Four Mile Run Park Community Feedback

Process

From September through early December , 2012, the public was invited to provide input on the existing conditions and possible future uses for Four Mile Run Park. To gather information, the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA) held a public workshop to discuss Park needs, distributed a survey asking for feedback, and met with a local playgroup.

This same process simultaneously occurred for each of the City's large parks, including Simpson Park, Chinquapin Park, Hensley Park, Brenman and Boothe Parks, and Holmes Run Park. Combined, over 585 Alexandria residents responded to the surveys and 45 attended workshops.

Throughout the 2012/2013 winter, RPCA will use the information gathered to determine Park needs and priorities to develop Park Improvement Plans. Ultimately, these plans will help inform budget decisions and on-going use considerations.

Survey Results

On October 1, 2012, online park improvement surveys became available to the public through the City of Alexandria's website, press releases

"[I like the] Proximity to the stream; ability to see nature; it is a crossroads of sorts for people and activities, and a place for urban"

"I like the proximity to my neighborhood and the water, as well as the bike path."

"The nature trail is very serene and peaceful amidst two very busy roads (Mt. Vernon Ave. and Route1). The trail's path is smooth and very accessible to beginner cyclists."

"I like the ability to walk my dog on the trail along four mile run and in the nature area without many other users. It's one of the few quiet places in that part of town. I generally like the informal, passive uses of the open space (e.g., pick-up games) as it feels more like a neighborhood park than a fully programmed regional park."

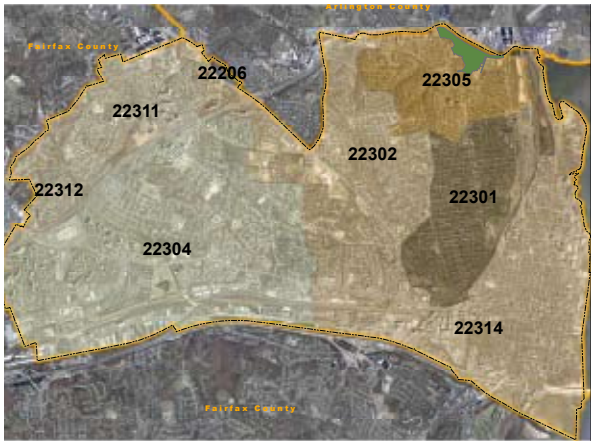
" [I like] Nothing - dirty, crowded, unkept, terrible. But there is so much potential. This is the 'other waterfront' our city has and it should be exploited as such."

How often do you visit the Park?

Value	*Count*	*Percent*
Daily	15	16.5%
Weekly	39	42.9%
Monthly	23	25.3%
Yearly	17	18.7%

Where do you live?

(Darker color zip codes indicate a higher number of participants)



and social media. RPCA also distributed both English and Spanish hard copy surveys through boxes located at entrances to the park and at the Cora Kelly Recreation Center. RPCA received 91 completed surveys.

RPCA acknowledges that this survey is not statically accurate. Rather, it served as a self-reporting method of data collection—those who sent in the survey saw it and wanted to provide feedback. While this is a sample of Park users, it is not representative of all users. As an example, through the sports permitting process, RPCA is able to capture the number of players that use the sports fields daily; yet, the surveys do not fully represent the sports use. For this reason, the information below will be supplemented with site observation and additional data to support recommendations.

The survey asked park users to identify their usual point of access into the park, the mode of transportation they use to get there, their typical park activities, what they like about the park, and what area of the park need improvement. Survey participants also prioritized their improvement needs.

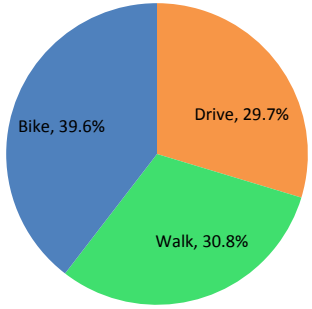
Of those surveyed, 32 participants lived in the 22301 zip code and 28 lived in the adjacent zip code, 22305. Fewer than 10 participants lived in the lived in each of the other Alexandria zip codes and none lived in 22206. Seven participants lived in Arlington. The majority of those who visit do so weekly (42.9%).

This is what we heard from them:

Access and Park Use

There is not a dominant mode of transportation to Four Mile Run Park. Park Users almost equally walk (30.8%) as much as drive (29.7%), while 39.6% bike.

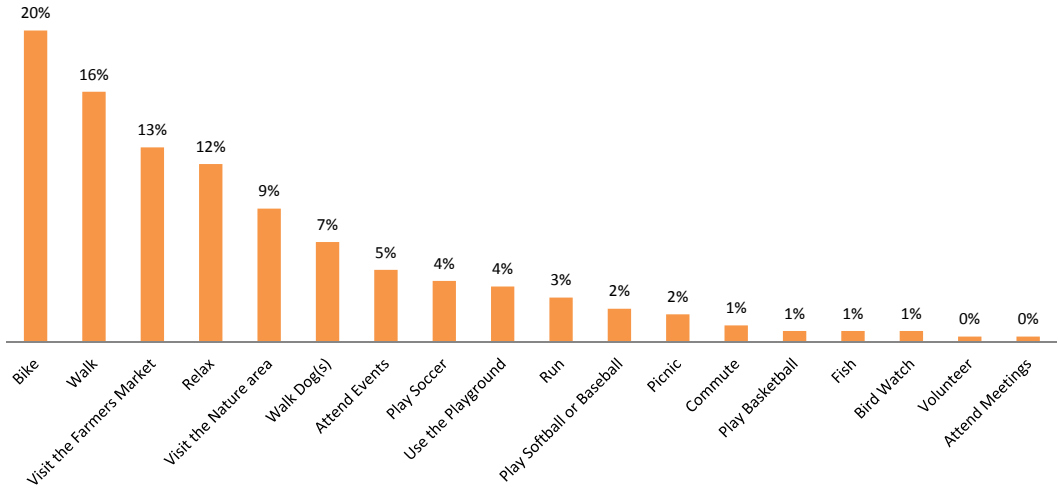
How do you get to the Park?



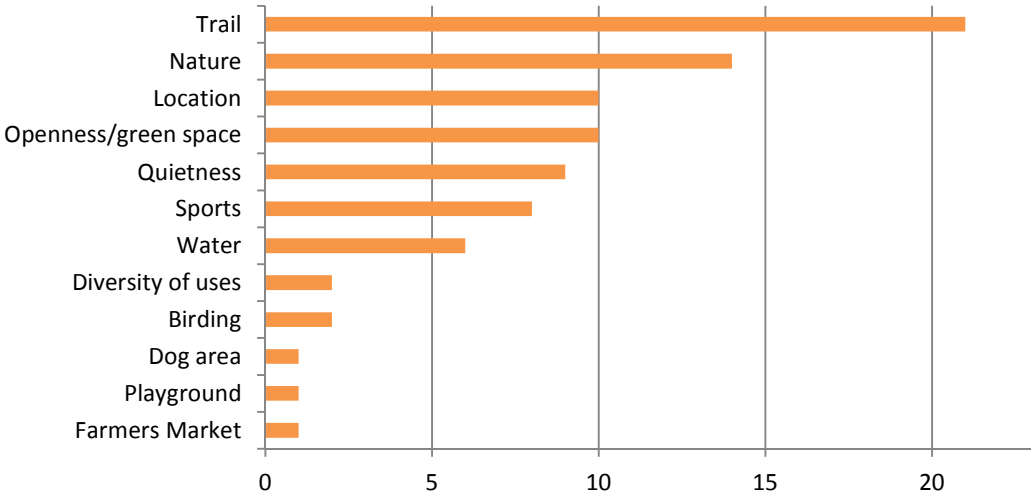
When looking at this information in combination with the question "What do you do in the Park," it is apparent that survey participants are using the Park's trails (30% use the park for biking and 14% for walking), implying that the trail through the Park is one of the major Park resources. Other activities of significance include the visits to the Farmer's Market and general relaxation.

When asked, "What do you like about the Park," participants overwhelmingly identified the trail, reinforcing the Parks importance as a route for walkers and cyclists. Other replies, including "nature," "location," "openness and green space" recognize the Park's natural setting along the Four Mile Run Stream, a scarce resource in an urban setting.

What do you do in the Park?



What do you like about the Park?



Improvements

Participants identified the Park's natural areas as the highest priority for Park improvements (over 17% of participants). Below are selected statements that support the need for identified improvements. The improvements are shown in prioritized order, based on the number of respondents that selected the need *(all participants selected a need but did not always provide additional comments on their selection)*:

Natural Areas

- *"The natural area is underutilized and has been ignored for a long time. If it is at all intended for any sort of recreational use then it needs a lot of work. If it is intended to be natural habitat then it needs to be cleaned up and restored (remove invasives)."*
- *"Continue to keep the margins of the Run vegetated; gradually eliminate invasive exotic plants (esp. Paulownia) while increasing native herbs, shrubs and trees. Management for wildlife, esp. birds, should be one of the formal objectives for this park."*
- *"Ensure that all development and enhancements for people support the health and ecosystem of the 4 Mile Run stream and shoreline, so it can continue as a habitat for the many birds, fish, etc. that exist there."*
- *"Protect the trees, natural area, and wildlife by maintaining the designated trails and public areas."*
- *"Remove invasive plants from woodland"*

Recreational Transportation

- *"Better connect to/among bike trails, esp. Mt. Vernon trail and new trails in Potomac Yard."*
- *"Better connectivity of the park to the neighborhoods via bike/waking trails."*
- *"Repave the trails!"*
- *"Smooth paths. A new paved connector from the bike path to the parking lot for MOM's"*
- *"Better and longer bike paths for riding with tweens."*
- *"Consolidation of entrances to (Duron) bldg parking lot and 24 hr Express parking lot to improve pedestrian safety."*

Athletics

- *"More organized and accessible adult sport facilities (baseball, softball, etc.)"*
- *"Keeping the trail, but additionally add some smaller soccer facilities. Every afternoon, there are multiple pick-up games going on. It would be nice to provide some facilities to facilitate them."*
- *"Could be the premier baseball field and softball field in Northern Virginia as far as league games and tournament sites go"*
- *"I would like a turf field installed so the fields can be used for general play in addition to league play. Currently the fields are always locked except for league play."*
- *"Covered dugouts for baseball/softball fields*
- *Fix the backstops, fences get this back to a number 1 ballpark"*

Security

- *"The security, the park is not very safe with the wooded area so close to the bike path and the connections to the housing behind MOMs. This is especially noticeable early morning and dusk."*
- *"The running trail could use more lighting."*
- *"Lighting would be nice for night walks. I don't feel safe there after the sun goes down"*
- *"I do not feel safe."*

Playground

- *"The playground. This is a very busy playground, and it often feels neglected. A few benches for tired mamas would be appreciated!"*

Dog Area

- *"Would love to see a fenced in dog park."*
- *"Create a dog area away from the bike path"*

Park Furniture

- *"You need more picnic tables throughout, especially near the farmers market. It would be nice to go there in the morning and sit and enjoy the space."*
- *"Working water fountains"*
- *"Some sort of pavement or paving tiles under the benches. The grass is worn away, making the space near the benches either dusty of muddy."*
- *"Improved facilities for passive recreation. More seating that is oriented towards Four Mile Run, so visitors can enjoy the natural beauty of the park."*

Parking

- *"The parking area is not the most important to me but it seems worn out. For larger events, bona fide bike locking set-ups would be helpful."*
- *"The parking is awful. the city should be horribly embarrassed about providing such wonderful soccer fields for our kids and then sending police to ticket parents parked in a VACANT CITY lot that is marked as held for 4 mile run expansion. I can't believe how short sighted we are as a city."*
- *"Need more parking."*

Maintenance

- *"There's always trash along the trail, the banks of the canal, and in the bird preserve area. Would be nice to see the beer cans and liquor bottles gone since so many kids are there."*

Restrooms

- *"Need public restrooms"*

Other

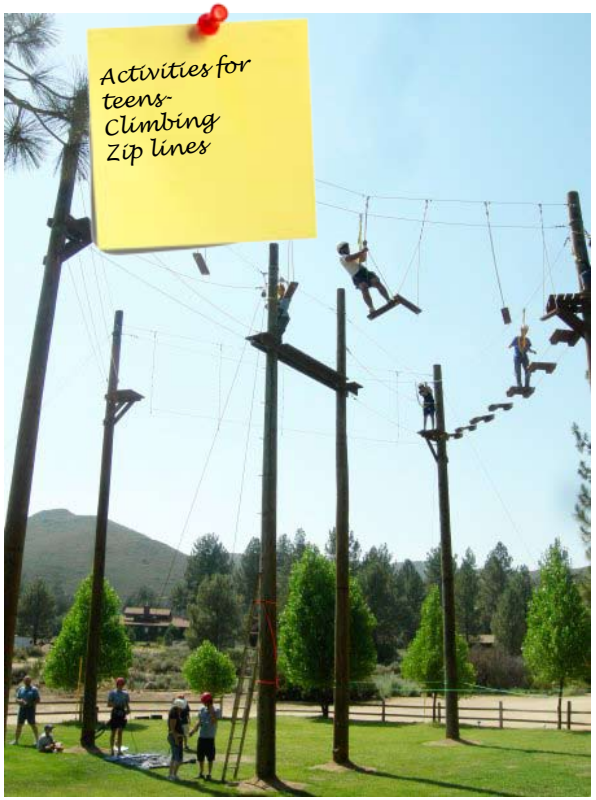
- *"Tear down the basketball court"*
- *"Create a clear layout"*
- *"Spray park like they have built in Arlington at the park on Lee Highway."*
- *"Remove high transmission wires"*

Workshop

A Four Mile Run workshop was held on October 10, 2012 at the Cora Kelly Recreation Center with the purpose of having community members identify the priorities for future improvements, based on their park experiences and observations. The workshop was advertised through the City's e-news and calendar. Signs with workshop information were posted at Park Entrances and flyers were distributed through the Cora Kelly Recreation Center and at the Four Mile Run Farmer's Market. A total of six park users participants attended.

Inspiration Board

As participants entered the room they were asked to comment and write their thoughts on precedent images. The exercise was designed to provoke ideas and inspire site programs. None of the images were from City of Alexandria Parks. Participants commented on the following images:



Group Exercise

Following a presentation on the Park's existing conditions, participants joined a group exercise.

The first exercise was designed to identify the Park's top five assets. These are the areas of the Park that participants felt keep them coming to the Park and should remain in the Park and be further enhanced:

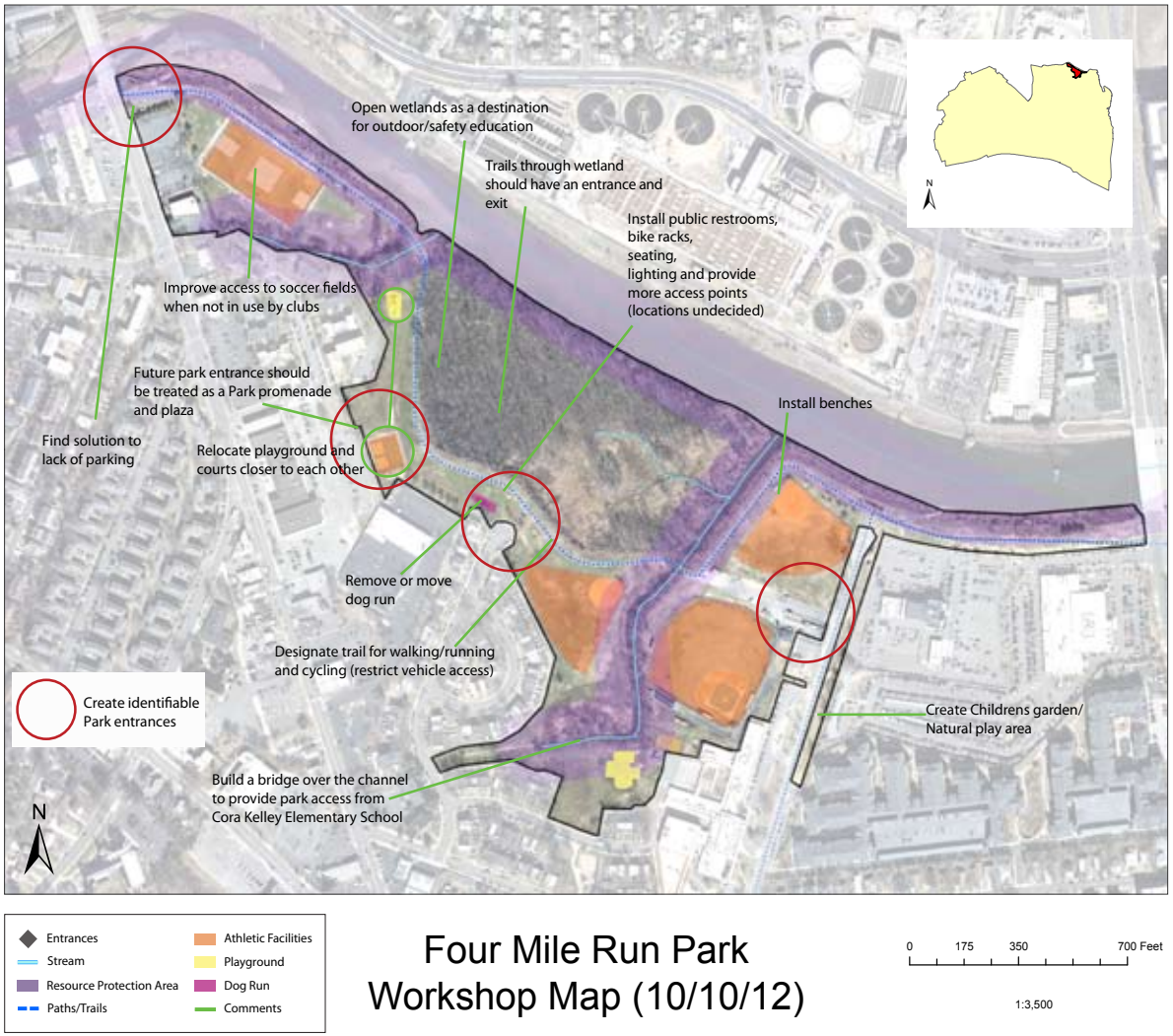
The top five park assets

1. Natural areas
2. Paths/trails
3. New community center plaza
4. Stream
5. Ball fields

Second, the group used a map of the Park to (1) suggest where pathways should be for optimal park circulation, (2) where the multi-use courts should be re-located, following re-development of Mount Vernon Village, (2) which existing conditions need improvement, (3) and what programs and facilities are not in the park, but should be. The results of this exercise are shown to the right.

Additional feedback included:

- Promote alternative transport such as biking, install plenty of bike racks and safe places to store them
- Park should have more access points, thinking about new development
- Pavilion for community to gather and interact
- Trails look like a road and invite traffic causing an important safety issue



Four Mile Run Park Workshop Map (10/10/12)

Playgroup

On October 26, 2012, RPCA staff met with parents in a Playgroup (ages 2-5) that regularly meets at the new Four Mile Run Community building. The intention of the meeting was to gather feedback on the Park from neighborhood parents. Over ten parents participated, all of whom were Spanish speakers and spoke to RPCA staff through a translator.

Of the parents, only two knew there was a playground in the Park. However, they had never brought their children there because, in their community, the Park is perceived as being too dangerous. They suggested moving the playground to a more visible location, such as closer to the new community building and Mount Vernon Avenue. This suggested location would provide "eyes on the park" and allow them to feel safer.

Summary

There are some consistent themes throughout the three methods of community feedback. These include:

1. Nature: The survey and workshop clearly indicated the Park's highest asset and priority for improvement are the Park's natural areas. The Park's features, such as the wetlands and stream, are rare in an urban environment and create bird habitats and unique ecological resources. Yet, the Park's current design and the growth of invasive species have masked these resources and opportunities for environmental education.
2. Trails and Connections: One of the dominant uses of the Park is its pedestrian and bicyclist trail. As indicated in the survey and the workshop, the trail is a local and regional destination. However, the trail mainly serves as a connection through the park, rather than attracting people to stay in the Park. Trail amenities, such as bike racks and park activities, would allow people to not only pass through, but to visit. Additionally, more trails through the wetlands and to the Cora Kelly Recreation Center would allow greater park usage and connections to nature.
3. Security and Park Activities: The playgroup's major concern with using the Park is its security. This was also emphasized in the workshop and survey. Park activities, such as the playground, are not fully used because they are hidden from the street and isolated, often attracting illegal uses. As suggested in the workshop, one solution to enhance the Park's activities is to cluster uses near the park entrances. This would create a convergence for mixed age groups and programs, allowing more "eyes on the park" and the perception of active, safe spaces. The new Four Mile Run Community Building on Mt. Vernon Avenue has set an example as an active and visible Park area.
4. Parking: The majority of Park visitors bike or walk to the Park. However, there are many users that drive, particularly to use the athletic fields. It is likely that most sports players will continue to drive as they are coming from all over the City to use the fields and often carrying athletic equipment. Appropriate parking accommodations must be met for sports field use, but while doing so natural areas will need to be preserved.
5. Natural play spaces: The workshop participants indicated an interest in seeing more areas in the park for kids to play on informal park elements, such as boulders and climbing features. The survey also supports the need for a renovated playground with park furniture, while the playgroup hoped to see play features in more visible locations. All three of these interests may be incorporated near park entrances and other locations.

While these five themes were consistent throughout the feedback process, they are not fully comprehensive to all of the Park's improvement needs. The information will be supplemented with site observation and additional existing conditions data to ultimately support recommendations and an implementation plan.