

ALEXANDRIA OPEN SPACE



OPEN SPACE STEERING COMMITTEE REPORT

JULY 2004

I. THE OPEN SPACE STEERING COMMITTEE

The Open Space Steering Committee is composed of citizens who volunteer their time in order to assist the city government with the implementation of the City's Open Space Plan. Created in October 2003 by the City Manager, the Committee was asked to:

educate the public, engage in outreach activities and begin the process whereby the city identifies and prioritizes property sites for potential acquisition and other means of protection.

The members of the Committee include the chairpersons and representatives of the Planning Commission, the Environmental Policy Commission and the Park and Recreation Commission, as well as citizens.

Co-chairs Judy Guse-Noritake, Chair, Park and Recreation Commission
Eric R. Wagner, Chair, Planning Commission

Members: Cynthia Degrood, Environmental Policy Commission
William Dickinson, Citizen
Bruce Dwyer, Citizen
Glenn Eugster, Citizen
Mark Fields, Archaeology Commission
Bill Hendrickson, Park and Recreation Commission
Kenyon Larsen, Chair, Environmental Policy Commission
Richard Leibach, Planning Commission
Ellen Pickering, Citizen
J. Lawrence Robinson, Planning Commission

By borrowing the expertise of other Commissions, the work of the Committee gains insights into the specialized areas of, for example, the environment, recreation needs, and planning and development goals. Likewise, we have been supported by senior level personnel from the Department of Recreation Parks and Cultural Activities, the Department of Planning and Zoning, the Department of Transportation and Environmental Services and the Office of Historic Alexandria. Without the assistance and guidance of key staff and Commission representatives, our Committee would have had difficulty accomplishing its mission.

We have met ten times since our inception in October 2003, always at 7:00 a.m., before members must start their workdays, and leaving evenings free for our Commission and family responsibilities.

II. RECENT OPEN SPACE ADVANCES

The City of Alexandria has taken great strides in its open space efforts over the past few years. About four years ago, public concerns had begun to surface about the quality and quantity of open space in the community. These concerns had been raised at the Planning Commission, the Park and Recreation Commission and the Environmental Policy Commission, in different contexts. Citizens were asking questions about the care we were giving natural resources, where new ball field sites would come from and the amount of open space planned as a part of new developments. The chairs of these respective commissions came together to forward a notion that a comprehensive open space plan addressing all these aspects needed to be undertaken. The City Council and the City Manager agreed and allocated funds to retain a professional planning firm to lead this effort.

Open Space Plan

Over the course of a year or more, public meetings were held throughout the City to solicit ideas and information from all of the neighborhoods. GIS maps were produced which illustrate the current open space situation as well as trends in growth and other factors that might influence the development and implementation of an open space plan. Though it was no surprise, a picture soon emerged of a city that grew facing the river, with its back to the neighborhoods, which had sprung up behind that important zone of commerce as the centuries slipped by. No overall plan for parks and green space-no plan for the relief of urbanness-had ever been considered, and it seemed almost too late.

The Open Space Plan proposed to trace a broad, green line around the City, drawing on the two channelized "runs" that defined the boundary of Alexandria at the north and the south, joined by pieces of trails and possible linkages to the Potomac waterfront on the east. The protection of our stream valleys, the natural resources they contain, and the connections they provide are the highest priority in this plan. This Green Crescent, a zone of hope and possibilities, strung with pieces of trails and gems of parks, is now the backbone of a plan to connect our City and its neighborhoods.

At the end of a long and full process of discovery and community discussion, last spring the three commissions forwarded recommendations to Council to accept the Open Space Plan as a part of the City's Master Plan. After conducting a public hearing at which broad support was expressed, the City Council voted unanimously to make the plan a formal part of the Master Plan for the City in May 2003, not six weeks after the ink was dry and the finished product was delivered. One of the realities which the plan pointed out very clearly was that in the next ten years, our small and bounded City of seemingly few opportunities needed to protect an additional 100 acres of meaningful open space. The cost to do so is high.

Open Space Funding

The availability of open space funds at both the state and federal levels has been slowing in the past few years. Enlightened, undaunted, and realizing that no one was going to save us but us, a proposal was forwarded during the annual budget process to allocate one cent of the real estate assessments to a dedicated open space fund, to be used for the acquisition of easements or land in fee simple.

City Council has voted unanimously for this one-cent allocation, and it must be voted upon each year.

There was much discussion last summer about how to start the implementation of the Open Space Plan. As a first important step, an MOU was signed with the Northern Virginia Land Trust (NVCT) to investigate and execute easements with private landowners which had been identified by the Plan or through other opportunities. The City Manager asked the Open Space Steering Committee to serve for another interim two-year period as a citizen-based group to help guide the implementation process (see Attachment 1). Several citizens knowledgeable in land conservation were added (see Attachment 2). Staff from the relevant departments were asked to continue their work to assist in the work of the Committee. This Committee has been charged with forwarding a recommendation as to a permanent citizens' structure, in order to guide the continued work on open space at the end of the two-year period.

The first year is nearly up, and the Steering Committee is forwarding this report to the City Council to highlight some of the progress that has been made. The group has used the Open Space Plan over the past year as a roadmap to objectively: rank the top priority sites in the City, to look for further opportunities and to refine ranking criteria. A healthy public debate has ensued about what land to save and how to spend the money that has been set aside. The whole level of awareness and discussion across the community about

open space has been raised to a very high level, and headed into the second year of implementation, we are hopeful that several of the highest priority purchases and easements will be put in place.

In the end, in the span of just a few short months last spring, the Open Space Plan was made a part of the City's Master Plan, dedicated funds were allocated, an implementation group of knowledgeable citizens on these issues had been assembled, an MOU with NVCT had been signed and staff had been assigned. Work has begun in earnest. We will debate what to save for years to come, but we are well on our way to saving something. It has been a remarkable journey and only now are we beginning, with some perspective, to understand what it is that we have accomplished.

The Open Space Plan and our ability to implement it is the direct result of a wonderful community debate and a City Council which moved to embrace a better future for this City. It is quite remarkable that in a few short years, we have come to this moment where we can engage in a debate about what to acquire first.

III. COMMITTEE ACHIEVEMENTS

By meeting generally once a month, and twice a month this spring, the Committee has successfully worked on several implementation steps called for in the Open Space Plan. The Committee established a mission statement early on:

To thoughtfully improve, maintain, and expand the open space, parks, natural resources, urban landscapes and recreational areas of Alexandria, through public and private partnerships, into the premier urban open space system in the metropolitan area and to serve as an example to the United States.

A. Outreach

The Committee has also developed a series of outreach materials and organized meetings with civic associations and other groups to deliver the open space message. Its specific efforts include:

- **Brochures**. Committee members worked with staff to develop the attached brochures for dissemination to the public. One brochure focuses generally on the benefits of open space. The second is more technical and outlines the benefits but also the methods for preserving land with easements.
- **Web Presence** The Committee has arranged with the City to have the Open Space Plan, the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, downloadable open space brochures, and contact information posted on the City's website, providing the public with maximum access to information.
- **Civic Association and Commission Meetings** Committee members have volunteered their time to attend a number of meetings, including meetings of the North Ridge and Old Town civic associations, the Federation of Civic Associations, and the Archaeological Commission. Members explained the City's emphasis on open space, the benefits of open space, and the variety of options available, including easements and donations, for protecting citizens' private property. Additional civic association discussions are scheduled for the coming year.
- **Easement Seminar** On March 27, the Alexandria Historical Restoration and Preservation Commission, the Open Space Steering Committee, and the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust joined forces to sponsor a public seminar on the methods by which property owners can preserve

land. Discussion included different types of easements, tax credits and other benefits, and donation techniques.

- Developer, Attorney, Investment Advisors Meeting. Additional meetings are scheduled for the near future with representatives of the development, real estate and investment communities, in order to heighten awareness about the benefits of open space for the private sector developer and investor.

B. First Year Milestones of the Open Space Plan

The Open Space Plan outlines the City's work to be achieved in advancing open space initiatives over the first seven years after the Plan's adoption, and has stated targets for Year 1, Years 2-3, Year3-5, Years 5-7. The City has met all of its Year 1 goals, including creating the citizen committee and defining a strategy to identify at risk properties needing protection. The City has also hired a part-time grants writer for the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities. And the Planning Department's work on planning for special areas of the City and on individual developments has elevated and addressed the open space issue in new development areas. By beginning the work of an Urban Forestry Plan, updating its Chesapeake Bay regulations, and focusing a planning effort on the Potomac River waterfront, the City has also begun work on items slated for future years.

C. Prioritization of Open Space Sites

The most difficult Committee undertaking has been to fulfill the City Manager's request to find and prioritize open space properties which present opportunities for the city either to preserve or protect our existing resources, or to create new ones.

The Committee's identification process has been guided by the selection criteria listed under Goal 2 of the Open Space Plan and in the Committee's Open Space Priorities and Opportunities List. These criteria constitute the factors that the Committee used to assess candidates for open space in making its recommendation to the City Manager and City Council.

Working through the efforts of a subcommittee, a long list of potential properties was presented for review by the Committee. The subcommittee identified its top ten Priority Sites for the Committee's consideration, providing extensive information regarding acreage, ownership, assessment and open space or natural features of each top site. Through discussions at a series of Committee meetings, the full group applied the criteria from the Open Space Plan to the group of priority sites to establish a methodology with which to rank open space sites.

The attached "Open Space Priorities and Opportunities" report (Attachment 3) contains the Committee's recommendations as to the most important sites in the City that require attention, either in the form of acquisition or another protection method, so that their open space values are not lost. This separate report also states the criteria used by the Committee in reviewing and evaluating potential open space sites, and provides pertinent information regarding those sites that received the Committee's recommendation.

The Committee's recommendations include a list often proposed "Priority Sites" and group those properties into three categories, based on how they were ranked under the evaluation criteria (see Attachment 3, pp. 5-10).

Immediate priority:	Waterfront properties Mount Vernon Trail section
Priority:	Ivor Lane/Seminary Forest connection Clermont Cove Monticello Park expansion Masonic Temple
Other important sites:	Seminary/ Beauregard Braddock / Valley Ridge Lloyds Lane Second Presbyterian

In the Committee's view, these are the ten sites in the City that most warrant the Council's consideration for acquisition or other protection measures.

Attachment 4 is a chart with the evaluation criteria applied by the Committee to these ten properties, and Attachment 5 contains individual graphics depicting these sites.

In addition to identifying these ten "Priority Sites," the Committee also has compiled (a) an "Open Space Opportunities List" (see Attachment 3, pp. 11-16), which contains properties that are potential acquisition/protection candidates, but require further evaluation, (b) a list of "Trails Opportunities" (see Attachment 3, pp. 17-19), which contains potential sites deserving attention for trail (walking and/or bicycling) connectivity, and (c) a list of "Additional Opportunities" (see Attachment 3, pp. 20-22), which contains a number of additional properties and opportunities that require additional review and evaluation before becoming acquisition/protections candidates.

IV. PROCESS AND CRITERIA RECOMMENDED FOR FUTURE ADDITIONS TO LIST

The Committee has assembled and organized a list of candidates for close attention as priority sites. The Priority Sites have been carefully reviewed and assessed. In the years ahead, each of the other sites in the Committee's "Open Space Priority and Opportunities" lists should be evaluated for its potential for open space value and assessed against appropriate criteria. In addition, it is the intent of the Committee to invite civic associations and citizens to add to the Committee's lists other parcels of land that are important in their neighborhood. One of the tasks of the Committee over the next year will be to collect information about and sort through these properties (i.e., those identified by the public and those now listed by the Committee but not as "Priority Sites"), and with staff assistance, to make recommendations about additional Priority Sites for the City. The Committee may also be asked by City Council or the City Manager to make recommendations on individual parcels that are suggested to them by citizens.

To effectively deal with each of these circumstances -the Committee's own list of many parcels, citizen and civic associations' suggestions, and individual properties the Committee is asked to review -the Committee and the City must establish a consistent approach to determining which of the many candidates are true Priority Sites for action by the City. We therefore are including here a proposed set of criteria and process to guide all of us in the future.

Criteria

The criteria listed in Goal 2 of the Open Space Plan have been critical to the Committee's effort to assess potential open space sites and to be consistent in its consideration of differing properties with a wide range of attributes. The Committee has discussed the issue of criteria at length and, while satisfied with the criteria it has been using, it notes that important criteria are also listed under Goal 9 of the Open Space Plan. Given the length of the plan, its conceptual approach, and the potential for differing interpretations, the Committee determined that there is value in restating the Open Space Plan criteria in a differently articulated Form. The existing criteria, for example, focus on whether the property is adjacent to an existing open space property, capturing and emphasizing that value. In its new rendition, the Committee has capturing that value issue, but expanded it and added others to ask the principal open question: What is the open space value of the proposed site? In addition, as pointed out by Committee members and by Council, the existing criteria do not address the following questions:

1. Will the benefits identified above be shared by everyone in the City/city-wide?
2. Does the benefits provide open space in a neighborhood or area that is deficient in open space?
3. Is the site identified in the Open Space Plan or the RP&CA Strategic Master Plan or does it otherwise meet the goals of those plans? .
4. What is the cost of acquiring the property or otherwise protecting the benefits identified?
5. Is there an urgent need to protect the site because of an immediate threat or potential loss of historical, cultural, natural or recreation resource?
6. Is there a way to develop the site and keep the open space values of the property?

While these questions do not relate to the Open Space *value* question, they are important ones for the City Council and the community in any decision about whether to buy or otherwise act to protect a particular site, and how. Therefore, the Committee's restated criteria (Attachment 6) incorporates the first three questions, which can be used as part of or in addition to the "value" criteria. The remaining three questions are important factors and circumstances that must be considered in the ultimate City decision, to acquire or otherwise protect, but are not true criteria by which to judge a site's importance for protection.

Process

In addition to criteria, there should be an established process by which the City determines whether to add a particular site to the "Priority Sites" list in the future. There are two types of situations that require a procedural approach.

1. *Development of Committee's Recommended 2005 "Priori Sites" List.* After the approval by Council of a 2004 "Priority Sites" list, the Committee hopes to continue its work assessing potential open space sites by taking several steps over the next year. It intends to invite additional suggestions from the community to add to its existing "Open Space Opportunities" list, in order to ensure that important neighborhood sites are not overlooked. It also hopes to hold a public work session with the public to explain its program, to solicit additional site suggestions and to hear from the public generally about its methodology. From the larger list of candidates, including the "Open Space Opportunities" sites and additions from the Committee and the community, it then plans to spend several months reviewing, assessing, and applying

criteria to this larger group, in order to revise the "Priority Sites" list and recommend the revised list to the City Manager in 2005. That recommendation will be a proposed "Priority Sites" list for 2005, which may add sites to the 2004 list, reorder it or otherwise alter it.

The Committee's process will include the following procedural steps and timeline:

- July 2004: Committee will send letter to civic associations and other groups inviting their suggestions for sites with open space value to be considered as part of the Committee process. A nomination form will be included.
- Sept-Oct: Committee will hold public work session to solicit input on the nominated and any other open space sites, and ways to evaluate sites for inclusion on the "Priority sites" list.
- Oct-Feb: Committee will review, assess, and distill the open space candidate sites and create a 2005 "Priority Sites" list.
- Feb 2005: Committee will propose its 2005 "Priority Sites" list to City Manager".

2. Addition of Sites to "Priority Sites" List Outside of Committee Process. The Committee suggests that the City adopt the following process for adding to the "Priority Sites" list a site that is suggested outside of the regular Committee process. With the benefit of the recent debates about the Second Presbyterian site, the Committee believes it is important that there be such a process so that all participants know what to expect.

- a. The recommendation that a site be added to the "Priority Sites" list must come from City Council;
- b. The recommendation should be vetted through the Open Space Steering Committee, in order to create consistency in approach and to ensure the recommended site is reviewed in the same manner as properties already on the "Priority Sites" list;
- c. Staff should be asked to gather important background information to assist the Committee and Council make a decision; and
- d. The Open Space Steering Committee should make a recommendation to the City Manager who forwards it to Council; and
- e. City Council should hold a public hearing on the issue and decide whether to add the site in question to the "Priority Sites" list.

V. OPEN SPACE STEERING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on its work over the last year, the Committee recommends that Council take the following steps:

1. approve an Open Space "Priority Sites" list, as recommended by the Committee, after a public hearing;
2. approve the Committee's proposed criteria and process for revising and adding properties to the "Priority Sites" list
3. renew its commitment to the "one cent set aside" for open space;
4. renew its agreement with the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust for another year; and
5. explore options for capitalizing the money represented by the one cent allocation in order to obtain additional monies right away for purchasing and protecting land for open space.

Attachments

1. CMO memo to Council, September 18, 2003
2. CMO letter to Committee member, September 11, 2003
3. Open Space Priorities and Opportunities list "
4. Ranking chart of "Priority Sites"
5. Graphics of , 'Priority Sites"
6. Recommended Criteria for Open Space "Priority Sites" List