October 31, 2019

Mark Jinks, City Manager
City of Alexandria
301 King Street
Alexandria VA 22314

Dear Mr. Jinks,

RE: Park & Recreation Commission Priorities for FY 2021 Budget

The Parks and Recreation Commission apologizes for the delay in remitting budget priorities for FY 2021. Recent unexpected leadership changes and a postponed election of officers delayed the commission's response.

The commission has identified four areas of priority, which are, maintenance of facilities and fields, aquatics, open space and providing more services to the business community.

Maintenance of aging facilities continues to be a challenge and stress limited resources. The greatest example of this being Chinquapin. The Recreation & Parks Department is conducting a physical condition facility assessment to determine the pool’s estimated useful lifespan. With Chinquapin clearly coming into the twilight of its useful life, the commission will look to find alternative locations and substitute facilities to supplement uses at Chinquapin.

With that in mind, the Commission stresses the importance of continuing to move forward on the renovation of Old Town pool, funding the upcoming construction of the Nancy Dunning Park and spray ground, and working to find a place in the budget for Chinquapin’s ultimate replacement facility. These projects are essential components to sustain active aquatics programming in the City.

Beyond the facilities, a cause of great concern is the stress on fields and their overuse. The school building process will continue to strain the City’s limited field resources. Because Patrick Henry field construction is delayed for several years, the temporary loss of field space will cause catastrophic impact to school and City recreation programming. Looking ahead, with the possible TC Williams expansion at Minnie Howard, the loss of that field would displace 240 school uses alone. That number doubles when recreation uses are included.
The City must look to find alternative locations to make up lost field access. Certainly, adding lights to turf fields, like Hammond and Jefferson Houston could alleviate some stressors and help mitigate overuse. The Commission understands ACPS is unlikely to build a school facility on Simpson field in the next decade. Given the likely loss of Minnie Howard fields, moving forward with the implementation of turf and lights at Simpson field should be regarded as a high priority to meet ever increasing field demands from a number of sources over the next decade.

In terms of alternate locations, we request the City to continue to look at Jones Point Park for the completion of the promised fields. Nothing has been done by NPS or the City to improve field conditions, and the existing turf is so bad it would seem it was planted to discourage use. The fields are completely unusable and should not be considered safe for any recreation programming. (see photo)

The link below shows NPS continues to advertise fields as though they are available for use. https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?parkId=186&projectId=13128

The commission believes that Jones Point is a viable alternative to alleviate future field stressors and an inevitable field scarcity. Continuing to include elected officials, such as Congressman Beyer and others in your discussions with NPS regarding field restoration at Jones Point is a high priority.

As our community grows and expands, meeting minimum open space continues to be a challenge. Currently, the City has 7.3 acres of open space per thousand people. The Environmental Action Plan recommends an increase to 7.5 acres per 1000 and the Commission
would like to strive beyond that, recommending 7.5 acres per thousand level be considered a minimum standard for our community. In the coming months, the commission will participate in the re-constitution of the Open Space Policy Plan Steering Committee. It is hoped this group will serve to identify possible funding sources to continue to conserve open space at a greater ratio than what currently exists.

The Commission would also like to see greater services provided to the business community in terms activating new park spaces and servicing the King Street Corridor Initiative. Small steps to improve King Street with décor expanded to include Waterfront Park and the Marina would likely improve the City’s relationship with business. Expanding the Holiday lights budget to include the King Street Park, Waterfront Park and the Marina is a worthy goal for FY21. A secondary initiative in the same vein may include seasonal lamp post banners to complement the hanging flower planters. Expanding similar action plans into the West End should be considered a worthy future goal.

In closing, it is noteworthy to mention the success of the current fee structure and cost recovery initiative. The cost recovery initiative is providing much needed monetary resources to support RPCA. The Department should be commended for its efforts to quickly implement and maximize the benefits of the cost recovery program to serve the City during economically challenging years.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Gina Baum, Chair
Park & Recreation Commission

cc: Honorable Mayor & Members of City Council
    Park & Recreation Commission members
    Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager
    James Spengler, Director, Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities
    Jack Browand, Division Chief, Staff Liaison to the Park & Recreation Commission