

PARSING THE PROS PLAN:
What's New, What's Missing, and What's Coming Later

The *2012 Park Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Plan Update* will estimate future parks and recreation needs and present strategies for meeting those needs. On April 12, the Planning Board approved the staff draft of the 2012 PROS plan, and voted to submit that draft to the state. The Board also scheduled the public hearing on the plan for Thursday, May 24th.

The PROS plan is an important step in the facility-development process. PROS plan parks and recreation needs *estimates* are cited as *indisputable needs* in the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process. So knowing what's in the PROS plan gives you a preview of how your tax money will be spent over the next ten years. Thus it's important to look very closely at what's included in the plan and how the estimates are derived, especially for those estimation methods that are not based on actual facility use data.

We also need to look beyond the individual facility types and consider the plan's totality. In these tough financial times it's important to develop consensus on what we really need and what we can afford. Do we need state-of-the-art facilities for every conceivable sport and hobby? Is it more important to have convenient, nearby facilities or is it more important to have regulation-sized facilities? Should we be building new facilities when many existing facilities cannot be adequately maintained?

Each community also needs to assess how the PROS plan will impact nearby parks and recreation facilities. The PROS plan is essentially a "top-down" planning process meant to guide the type and distribution of facilities in the County. Communities, however, may have very different ideas about what park and recreation priorities should be from a local ("bottom-up") perspective.

What's New:

The draft 2012 PROS plan contains a new definition of urban parks which calls for "more green space than paved surface" (including urban wooded areas). The new urban park definition also incorporates the concept of a "civic green", "Predominantly flexible space for community gatherings and festivals, as well as active and passive recreation activities, that may include Frisbee, pickup sports, picnicking, skateboarding , community gardens, etc."

This is good because it recognizes the need for natural areas in high-density communities as well as the multiple benefits of such areas. This is something residents in highly-developed portions of the County have been advocating for years. (In fact, in all recent statistically valid countywide surveys citizens countywide have given natural areas a high priority.) For Four Corners residents, however, this is a bittersweet victory. The rationales for the new definition are the same arguments we have been making for ten years in support of saving Rachel Carson Meadow in North Four Corners Park. The

Meadow already functions as a civic green, community open space, and urban wooded area. Now Parks is finally embracing these concepts, yet Parks still plans to spend almost \$6 million dollars to destroy this valuable urban resource and replace it with a soccer field and 50 car parking lot.

What's Missing:

Guidance from the Vision 2030 Strategic Plan recommends the co-location of facilities of two or more public agencies, yet the PROS envisions no co-located facilities. Like the concept of residential co-housing communities, sharing common areas between agencies allows for smaller individual building footprints and thus saves both capital and maintenance expenses. Also, when facilities don't need to be as massive, they are easier to site in developed areas where land is scarce.

Most of Prince George's County recreational facilities are co-located. For example, community recreation centers are often co-located with schools. Prince George's County Parks and Recreation (part of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission) and Prince George's County Public Schools have an agreement which governs management of the joint facilities. Surely Montgomery County could do as well.

In addition to saving money, co-location with schools means facilities are conveniently distributed within neighborhoods around the County. Users also benefit from "one-stop shopping" when (for example) a parent can work out while their child attends team practice or rehearses the school play.

What's Coming Later:

The draft 2012 PROS plan does not contain updated needs estimates for ballfields. Instead, it contains the estimates from the 2005 plan. These old estimates are highly flawed. The way the estimates were derived led to an overestimate of ballfield needs for most areas of the County.

That is why the Vision 2030 Strategic Plan, using a more sophisticated method, concluded that most areas of the County have sufficient fields to meet demand. (Of course if fields are not in playable condition, having lots of fields becomes meaningless. Parks needs to demonstrate the capability to manage its existing field inventory before asking taxpayers to fund new fields.)

In addition, much has changed since the 2005 plan. New fields have been built. Permitting is now centralized, instead of being scattered between three agencies. In addition, ballfields are permitted by the hour. These changes have reduced the practice of booking multiple fields. (Groups would often book multiple fields to increase their chance of getting a playable field come game day.) In addition, these changes should make it easier to generate accurate use statistics.

Parks does intend to generate new estimates, but they may not be completed before

the PROS plan is finalized. Parks plans to conduct an Athletic Field Study to be completed sometime in FY 2013. Aspects of the study which would be an improvement over the 2005 methodology include:

- Conduct extensive outreach efforts to athletic field user groups and various governmental partners, e.g., CUPF, Montgomery County Public Schools, and Montgomery Department of Recreation
- Identify athletic field issues and associated solutions unique to each of the seven athletic field areas
- Consider the contributions of alternative providers(e.g., Olney Boys and Girls Club) to meeting countywide athletic field needs
- Compare and contrast M-NCPPC Department of Parks current method of predicting future athletic field needs with methods used by other jurisdictions throughout Maryland and elsewhere

The final Plan will also include updated information on Natural Resource Conservation, Historic/Cultural Resource Preservation, and Agricultural Land Preservation. Of course it is not possible to discuss all the issues associated with the draft 2012 PROS plan in a short article such as this. Readers are encouraged to review the plan themselves:

http://www.montgomeryparks.org/PPSD/ParkPlanning/Projects/pros_2012/documents/pros2012-05.24.12.public.hearing.draft.pdf

Here is a link to the PROS update web page:

http://www.montgomeryparks.org/PPSD/ParkPlanning/Projects/pros_2012/pros_2012.shtm

Let the County officials know what *you* think:

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Schedule for finalizing the PROS plan:

Thursday, May 24th - Public hearing before Planning Board

June - Planning Board Work session(s)

June/July - Request Planning Board Approval of Plan

July - Submit Approved Plan to Maryland Departments of State Planning and Natural Resources (required by the state to maintain Program Open Space funding)