



Fort Ward Park Playground Improvements

June 15, 2020 Virtual Presentation

*Summary of Community Feedback
Received*

Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
August 13, 2020

Project Schedule

- **June 2020:** Receive feedback on playground design
- **July-August 2020:** Refine design in response to community feedback
- **September-December 2020:** Develop construction drawings and obtain permit approval by December 2020
- **January-June 2021:** Begin formal solicitation process and award construction contract



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Playground Area and Play Equipment

General Comment	Response
Why is the playground being relocated	The playground is being relocated for many reasons, primarily due to the steep slope at the existing site and the costly challenges and amount of grading that is required to make an accessible route between the parking area and the playground. There are ongoing maintenance issues with the mulch washing out from the existing playground and stormwater challenges that affect both the playground and the adjacent neighbors. Relocation has been discussed for many years. The new location, per this discussion, was incorporated in the Alexandria City Council adopted 2015 Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan.
The new playground seems smaller and with less activities	The large piece of equipment (composite structure) from the existing site is being relocated for use at the new location. This structure is in excellent condition. Along with a refreshment of the existing composite structure, the new playground will include a number of new play features. As suggested by attendees at the December 2019 Public Meeting, the playground concept incorporates the area surrounding the playground for additional nature-inspired play opportunities, including the gently sloping western edge of the playground (a 3:1 slope), the broad and open grassy area to the playground's west, and the timber borders along the eastern edge of the playground. Such play features provide opportunities for imaginative play.



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Playground Area and Play Equipment

General Comment	Response
There is another stage at the amphitheatre, why is another one proposed at the playground?	The inclusion of a small stage area at the playground is to provide a platform and opportunity for spontaneous play. It is not intended to be used for formal productions, nor is the existing amphitheater nearby intended to be used for informal play. The stage area can also serve as a quiet reading nook, a pop-up jump-roping site, a place to put together Legos, a look-out station—a truly versatile space for children’s imaginative play in a spot where they are slightly elevated from the surrounding grade.
The playground could incorporate design elements that reflect the site’s history.	<p>The playground design references the nearby Fort in its overall geometric form, its use of wood members along the edge [abatis], the shape of the elevated platform which reflects a piece of the fort [bastion], and the 3:1 sloped grassy earth embankment on its western edge. The final design intentionally does not mimic the explicit characteristics of the Fort, as numerous concerns were raised that doing so could confuse visitors and encourage them to climb, play, and run on the actual historic structures.</p> <p>One of the new park orientation stations will be installed in the vicinity of this area. An interpretive marker is also planned to be near the playground area. This marker will highlight the Fort family homesteads that were on the site.</p>
Can there be a taller climbing structure or a climbing wall along the hill?	The relocated composite structure includes several different climbing features that go up to 7 feet in height. The raised playground (to protect the archaeological features) does not include a direct 5-foot drop to allow for a climbing wall. Instead, the change in grade is manifested in a long gently sloping edge.



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Playground Area and Play Equipment

General Comment	Response
<p>We are concerned there are not enough activities for children ages 2-5 in the new design.</p>	<p>Based on comments received to the presentation, the design team will look for an additional play feature(s) directed towards ages 2-5. We are currently considering a smaller play structure such as a playhouse with activity panels, and a low slide.</p> <p>The current plan incorporates several features for young children. The log timbers on the eastern side of the playground function also as 'stepping' and a short climbing feature. The willow tunnel is also for young children as well, allowing them to go under and through a safe textured space. Because the tunnel is broken into separated segments, clear sight lines will be available for adult supervision. The swings are also available for young children to enjoy with three swing seat options: bucket, inclusive bucket, and belt swings.</p>
<p>How are you addressing stormwater management in the playground?</p>	<p>The design team is working with City staff to develop an appropriate and responsible stormwater management plan for the new playground site. Its design will take form in the upcoming construction drawings, but given the generally level site, some of the water will be captured by sheet flow in the adjacent lawn area. Other considerations will be incorporated to ensure that stormwater is fully addressed for this park improvement.</p>



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Site Furnishings and other Park Amenities

General Comment	Response
Provide bike parking at the playground	Consideration to add a new bike rack in the vicinity of the playground and loop road will be undertaken as a separate City effort. Potential locations in this area will be evaluated.
Provide a drinking fountain feature for water bottles	The City of Alexandria's updated park standards include a drinking fountain that has a component to fill water bottles. That feature will be included with the water fountain provided adjacent to the playground.
Consider addition of adult exercise equipment so adults can exercise while watching children	While the incorporation of adult equipment was considered and would be of value, the budget for providing the equipment and related safety surfacing is tight. Unfortunately, the playground equipment cannot be modified to accommodate adult use (increasing the size or strength of the chin up bar for example). The City will look for other opportunities in this park and elsewhere to provide adult equipment.



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Safety

General Comment	Response
There should be fencing to enclose the playground for safety and to enhance supervision.	The design team will take another look at the use of fencing or other barriers along the Braddock Road and the park drive/parking sides of the playground. The intent is to provide some barrier to prevent children from wandering off site yet still allow the hill and grass areas to be used for free play.
There have been illicit activities occurring at the restrooms	The City will continue to monitor park activity and coordinate with Alexandria Police. One of the best ways to discourage illicit activities is to encourage higher use of encouraged activities. The playground's move to the southwestern corner of the park will add a new and very active user to this corner of park, providing more 'eyes' and deterrents to illicit uses.

Subject: Existing Playground Site

General Comment	Response
What will happen to the existing playground site?	The area of the existing playground will be restored when the play equipment is relocated. The area will be stabilized with native trees and groundcovers. The establishment of groundcover will help to reduce erosion and alleviate runoff.
Consider transforming the existing site to a dog park.	There is no provision for a dog park in the adopted Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan. The former off-leash dog area was removed from the park several years ago. Dogs are welcome in the park, on leashes, and can be walked on leash throughout the park.



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Trees and Construction

General Comment	Response
By raising the playground several feet, will this harm the existing trees?	The relocated playground is raised above the existing grade to minimize ground disturbance due to the cultural resources on site. Care has been taken to site the raised area to not impact the existing trees' critical root zones (CRZ), one of the reasons for the playground's specific location and form. The gradual slope (3:1) was intentionally put on the western edge of the playground (a side that does not abut the parking lot or Braddock Road) which abuts the large open grassy area.
How are trees being protected during construction?	The City Arborist is and will continue to be involved with the development of the new playground, as will the City Archaeologists. The design team includes an ISA-certified arborist. Considerations for the protection of existing trees through the design have been incorporated in this plan with consideration to existing critical root zones and minimizing digging. Tree protection measures designed in compliance with the City Landscape Guidelines will continue to be developed and is a requirement for permit approval. Although the two non-native large pagoda trees to the new playground's west are not slated for immediate removal because they provide welcome shade from hot afternoon sun, new trees could be planted generally in the same area in anticipation of their ultimate removal.



Community Feedback Summary

Subject: Trees and Construction

General Comment	Response
What is being done to plant more trees in the park?	The City, in collaboration with groups such as the Tree Stewards, will continue to add new tree plantings throughout the park. Annual planting will be coordinated with planned capital projects to better prioritize and identify park areas suitable for planting. One of the more immediate planting areas will be the site of the existing playground. Another site for consideration is the edge between the St. Stephens St. Agnes Middle School parking lot and the park—perhaps a loose screen of evergreen and deciduous trees is appropriate in this location. The new picnic shelter path also includes planting of native trees and the establishment of a forested conservation area. Other potential planting include areas along West Braddock Road.
What is the status of the picnic shelter pathway?	The construction drawings for the new accessible path between the parking lot and Van Dorn Street are expected to be approved in August. The process to solicit a construction contract will begin this fall.



Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects, P.C.

APPENDIX

Fort Ward Park Playground Improvements Compilation of all Community Feedback Received June 15- July 1, 2020

Q1

Overall, I like this design and think you have done a good incorporating the playground into the park.

1. There doesn't seem to be any plans to provide for bike parking. Can you please be sure to include parking near to the playground.

2. Based on the plans, it appears that the drinking planned for this location does not easily accommodate water bottles. The city should update their drinking fountain standards to accommodate water bottles. <https://www.elkay.com/us/en/drinking-water/outdoor.html>

Q2

It seems like we've prioritized Granma over the kids who will actually use the park. On nice weekend days, there are large numbers of families picnicking who will spend the entire day at the current location. The current playground is much larger, features two playsets, one for 5-12-year olds, and one for 2-5. Kids can also chase each other around a much larger playground. While it is nice that Granma doesn't have to walk as far, the children will actually have significantly less space to play. No child is going to be excited to see basically the same equipment minus the tot play area. What could the city be thinking? Why not level the current area, install a soft play surface and new state of the art playground equipment? We can line the area with trees, build a path from the parking lot, and a picnic area and we don't have to worry about digging over historic areas. The presentation is fine but the new location looks like a big headache. If the city moves forward with this plan, I, and the children of Alexandria are going to wonder why we went to the trouble.

Q3

Some kind of taller climbing structure would really help keep kids on the older end of the target age range interested — perhaps a climbing wall along that 5 foot elevation drop

Q4

Overall, this seems like a thoughtful plan. My only question/concern is regarding a possible stage with seating. That might be redundant with the amphitheater so nearby.

Q5

I would love to see an outdoor, exercise area like they have at the Fairlington Park. The adults could have a space to exercise, and watch their kids play as well.

Q6

It will be way better than the present playground. It needs to be built pronto. What will happen to the area of the current playground?

Q7

Turn the current playground area into a fenced in dog area. once playground is moved.

Q8

Thank you for providing a link to Kara Smith's presentation on the Fort Ward Playground Concept Design. It is an excellent presentation and, as frequent park visitors, we found it very informative.

Here are some comments.

- 1. We presume that raising the level of the playground is done to ensure a relatively "soft landing" for children at play. Will adding 30 inches of soil and other material harm existing trees when it is added to their root zone? We hope this has been considered.*
- 2. The design for the playground is lovely! It includes many interesting features and structures. Thank you for selecting subdued, natural colors for the playground equipment and structures. They should blend in well with the natural setting.*
- 3. Thank you for making efforts to save existing trees.*
- 4. As I am sure you are aware, a major cause of tree loss is construction activities. Please ensure every effort is made to ensure construction equipment and vehicles do not damage existing trees in and around the construction site. This includes damage due to soil compaction. Care should also be taken in placing log walls and other structures so that existing trees and their root zones are not damaged.*
- 5. As noted by others, it would be very helpful to have a pdf file of the Kara Smith's presentation so that interested park users can clearly see the details of the design concept.*

In addition to these comments on the proposed playground, please provide us with an update on two things we discussed previously.

These are:

- A. During our walk through with you and city staff, it sounded as though the city strongly supported planting more native canopy trees in the park. Please tell us where that effort stands.*
- B. Also during our walk through, we discussed an alternative location for a path to the new picnic pavilion and steps that would be taken to protect trees along the ADA path to the pavilion. It would be helpful to have an update on these items as well.*

Q9

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the playground proposal.

I'm glad to see the City is investing in Fort Ward Park and is expressing an intent to improve amenities for children and improve accessibility. I think the overall design leans

in a good direction, but I have concerns around an insufficiency of fencing and barriers. I also see a need for more toddler and preschool age amenities.

I am concerned about the lack of fence and what I perceive to be an insufficiency of barriers. Pregnant mothers, parents and nannies with mobility issues, and aging grandparents will struggle to maintain control of a child in this environment and put both themselves and the child at risk. Further, any caretaker will not be able to take care of two or more children at or below preschool age in an environment like this, where behavior and obedience of a child is critical. I'm not completely opposed to natural barrier elements including slopes. However, a steep natural slope must ascend out of a playground area rather than descend. The former allows control of a child, while the latter (which is what is proposed) lets a child run away down a slope hazardous to some adults.

The playground area seems smaller than the current playground and removes a second structure element geared towards preschool and toddler ages. I understand that some elements in the new design are for ages 2-5, but it seems like a downgrade in amenities from the current structure geared toward this age group.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. Please feel free to contact me for more feedback.

Q10

Dear Ms. Lo,

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the proposed improvements to Fort Ward Park. I live within walking distance of the park and look forward to changes, but I do have some feedback.

I am a mother of a 2-year-old and I am pregnant with my second child. I am a stay at home mom and before Covid-19, I would go to a playground almost every day with my son because we do not have a backyard. Before I was a SAHM, I worked as a developmental psychologist studying age appropriate behavior in play, specifically fine and gross motor skills when playing with toys in a project with the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. My education, previous work, knowledge of safety in children's products, and daily experience watching my son and other children at playgrounds has led me to have strong preferences in how this playground should be designed. I also have several mother/father, grandmother/grandfather, and nanny acquaintances in the city, and we frequently discuss what we look for in a playground. The things I mention below echo what I hear a lot from these caretakers in the community.

*1. The playground needs to be fenced. Children (even the most well-behaved) cannot be trusted to stay within confines of a certain area for long. Adding further complication to this is when a parent or caretaker is older, pregnant, disabled, or taking care of 2 children and cannot leave one, rendering them UNABLE to run down a hill to grab a child who is about to approach the parking lot or Braddock Road. I cannot stress this enough, but I see this struggle *daily*. I meet with a parent playgroup 2 days a week at local playgrounds and it has gotten to the point that we cannot meet at a place unless it has a fence because almost all of us are either pregnant, are wearing an infant while trying to attend to their 2-3 year old, or have their infant sleeping in a stroller. Sure, we*

could make the argument that this is an "older kid" playground, but it will be very common that a 5-12 year old will be accompanied to this playground with a younger sibling. In short, this playground needs a fenced-in area.

2. Even if it is decided that the playground will not have a fence, does it really have to be on a hill? Children love to run up and down grades. They will think it is just another play structure and will attract them more to the hill, getting them closer to the parking lot.

3. There needs to be a play structure for 2-4 year-olds. The log climbing track is cute, but it won't hold interest for long for the younger children. There is something like this at the park behind the YMCA in Del Ray and it is not super popular. Children ages 2-4 years love to climb, climb, climb (up stair-like structures, if available). If a 2-4 year-old child does not have stairs to climb on in a play structure, they *will* head over to the large play structure, and risk falling off the higher elevations. I see this happen all the time. Trying to keep a 2-4 year-old away from a 5-12 year-old play structure (when there is nothing they can play on other than logs) is extremely difficult and leads to major breakdowns and tantrums. I do not see why the children's stage is necessary given the stage that is next door in the park; perhaps this could be removed and a 2-4 year-old play structure added. Please let me know if you have any further questions. Like I said, I am well versed in age appropriateness, age appropriate behavior, and also the day-to-day happenings at Alexandria playgrounds, and I am happy to elaborate more.

Q11

Overall this look like an excellent plan. The playground will be moved to a more accessible site and the current site will be available for the type of additional tree and shrub planting that will enhance Ft. Ward's status as the City's "arboretum." The specific plans for the new playground seem well-considered. Moving over the existing equipment makes sense and will mean that natural/neutral colors will continue. The new play equipment all looks attractive and designed to help accomplish the stated goals of echoing the fort theme a bit and promoting imaginative and physical activity. The willow tunnel is an outstanding idea - kids like tunnels, particularly as entrances.

Placing fill over the architectural sites appears to be an environmentally sensitive proposal. Care should be taken to ensure that tree root structures are not adversely affected. I note the intention is to work with the City Arborist on achieving this goal. I appreciate that the siting takes the existing trees into careful account. The mulberry tree should be removed as proposed. The small flowering cherry proposed for removal or transfer does have a damaged trunk and appears to be a non-native. Removal of the larger cherry seems appropriate, too, as it appears to be in a weakened condition and there are many other better specimens of black cherry in the park. I would recommend that the City use the playground construction as an opportunity to remove the two declining pagoda trees on the western edge of the site and replacing them with native canopy trees.

The plan proposes establishing a buffer of shrubs to screen the view of the access road to the south. This is a welcome proposal. So is the proposal to develop a raised grass hill to the west. I would urge the City to also add a row of evergreen trees (perhaps 4-5 red cedars) along the open portion of the perimeter of the park to screen SS/SA. In setting down his personal principles for park design, Frederick Law Olmsted wrote that what he sought to create were grounds "where people may stroll for an hour seeing,

hearing and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets" and where there is a "depth of wood enough about it to completely shut out the city."

Those are principles that can be significantly advanced by this project with only a few, relatively inexpensive, additional plantings. I note that Judy Lo has advised that over on the other side of the park the City is planning to build a raised path around the large white oak tree between the parking lot and the picnic pavilion. I appreciate the commitment to protect that tree.

One thing I have do not seen mentioned in ether the slide/oral presentation or Ms. Lo's e-mails is additional tree planting at the park. In last year's "walk around" of City staff and several persons interested in the City's renovation plans, there was considerable discussion about near and long term tree and shrub plantings. There appeared to be a commitment of an initial planting this year (2020) of 30-50 trees. Is that commitment still in place? Has it been modified? If the latter, what is the current thinking about tree planting? I have noticed that usage of Ft. Ward has greatly increased over the last three months and with a greater awareness of the park, it is quite likely the usage rates will stay up. The park truly is one of the City's natural gems and there should be a steady effort to improve its tree variety and density.

I have grandchildren aged 1, 2 and 3 with another arriving in September. I have every expectation that we will all be enthusiastic users of Ft. Ward for many years to come. I appreciate the positive upgrades that are proposed in this plan and hope that additional, thoughtful, improvements will continue to be made.

Thank for your careful consideration of these comments.

Q12

I wasn't sure how much smaller this playground is compared with the existing one.

Q13

All,

I have had a chance to take a look at what new playground the contractor is proposing to build in Fort Ward Park.

First a quibble; The video presentation by the contractor says the relocation of the playground is in response to a city recommendation made in 2015. The Fort Ward Advisory Group, which I chaired, made up of concerned citizens made relocation of the playground for ADA compliance a recommendation to the city in 2010. Which the city accepted.

Second, while the proposed playground is fully functional and compliant, and I suppose is a template broadly used in large rural parks (Fort Ward at 44 acres is Alexandria's largest park) around the country, what it isn't is inspirational; in that it makes no effort to tie into the enormously nationally significant story that Fort Ward represents. It doesn't tie in the story of the Civil War, of which Fort Ward represents the best existing example of Lincoln's forts surrounding D.C., or of the Alexandria African American families who lived there post slavery.

Fort Ward is not just a city park, it represents an ideal, an almost mandatory lesson in our nation's complex history. Its' purpose is to recreate, certainly, and for that it has many hats, but it exists also to learn about and understand our shared past. The first playground at Fort Ward was not ADA compliant, and should have not been located where it was, but the playthings were themed toward the civil war period. We are more sophisticated now, but I would expect a paid consultant would be able to come up with a playground that combined elements of play with learning. Except for the corner shaped stage, (the inspiration for which may have occurred when the contractor noticed the large amphitheater less than 100 feet away), this playground does not inspire. The city can do better.

Q14

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed playground concept design for Fort Ward Park. The virtual presentation was most helpful in describing the project and it illustrated your teams approach to this new location. This is a welcome improvement to the park and the playground.

When city leaders first proposed moving the existing playground in 2008 the gesture was applauded but that alternative location was a poor fit. As you may know, the original playground plan was done without public notice or community input. Although it was a goodfaith effort by the City of Alexandria it side-stepped a formal review process and resulted in a playground that was not handicap-accessible. It also has eroded soil, increased stormwater runoff, and caused damage to adjacent properties. Your process offers great promise that the new location will be a quality addition to the historic park.

My comments follow.

- 1. Please provide me a copy of the full-report on the archaeological research that has been done on the Peter's and Lewis properties.*
- 2. The tree log obstacle course seems like a positive way to add adventure to the static elements of the playground. It also offers a way to reuse logs from park trees that have fallen or been cut. At the present time these logs are being dumped into the wooded area that surrounds the stormwater retention basin off-of Van Dorn Street. Interestingly students and faculty from the Potomac Crescent School regularly use Fort Ward Park for adventure playground activities. The students, as well as their teachers, have very creative ideas about using logs and tree branches to build huts, bridges, etc. Most of the adventure, which doesn't include the current playground, takes place along the riffle trench leading to Van Dorn, along the intermittent stream--Short's Run, and in the wooded area. This group's wisdom and creativity may be helpful to you.*
- 3. Your e-mail outreach was excellent but made me wonder if you are communicating with the users of the existing playground. Many of these children, as well as their parents, and, or guardians, do not speak English. Increasingly park users are more diverse and most likely would have an interest in your proposal. This is also an opportunity to give park users a headsup about future changes to the park.*
- 4. The play stage seems interesting but many children now use the stage at the amphitheater for various activities. Perhaps a duplicate stage is redundant.*

5. *Adding soil and using stabilizing mats seems to have great promise to reduce soil erosion and water runoff.*
6. *Your proposal doesn't address any use or restoration of the existing playground area. What will this area be used for? How will the soil and slope be restored to manage stormwater runoff and soil erosion? Also, artifacts from the original playground continue to litter the park. It would be better if the past practices of dragging debris into the wooded area, dumping concrete in intermittent stream channels and moving the kids-cannon from one part of the park to another are not repeated. At a minimum it would be good for the area and it's users and neighbors if: 1) all of the discarded materials from the current playground, including the kids-cannon, are removed from the park and recycled; 2) the playground footprint be restored to the previous grade and replanted with native grasses and vegetation. Perhaps grass mats could be used to stabilize some of the some which are eroding now.*
7. *The playground concept design does not address how water runoff will be managed. The park continues to struggle with stormwater management and this plan, although modest in size, needs to avoid adding to existing problems. Perhaps if the redundant stage were eliminated a small dry-pond could be used to capture peak runoff in a rain garden with native plants.*
8. *In the past the restroom, as well as the area behind the amphitheater near the proposed playground, has been advertised and used for afternoon sexual liaisons. This part of the park as long been known for this use and it is not uncommon to see single people sitting in their cars waiting for an opportunity for a sexual liaison. This activity, which is not a permitted use in the park, has been discussed with officials from the City of Alexandria Police Department and St. Stephens-St. Agnes School. As the city eventually reopens this part of the park may again a destination for this use. The concept should anticipate that this may be a problem and speak to how this will be addressed. The playground concept design has been professionally prepared and has the advantage of the knowledge of the consultants who helped the City of Alexandria prepare the management plan for Fort Ward Park. What you are doing now is useful both in terms of process-steps, outreach and actual design. I look forward to your follow-up as the city moves ahead. Thanks again for the opportunity to comment.*

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