

## PARK CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

### INTRODUCTION

The Park Classification System is a general framework intended to guide open space and public facilities planning, and also to assist in the development of public and private land management plans, by grouping parks according to certain common typical characteristics. The Park Classification System specifically supports Countywide Objective 1, Policy a. by outlining the primary purpose, location and access, character and extent of development for the following park classifications:

- A. Local Parks
- B. District Parks
- C. Countywide Parks
- D. Resource-Based Parks
- E. Regional Parks

This Park Classification System is augmented by state and federal park areas within Fairfax County boundaries.

Park Classifications provide guidance: a) to the Planning Commission for determining whether a proposed park site is in substantial conformance with the County Comprehensive Plan; b) for determining the appropriate geographic location and equitable distribution of varying types of parks; c) to the park planning staff during the park planning and development process; and d) to set public expectations for future park uses. Park master planning, determination of substantial conformance with the County Comprehensive Plan pursuant to Code of Virginia section 15.2-2232 (known as the 2232 process), and capital funding allocations are all public processes that precede development on parkland.

Criteria for each park class are provided in the individual descriptions below. The general areas of consideration are:

1. **Purpose** - indicates the general park use.
2. **Location and Access** - indicates the appropriate location and means of access.
3. **Character and Extent of Development** - indicates the general park size range, typical facility types, the extent of development, the general experience a user may expect and any special considerations. Site-specific facilities and uses are determined through the park master planning process for individual parks. The park master planning process is a public process that provides opportunities for public input and requires approval by the appointed officials of the respective park agency or elected officials of local municipalities.

### A. LOCAL PARKS

#### Purpose

This general classification of parks includes parks that serve neighborhoods and mixed use centers in suburban and urban areas of the County. Local parks primarily offer a variety of active or passive recreation opportunities, or a combination of both, in close proximity to County residents and employment centers. Areas designated for natural and/or cultural resource protection may also be included within these parks.

#### Location and Access

Local parks should be located to serve local residential neighborhoods, broader residential communities and/or urban employment or mixed-use centers. Pedestrian, bicycle and/or car access is appropriate depending on the setting and access features. Whenever feasible, locate these parks adjacent to elementary or intermediate schools to maximize co-location of recreation facilities; In mixed-use developments, proximity to retail/office areas is desirable for collocation of parking and minimum impact on residences.

### Character and Extent of Development

Local parks primarily provide facilities for active or passive recreation, or both; areas for scheduled and unscheduled recreation activities and social gathering places; and serve residential, employment and mixed-use centers. In suburban settings, park size will typically be at least 2.5 acres and less than 50 acres, but some local parks may range up to 75 acres. In urban areas, park size is typically less than 5 acres and often less than ½ acre. Visits to local parks will typically be less than two hours.

The character of local parks may vary depending on their location within the County. In residential settings, local parks will generally be larger than in urban parts of the County. Local parks offer open space to those with little or no yards. Typical facilities may include open play areas, playgrounds, courts, athletic fields, game areas, trails, trail connections, natural areas, picnic facilities and facility lighting. In a suburban setting and depending on the park size and facilities, the local park service area may be up to 3 miles.

The user experience at local parks may be casual and informal geared toward social interaction, play and outdoor enjoyment, or may be more structured to support organized sports and park programs. Collocation of a mix of park uses and facilities that support both informal and structured activities is increasingly necessary to meet the County's diverse and varied recreation and leisure needs where available land is diminishing. To the extent possible, facilities will be planned so that areas that address different needs are compatible.

In urban areas, urban-scale local parks are appropriate. These publicly accessible urban parks should include facilities that are pedestrian-oriented and provide visual enhancement, a sense of identity, opportunities for social interactions, enjoyment of outdoor open space and performing and visual arts. Urban parks are generally integrated into mixed use developments or major employment centers in areas of the County that are planned or developed at an urban scale. Areas in the County that are generally appropriate for urban parks include Tysons Corner Urban Center, Transit Station Areas, Suburban Centers, Community Business Centers and identified "Town Centers" or mixed-use activity centers. Urban parks can be administered by private land owners, Fairfax County Park Authority, or through joint public and private sector agreements for public benefit.

Primary elements of urban-scale local parks are ease of non-motorized access and a location that complements, or is integrated with, surrounding uses. Features may include urban style plazas, mini-parks, water features and trail connections, oriented to pedestrian and/or bicycle use by employees and residents. Park architectural characteristics reflect the built environment. Short-term, informal activities and programmed events during lunch hours and after-work hours are intended to foster social interactions among users, provide leisure opportunities, and create a visual identity to strengthen sense of place and orientation. In urban areas, park size is typically less than five acres and often under ½ acre. Service area is generally within a 5-10 minute walking distance from nearby offices, retail and residences. Well-conceived and executed design is critical to the viability of this type of park. To be successful urban parks need high visibility, easy access, lots of pedestrian traffic, immediacy of casual food service, access to basic utilities, landscaped vegetated areas, ample seating, high quality materials, a focal point or identity, regular custodial maintenance, and an inviting and safe atmosphere.

The Area Plans element of the Comprehensive Plan delineates the park classifications of all public park sites in the County. The specific types of facilities to be developed at each Local Park site is determined by the managing park agency with public participation through its Park Planning and Development process.

## **B. DISTRICT PARKS**

### Purpose

This park classification includes larger parks that serve larger geographic areas of the County and provide a variety of indoor and outdoor recreation facilities and park experiences. Portions of these parks may be designated for natural and/or cultural resource protection.

### Location and Access

These parks may be located in most areas of the County. Access should be available by the major arterials and the Countywide Trail System to encourage pedestrian and bicycle trips; public transit access is also desirable. The service area can range from 3 to 6 miles. Size is typically 50 to 150 acres. Parking must be provided.

### Character and Extent of Development

District Parks provide diverse opportunities for passive and active recreation uses. Generally, facilities in these parks are larger in number and scale than at Local Parks and support a longer visit.

District Parks may combine recreation-oriented complexes of developed facilities with areas of the park that are undeveloped. The extent of development will depend on actual site conditions, such as topography, amount of developable acreage, and access. Appropriate facilities include those that support active and passive recreation, often clustered together, areas for programmed activities and gathering places and areas designated for resource protection. Lighted facilities and extended hours of operation are the norm.

These parks offer diverse experiences and activities that typically involve an individual or group for a time period of up to a half day and may attract spectators or participants. Typical recreation activities at District Parks include golf, skating, cultural and holiday events, performing arts, sports play and activities scheduled in RECenters. Additionally, woodlands, open space, trails and open play areas are highly desirable features. Sensitive environmental areas and cultural resource sites within the parks will be managed as Natural or Cultural Resource Areas.

The Area Plans element of the Comprehensive Plan delineates the park classifications of all park sites in the County. The specific types of facilities to be developed at each District Park and support amenities, such as parking, lighting and restrooms, is determined by the managing park agency with public participation through its Park Planning and Development process.

## **C. COUNTYWIDE PARKS**

### Purpose

This park classification includes larger parks that serve the County and provides a variety of larger-scale indoor or outdoor recreation facilities, or both, and facilities that are unique within the County. Areas designated for natural and/or cultural resource protection may also be included within these parks.

### Location and Access

These parks may be located in most areas of the County. Access should be available by the major arterials and the Countywide Trail System to encourage pedestrian and bicycle trips; public transit is also desirable. The service area is typically larger than 5 miles often including the entire County, or larger, depending on the facilities and location. Park size is typically 150 acres or more. Parking must be provided.

#### Character and Extent of Development

Countywide Parks provide diverse opportunities for passive and active recreation uses to a wide range of simultaneous users. Generally, these parks provide complexes of intensively developed activity areas. The complexes may include multiple facilities for the same activity, an assortment of different activity focuses in one or more areas of the park, and/or unique facilities found in only one or a few parks within the entire park system. Facilities in these parks are larger in scale than those found in District Parks

Countywide Parks may combine larger complexes of developed areas with extensive natural areas. The extent of development will depend on actual site conditions, such as topography, amount of developable acreage, access and intensity of adjacent land uses. Appropriate facilities include those typically found in District Parks as well as the facilities unique to Countywide Parks and the support uses necessary for a full day activity such as concessions and restrooms. Formally scheduled community gathering places and areas for large programmed activities and events are also typical. Lighted facilities and extended hours of operation are the norm.

These parks offer diverse experiences and activities that typically involve an individual or group for a time period of up to a day and which may attract large numbers of spectators or participants. Typical activities include those found in District Parks as well as facilities such as sports complexes, indoor gymnasiums, field houses and lakefront parks. Sensitive environmental areas and cultural resource sites within the parks will be managed as Natural or Cultural Resource Areas.

The Area Plans element of the Comprehensive Plan delineates the park classifications of all park sites in the County. The specific types of facilities to be developed at each Countywide Park and support amenities, such as parking, lighting and restrooms, is determined by the managing park agency with public participation through its Park Planning and Development process.

#### **D. RESOURCE-BASED PARKS**

##### Purpose

This classification includes parks that primarily preserve, protect, and interpret natural and/or cultural resources.

##### Location and Access

The location for Resource-based Parks is determined by the location of the specific resources. Size and access can take many forms depending on the setting and type of resources. Access to stream valleys is primarily by trails; however trailheads with parking should be strategically located along trail routes. Management plans should give consideration to the resource and allow public use only as it is compatible with resource protection.

## Character and Extent of Development

Resource-based Parks are selected for inclusion in the park system because of their exemplary natural and/or cultural features and are acquired, identified and preserved for stewardship and protection. Protection and stewardship of unique natural and cultural resources provide a variety of public benefits. These parks provide educational and interpretative opportunities relative to environmental and cultural resources. These lands may offer opportunities to restore degraded areas and to protect, increase and restore biodiversity of species that may inhabit these areas. In addition, passive recreation opportunities and facilities are also appropriate at these parks. Development which does not adversely affect resources and which enhances awareness of the resource values is appropriate. Development of public sites should include opportunities for public education and enjoyment. Interpretive (educational) facilities and structures may include visitor centers, nature centers, orientation kiosks, nature watching stations, demonstration areas, preserved buildings and gardens, hiking, biking and equestrian trails as designated. To the extent that they do not adversely impact the resources themselves, support amenities may also be developed such as picnicking areas, restrooms, signs, benches and parking. Trails and trail connections are a significant feature at these parks, especially along stream valleys and often serve as Countywide trail connections.

Stream valleys are a predominant physiographic feature of Fairfax County and comprise the core of the County's Environmental Quality Corridor (EQC) system. Parks located in and along the stream valleys encompass those segments of EQCs planned for public parkland and comprise the core elements of a greenway network that links areas notable for significant natural and cultural resources with residential and employment areas throughout the County. They may vary in size and character from steeply sloped corridors with cascading streams to broad floodplains; all are treated as sensitive environmental areas. Trails within stream valleys should be located to be sensitive to environmental conditions. In addition to trails, seating areas, small picnic and open play areas, landscaping and interpretive structures may also be developed, if they do not adversely impact the EQC or ecological functions.

The user experience at Resource-based Parks will be varied. These parks support nature, horticulture and history programs as well as more casual interests such as gardening, nature watching and appreciation of local, regional, state and national history. Settings for quiet contemplation are appropriate in these parks. Visitors may frequent these parks on a regular or occasional basis.

The Area Plans element of the Comprehensive Plan delineates the park classifications of all park sites in the County. The specific types of facilities and support amenities, such as parking, lighting and restrooms, to be developed at each Resource-Based Park is determined by the managing agency with public participation through its Park Planning and Development process.

## **E. REGIONAL PARKS**

### Purpose

Regional Parks are lands or facilities administered by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (NVRPA), with region-wide significance that supplement and enhance the County and municipal park systems within the six participating political jurisdictions. NVRPA parks and facilities serve a multi-jurisdictional constituency.

NVRPA's Park Classification System was developed within the context of the mission, goals and objectives: 1) to distinguish regional parks from local, state and federal parks; 2) to provide a concise description of the management functions and responsibilities of the Authority; and 3) to apply to regional

parklands and recreational facilities. While the classification system is comprehensive, it is not mutually exclusive, and some parks may fall within more than one classification.

### Location and Access

NVRPA owns more than 10,000 acres of public parkland and has developed nineteen parks in its service area of Fairfax, Arlington and Loudoun Counties and the cities of Fairfax, Falls Church and Alexandria. Facilities within this service area are typically accessible within a 1 to 1.5 hour drive by car and by foot, bicycle and equestrian trails. Eleven Regional Parks consisting of more than 8,000 acres, are located within Fairfax County.

### Character and Extent of Development

The character and extent of development for regional parks is directed by its Park Classification System that contains six categories, each with its own criteria. These criteria identify the park purpose and provide general planning and development guidelines and resource management and use policies. Individual Park Master Plans, created for each park, work in conjunction with the NVRPA classification system to further define use and management of the park as a resource. The general purpose and character of NVRPA's six park classifications are briefly defined below:

**Regional Land Bank** - This designation provides the NVRPA with an administrative mechanism to hold lands on a temporary basis pending decisions on classification or disposition. Because the land will be held under this designation on a temporary basis, planning for these areas will occur only as required.

**Regional Conservation Area** - This designation places public ownership or control over regionally significant natural areas or water resources, so as to protect and preserve their unique environmental, cultural, ecological or scenic value. The primary long-term objective is to limit the development of these areas to preserve their "wilderness-like" qualities.

**Regional Shoreline Park** - These parks preserve riparian lands adjacent to regionally significant water resources, and provide public access for educational and environmental study and recreational and scenic enjoyment. Long-term objectives for these parks vary for natural and recreational areas. Natural areas are limited to development and use consistent with preserving their natural characteristics. Recreational areas allow for development of facilities consistent with regional needs, with particular emphasis on water access and the creative use of recreational and water resources.

**Regional Trail and Greenway Park** - Designated as networks of linear corridors or parks that connect recreational, natural, and/or cultural resources, these parks provide regionally significant links to comprehensive regional greenways and open space. The primary long-term objective will be contribution to and completion of a regional greenway and open-space plan for Northern Virginia.

**Regional Historic/Cultural Park** - This designation preserves structures and/or sites deemed significant to the history and culture of Northern Virginia. Long-term objectives include continued development of interpretive facilities on currently held park sites, as funding permits.

**Regional Recreational/Special Multi-Use Park** - These parks contain specialized recreational and other public facilities or opportunities, which, because of their specialized nature, cost or demand, are not otherwise generally available within local parks, or offered by local park and recreation agencies. The long-term objectives for these parks include pursuing new and innovative park, recreational or other public facilities which avoid duplication of local, state and federal park facilities.