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Arlington's Natural Areas

In this newsletter, we consider Arlington's natural areas and the importance of preserving them for future generations to enjoy.

In the early 20th century, Arlington (then Alexandria County), was largely a rural area with streams, fields and vast natural areas. Most of those disappeared as the County was developed during the course of the century. Some 740 acres of natural lands remain, about 4.4% of the area of the County. About half of that is along the George Washington Memorial Parkway managed by the National Park Service (NPS).

Excluding the NPS property, most of which is not readily accessible to visitors, Arlington's remaining natural areas are found primarily in several County parks, two Northern Virginia Regional Parks, and two properties owned by the state of Virginia. Together, these account for perhaps 2% of the area of the County.

Nature Matters

Natural areas provide many benefits. Arlington's natural areas are primarily wooded parks, and mature trees provide a variety of practical benefits: cleaner air, lower temperatures, reduced stormwater runoff, and wildlife habitat. In wooded areas, most precipitation infiltrates the soil, recharging depleted groundwater instead of increasing stormwater runoff. In stream-valley parks, healthy riparian buffer contributes to stream health. Finally, the native trees and other vegetation in natural areas enhance the quality of wildlife habitat.



Headwaters of an Arlington stream (photo by Greg Zell)

But natural areas also provide important psychological benefits for park visitors. It has long been recognized that urban dwellers enjoy opportunities to be close to nature. Early in the last century, nature writer John Burroughs described his own need for nature:

“...the impact of the city upon my senses is hard and dissonant...I go to Nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.”

Modern Arlingtonians are more attuned to urban sights and sounds than Burroughs, but we can still benefit from contact with nature. Wooded parks provide quiet retreats from the busy pace of urban life, and not only adults benefit from them. Children enjoy nature from an early age; those living in rural areas are attracted to woods and streams near their homes. In urban areas, stream-valley parks often provide the woods and streams. In the summer, it would be difficult to find happier children than those playing along streams in Arlington parks. Moreover, there is growing evidence that regular contact with nature contributes to improved physical and mental health.



Box turtles can be found in many of Arlington's parks (photo by Greg Zell)

Most Arlingtonians agree that natural areas are important. When residents were asked in a survey to rank their needs for parks, recreation, and cultural facilities, the top four choices from a long list were: (1) walking and biking trails; (2) neighborhood parks; (3) nature centers and trails; and (4) natural areas and wildlife habitats. These ranked significantly higher than athletic fields, basketball courts, volleyball courts or skateboarding facilities. Moreover, when asked to select programs they viewed as most important to the future of Arlington, *preservation of open space and the environment* was chosen by more respondents than any other. Arlington residents clearly value nature.

Preserving Nearby Nature

It is important to protect the few natural areas that remain in Arlington. A rare plant community could be lost from building a trail or other improvements in a park. To avoid such losses, a new *Natural Resources Management Plan* is being developed. Prepared by naturalist Greg Zell at Long Branch Nature Center, the plan has been reviewed by advisory commissions and discussed at a public hearing. It should be ready for adoption by the County Board in the fall. Adoption of the *Natural Resources Management Plan* will be a milestone in efforts to preserve Arlington's remaining natural resources. We will report on the plan and its significance in the next issue of the Friends of Arlington Parks newsletter.

While preserving natural resources in parks is the first priority, there may occasionally be opportunities to acquire natural areas that are privately owned. There are also other ways to preserve such areas, especially through conservation easements. In either case, it is important for funds to be available when opportunities for preserving natural resources arise. We are pleased that a park bond will be on the November ballot, providing funds for acquisition of parkland (see separate report on park bond).

Another concern is the impact of budget reductions in these difficult economic times. County programs most closely related to natural resources are conservation and interpretation activities, which have not fared well in recent budget cycles. We recognize that reduced County revenues have required budget reductions, but parks programs have been hit harder than most, and conservation and interpretation activities have faced major cuts.

People are key to County programs, and the services of qualified naturalists are needed to benefit fully from natural areas. Visits to natural areas are rewarding in any case, but the benefits can be enhanced by some familiarity with the plants and animals living there, and how they interact. By helping residents understand what to watch for in nature, naturalists can make park visits more interesting and rewarding. This also has long-term advantages: increased appreciation of nature helps to increase support for long-term preservation of natural resources.

Arlington's Division of Parks and Natural Resources manages two nature centers: Long Branch Nature Center on Carlin Springs Road and Gulf Branch Nature Center on Military Road. Programs offered by those centers reach thousands of residents each year, many of them students.



Gulf Branch Nature Center (photo by Denise Chauvette)

Arlington's nature centers have been hit hard by recent budget cuts. Two years ago, the combined staff of the two centers included five full-time naturalists and several others who worked part-time. In the spring of 2009, the director's position at Gulf Branch was eliminated, leaving only two full-time naturalists at each nature center.

Also in the spring of 2009, County staff proposed a FY 2010 budget that called for closing Gulf Branch Nature Center and demolishing the building. That proved to be a call to action for regular visitors to the

center. Residents established a new organization, Friends of Gulf Branch Nature Center. That group organized a major rally, persuaded supporters to attend County Board budget hearings, and raised funds for the center. The Board decided to keep Gulf Branch open, but with reduced operating hours.

The budget for FY 2011 eliminated funding for part-time naturalists at both nature centers. The budget proposed by County staff also called for eliminating a naturalist position at Long Branch, which would have left only three full-time naturalists to staff both nature centers. The County Board decided to keep the naturalist position at Long Branch, but the loss of part-time naturalists required further reductions in operating hours at both centers.

In summary, conservation and interpretation programs have been sharply reduced in the last two budget cycles. The County Board has intervened to prevent even deeper cuts, but it is doubtful whether the nature centers can fulfill their broader responsibilities with remaining staff. Outreach activities are very time consuming, leaving little time for naturalists to study plants and wildlife in the parks. With present

reduced staffing levels, it probably will not be possible to continue the extensive field work that led to development of the *Natural Resources Management Plan*.

To avoid even deeper reductions in nature programs, Friends of Arlington Parks urges residents to let the County Board and County Manager know that they view nature as important, and that programs related to natural resources should not be at the top of the list for future budget cuts.

Exploring Nature in Arlington

For those who would like a close look at nearby nature, we suggest starting with a visit to two parks: Potomac Overlook Regional Park, managed by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, and Donaldson Run Park, managed by Arlington County. These parks have a long common boundary, and together they provide about 100 acres of natural lands to explore.

To get to Potomac Overlook, take Military Road to Marcey Road; follow Marcey Road to the Potomac Overlook parking area. Leave your car – or

bicycle – in the parking area and proceed into the park on foot. Follow the access road to the park nature center, where you can get a trail map. It is easy to explore the park by following the well marked trails. Potomac Overlook consists primarily of upland hardwood forest with a wide variety of trees: oaks, hickories, tulip poplars and many other species. Much of the present park had been cleared for farming, so this is a relatively young forest.



Doe and fawns in Potomac Overlook Regional Park (photo by Martin Ogle)



Healthy forest in Donaldson Run Park (photo by Greg Zell)

When asked what wildlife visitors might expect to see, park director Martin Ogle mentioned white-tailed deer, red foxes, raccoons, and short-tailed shrews. Over the years, the list of birds seen in the park has grown to about 140, but visitors might see a variety of warblers in the spring and fall, and wood thrushes in the summer. There have been occasional sightings of bald eagles, which nest near the Potomac.

After exploring Potomac Overlook, take the connector trail down a long hill to Donaldson Run Park. This stream-valley

park has some of Arlington's oldest forest, with large oaks and beeches on the hillsides, and sycamores closer to the stream. To explore this park, follow the trail downstream toward the Potomac. This is an unimproved trail, and stream crossings require stepping on rocks. Since rocks can be unsteady, it would be best to wear shoes that can survive getting wet. This is a very scenic walk, and those who reach the Potomac can extend it by following the Potomac Heritage Trail upstream or downstream along the river.

Wooded parks are a good choice for summer outings: since trees lower air temperatures, these parks can be 8-10 degrees cooler than nearby areas. Still, anyone exploring large parks in the summer would do well to take a bottle of water along.

After Potomac Overlook and Donaldson Run, there are many other parks to visit. Enjoy Arlington's natural areas – and please help to preserve them!

2010 Park Bond

On July 10, the County Board approved local bond referenda for the November ballot for Arlington voters. One of the bonds, in the amount of \$5.975 million, is for Local Parks and Recreation. That includes \$2.0 million for acquisition of parkland, with the rest to be used for capital investments in existing parks. Earlier this year, it appeared that voters would not have an opportunity to vote on a park bond this year. In the proposed Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for FY 2012, staff had recommended a bond for land acquisition for various uses, including parks.

November 10, 2010 Ballot Question

Local Parks and Recreation

QUESTION: Shall Arlington County contract a debt and issue its general obligation bonds in the maximum amount of \$5,975,000 to finance, together with available funds, the cost of various capital projects for local parks and recreation, and land acquisition for open space?

Until two years ago, CIPs routinely included funds specifically for acquisition of parkland. Park bonds were for “the purchase of land adjacent to existing parks, new park locations, and unique parcels for open space as they become available.” This year, however, the language was different: “This program funds purchase of right-of-way for transportation improvements, facilities or land for general government use, land adjacent to existing parks, new park locations, and unique parcels for open space as they become available.”

At the County Board hearing on the CIP, Friends of Arlington Parks spoke in opposition to that approach. There are several reasons why we believe it was a bad approach:

- The need for additional parkland would have been competing against other land acquisition needs, making it uncertain what funds (if any) would actually have been available for acquisition of parkland.
- Land purchased with funds from a park bond must be used for parks, providing some assurance that County parkland would be protected from future County governments that might want to use it for other purposes.
- The presence of a park bond on the November ballot draws attention to the need for additional parkland. It also gives residents an opportunity to demonstrate their support for parks and open space.



For these reasons, Friends of Arlington Parks joined three advisory commissions in recommending a separate park bond. The County Board agreed, and Arlington's tradition of having a park bond on the ballot will continue.

Friends of Arlington Parks has supported park bonds for more than 30 years, and we are pleased to be able to do so again this year. We urge everyone to vote for the park bond to show support for Arlington's parks and natural areas.

Volunteer Tree Planting Project in Virginia Highlands Park

Aurora Highlands Civic Association is to be congratulated for taking the lead in organizing a very successful volunteer tree planting project in Virginia Highlands Park. The neighborhood was founded in 1910, and this project was initiated to mark the neighborhood's centennial anniversary this year. The civic association worked with landscape architect Patrick Wegeng of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (PRCR). Tree Steward Cory Giacobbe took the lead for the civic association, working with Patrick on the project and showing volunteers how to plant trees.



The neighborhood and PRCR jointly selected a site in the heart of Virginia Highlands Park. As described in the civic association newsletter, the site chosen was "an eyesore of scrubby trees, overgrown weeds, and a mass of exotic invasives." Volunteers worked two Saturdays in May and another in June removing invasive plants and planting trees. There were about 75 volunteers altogether. PRCR provided all of the

trees. Canopy trees included white oak, red oak, pin oak, black gum, and red maple. Understory trees included flowering dogwood, redbud, American filbert, serviceberry, sweetbay magnolia and sumac. A priority goal was to increase species diversity in the park, and only native species were planted, enhancing the quality of wildlife habitat.



The area being planted has been named Aurora Highlands Centennial Grove, and the neighborhood requested 100 trees to correspond to the centennial. In fact, PRCR provided some 160 trees for planting. Prior to the project, the area had invasives, degraded and compacted soils,

and very limited species diversity. Following the plantings, more than 300 cubic yards of leaf mulch was applied to the entire area to begin development of a rich, organic forest floor – about as much yearly accumulation of leaf matter that happens naturally in wooded areas. In the future, all leaves that fall in this part of the park will be left to decompose and return nutrients to the soil for use by the trees.

Thanks to PRCR for providing photos showing volunteers at work in the park. This is the largest volunteer tree planting project in Arlington in recent memory. Friends of Arlington Parks congratulates Aurora Highlands Civic Association for initiating this project and finding volunteers to get it done. We hope it will serve as a model project, inspiring other neighborhoods to plan planting efforts in their parks. Civic associations considering planting projects in parks can contact Patrick



Wegeng at pwegeng@arlingtonva.us. PRCR will arrange for the participation of Tree Steward volunteers as appropriate.

Park Events in Arlington

Don't forget to check out Arlington County's Park and Recreation website for upcoming events in the parks, including:

- ❖ Music and movies
- ❖ Volunteer opportunities such as invasive plant removal
- ❖ Nature center activities

For example, the nature center publication, The Snag, is online and describes upcoming nature center events.

An example of an upcoming event from their website:

Sat., August 14, 6:30 PM - 9:30 PM Gulf Branch Nature Center

Enjoy a thoroughly batty evening and add to your knowledge of local night life at this bat conservation and appreciation program. See live bats, go on a walk to see bats flying and to hear their echolocation calls, and learn about foods that are pollinated by bats. We'll also have games, bat crafts, and lots of info on our local furry bug zappers. Live bat shows will be presented by Leslie Sturges, Director of Bat World NOVA, established in 2001 to protect and conserve bats in this region.

Information: 703-228-3403. Registration required for all attending - both children AND adults.

Children under 13 must register with an accompanying adult.

\$10 fee per adult, \$7 fee under age 12.



Friends of Arlington Parks Membership form

To join friend of Arlington Parks or to renew your membership, mail this form and payment to:

Terry Hillerich, Treasurer, 3555 North Somerset Street, Arlington, VA 22213

Name: _____

Street address: _____

Cit, State and Zip _____

email address: _____

Individual, \$7.00 _____ Family, \$12.00 _____ Organization, \$20.00 _____ Other Contribution _____

Check here to get your newsletter by email _____ Add me to the volunteer list and contact. _____

You may also renew your membership online with a credit card.

Visit us on the web at www.foap.org

Friends of Arlington Parks
3555 North Somerset Street
Arlington, VA 22213