton, including an outdoor baseball field renovated in 2009. The remains of Fort Stanton are on the park's west side in an area that straddles the property line between the park and Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The earthworks of Fort Ricketts are on the east side of the park.

Specific issues and opportunities include:

- ◆ Increase the interpretive and visitor resources associated with the Civil War and forts. One of the most significant views to downtown Washington is on the church property adjacent to the park, near where Fort Stanton once stood. This view should be protected permanently and made part of the park experience.
- ◆ Improve the trails through the park and link them to surrounding cultural destinations, including the Frederick Douglass House and the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Community Museum.
- ◆ Improve the existing recreational amenities and recreation center to meet neighborhood needs and changing demographics.
- ◆ Preserve the stream corridor and floodplain in the park's interior and enhance the recreational experience in this area.



The existing trail at Fort Mahan is not easily identifiable due to lack of maintenance and signage.

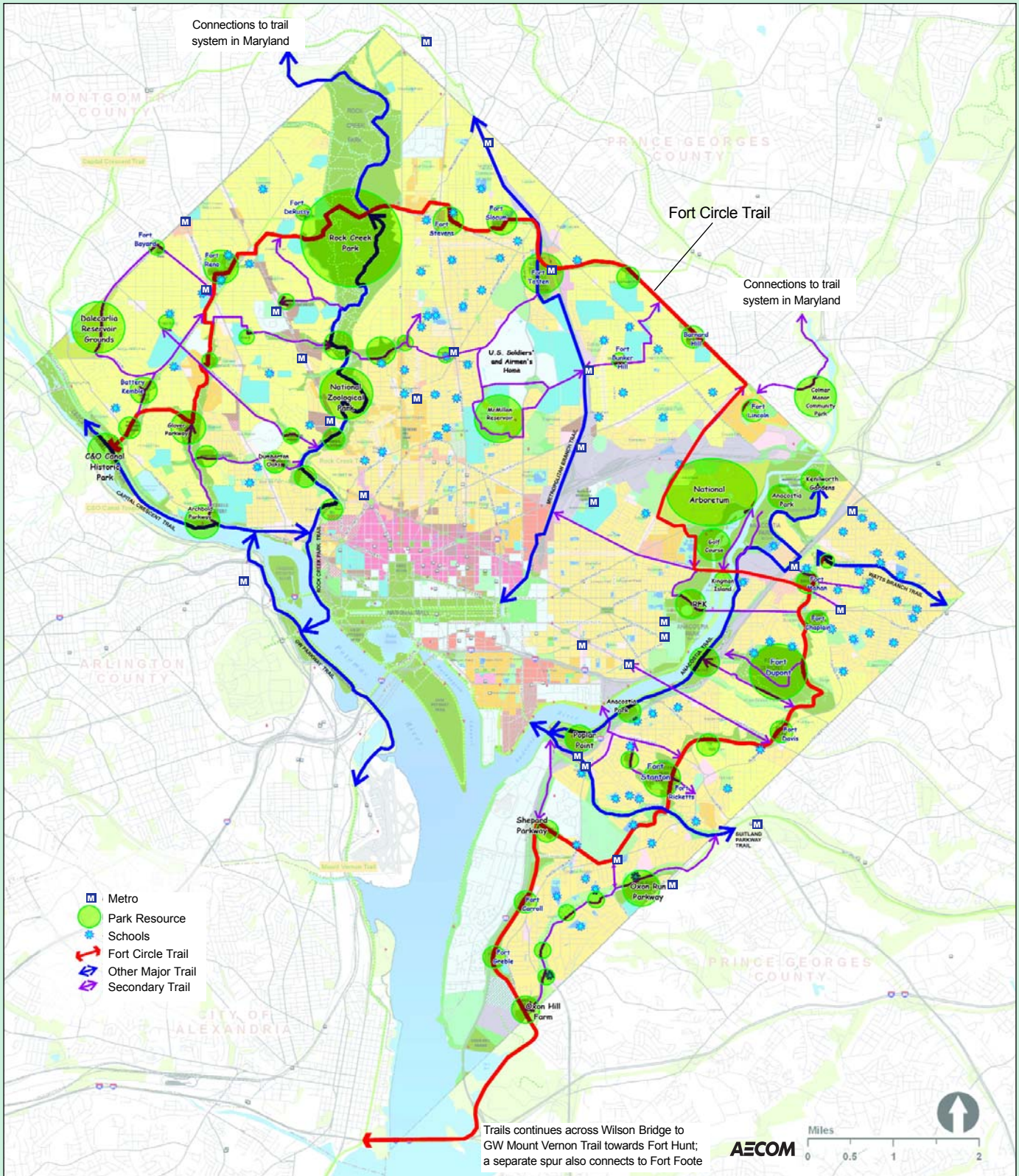


The existing recreation center at Fort Stanton is scheduled to be replaced with a new facility in 2010.



## Potential Fort Circle Parks Trail Connections

This map identifies opportunities for strengthened connections between the fort parks and other parks, schools, and access points. It also illustrates conceptual trail connections. Refer to current trail maps for actual existing, planned, and proposed trail alignments.





# Link the Fort Circle Parks

## Promote the Fort Circle Parks and Greenway as a National Historic, Cultural, and Recreational Treasure (FCP-1)

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Provide opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize the history of the Fort Circle Parks. Remains of many of the forts are slowly vanishing.

- ◆ Install park and trail signage and interpretive stations to provide information, celebrate important vistas, and describe the park's role in the Civil War.
- ◆ Increase visitor resources and programming, especially near trail heads.
- ◆ Build public awareness about the Fort Circle Parks and the Greenway.

## Increase Public Access by Connecting the Fort Circle Parks to Other Destinations (FCP-2)

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Connecting the Fort Circle Parks to other parks, schools, neighborhoods, and other destinations increases accessibility to the parks.

- ◆ Design and build the entire Greenway trail to link all of the fort parks.
- ◆ Improve existing trails, including the hiker-biker trail, with increased maintenance, signage, and interpretation.
- ◆ Strengthen connections from the Greenway to transit, schools, and other parks with improved streetscape conditions, street crossings, on-road bike lanes, and signage.
- ◆ Provide low-impact trails within the fort parks to offer opportunities for discovery of views, exploration of interior woodlands, and native habitats.

## Activate the Fort Circle Parks and Greenway for Residents and Visitors (FCP-3)

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The Fort Circle Parks were once community gathering places. Selective park activities can once again engage residents and visitors in the parks' rich natural environment and cultural history.

- ◆ Improve existing recreational facilities, with an emphasis on recreation fields.
- ◆ Enhance cultural and natural interpretive amenities provided within the parks.
- ◆ Enhance the park edges to be more welcoming to residents and visitors.

## Protect and Celebrate the Diverse Natural Resources of the Fort Circle Parks (FCP-4)

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The Fort Circle Parks preserve significant natural features, including mature native hardwood forests and diverse critical habitat for indigenous flora and fauna that are rarely found in an urban setting.

- ◆ Restore upland and stream habitats by managing invasive species and daylighting stream channels where feasible.
- ◆ Interpret natural resources through identification of native vegetation, habitat, and species.
- ◆ Expand nature-based educational programming with schools and other organizations to educate students and visitors about habitats and natural systems, and build park appreciation.
- ◆ Utilize innovative techniques, such as low-impact stormwater management, to address impacts to natural resources and landscapes.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



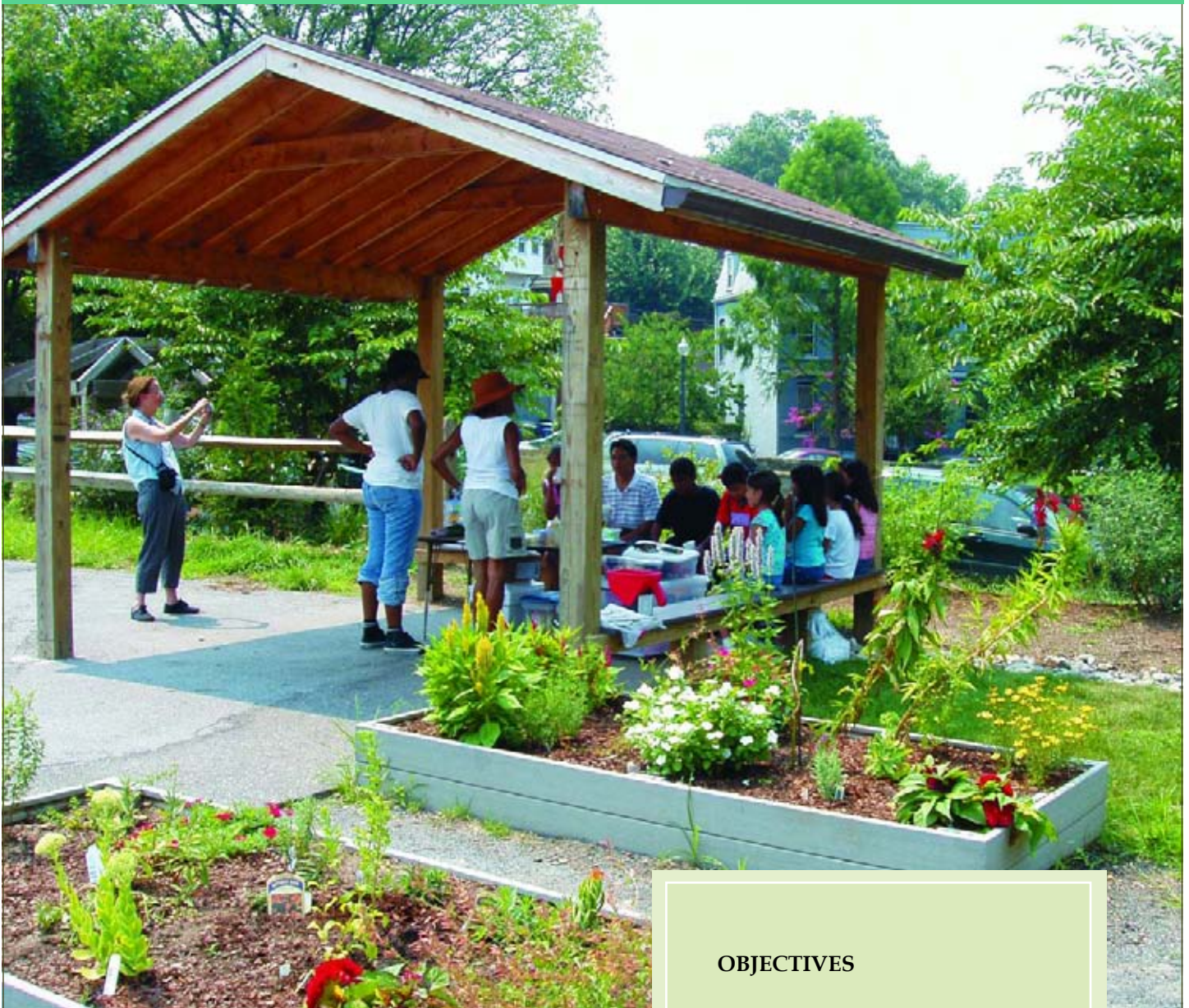
Weave a Greenway through Neighborhoods



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Expand Park System Capacity



21st Century School Fund

Teachers, volunteers, and students at Bancroft Elementary School attend an outdoor classroom workshop in August 2009.

**OBJECTIVES**

Schoolyards are maintained and improved to provide diverse opportunities for learning, healthy living, and recreation, and are recognized as a vital part of Washington's parks and open-space system.



## 2

# Improve Public Schoolyards

## Big Idea in Action

In the past, great value was placed on the importance of open space and recreation in early childhood development. Further, federal and local plans sought to co-locate public facilities and use them for broader community purposes. Schools played a critical component in this strategy, offering joint learning and recreational facilities and serving as neighborhood centers. Schoolyards continue to play an important role in providing open space and recreation for the city's children, and as a focal point of community life.

In the future, students at District of Columbia schools will gaze out their classroom windows in eager anticipation of their outdoor class time. For recess, students will be able to play kickball on green athletic fields, explore butterfly gardens, or play quietly with friends in a shaded spot. Other students will spend some classroom time outdoors to learn from their science teacher about the role trees play in mitigating climate change and how the native wildlife habitat helps to preserve biodiversity in their neighborhood.

Public schoolyards serve as places of recreation and physical activity, and also provide centers of learning about the environment, food systems, and healthy living. This is particularly important in Washington, which has one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the country. A combination of physical activity and learning about healthy living, for example, through development of a schoolyard vegetable garden provides a powerful antidote to childhood obesity and a host of other physical and emotional health issues that commonly affect students.

With innovative stormwater management features, such as rain gardens, integrated into schoolyards, children can learn how greening their schoolyard is beneficial for the environment. With the District's public schoolyards using sustainable design strategies, all of Washington benefits through improved water quality.



Butterfly Garden at  
Cardozo Senior High School





Library of Congress

Central High students at a track meet in 1925

## Brief History of Schoolyard Expansion and Neighborhood Recreational Centers

At the turn of the 20th century, new ideas were developed about the importance of open space and recreation in early childhood development. These ideas were rooted in the Progressive belief that an orderly environment played an important role in creating healthy families and communities. In 1901, Washington's first neighborhood playground opened in Southwest at the Neighborhood House, a privately operated community center. In the following years, federal and local government agencies worked together to systematically provide areas for active recreation across the city. With the support of a powerful parks movement and an emerging recreational leadership, schools became a critical component in providing publicly accessible recreation areas throughout Washington.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, a number of governmental bodies, including the District's Department of Playgrounds, the municipal Board of Education, and the federal National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCPPC), oversaw implementation of new playgrounds and fields in schoolyards. These new schoolyards met goals for student and community recreational needs. The District established a four acre minimum size for new school sites, one of the first cities in the United States to do so. In 1927, NCPPC promoted the concept of neighborhood centers, planning for new schools, athletic fields, and recreational areas to be located in close proximity to other municipal buildings, such as fire and police stations, and libraries. These joint learning and recreational facilities were to be the focal point of community life, functioning as neighborhood open spaces where students and families could come together.

As of 2006, public schools contained many of the city's overall recreational resources, providing 49 percent of playgrounds, 56 percent of football fields, and 39 percent of basketball courts.

Today, several entities manage the construction and maintenance of schoolyards, including the District of Columbia Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, DCPS and DC Parks and Recreation. The District of Columbia's Department of Transportation (DDOT) maintains the perimeters of some schoolyards, and DPR maintains 16 athletic fields located on schoolyards. In some instances, the federal government retains the underlying ownership of schoolyards. The generally balanced distribution of schoolyards throughout Washington provides important access to recreation and open space that meets some, but not all, of resident needs.



Library of Congress

Schoolyards, such as at Ross Elementary School, provided venues for competitive sports.



Some schools' athletic fields are waterlogged and unusable even in good weather.



The broken sight lines on the grounds of some elementary schools, like the one here blocked by an outdoor stage, present safety issues even during daylight hours.

## Challenges

A number of District public schoolyards suffer from overuse, contain aging infrastructure, and are in need of modernization. Although the District is making unprecedented investments in school modernization and new facilities, some elementary schools are still equipped with out-of-date playground equipment and non-regulation size athletic fields. In 2009, the District unveiled an extensive public school facilities modernization program, with a focus on the buildings—not the schoolyards. Private and charter schools fall outside of the scope of the school modernization process.

School administrators may have safety concerns about opening schoolyards to the public because they are unable to secure the site during school hours. These security concerns may be amplified by poor site design and physical conditions, such as high walls or hidden corners, that make it difficult to monitor students in the yard during recess and gym. School administrators may also have to address issues of vandalism, hazardous trash, and illegitimate activities caused by unregulated access to the schoolyard.

Developing a District-wide schoolyard modernization program is difficult because public schoolyards are diverse in size, schools have different programming needs, and there may be potential location and external pressures. These challenges can make it difficult to develop broad standards and policies that can be applied to all school sites.

Another challenge is that schoolyard improvement, programming, field permitting, and maintenance responsibilities are shared by several District agencies. While the public may only see a unified open space, the number of agencies involved makes coordinating ongoing maintenance, improvements, and overall access challenging.

For many neighborhoods, schoolyards are the only easily accessible open space. This puts added pressure on the schoolyards to accommodate the recreation and open-space needs of students and nearby residents.



Opened in 2009, the Walker Jones Education Campus in Northwest includes a public library, recreation center, and fields, continuing the tradition of providing multiple education and recreation facilities at one site.

J.O. Wilson Elementary School received a new schoolyard in 2009. Amenities include new playground equipment, a plaza, and an outdoor garden.



## Opportunities

Schoolyards can provide critical recreational and environmental education opportunities for students. More classroom plans are incorporating the outdoors, and children need accessible outdoor spaces to learn about a wide variety of subjects including biology, history, personal health, and the environment. Adequate exercise, outdoor play, and team sports have proven to be critical in helping children become healthy adults. Physical activity can also help reduce childhood obesity, which 2009 estimates had affecting 35 percent of the District's children.

Schoolyards can also provide important community recreation and open space locations during non-school hours. Making use of existing open space is particularly important in neighborhoods where park resources are otherwise scarce. Schoolyard improvements thus provide concurrent benefits to nearby residents. Well-landscaped and designed school sites can help to beautify neighborhoods and increase environmental stewardship among students, teachers, parents and the surrounding community.

While schoolyards are not currently the focus of the school modernization program, there is an opportunity to develop a comprehensive schoolyard program and integrate it within the existing modernization process with the help of other District agencies. The District of Columbia Department of the Environment developed programs to green school sites, and the agency works closely with DC Schoolyard Greening, a program of the DC Environmental Education Consortium, to lay the foundation for improving schoolyards. DPR is also working to co-locate more of its facilities with existing schools to save money and provide more centralized and integrated community services, including open space. Through shared agency goals, these programs can further increase the benefits conferred by schoolyard modernization.



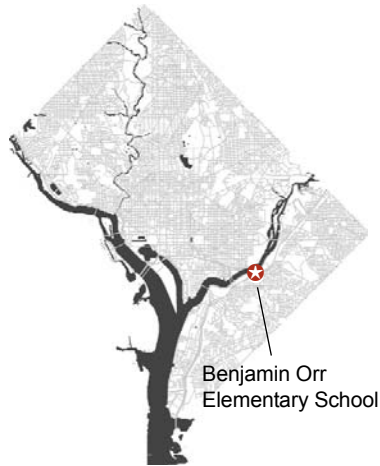
21st Century School Fund

21st Century School Fund

21st Century School Fund



# Benjamin Orr Elementary School



A positive aspect of Orr’s schoolyard is a painted mural and learning landscape.

## Proposed Access and Safety



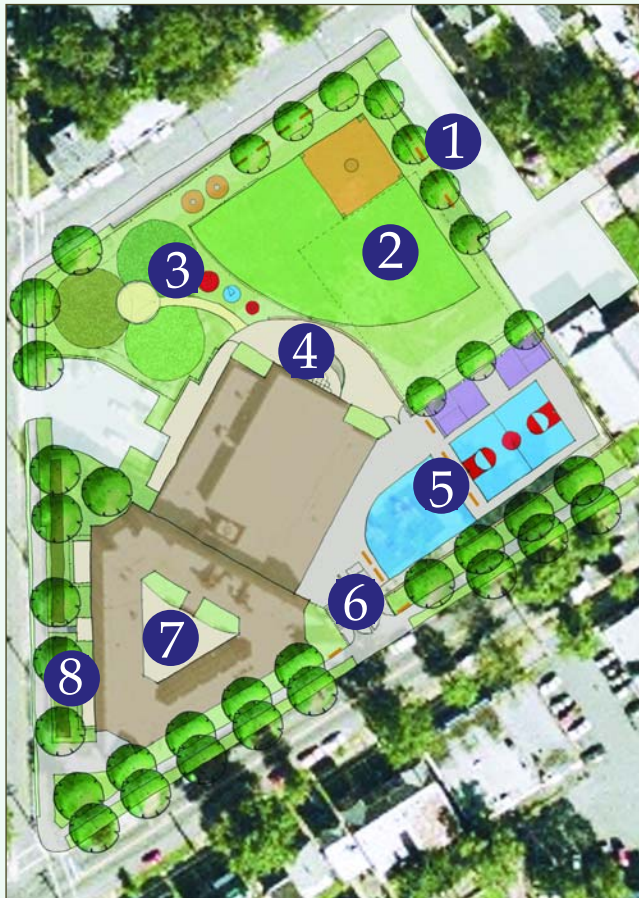
Identifying appropriate public access to Orr’s schoolyard can help improve student safety.

Built in 1974, Benjamin Orr Elementary School was selected as a model project because it has not been through a major modernization, its 1.4 acres are considered average in size compared to other schools, and it is in an area of Southeast Washington identified as underserved by parks, open space, and recreational facilities. Orr’s schoolyard provides recreation opportunities for students and the community, and includes a play area, baseball backstop, basketball courts, and a stage/seating area. Orr has 276 students, and approximately 75 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. A branch location of the Boys and Girls Club is also located at Orr.

Although all schoolyards are different, Orr’s schoolyard has representative opportunities and challenges that can inform schoolyard policies District-wide. The project identified the following goals:

- ◆ Meet physical education and health needs by improving existing active recreation amenities, including the play areas, fields, and basketball courts.
- ◆ Meet environmental and educational goals through “greening” the schoolyard with gardens or other stormwater measures.
- ◆ Address visibility issues.
- ◆ Create a new outdoor learning opportunity by expanding the stage area.
- ◆ Improve security, school appearance and delineating schoolyard space with landscaping improvements.

## Proposed Recreational, Environmental, and Educational Features



This graphic identifies a potential approach to providing recreational, environmental, and educational features within Orr's schoolyard.

AECOM

### 1. PARKING

The existing parking lot is reduced in size and 14 new parking spaces are provided along the playground edge. Shared parking with an adjacent church is encouraged for additional capacity.

### 2. ACTIVE RECREATION

Relocation of an existing slope and wall allows for an improved baseball field with a safety surface infield, an expanded practice/multipurpose field, and room for tetherball.

### 3. OUTDOOR LEARNING

A wetlands butterfly garden and vegetable garden area could be integrated with school programs and maintenance capabilities. Additional interactive elements could include weather stations, hands-on sculptures, and climbing features. Outdoor learning areas could utilize "boardwalk" access and offer outdoor classroom opportunities.

### 4. MUSIC STAGE

The existing stage is redesigned to remove barriers and hidden corners, allowing for outdoor music classes complete with fixed musical instruments. An expanded stage platform retains emergency egress.

### 5. SECURED PLAY AREA

Fenced and gated areas protect ball courts (paddle ball, four-square, etc.), resized age appropriate basketball courts, and an expanded playground with a poured-in-place safety surface.

### 6. NEW ENTRY

The entryway to the secured play area is redesigned with a wider stairway, a handicapped ramp with stroller access, and seating areas.

### 7. INTERIOR COURTYARD

The courtyard maintains active play for 2-5 year olds and includes a learning garden on the south-facing wall.

### 8. WEST SIDE

Removal of the existing wall maze allows for new plantings and a bioswale.

## Lessons Learned

**Goals identified for schoolyards can be in conflict with each other; approaches should balance all goals.**

Several competing goals at Orr's schoolyard need to be reconciled. For example, providing community access to the site perpetuates a security challenge for school administrators. Guidelines should balance the need to regulate access to the site and create areas closed to the community after school hours. The proposed access and safety graphic (see prior page) demonstrates how schoolyard access and security issues might be balanced.

Introducing environmental elements such as rain gardens can conflict with recreational activities that require hard surfaces. Guidelines should include specific measures or approaches to analyze how to balance recreation needs with managing stormwater on-site. Fortunately, stormwater measures can be paired with outdoor learning and environmental stewardship goals to meet this balance.

**Improvements to parks and open space near schoolyards may help meet demand.**

Improving parks near schoolyards to provide recreation and other amenities, particularly in neighborhoods where parks resources are scarce, may reduce pressure on schoolyard sites from overuse. Improvements would also meet community recreation and open-space needs. An evaluation of neighborhood park improvement opportunities should be included in any schoolyard improvement strategy. This collaborative approach between schools and parks can help ensure that students have fun, functional, and accessible recreation space during and after school hours, and simultaneously help to ensure that other park users have places for recreation and team sports that do not compete with school needs.



## Recommendations

# Improve Public Schoolyards

A District-wide priority list for schoolyard improvements could identify which schools will be outfitted with synthetic turf fields, such as Key Elementary School.



### Incorporate a Schoolyard Improvement Strategy into School Modernization Programs (SCH-1)

A comprehensive strategy to assess and improve the District's schoolyards should be developed. Schoolyards are also important recreational spaces for the neighborhood; therefore, improvements should be planned to maximize their benefits.

- ◆ Set goals for the assessment and improvement of the District's schoolyards.
- ◆ Develop a District-wide priority list for schoolyard improvements and enhancements.

### Preserve Recreation and Open Space for Community Use (SCH-2)

Schoolyards provide important recreation space for Washington's residents. Without schoolyards, many neighborhoods would lack access to playgrounds, athletic fields, and green open space.

- ◆ Ensure that schoolyards are safe and secure for students.
- ◆ Support community use of schoolyards for recreation space, wherever and whenever possible.
- ◆ School sites located on federally owned parcels should remain for recreational or school purposes only, unless alternative uses are mutually agreed upon.
- ◆ Schoolyards located on District land should remain available for the public, to the greatest extent possible, to ensure that residents' access to parks and open space is not diminished.

### Develop District-Wide Guidelines for Schoolyards (SCH-3)

Guidelines can assist schoolyard planning. They should be broad and address recreation, stormwater management, landscaping, and environmental education.

- ◆ Create design guidelines that encourage the basic schoolyard components.
- ◆ Develop guidelines regarding where stormwater measures should be located based on existing infrastructure and site conditions.
- ◆ Develop opportunities for enhanced components, such as gardens, and then identify partnership and funding opportunities from non-profits or other groups.

### Develop a Collaborative Schoolyard Improvement Program (SCH-4)

Several entities play a role in managing schoolyards. Clarifying their responsibilities will improve outcomes. Further, the District would benefit from developing long-term partnerships with community organizations to help meet maintenance challenges.

- ◆ Establish basic schoolyard maintenance standards and clarify agency roles and responsibilities for these standards.
- ◆ Reassess schoolyard funding mechanisms to determine if it is possible and preferable to have dedicated funding.
- ◆ Develop private-public partnerships to maintain schoolyard components that require a higher level of care, such as rain and butterfly gardens, and to provide additional programming.



PLANNING CONCEPTS



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Connect with Rivers



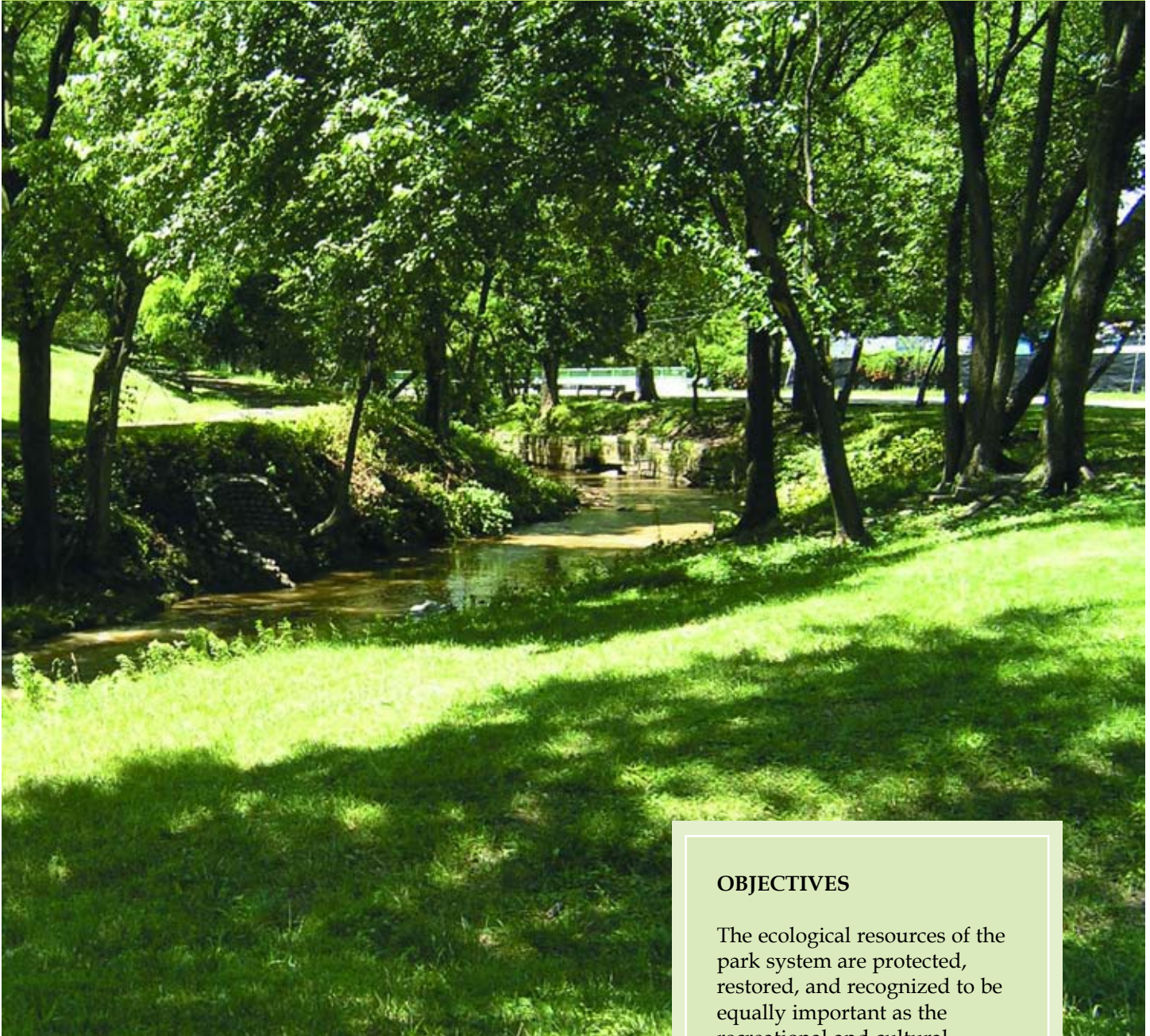
Protect, Connect, and Restore Natural Resources



Expand Park System Capacity



Link the City with Green Corridors



Watts Branch Park

**OBJECTIVES**

The ecological resources of the park system are protected, restored, and recognized to be equally important as the recreational and cultural amenities in the neighborhoods and the city as a whole.



## 3

## Enhance Urban Natural Areas



Red-shouldered hawk in Rock Creek Park

## Big Idea in Action

**I**n the future, Washington's parks will contain the majority of the city's forests, wetland and riparian habitats, and many unique ecosystems. Washington's urban natural areas are appreciated and protected for the use and enjoyment they provide to residents and visitors, but also because they are respected urban sanctuaries that provide a safe refuge for wildlife and important ecological functions that enhance the entire metropolitan region.

Washington's natural parkland areas, including the numerous stream valleys and wildlife corridors, connect to each other, connect to urban neighborhoods, and connect to the greater regional system of natural areas. Natural areas are protected, restored, and enhanced.

The natural areas in Washington's parks play a critical role in fulfilling the city's sustainability and environmental goals. Low impact and sustainable measures to reduce pollution are incorporated across the city and around the region. The natural and built environment now work in concert, providing the city with green infrastructure to improve air and water quality and address climate change.



Kayaker on the C&amp;O Canal



Library of Congress

Boulder Bridge, Rock Creek Park, ca. 1920-1940

## Brief History of Washington's Natural Areas

Washington's parks contain most of the city's river and stream valley corridors, escarpment, and forested areas, and provide many ecological functions. Historically, the preservation and management of these spaces was related to two main purposes. First, natural areas provided a critical element of much-needed city infrastructure by serving as discharge areas for stormwater. Second, there was an interest in conserving aesthetically pleasing natural features and recreational opportunities, which provided places of public respite. Neither purpose, however, was fully informed by the ecological value of these areas now recognized by park providers, environmental advocates, and the public.

Despite having admiration for its natural features, Washington's city builders were more preoccupied with the construction of roads, buildings, and other infrastructure during the city's first 100 years. During the 19th century, these



activities included massive forest clearing, re-engineering of natural springs to supply city water, leveling of bluffs and filling in of valleys to provide a flat terrain for development, and the use of rivers as depositories for the city's sewage. These actions, and the rapid population growth post-Civil War led to infrastructure, economic, and health problems that in turn further impacted natural areas. Deforestation caused the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers to fill with silt, disrupting navigation and exacerbating flooding. Untreated sewage trapped in the silted rivers threatened public health, resulting in the filling of many wetlands and marshes. City-wide sewer infrastructure was constructed in stream valley corridors, and many streams were put into underground pipes. Stream valleys were purchased as parkland in part for the purpose of conveying stormwater from neighborhood streets to the rivers. Even park plans could negatively affect natural areas—the McMillan Plan of 1901 resulted in additional filling of low-lying areas along the Potomac River to complete the National Mall.

However, use as city infrastructure was not the only reason tracts of land were converted into parks. Towards the end of the 19th century there was growing recognition of the value of parks in elevating the quality of life of city residents. Civic initiatives focused on acquisition of many of the remaining natural areas of Washington for urban recreation and nature conservation. Rock Creek Park was created by a Congressional act in 1890 with a mandate to protect its natural beauty while accommodating carriageways and trails for public use.

The McMillan Plan established a city-wide plan for a connected system of park and open spaces that included sites along the escarpment, the stream valley corridors, and river edges, including a proposal for Anacostia Park. This plan subsequently drove park acquisition in the first half of the 20th century, resulting in the majority of the park areas present today. These significant park acquisitions and their inclusion in the National Park System, often under the directive that their natural resources be protected, has resulted in the city's many connected and largely intact natural corridors.

Increasing recognition of the importance of natural areas for wildlife habitat, community health and to provide critical climate, air, soil and water quality, continued to gain momentum throughout the 20th century. Inspired by publications such as *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson and *Design with Nature* by Ian McHarg, this growing environmental awareness led to federal and local legislation and programs to protect and restore natural resources. Beginning in the 1980s, regional efforts to protect and restore the Chesapeake Bay, the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, and their tributaries raised public awareness on the need to balance healthy ecosystems with the built environment.

The early 21st century has seen more work to restore urban natural areas and protect them from future development pressures. Spearheaded by the work of Casey Trees, Washington is working towards restoring the city's tree canopy to 40 percent by 2030. Plans are also underway to make the Anacostia River safe for swimming and fishing by 2032. The creation of the Mayor's Green DC Agenda program in 2009 commits Washington to become one of the most sustainable cities in the world. These goals for a sustainable, resilient city highlight the continuing need to integrate restored natural areas into the fabric of the urban environment.



Library of Congress



Library of Congress

Rock Creek Park, ca. 1920

Land uses such as athletic fields can sometimes bring unintended impacts to ecologically sensitive areas. Fertilizers and other lawn care chemicals can contaminate adjacent streams.



## Challenges

Urban parks are often defined and valued by the way they are used by residents and visitors. Some parks have a variety of more active recreational uses, with each use represented by a different constituency group. These groups serve as an ad hoc oversight committee to ensure their parks are maintained sufficiently. In addition, the historic planned squares and circles within Washington are protected by a number of historic preservation laws, regulations, and policies. Many of Washington's natural areas, however, do not have well-defined constituent groups, nor do they have the benefit of robust policies designed to protect their ecological communities and functions.

Because natural park areas are wild and unstructured spaces, and are not activity-focused, they are often invisible in the urban landscape. In some instances these spaces are overgrown with vegetation and can seem forbidding and unsafe to adjacent residents. In other cases, they are heavily used for active recreation that may be disruptive and damaging to the fragile natural ecosystem. Often, the very measures that residents request to make a park safer—adding lighting, paving trails, or clearing vegetation—end up threatening these urban natural places.

The pressure on Washington's natural areas is significant and continues to grow. These areas are threatened not only by the potential for new development, but also by urban activities, increasing demand for recreational opportunities from a larger and more active population, and over-use by athletes and outdoor enthusiasts. When these areas are disturbed, invasive plant species such as English Ivy are more likely to out-compete native plants for resources and replace them. In turn, the habitat may become so adversely modified that wildlife populations are displaced.

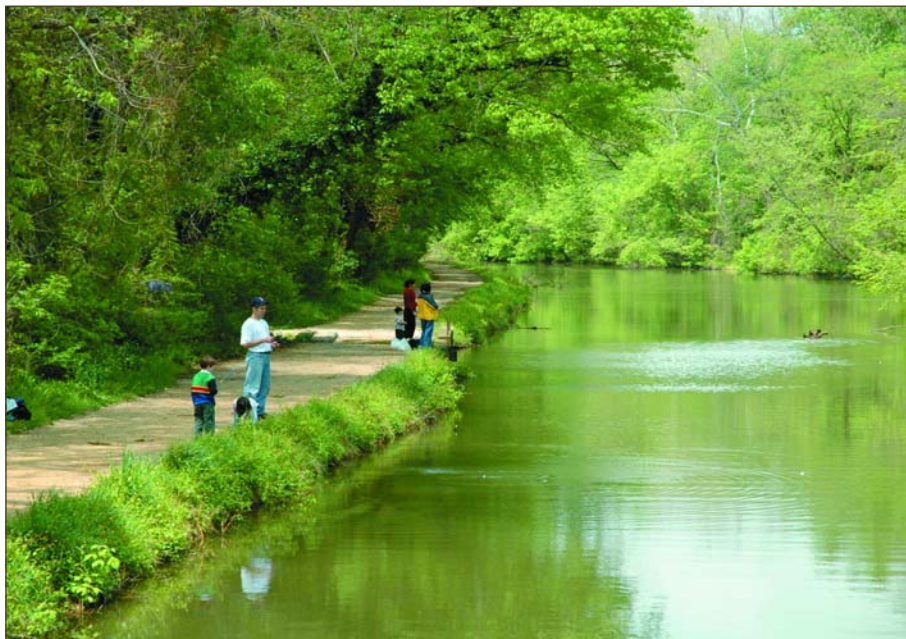
Even more importantly, natural processes such as stormwater storage and filtration may be disrupted permanently. City and regional growth puts additional pressure on wetlands and other low-lying, permeable areas to detain and filter stormwater during storms. Without adequate on-site treatment of stormwater in the built environment, natural areas are negatively impacted by a quantity and quality of water that causes so much damage that the area is no longer capable of treating any water. This, in turn, destroys the carrying capacity of streams and rivers, and damages flora and fauna that have existed in this area for thousands of years.



Trashfree Anacostia

Trash and sewage kept the Anacostia River from supporting a healthy community of fish and wildlife.





Fishing along the trail at the C&O Canal National Historic Park

National Park Service

## Opportunities

Washington’s natural areas, parks, and other urban green spaces provide significant ecological value as corridors for wildlife to move within and through the region, for stormwater storage during periods of flooding, and for filtering air- and water-borne pollutants. Beyond local ecosystems, Washington’s parks and open spaces play a role in mitigating climate change and restoring regional river systems throughout the larger Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Many of Washington’s urban natural areas are stream corridors that weave through the urban fabric and host diverse riparian and upland habitats for myriad bird and wildlife species. Further protection and restoration of these areas will create a stronger wildlife corridor system that can connect to each other and to natural areas throughout the mid-Atlantic region. As more green roof development continues in Washington, these spaces can expand these corridors to provide additional habitat opportunities for native flora and fauna.

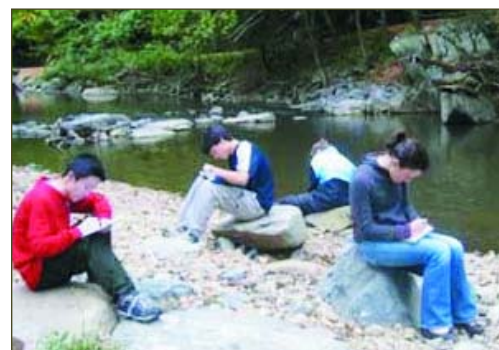
Washington’s trees, parks, and open spaces absorb carbon dioxide from the air, and wetlands help to improve water quality. Combined with the inclusion of sustainable design elements in new developments, urban natural areas can become a critical component of a green infrastructure system to improve environmental health. Advances in sustainable design technology and urban ecology allow for restoration of urban natural areas, and it is important to transform them into healthy, functioning ecosystems.

Urban wild areas are not only important because of their ecological benefits. Studies indicate that access to nature may have powerful preventative and curative impacts on personal health. For urban residents, nature can be a soothing and calm escape from the loud and harsh manmade environment, and natural areas can soften the hard edges of urban environments. Understanding how natural systems function and allowing residents and visitors to reconnect to nature helps create and retain a core group of advocates to protect and enhance these important spaces.



Hoopdreams 2009

To prevent illegal dumping of vehicles at Marvin Gaye Park, volunteers at the 2009 Hoopdreams Global Youth Service Day plant trees along its banks.



Alice Ferguson Foundation 2006

Journaling at Rock Creek

## Urban Natural Area Model Project

# Oxon Run Stream Corridor

Oxon Run is a natural system selected as a model project because a variety of public agencies, municipalities, and private and non-profit organizations are responsible for its management. Oxon Run, a tributary of the Potomac River, has lost most of its riparian habitats to urbanization. About 85 percent of the Oxon Run watershed within Washington is now directly connected to the storm sewer system, which significantly increases water velocity and reduces water quality. These existing conditions are not conducive to a healthy habitat for plants and animals.

Analyses based on field studies, stakeholder interviews, and research identified the major environmental challenges to the health of the Oxon Run watershed. The model project study also reviewed previous and ongoing restoration efforts, and provided recommendations specific to Oxon Run.

From this in-depth study, lessons were learned that informed recommendations on urban natural areas citywide, including:

- ◆ Habitat restoration
- ◆ Water quality improvements
- ◆ Improved recreation and community access
- ◆ Coordinated maintenance and monitoring
- ◆ Regulatory structures and policies

The Magnolia Bogs in the Oxon Run watershed are some of the last bogs known to exist in the Atlantic Coastal Plain area, and the only one of this type in the National Park Service inventory of wetlands.



National Park Service

## Lessons Learned

### **Involve Neighborhoods in Protecting Natural Areas**

Cities need natural landscapes because of the ecological functions they provide to developed areas, but natural areas also need neighbors to protect their functions for future generations.

### **Cooperation and Empowerment are Needed to Keep a Functioning Urban Ecosystem**

Natural resource issues do not always fall neatly within jurisdictional or political boundaries, and District entities must seek out and develop partnerships with each other, and with agencies and groups in neighboring jurisdictions.

### **Healthy Parks Help Create Healthy Communities**

Ecosystem-based approaches to park management can yield economic and environmental benefits.

### **Natural Areas Help Improve the Quality of Life for Neighbors**

Parks can improve an individual's well-being by providing a place to exercise and recreate, as well as engage residents and visitors in experiencing the natural world.

### **Increased Recreation Opportunities and Enhanced Ecological Functions are Not Mutually Exclusive**

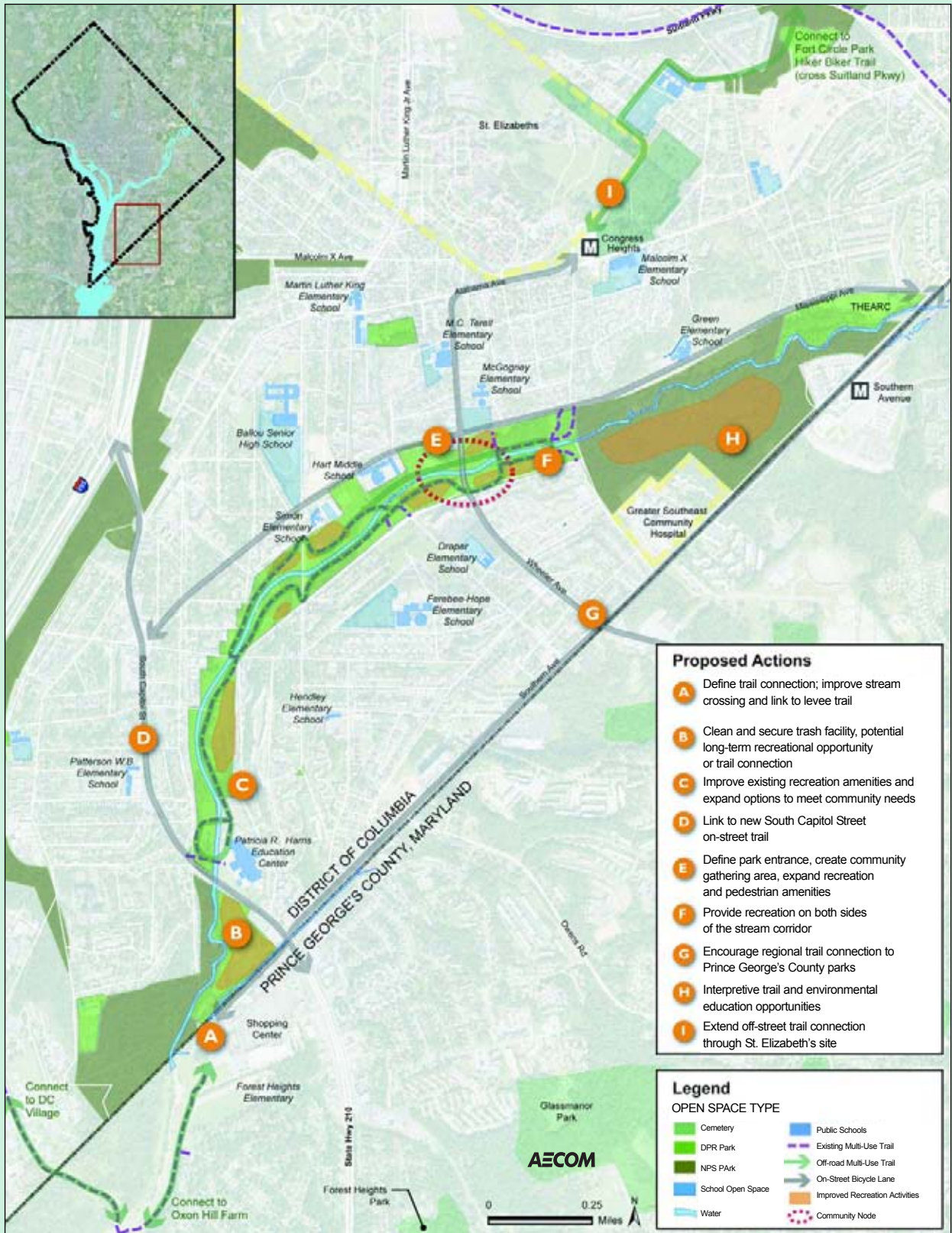
Increased park programming, environmentally compatible forms of recreation, and environmental education opportunities can be desirable in natural areas and can help increase stewardship of the park, build a park constituency, and instill a greater understanding of the intrinsic value of nature.



# Urban Natural Area Model Project

## Oxon Run Stream Corridor Recreation Recommendations

Oxon Run can become a catalyst for environmentally themed community activities in southeast DC if appropriately programmed. The map shows several opportunities for recreation and community access.



This map illustrates conceptual trail connections. Refer to current trail maps for actual existing, planned, and proposed trail alignments.

## Recommendations

# Enhance Urban Natural Areas

### Form an Urban Natural Areas Team (ENV-1)

The natural resources embedded in Washington's parks need a coordinated team of federal and local agencies, as well as local organizations, to ensure that they are protected.

- ◆ Map the ecological functions, including existing wildlife habitats, wetlands, floodplains, tree canopy, etc., within the parks and an open-space system to ensure there is a unified inventory of existing green infrastructure and essential ecological functions within the parks system.
- ◆ Coordinate future research efforts being undertaken on natural resources by the National Park Service, including the Center for Urban Ecology, the District government, and other federal agencies such as the Department of Agriculture.
- ◆ Launch a District-wide ecosystem research consortium to apply new research strategies to measure and protect ecological functions.
- ◆ Expand nature and interpretative programs in existing parks that promote an appreciation of environmental resources, and institute school curriculum and teacher training programs that promote stewardship of the natural resources and waterways.



Alice Ferguson Foundation 2006

Water testing at Rock Creek

### Protect Ecological Functions (ENV-2)

It is important to protect the ecological functions provided by natural areas and parks.

- ◆ Adopt clear, consistent, and shared goals among responsible agencies and adjacent jurisdictions for long-term resource management.
- ◆ Establish and implement a District-wide tree canopy goal that applies to local and federal parks.
- ◆ Adopt park management goals that support the conservation of native species, protect critical habitats, and increase biodiversity. Reintroduce native plants and eliminate exotic invasive species where feasible.
- ◆ Develop and map resource protection districts to minimize the impacts of urbanization and development on natural areas.
- ◆ Implement cooperative watershed management strategies with adjacent counties that engage stakeholders, leverage resources, and empower neighborhoods to limit pollution and stormwater run-off.
- ◆ Identify the role Washington's parks, open spaces, and rivers play in climate change, and adopt a climate adaptation plan for essential ecological functions as affected by global warming relative to floodplains and species migration. Successful adaptation planning is likely to require significant federal and local cooperation and collaboration.
- ◆ Identify the environmental corridors that create the physical connection of the park system within the city and connections to larger regional systems.
- ◆ Adopt park management goals that support restoration of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.



## Recommendations



Simulated photo of Kingman Island and the Anacostia River showing the construction of wetlands (bright green areas) along its banks.



### Synchronize Park Management Strategies among Jurisdictions (ENV-3)

The importance of Washington's parks transcends agency jurisdictions and municipal boundaries. Federal and local agencies need to coordinate and collaborate regularly.

- ◆ Identify and rank parks and open spaces in need of preservation and restoration. Target funding for programming, research, and mitigation based on greatest need.
- ◆ Target off-site environmental mitigation efforts towards enhancing or restoring designated urban natural areas.
- ◆ Develop uniform standards and employ best management practices in all parks and natural areas for maintenance and operations, stormwater, water usage, pest management, and recreation programming.
- ◆ Launch a demonstration project for a coordinated park maintenance team for a trial period to maximize existing resources, consolidate training time, and improve maintenance outcomes.
- ◆ Integrate environmental interpretation activities in a sustainable manner at ecologically significant parks.

### Build a Green Infrastructure Network (ENV-4)

Stormwater management, flood control, and water quality can be reliably managed by integration of natural systems with engineered design elements that work with nature, often at a reduced cost. Green infrastructure can perform many of the same services as gray or man-made infrastructure.

- ◆ Design and build new green infrastructure to supplement existing gray infrastructure, when possible.
- ◆ Designate green infrastructure as a public utility in capital programs.
- ◆ Launch a Green-Parks Training Program which will train employees on sustainable land management techniques.
- ◆ Better connect green roof habitats to animal migration programs and patterns.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



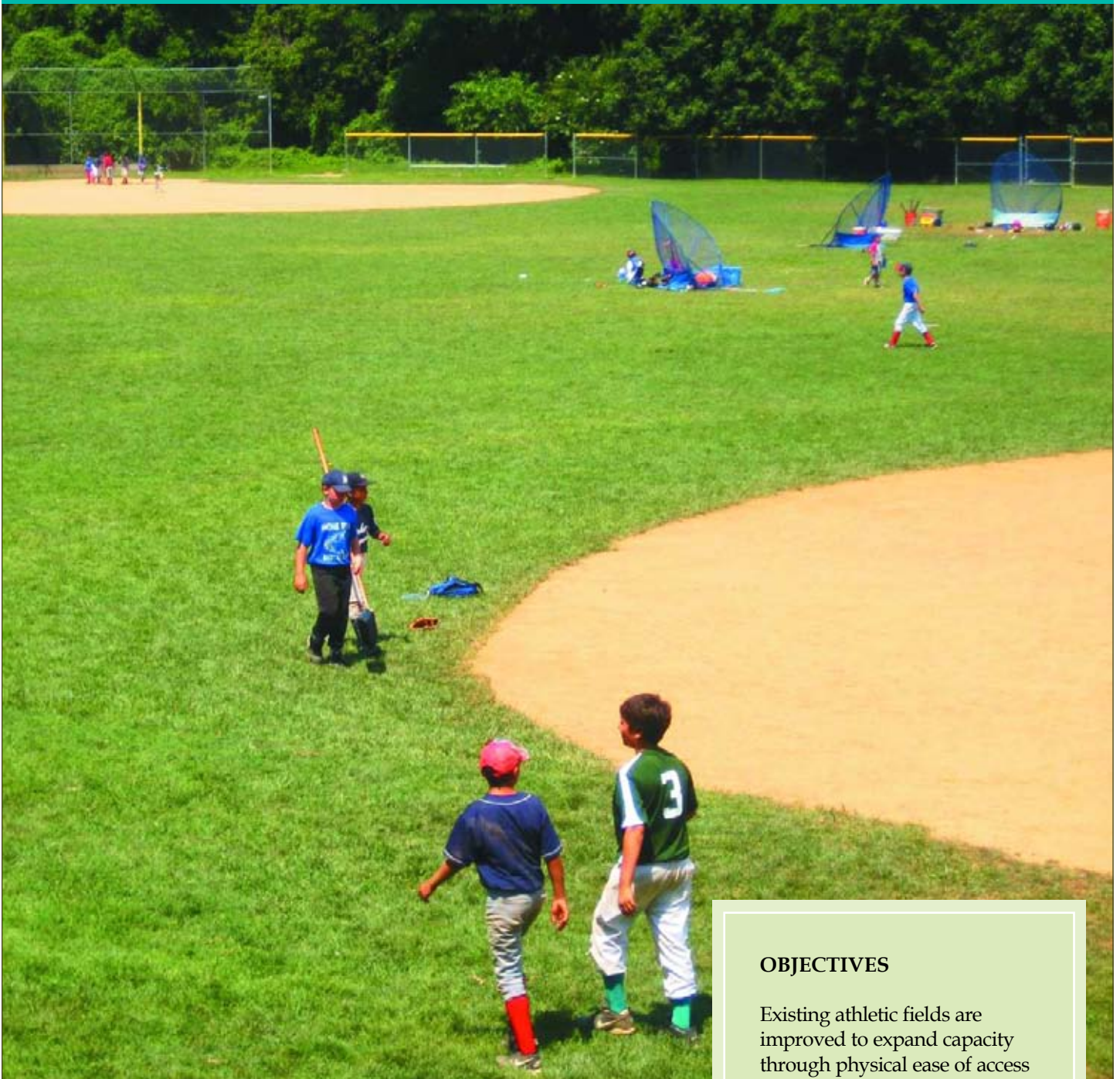
Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Celebrate Urban Parks



Expand Park System Capacity



DC Department of Parks and Recreation

Little League baseball continues to be a popular pastime in Washington.

**OBJECTIVES**

Existing athletic fields are improved to expand capacity through physical ease of access and permitting. Appropriate levels of maintenance are funded and implemented to further increase capacity.



## 4

# Improve Playfields



## Big Idea in Action

**I**n the future, Washingtonians will be able to enjoy playing a wide array of team sports on high quality, safe fields. Multi-purpose turf fields distributed across the city accommodate team play of all types, including soccer, baseball, lacrosse, football, cricket, ultimate Frisbee, rugby, field hockey, softball, and kickball.

As a highly sought after recreational resource, athletic facilities will be accorded the highest level of design, construction, and upkeep.

Athletic fields will be enhanced by the addition of synthetic turf and lighting where possible. This will allow more intensive use of these spaces while still ensuring superior playing conditions. Fields that retain their natural turf will be improved with grass species that are better designed to withstand Washington's intensive field play and hot and humid summers. At various times throughout the year, fields will be closed to play to allow the turf a sufficient time to regrow. Both natural and artificial turf fields will benefit from a dedicated funding stream for capital projects and maintenance.

A new online permitting system will allow organized sports leagues and informal pick-up teams alike to easily locate, reserve, and permit any sports facility in Washington regardless of which agency has management jurisdiction over the field.

Well-maintained playfields like this one at Upshur Recreation Center in Upper Northwest encourage an active lifestyle and can become one of the central gathering spaces of the community.

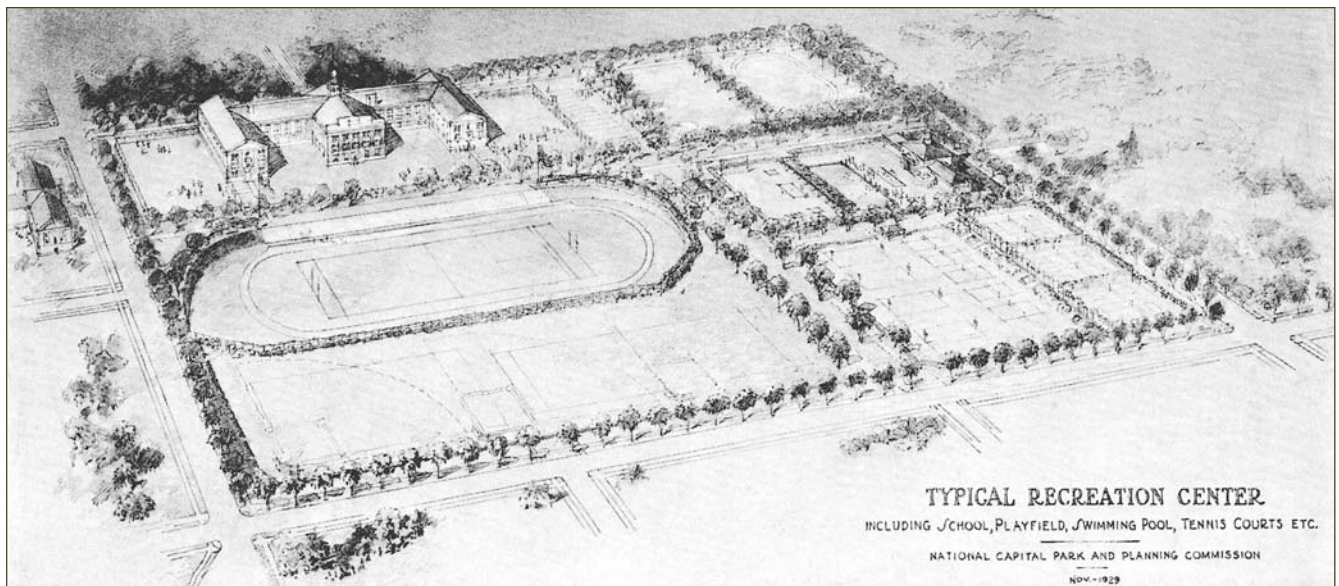
## Brief History of Active Recreation in Washington

The first active recreation facility in Washington available to the public opened when the privately operated Neighborhood House constructed a playground in 1901. Active recreation facilities were not provided by a government agency until 1911, when the Playground Department and Board of Education were authorized to provide community-oriented recreation. In 1911, the District Commissioners created the Department of Playgrounds to administer municipal land used for playgrounds and athletic fields. A second municipal agency, the Board of Education, also planned to increase recreational use at their facilities by increasing the number and size of playgrounds and athletic fields at all of Washington's schools. In 1916, a collaborative agreement between the Board of Education and the Department of Playgrounds resulted in public recreation facilities on school grounds becoming increasingly accessible to children after school hours and during the summer.

Prior to the 1930s, most active recreation facilities in the District were located at District operated playgrounds or public school sites. However, between 1933 and 1942, the National Capital Parks, a division of the National Park Service, had a recreation division charged with the construction, maintenance, and operation of many recreational facilities in the parks of Washington. While it was the policy of the federal government not to engage in supervised recreation, National Capital Parks built and maintained facilities for 30 major sports. Almost every conceivable type of athletic activity was available for park users through permits, and National Capital Parks arranged and supervised public events, such as band and symphony concerts, as well as major celebrations, ceremonies, and dedications in the parks.

In April 1942, Congress authorized creation of a District of Columbia Recreation Board. With both federal and District representation, the board was given authority to determine general policy for public recreation in the District and to supervise and direct the expenditure of all federal appropriations and local funds made available for recreation in Washington.

This 1929 NCPPC plan included athletic fields as a typical component of recreation centers in Washington.





The board developed a comprehensive public recreation program offering physical, social, emotional, and creative opportunities in the major parks, publicly-owned buildings, and other recreational facilities agreed upon by the Board and the agencies with jurisdiction over them. The public properties utilized by the Board included those designated by National Capital Park and Planning Commission as suitable and desirable units of the District's recreational system.

In 1949, the District and the National Park Service entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) detailing the roles and responsibilities of the NPS and the District government regarding the use of lands subject to the agreement, the maintenance and improvement of these lands and facilities, and the transfer of funds. To carry out the terms of the agreement, the Recreation Board was authorized to transfer to the relevant agencies such funds, equipment, and personnel as may be necessary.

The original MOA was to remain in effect until cancelled by either party. The MOA was amended several times to include additional federal park areas. In 1966, and again in 1972, its duration was changed to 25 years "at the end of which period it shall remain in effect until cancelled upon 30 days' notice by either party to this agreement."

In 1974, the Home Rule Act abolished the Recreation Board and Superintendent of Recreation. The functions of the superintendent were transferred to the Mayor of the District of Columbia. Since Home Rule, most recreational properties under title of the government of the District of Columbia, and some, but not all of those still titled to the United States government but with administrative jurisdiction of the District, are managed by the DC Department of Parks and Recreation. The NPS maintains overall management of the designated national parks within Washington, although DPR provides permitting services for certain NPS fields.



The Watkins Hornets, who practice on the football field at Watkins Recreation Center, won the 2009 Pee Wee Division One National Championship

DC Department of Parks and Recreation



DC Department of Parks and Recreation

The playfield at Fort Stanton before (left) and after (right) a 2008 - 2009 renovation. The field now uses Patriot Bermudagrass, a warm season grass that is drought and heat tolerant, resistant to most pests, and holds up well to heavy use year-round.

## Challenges

Washington, like many cities and suburban communities across the country, faces pressure to increase the number of playfields for team sports, including soccer, football, and baseball. The growing population in Washington, along with the demands for active recreation spaces, is exerting pressure on the existing fields. As such, meeting needs for active recreational fields in Washington's urban environment is becoming challenging.

Locating new fields is both difficult and expensive because of the limited amount of available land. Because of the nature of organized competitive play, it may not be as important to have competition-quality athletic fields located within close proximity of people's homes as people are likely to travel to another part of the city to play. It may be more important to ensure that the District maximizes the capacity of the existing fields to accommodate new demands and, where feasible, locates new fields closer to public transit.

The quality of Washington's playfields can mitigate the lack of quantity. The condition of a recreation field has a direct relationship to the usability or performance of the field for active recreation purposes. Field condition is influenced by many variables such as weather, topography, type of use, frequency of use, budget, maintenance standards, and programs. The impact of field conditions can extend beyond capacity issues; some jurisdictions face legal questions and liability issues associated with poorly designed, constructed, or maintained fields.

Maintenance of athletic fields in Washington is a critical challenge for the NPS, DPR, and DC Public Schools. Maintenance is constrained by a variety of reasons, including increasing user demand, an insufficient supply of field facilities and field types, a growth in sport leagues and tournament play, over-use of facilities, limited funding, lack of expertise, and overall coordination. Over time, deferred maintenance can accelerate field deterioration or even lead to unsafe playing conditions.

Both DPR and the NPS experience high demand for recreational field permits in Washington and in most instances, capacity for permits is reached soon after the permitting season opens. High demand is driven by the large number of league teams that compete for space and the limited number of suitable playing fields and available hours. Multiple separate and uncoordinated recreation field permitting processes exist (mainly through DPR and the various NPS park units within Washington) with their own application process, season, requirements, and fees.



## Opportunities

DPR, the NPS, and DCPS can cooperatively implement a comprehensive strategy to increase the capacity of existing playfields in Washington. This strategy can include facility and maintenance improvements to improve field conditions, as well as simplifying the permitting process so that individuals, teams, and leagues have an easier time accessing existing playfields.

Currently, DPR, the NPS, and DCPS have methodologies in place to prioritize fields for improvements following a condition evaluation. Field evaluations and surveys conducted on a regular basis could help guide infrastructure investments to areas that are underserved and/or experiencing declining facility conditions. A more detailed condition analysis could be a factor for identifying target areas for improvement and increasing capacity. Improving field conditions or installing features that allow fields to be used more often could also help alleviate current demand. Examples include converting grass fields to synthetic turf or installing lights. Condition assessments and inspections can be conducted regularly to ensure field conditions are adequate and safe and that any issues are addressed within a reasonable timeframe to ensure fields can be used to their full capacity.

As part of its mission to conserve natural and historic areas, the NPS management policies restrict certain improvements to playfields, such as artificial turf or artificial lighting. As such, District playfields are better suited for physical improvements that can accommodate formal league play.

More progressive and sustainable maintenance practices can be pursued if resources are available after basic maintenance requirements are met. Currently, field maintenance standards either do not exist (DPR) or if they do exist, are only modestly followed (NPS) due to limited funding and/or lack of expertise. In addition, the demand for playing time routinely takes priority over field maintenance, contributing to deferred maintenance and poor playing conditions. Closing fields to give them time to regenerate may reduce short-term capacity but can provide significant long-term benefits through improved playing conditions.

Ongoing fiscal restraints exacerbate the underfunding of field maintenance programs in Washington, lowering turf quality and field capacity. Dedicated funding for field maintenance by the public agencies, as well as new opportunities for public-private partnerships to provide high-quality fields, should be explored.

Improving access to fields by permit process coordination and improvements can help increase the capacity of Washington's fields. While underlying regulations and rules need to be retained based on a field's jurisdiction (NPS or DPR), more seamless and coordinated permitting could result in a more user-friendly process.

Although land availability is tight in Washington, one strategy to pursue is the creation of consolidated recreation facilities with multiple fields and other new recreational amenities at available sites. This can alleviate the specific shortage of fields in the city and the existing pressures on existing fields.



DC Department of Parks and Recreation

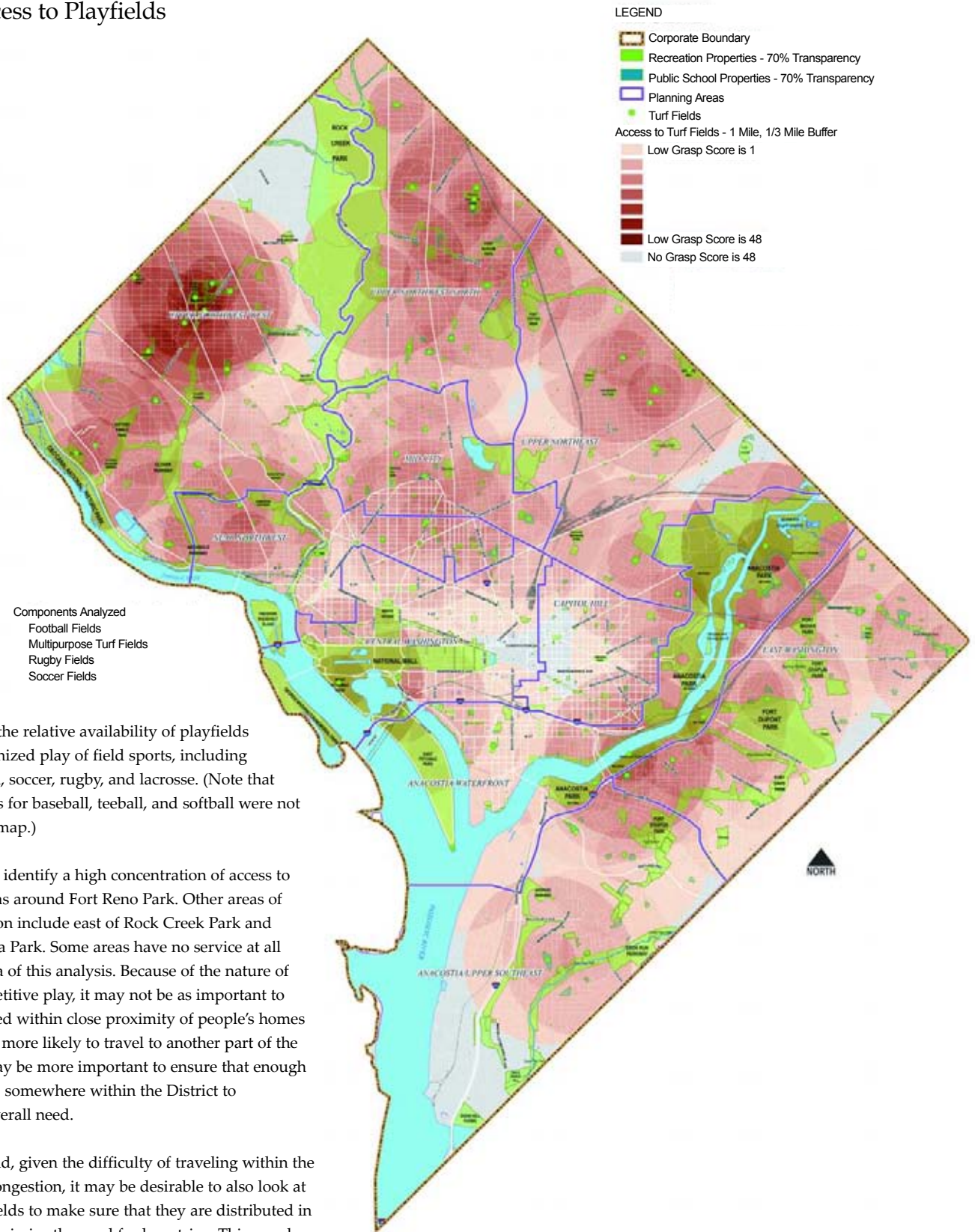
## Maintenance of Playfields

Maintenance has not kept pace with user demands. Ongoing fiscal restraints result in challenges to playfield maintenance programs, lowering turf quality and field capacity. Neither the NPS nor DPR currently have the ability to dedicate significant specific funds for athletic field maintenance. On some DPR fields, users (permit holders) assist with providing field maintenance activities so that fields are ready for play.

In 2007, the DC Sports & Entertainment Commission Board of Directors approved a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DC Public Schools to manage the \$21.5 million renovation of five athletic fields and associated facilities on DCPS facilities. Renovation schedules are based on the DCPS Master Facilities Plan. All facilities will receive high quality tracks and synthetic field surfaces used at many college and professional stadiums, as well as upgrades to bleachers, press boxes, and other amenities where feasible.

Certain projects funded by DPR can build in costs associated with maintenance if related to a warranty; however, this approach is project-specific and maintenance needs are District-wide. DPR uses the capital improvement process to address field renovations on a yearly basis but only a certain amount of fields can be funded each year. Likewise, the NPS does not have a specific fund for field maintenance and volunteers play a less active role in field maintenance.

## Access to Playfields



The map shows the relative availability of playfields suitable for organized play of field sports, including those for football, soccer, rugby, and lacrosse. (Note that “diamond” fields for baseball, teeball, and softball were not included in this map.)

The darker areas identify a high concentration of access to playfields in areas around Fort Reno Park. Other areas of high concentration include east of Rock Creek Park and around Anacostia Park. Some areas have no service at all under the criteria of this analysis. Because of the nature of organized competitive play, it may not be as important to have fields located within close proximity of people’s homes because they are more likely to travel to another part of the city to play. It may be more important to ensure that enough fields are located somewhere within the District to accommodate overall need.

On the other hand, given the difficulty of traveling within the District due to congestion, it may be desirable to also look at the location of fields to make sure that they are distributed in such a way to minimize the need for long trips. This may be a combination of scheduling and programming, as well as providing facilities. Placing fields at transit-accessible locations whenever possible would be another option.



## Permitting Playfields: Learning from Local Jurisdictions

Both DPR and the NPS experience a high demand for recreational field permits and in most instances capacity for permits is reached soon after the permitting season opens. This high demand is driven by the large number of league teams that compete for space and the limited number of suitable playfields and available hours. Improving access to fields by permit process improvements could result in increased efficiencies and capacity. While underlying regulations and rules need to be retained based on a field's jurisdiction (the NPS or DPR), a more seamless and coordinated permitting process could result in a more user-friendly process. To develop recommendations on improving the permitting process for playfields within Washington, the CapitalSpace partners analyzed the processes of other jurisdictions in the region, including the City of Alexandria and the counties of Fairfax, Arlington, and Montgomery. Information analyzed included permitting trends, agency responsibility and organization, and revenue.

Key points learned from this analysis are summarized below.

- ◆ New athletic field amenities, such as synthetic turf, help communities meet increased demand and can increase the capacity level for a number of different active recreation fields and facilities. Furthermore, maintenance programs can be structured to further streamline maintenance and provide more play time.
- ◆ Permit fees are not typically linked to specific field improvements, but instead, are directed to a general fund that is used for multiple purposes.
- ◆ Fee structures vary and are tailored to each jurisdiction. However, based on the communities studied, fees are higher (significantly in some cases) than those fees charged by either DPR or the NPS.
- ◆ Fees increase substantially for non-residents and for use of synthetic turf fields.
- ◆ Multiple ways to apply for permits help expedite and simplify the permitting process.
- ◆ Enforcement is a common issue that is being addressed in different ways based on available resources such as contracting with local police, hired field monitors, or through a dedicated unit within a parks department.

Various application systems used by other jurisdictions were studied, such as this online permit application form used by Montgomery County, Maryland.



## Recommendations

# Improve Playfields

Community benefit agreements from new development near playfields could be a resource for ongoing maintenance and improvements.



### Maintain or Expand Current Recreation Field Capacity (REC-1)

The relatively good access to athletic fields that District residents across the city share should be maintained.

- ◆ Thoroughly evaluate the impact of any proposed change to (including reduction of) any recreation field, and ensure facilities are provided and appropriately located consistent with the neighborhood context and citywide demand.

### Increase Field Capacity Where Feasible (REC-2)

The NPS and DPR both experience high demand for athletic fields, and capacity is soon reached after permitting season opens.

- ◆ Develop a coordinated field assessment and evaluation program for the NPS, DCPS, and DPR so that public investments are guided to those fields in the poorest condition and to areas of Washington experiencing the highest needs.
- ◆ Develop a field use report inclusive of DPR, DCPS, and the NPS fields for improving capacity through access, scheduling, and improving field allocation.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated field improvement plan and capital program for the NPS, DCPS, and DPR fields that uses a collaboratively developed methodology for assessing field conditions based on where the greatest needs for improvements are located.
- ◆ Develop multi-use sports complexes that can accommodate a range of sports uses and include new athletic fields.
- ◆ Convert selected fields to synthetic surfaces to achieve goals of increased capacity, improved durability, and enhanced safety where environmental impacts can be mitigated.
- ◆ Explore opportunities to add lighting to DPR and DCPS fields to expand the time that they can be used.
- ◆ Pursue opportunities for private sector recreation providers to help agencies meet active recreation needs through new facilities and programs.
- ◆ Establish a mechanism to regularly coordinate athletic field programming, capital improvements, and permitting between federal and local agencies.



## Recommendations

### Improve Field Maintenance (REC-3)

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More progressive and sustainable maintenance practices can be pursued if resources are available after basic maintenance requirements are met.

- ◆ Develop field maintenance standards that maximize opportunities to integrate sustainable practices.
- ◆ Revise sports field availability schedules to accommodate:
  - ◆ Full maintenance program requirements (pre and post- season maintenance)
  - ◆ Required in-season recuperative down time (closing fields/field rotation)
  - ◆ Playing time caps, practice time caps, and team/league caps
  - ◆ Unstructured play in certain locations
- ◆ Set up a dedicated funding stream for field maintenance to ensure that fields are ready for play and that conditions do not further deteriorate.
- ◆ Link developer contributions to field upgrades and/or long-term maintenance of fields within proximity of the subject development.
- ◆ Explore opportunities for agencies with jurisdiction to jointly fund field improvements and maintenance.
- ◆ Develop an adopt-a-field program to help attract private funding sources for field improvements.

### Simplify the Permitting Process (REC-4)

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Improving access to fields by permit process coordination and improvements can help increase the capacity of Washington's fields.

- ◆ Develop an on-line permit application system that integrates the NPS, DPR, and DCPS properties.
- ◆ Develop allocation policies to ensure accessibility to fields by managing the increasing demand for field time and reducing the monopolization of fields by a few user groups.
- ◆ Align permitting authority with park jurisdiction to simplify the process, give greater control for permitting to the jurisdictional agency, and ensure that permit costs are directed to the jurisdiction responsible for maintenance.
- ◆ Increase the permit fees to partially recover impact costs and align with permit fees levied by neighboring jurisdictions.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated permit enforcement strategy (urban rangers, volunteers, etc.).
- ◆ Provide consistent signage at all fields to indicate which agency manages the field, what the regulations are, and whom to contact for more information.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Connect with Rivers



Celebrate Urban Parks



Expand Park System Capacity



Link the City with Green Corridors



McPherson Square

**OBJECTIVES**

Center City parks are appropriately maintained, enhanced, preserved, and programmed in a manner that values their role as places of national, cultural, and historical significance, and recognizes their recreational and environmental contributions to the health and well-being of downtown neighborhoods.

Center City parks are supported by an engaged park constituency that includes strong partnerships between District and federal managing agencies and individuals, businesses, and organizations.



## 5

# Enhance Center City Parks

## Big Idea in Action



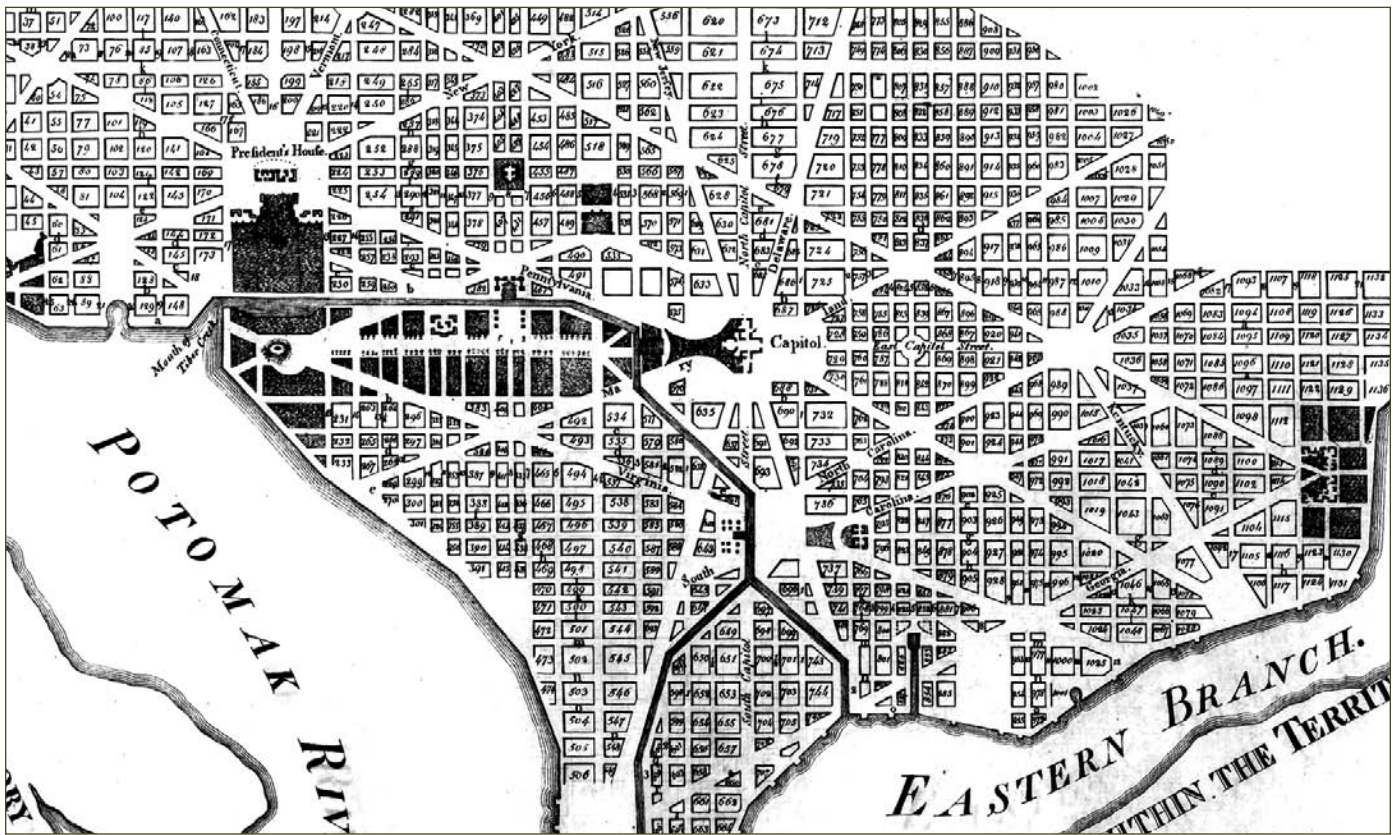
In the future, residents and workers embrace Center City parks and open space near their homes and offices as places to have a cup of coffee with friends, read a book, play with their kids, surf the Web, buy fresh bread at a farmers market, or just relax to take in the fresh air and sunshine. Visitors delight in learning about our collective American experience through cultural markers and commemorative works as they explore the historic squares and energetic urban avenues in the Center City. Others come together in these spaces to listen to a free concert or rally for a national cause.

To achieve this future, the District and federal governments, along with the growing business and neighborhood communities, join forces to meet the expanding demands for recreational opportunities in the Center City and improve the condition of its existing parks and open space.

The L'Enfant Plan's squares, circles, and triangles are restored and enhanced, filled with well-maintained trees, grass, flowers, monuments, and fountains, as well as activities that provide exciting urban experiences. In addition, sidewalks and streets surrounding parks, as well as street corridors that connect the parks will be filled with trees, lighting, benches, and outdoor cafes. Events and other recreational activities in these spaces will contribute to vibrant outdoor activities in the Center City. The parks' uniqueness and national significance are recognized as prime assets to the Center City's quality of life.

Some Center City parks will build upon the tradition of Dupont Circle, and become a community hub and provide a strong sense of neighborhood identity. In places where minimal park space has existed, new approaches for recreation will use street rights-of-ways, public properties, existing yards, or other public assets.

Dupont Circle has become the central gathering space of its namesake neighborhood and contributes to its economic vitality.



Washington's circles and squares were designed by L'Enfant to provide visual and physical reference points in the urban landscape and serve as centers of the proposed neighborhoods he hoped would develop throughout the planned city. It was not until after the Civil War, however, that grassy parks were located within most of these open spaces.

## Brief History of Center City Parks

While the L'Enfant Plan had grand intentions for Washington's parks and open spaces, due to fiscal challenges it took decades before many of them were more than dirt passageways. Apart from the National Mall, President's Park (including what is now Lafayette Square), and the United States Capitol Grounds, Washington Circle and Franklin Park (previously known as Fountain Square) were the only park spaces maintained consistently by the federal government in the early 19th century. Significant completion of the L'Enfant Plan did not occur until after the Civil War, when Washington experienced large population growth.

During the late nineteenth century, several important center city parks within the open spaces identified in the L'Enfant Plan were constructed. These include McPherson, Farragut, and Mount Vernon Squares, as well as Scott, Thomas, and Dupont Circles. These were often designed as formal gardens surrounded by carriageways, and provided more passive recreation opportunities for the homes and residential buildings encircling the spaces. Similar park improvements were made in the small triangle parks along the major avenues. Congressional reports on parks reflected the popular belief that their development could lead to societal reform, contribute to the health and well-being of residents, and provide much-needed employment in the war-ravaged capital.

Growth of the city continued into the twentieth century, and the neighborhood context surrounding many Center City parks changed from residential to commercial. As commerce grew within the Center City, many of the parks were reconfigured to accommodate greater traffic and new traffic patterns, and some of the smallest parks were removed or paved over as concrete traffic islands. In addition, the design of the parks themselves evolved over time to reflect current aesthetic ideals, accommodate new memorials, improve security, or ease





Library of Congress

Thomas Circle circa 1922

maintenance in response to limited budgets. Franklin Park, for example, was redesigned several times and went from a curvilinear, naturalistic design aesthetic in 1888 to a more symmetrical park design of the 1930s, which is relatively retained to this day. During this time, center city parks were maintained by the District's Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, and improvements of the parks reinforced their importance as neighborhood amenities.

By the second half of the 20th century, new parks were created within many of the Center City's urban renewal areas. Sometimes these projects were characterized by large-scale redevelopment with significant park and open space resources accessible to the public; other times, projects involved open space and recreational amenities available only to residents. Some original open spaces identified in the L'Enfant Plan were significantly altered or disappeared altogether during this period. It was also during this time that new designs in commercial buildings and federal office spaces began to provide publicly accessible plazas and courtyards as open space amenities.

Interest in restoring or reclaiming the Center City's historic squares, streets, and original rights-of-ways that have been disrupted or closed is increasing during the early 21st century. Protecting the visual openness and functional qualities of the L'Enfant Plan is a high priority. In addition, there is a strong commitment to reinforce the Center City's, and Washington's, relationship to the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers through new development. These include improved waterfront access and new parks and active open space along the waterfront. As the cost of land in Center City continues to rise because of residential and commercial demand, there is a new push to use public properties and the air-rights above depressed highways and rail lines for new office, residential, hotel, and cultural development, and to reclaim land for parks and multi-purpose open spaces.



Lafayette Park

## Challenges



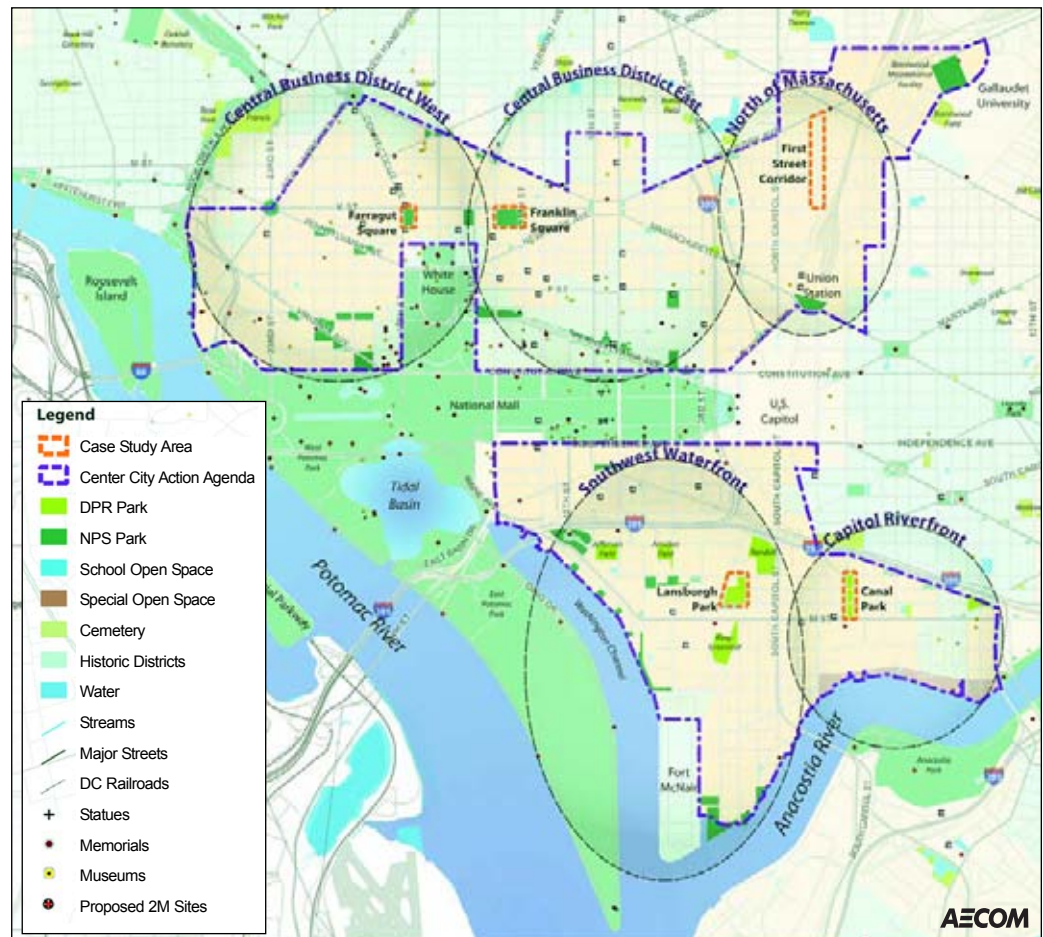
Issues related to homelessness are challenges that are not park specific and require a coordinated management approach among the District, federal agencies, and other partners.

The majority of Center City parks are relatively small. The deficiency of medium and large sized parks puts pressure on the National Mall, East and West Potomac Parks, school properties, and areas outside Center City to provide fields and other active recreational facilities. Additional challenges for Center City’s urban parks include:

- ◆ A lack of diversity in the type of parks needed to serve emerging residential areas.
- ◆ Insufficient resources to enhance and maintain the parks appropriately.
- ◆ A high cost of land that makes it difficult to add new parks.
- ◆ No cohesive approach to park design, security (including issues such as homelessness and drug dealing), partnerships, and programming.
- ◆ Lack of flexibility in existing federal and District laws, regulations, and policies in programming to keep parks more active and secure.

Central Business Districts East and West are relatively built-out areas of the Center City. Open space is primarily found within the historic circles, squares, and triangles of this area, as well as the wide avenues that connect many of these places. Given that most of these spaces contain commemorative features and historic landscapes, improvements to their physical character and how they are used in terms of events and concessions must consider how the historical and cultural resources will be impacted.

The Center City, as defined for CapitalSpace, is the dense urban area surrounding the National Mall and U.S. Capitol. Neighborhoods within the Center City have their own distinct character, issues, and opportunities related to parks and open space. Case study analyses were completed for Farragut and Franklin Squares, Washington Canal Park, and the NoMa First Street, NE corridor to better understand issues and opportunities within these subregions.





The Southwest Waterfront district has a number of mixed-use projects that will be redeveloped in the early 21st century, and contains a significant number of active play fields and recreation centers when compared to the rest of the Center City. However, with I-395 to the north and South Capitol Street to the east acting as major barriers, the Southwest Waterfront area remains isolated from the rest of the Center City neighborhoods and the other parks and recreational amenities found there.

NoMa and the Capitol Riverfront are undergoing significant transformations from low-density, primarily industrial uses, to dense, mixed-use communities. However, these areas lack existing parks to accommodate the demand for recreational space from new residents and workers.

## Opportunities

Throughout the Center City, opportunities exist to improve the park system as a whole, including:

- ◆ Shape a greater understanding of the national significance of the historical and cultural resources of the Center City parks, grand avenues and streets, and the statues and monuments within them.
- ◆ Increase the recreational capacity of existing parks and open space through targeted capital improvements and maintenance beyond clean and safe.
- ◆ Build upon the existing structure of partnerships to address specific needs and coordinate park stewardship to improve efficiencies in management, programming, and maintenance.

Within Central Business Districts West and East, efforts were made to enliven many of the historic park spaces through physical improvements, such as new lighting, benches, and seasonal plantings, as well as free concerts and other events. Continued physical improvements and increased programming at the parks will enable them to better meet the recreational needs that residents, workers, and visitors in these areas desire. But it is not just park spaces that can meet these needs. The streets and sidewalks that surround the parks could support park-related events and activities, as well as associated public art, landscaping, sidewalk concessionaires, outdoor seating, signage, and special paving.

There is significant redevelopment in the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood. Of particular note are mixed-use developments at the former Waterside Mall and along the Washington Channel that will add high-quality open space in the form of retail streets, and new parks and plazas along the waterfront. An improved green streetscape throughout the neighborhood can connect these new spaces with the existing active recreation fields in the community, creating a network of parks and open space within the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood that meets a variety of its recreational needs. Further enhancement of the connections between the Southwest Waterfront and the other neighborhoods will improve the availability of a variety of parks and recreational activities for all residents, visitors, and workers within the Center City.

Within the NoMa and Capitol Riverfront neighborhoods, local workers, residents, developers, and business improvement districts are working with the District to explore alternative ways to create new parkland. In NoMa, the effort is focused on creating a linear network of parks and open space along First and K Streets, and on land associated with the Metropolitan Branch Trail. In the Capitol Riverfront, the community is working with the District to create Canal Park, a signature community park on property previously used for other municipal purposes. As these areas grow, opportunities for new public parks at other available public property or within private developments, such as the waterfront park at The Yards, will be pursued.

## Center City Parks Model Projects



Farragut Square is located between 17th, K and I Streets, NW.

### Farragut Square and Franklin Park

Farragut Square and Franklin Park, in Northwest DC, are under the National Park Service jurisdiction and provide 1.5 and 5 acres of historic parkland, respectively. Used during the day by commuters and office workers and with the potential to serve the growing downtown residential base on weekends, both parks suffer from a perception that they are unsafe due to a large number of homeless people often present in the area. Landscaping and design changes have occurred in each park over the years. The Downtown DC and the Golden Triangle Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are active partners in maintaining and programming in the parks, as well as addressing issues related to homelessness and safety.



Studios Architecture

A 2009 Canal Park rendering shows a cafe, water feature and plaza.

### Canal Park

Washington Canal Park is a 1.8 acre public park planned by the District and the Capitol Riverfront BID for the center of an emerging high density, mixed-use development district along M Street, SEA, near Nationals Park and the United States Department of Transportation headquarters. Located in an area underserved in park and recreational resources, the park will transform a contaminated and abandoned bus lot to create a new amenity in a growing community, offering a place for active and passive recreation, a setting for public art, unique water and sustainable elements, and other programmed uses. The park is scheduled to open to the public in 2011.



DC Office of Planning

Plans for First Street were first identified in the DC Office of Planning's 2006 NoMa Vision Plan and Development Strategy.

### NoMa First Street, NE Linear Park

The First Street, NE network of open space is one component of a park and open-space strategy for the emerging NoMa area. The open spaces, most of which are yet to be constructed, will be created in the existing street right-of-way and along the Metropolitan Branch Trail in an area that lacks park and open-space amenities. The NoMa BID projects significant development levels through 2015 which could bring over 15,000 new residents to the NoMa community, increasing the demand for park and recreational resources. A 33-foot setback on each side of First Street will provide a setting for the linear park, offering generous room for gathering places, seating, landscaping, and other design elements to complement the new mixed-use neighborhood.



## Center City Parks Model Projects



“Sounds in the Square” is a summer concert series in Farragut Square sponsored by the Golden Triangle BID.

### Lessons Learned

- ◆ Center City parks are truly urban and unique from other parks in Washington’s surrounding neighborhoods. The experiences they offer, both in use and character, should be celebrated. These parks should not be made to conform with idealized suburban park landscapes and uses.
- ◆ Due to their continuity and mission, the BIDs in the Center City represent strong partnership opportunities to move from a clean and safe standard for the parks to something higher that reflects the quality of the new surrounding development. Specific partnerships, however, should be tailored to best suit the requirements and needs of the individual BIDs and park agencies.
- ◆ A park’s period of historical significance and new maintenance requirements are primary factors when considering new design elements.
- ◆ Programming, vending, partnership agreements, and other support services can add vitality to a park. At the NPS managed parks, some of these can be achieved through existing NPS legislation, policies, and regulations. However, desired modern urban uses of these spaces often conflict with the NPS’ service-wide management and preservation methods for its traditional parks.
- ◆ The District has demonstrated its willingness to re-purpose city land for parks.
- ◆ Local community and business groups are willing to raise funds for design, construction, maintenance, and programming if assured some level of control.
- ◆ Coordinated development and creative use of area-wide public space can bring about results on a large scale not possible on a site-by-site basis.
- ◆ Development guidelines for public space maintained by adjacent property owners is one strategy to promote a high-quality environment and community identity.
- ◆ Sustainable design practices that balance paving and landscaped areas can promote walkability and define community image.

## Recommendations

# Enhance Center City Parks

The DC Office of Planning began the Mount Vernon Square District Project in 2009, which includes recommendations for improving parks and open space in the neighborhood.



### Meet Park and Open Space Demands (CCP-1)

Increase capacity of existing parks by improving quality, diversity in amenities, programming, and access to green spaces.

- ◆ Identify and target capital improvements to repair and replace infrastructure and amenities, including quality landscaping, that will allow increased park usage.
- ◆ Explore the implementation and implication of a no net loss of green space approach for outdoor active recreational amenities.
- ◆ Identify opportunities to repurpose publicly owned spaces for park use.
- ◆ Consider the capacity of parks to function as neighborhood amenities when designing memorial and monument installations.
- ◆ Where appropriate, and to the maximum extent possible, re-establish public access to outdoor public spaces that have been closed for safety and security reasons, including schools and federal facilities.
- ◆ Enhance connections between parks with improved green streetscapes that include pedestrian and bicycle facilities.
- ◆ Create and maintain an online system for information on federal and local government park resources.

### Build Stronger Partnerships and Resources (CCP-2)

Build and strengthen community support through partnerships with businesses, residents, workers, and visitors.

- ◆ While maintaining tailored approaches within partnerships to address specific needs, coordinate park stewardship to improve efficiencies in management, programming, and maintenance.
- ◆ Maintain and build on existing arrangements with Business Improvement Districts and other groups to supplement maintenance and programming.
- ◆ The District and federal agencies should develop management, maintenance, and programming guidelines for required publicly accessible open space on private sites.
- ◆ The District should identify one responsible agency or office to manage District agreements regarding parks and open spaces with developers or other responsible parties.



## Recommendations



This section of Indiana Avenue across from the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial plaza is an example of how Center City sidewalks can be transformed into a parklike greenway.

### Utilize Placemaking and Programming to Expand Recreational Opportunities (CCP-3)

Create unique places for neighborhoods, strengthen the overall identity of parks and open space, and identify strategies to expand programs and amenity options.

- ◆ Identify specific parks for tailored design and programming efforts to encourage public use and celebrate the uniqueness of the neighborhood.
- ◆ Incorporate sustainable design features, low-impact development, and other greening techniques into new and existing parks and park improvements.
- ◆ Establish design guidelines that reinforce existing regulations promoting visual openness and continuity in the corridors between park spaces.
- ◆ Research, identify, and reinforce historical design elements as defining characteristics of Center City parks, including the use of elements like rounded curbs, fences, and benches that have been used historically in Center City parks. Create a palette of elements that are a basis on which to build additional amenities.
- ◆ Use elements such as public art, landscaping, sidewalk concessionaires, outdoor seating, street furniture, and special paving as a way to connect events and activities in parks to adjacent spaces and the surrounding neighborhood.
- ◆ Research, define historical significance, and build an understanding and appreciation of the park and neighborhood history through increased signage, promotions, programming, and other opportunities.
- ◆ Pursue changes to laws, regulations, and policies for both District and NPS parks within the Center City to allow greater flexibility in programming and appropriate concessions that would encourage additional public use within the parks and on adjacent rights-of-way.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Celebrate Urban Parks



Link the City with Green Corridors



Expand Park System Capacity



African-American Civil War Memorial at U Street and Vermont Avenue, NW

**OBJECTIVES**

Coordinated planning and management of small parks among federal and District agencies provides clear guidance on their purposes, level of maintenance, and jurisdictional responsibilities.

Partnerships with business and community organizations are effective in maintaining many of the small parks and providing appropriate programming to address national and local cultural and recreation needs.



## 6

# Transform Small Parks

## Big Idea in Action

**I**n the future, Washington neighborhoods will be resplendent with lushly landscaped circles, triangles, and squares. These small parks are easily visualized as accessible destinations for all residents and visitors and provide important community open space for a variety of activities. Individually, they serve as a lovely place to eat lunch outdoors, sit and chat with a neighbor, play, or read. Collectively, they green neighborhoods and beautify the public realm.

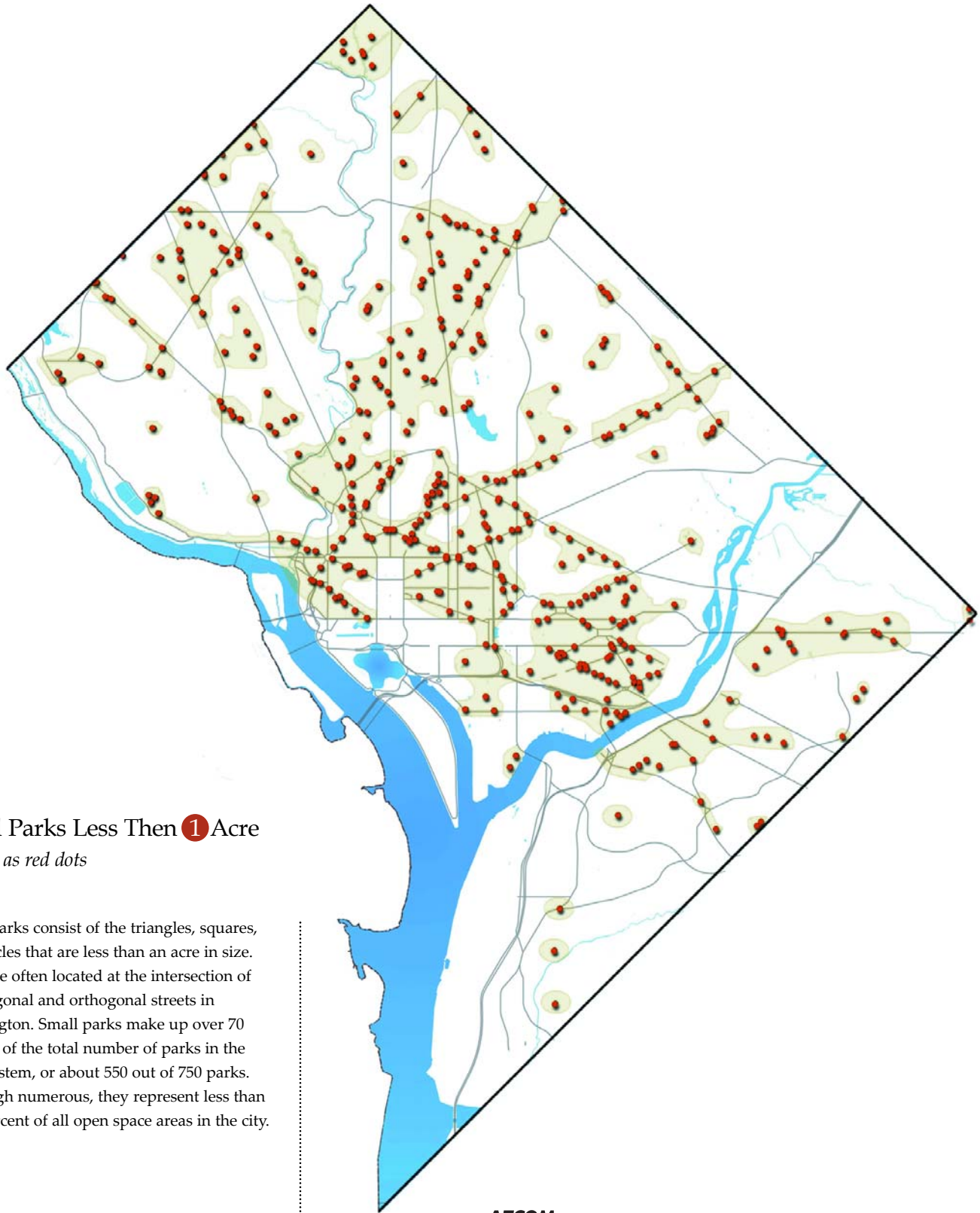
Washington's abundant small parks present an enormous untapped resource. The existing spatial distribution of small parks in Washington ensures that virtually every neighborhood can have walkable access to green open space. By transforming underutilized small parks into successful public spaces, more residents will have access to recreation and open space. Visitors and residents alike will be drawn to the small parks with their historic features, artwork, and cultural activities.

Civic groups take pride in helping to maintain the small parks in their neighborhoods, often providing additional programming as appropriate. In many neighborhoods, these small parks provide much-needed open spaces that promote active living, walkability, community safety, and choices for an enriching urban lifestyle. They also offer an opportunity to more evenly disperse Washington's commemorative works beyond the monumental core.

Each small park is individually important to area residents, workers, and visitors. Collectively, Washington's extensive small park system underpins a cohesive urban network of green spaces, serving as the glue of the larger parks and open space network. This diverse network of park and open space distinguishes Washington as a "City of Parks," beautifies neighborhoods, and is the place where local civic life happens.



The sheer numbers and locations of these small parks within Washington neighborhoods provide an opportunity to improve the park system at a manageable scale with big results.



AECOM

### Small Parks Less Than 1 Acre

*Shown as red dots*

Small parks consist of the triangles, squares, and circles that are less than an acre in size. They are often located at the intersection of the diagonal and orthogonal streets in Washington. Small parks make up over 70 percent of the total number of parks in the park system, or about 550 out of 750 parks. Although numerous, they represent less than two percent of all open space areas in the city.



## A Brief History of Small Parks in Washington

Small parks are distinct features of the urban fabric of Washington and the result of multiple planning and improvement initiatives. Within the L'Enfant Plan, triangle parks are typically open spaces at the intersection of diagonal and orthogonal streets. When L'Enfant created the plan for the capital city in 1791, he envisioned open spaces in the centers of the residential areas where streets meet to provide light and air to its inhabitants. It took almost another century as the roadbeds, curbs, and utility lines were constructed for these open spaces to be completed as parks.

While L'Enfant envisioned park spaces to serve the needs of residents of the new capital city, the largely undefined smaller open spaces only slowly took shape through the next century as the city plan was developed and streets were improved. In the mid-1800s, streets and neighborhoods began to be platted outside the boundaries of the L'Enfant Plan. Some of the earliest suburbs—such as Uniontown (Anacostia) and LeDroit Park— included small parks as a community amenity. Until the 1890s, the subdivision of nearby farms and estates were platted with streets and building lots that did not relate to an overall plan and lacked coordination. This occurred most notably in the northwest section of the city bounded by Florida Avenue, Rock Creek Park, North Capitol Street and Spring Road. This unregulated development prompted the creation of the 1893 and 1898 highway plans, developed in consultation with the noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. These plans extended major L'Enfant avenues, pre-determined locations for all city streets, and continued the tradition of creating small parks at the intersection of diagonal and orthogonal streets. The small parks along 16th Street, Mount Pleasant Street, Rhode Island Avenue, and Georgia Avenue north of Florida Avenue are examples of small parks resulting from these plans.

In the late 19th century, the Office of Public Buildings and Ground of the United States Army Corps of Engineers improved many of the smaller triangular spaces as simple lawns or flower beds, or as small parks. Significant improvements also occurred during the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration.

By the mid-20th century, urban renewal and other government programs intended to revitalize neighborhoods developed additional small neighborhood parks as part of mixed-use developments. Many of these parks are located within the city block, and usually provide active recreation amenities such as playgrounds, picnic tables, and multi-use courts.

Today, there are approximately 550 small parks less than one acre in size distributed throughout Washington. These parks function as sites for national and local commemoration, street medians, traffic circles and pocket parks in neighborhoods.



Triangle at Florida Avenue and R Street, NW

Ownership and ambiguity issues can lead to encroachment on park space by adjacent uses, such as this small park at the intersection of Florida Avenue and R Street, NW. Conceptual improvements are illustrated on the following page.



## Challenges

Small parks often exist in the shadow of the larger, more renowned parks. Residents and out-of-towners alike are more familiar with Rock Creek Park, Potomac Park, and the National Mall. Many small parks, on the other hand, are virtually unseen to any except for their immediate neighbors. Over the years, many of the squares, circles, and triangles have been used for private storage, Civil War camp sites, trash dumps, formal marketplaces, and squatter shack sites. To this day, confusion over ownership and purpose makes them prone to being ignored for funding, vandalized, encroached upon by private uses, or reconfigured for traffic improvements. As a result, many of these small parks have been underutilized as open space resources for the community.

Small parks can be hard to administer because their management and maintenance are split between the National Park Service and multiple District agencies. Each agency has a different mission, which determines the level of improvement, programming, improvement and maintenance of these parks. Management jurisdictions, and in many cases, ownership, of many small parks was transferred from the federal government to the District of Columbia at the time of Home Rule. Subsequently, various District agencies have been assigned responsibility for these spaces. This development history has resulted in confusion over site management that persists today.

Small neighborhood parks are difficult to maintain because they are not large enough to merit dedicated site staff. Instead, smaller maintenance crews responsible for a significant number of locations are assigned to small parks. However, they often only visit after a problem is reported. The multi-jurisdictional management structure for small parks makes it difficult for community users to know who to turn to when maintenance is needed or when there is an interest in the community to fix up a park. Even agencies are sometimes uncertain who has jurisdiction over some spaces. Thus, it is not uncommon to find a small park that is not maintained next to other well-maintained small parks in a neighborhood. Some neighborhoods resort to maintaining and making unsanctioned changes to the small parks themselves after unsuccessfully finding the appropriate park agency that could give them permission.

The lack of maintenance leads to other issues that go beyond park management and touch upon larger societal challenges, most notably homelessness and crime. While these small parks are not the root of the social problems, they are public spaces in neighborhoods that can become venues for anti-social activities when the people in the community do not take ownership of them. Lack of formal coordination between police, park departments and organizations dedicated to social change is an ongoing challenge that must be addressed.



The multitude of small parks makes maintenance difficult.



## Opportunities

While the size of the small parks limits the amount and type of programming and facilities that can be located within individual sites, each has the potential to become a defining component of a neighborhood. Small parks located along avenues or thoroughfares can serve as gateways to neighborhoods, while those located on local streets could be a central gathering place. They have the potential to be a character-defining feature of a neighborhood, while providing a safe and easily accessible resource for recreation. Activating them as vibrant community spaces can help encourage neighbor interaction, make neighborhoods safer, and improve the environmental health of the city through additional tree canopy, native landscapes and permeable surfaces.

In some neighborhoods, the small neighborhood parks can provide much-needed recreation space. These spaces can accommodate a wide variety of passive and active recreational opportunities. Some activities can be formally programmed as community gardens, playgrounds, or dog parks. Other activities that can be accommodated by small parks are more spontaneous, such as picnicking, throwing a Frisbee, or reading. With the increased use of a small park comes a stronger sense of community ownership over the space. These parks provide direct opportunities to incorporate positive behavior into the lives of its residents, and in turn can reduce the number of activities that hurt the fabric of a community, such as drug dealing and robberies. The more a neighborhood is involved, the safer the small parks are for the community.

Small parks are an ideal venue to showcase sustainable practices, specifically those for stormwater management, in every neighborhood across the city. Many of the parks are too small to be used for recreation or inaccessible because of traffic. With appropriate improvements, many small parks could play an enhanced role in capturing and treating stormwater runoff from adjacent streets. This practice could raise awareness of stormwater issues and incorporate small parks more fully into the city's green infrastructure. These green spaces can also help cool summer air temperature, increase Washington's tree canopy, and reduce air pollution.

In addition to serving as important neighborhood open spaces, the citywide system of small parks plays a vital role in defining the character of the nation's capital. Washington's bountiful small parks are a defining feature of the cityscape. Their frequency softens the hard urban streetscape and weaves open space throughout residential and commercial districts. Small parks are increasingly important as sites for distinctive local and national commemorative works. Collectively, the small parks can help unify and expand the existing parks and open space network. Coordinated improvements and maintenance along a corridor or within a neighborhood can reinforce their importance as a significant park type within a larger network of parks and open spaces.

## Small Space, Big Opportunities

Well-designed physical improvements can significantly enhance the contributions of small parks to a surrounding neighborhood. The three photo simulations below illustrate potential improvements, each highlighting a different park theme.



Placemaking



Connectivity: Urban Trail



Sustainability: Low Impact Development (LID)

## Small Parks Model Project

### Manage Small Parks by Geographic Area.

As Washington has relatively few medium-sized parks and several neighborhoods with comparatively less access to open space, linking geographically clustered small parks can be an important strategy in providing multi-purpose, complementary amenities. Thirteen small parks near the intersection of Rhode Island and Florida Avenues, NW, were considered as a neighborhood cluster case study. The four parks south of Florida Avenue are within the boundaries of the L’Enfant Plan and are considered contributing elements for its historic plan designation. None of the parks exceeds 0.7 acres in size and ten are less than 0.1 acre.

Ownership and management of the parks is diverse, and is reflected in their improvements. The largest park at the southwest corner of Florida Avenue and 1st Street, NW, is managed by the District Department of Parks and Recreation, contains playground equipment, a court and benches, and sees heavy community use. The National Park Service park immediately across Florida Avenue is landscaped and helps define the Bloomingdale neighborhood. The District Department of Transportation park at Florida Avenue and North Capitol Street is a busy transfer point for several bus lines. The remaining parks are minimally landscaped or paved. Truxton Park, formerly at the intersection of Florida Avenue and North Capitol Street, was eliminated by earlier transportation projects.

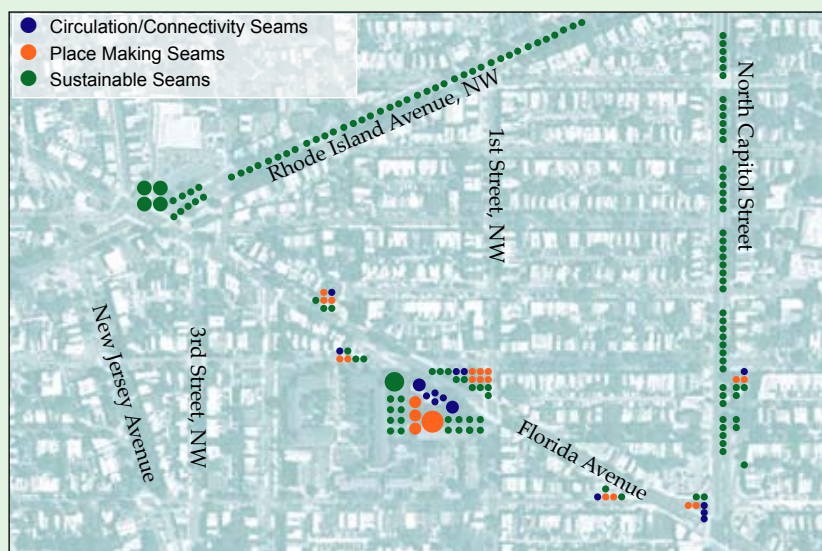
These small parks face many challenges:

- ◆ Size, location, and other restrictions, such as historic designations, can constrain use and design. These same factors, along with a lack of coordinated features, make these parks, and their potential, less visible to adjacent neighborhoods.
- ◆ High traffic volumes on adjacent streets pose challenges to connect park spaces, and bike and pedestrian access can be unsafe or unclear. Encroachment by adjacent uses and inappropriate activities discourages use.
- ◆ Maintenance and programming responsibilities are divided between three agencies. Without coordinated maintenance, design standards or complementary uses, parks are not used, or perceived, as part of a network. Small parks often bear the brunt of limited agency resources, resulting in less maintenance and fewer amenities.

### The Shaw/Rhode Island/Florida Avenue Cluster

There are many opportunities to connect and define small park clusters in the Florida and Rhode Island Avenue neighborhood so that their impact is magnified. Using the themes of connectivity, sustainability and placemaking, parks can be visually unified to create a distinct identity at the corridor or neighborhood level.

This physical improvement graphic identifies opportunities to connect and define small park clusters using themes of connectivity, sustainability, and placemaking. The cluster concept is appropriate for small parks with well-defined geographic areas, corridors, or neighborhoods where revitalization activities are occurring. Small parks can be linked to provide multi-purpose amenities in a community with very limited open space.

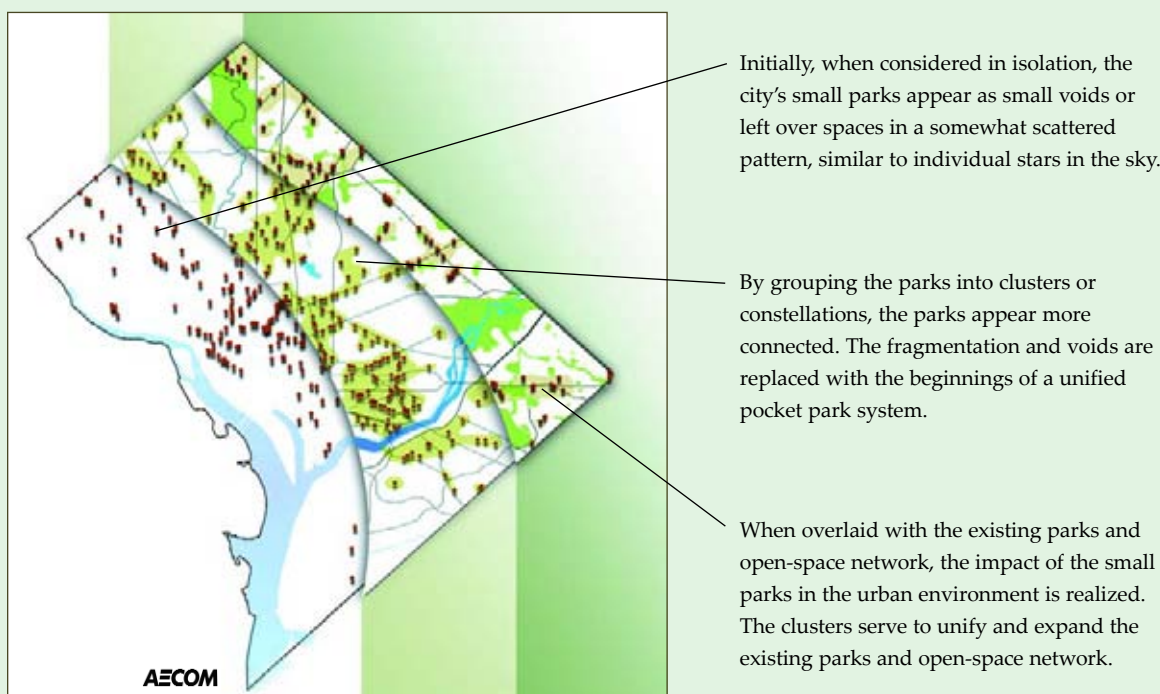




## Small Parks Model Project

## Move Towards a Systemic Approach to Planning Small Parks to Improve Design, Programming, and Maintenance.

While a cluster approach to improving and maintaining the small parks addresses needs at a neighborhood level, addressing system-wide challenges of managing small parks could have dramatic results. To appreciate this opportunity, consider the potential benefits of coordination between the federal and District agencies responsible for these small parks. A coordinated approach to programming, improving and maintaining these urban spaces would complement efforts to better define their use and design, and present opportunities to use scarce resources more effectively. It is helpful to step back and consider that improvements to small parks can have cumulative impacts to the whole park system, as illustrated to the right.



### Lessons Learned

- ◆ The full potential of small parks is largely untapped.
- ◆ Using parks to their best advantage and establishing a clearly defined role increases their visibility and provides great opportunities to build a sense of community.
- ◆ Their small size makes it easier for civic or business groups to provide improvements or maintenance.
- ◆ Given the widespread distribution and number of small parks, they have the potential to transform the image of the city and strengthen neighborhood identity.

## Recommendations

# Transform Small Parks

### Focus on System-wide Improvements to Small Parks (SMP-1)

Small parks can provide a greater contribution toward the existing open space network than their size suggests, provided that they are considered together as a system and not in isolation from one another. Small parks can be coordinated as a network to reinforce placemaking, sustainability, and connectivity.

- ◆ Categorize small parks by geographic area, function, adjacent use, and/or size as a basis for determining the appropriate agency to manage them, their purpose and programming, and their local or national identity.
- ◆ Prioritize improvements to small park clusters in areas with limited access to parks and open space, and a growing population.
- ◆ Coordinate the programming, physical improvements, and management of clusters of small parks to capitalize on the synergistic benefits of several parks with complementary functions such as a tot lot, rain garden, memorial, and seating area in the center of the neighborhood.
- ◆ Apply common themes such as sustainability, place-making, or connectivity to plan, enhance, and maintain the small parks as a system.

### Develop a Coordinated Management Approach (SMP-2)

Defining the role of small parks in the larger park system will help develop a coordinated approach to management among the various park and planning agencies, help the agencies manage them more efficiently, and promote system-wide investment of resources.

- ◆ Develop a shared database of small parks to inform coordination efforts between agencies and with the public, including data on ownership, size, location, function, level of use, historic or cultural value, commemorative elements, programs, and condition.
- ◆ Assess existing agency jurisdiction for certain small parks to ensure that each parcel is managed effectively to meet District and/or federal objectives and to clarify responsibilities of the managing agencies.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated approach to handle service requests and inquiries for small parks regardless of jurisdiction. The approach could include a central site to receive requests and inquiries that are then referred to the responsible agency that could best address their concerns.
- ◆ Incorporate local commemoration, linear or neighborhood gateways, public art, and way-finding as landmark elements.
- ◆ Provide informative and interpretive signage to identify park management and any park and/or neighborhood history.



## Recommendations



Lamont Park

### Increase Capacity and Improve Livability (SMP-3)

Providing appropriate programming and improvements and ensuring that the small parks are clean and safe can enhance neighborhood livability as these parks are the most accessible to residents, workers, and local businesses. In some neighborhoods, small parks are the only available open space; thus, their usability provides significant quality of life benefits.

- ◆ Improve pedestrian and bicycle safety along all the streets adjacent to small parks to improve park access, and include bike parking where feasible.
- ◆ Identify appropriate recreation opportunities based on park size, function, access, safety considerations, and natural and cultural resource protection.
- ◆ Encourage social interaction among park users with various pedestrian elements.
- ◆ Establish a shared baseline clean and safe standard for small park maintenance that considers the various maintenance practices and resources of the agencies.

### Employ Creative Resource Strategies (SMP-4)

Leveraging related investments and uncovering untapped funding resources for small parks are vital to achieving the goal for the small parks.

- ◆ Employ the “City of Parks” branding as a means of fundraising for the larger system of small parks.
- ◆ Use themes such as sustainability, placemaking, or connectivity to tap partnerships and funding programs focused on these issues.
- ◆ Tailor funding for maintenance and enhancements to park usage.
- ◆ Coordinate current planning and capital improvement efforts across agencies that affect small parks in clusters or corridors to achieve their maximum benefits.
- ◆ Seek out partners to provide improvements for small parks on an area- or District-wide basis.
- ◆ Explore unconventional transportation funding sources for improvements to small parks in challenging in-street locations.