

February 15, 2019

PARKS 4 EVERYONE'S RESPONSE TO THE COUNTY MANAGER'S PUBLIC SPACES MASTER PLAN STATEMENT

On January 28, County Manager Mark Schwartz [released his statement](#) on the Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP). This widely published statement fails to address the widespread substantive criticism of the PSMP methodology and results. **The Manager's statement also contains numerous erroneous assertions which have prompted both Parks4everyone and the [Arlington Civic Federation](#) to issue responses.**

As the overseer of the County's efforts to improve civic engagement, transparency, and open data, the County Manager does little to quell resident concerns on substantive data inclusion and evaluation of the PSMP. Instead, he either vilifies or ignores the numerous entities (e.g. [Arlington's E2C2 Commission](#), [Audubon Society of NoVA](#), [Civic Federation](#)...) that have raised similar fact-based, substantive concerns about the PSMP.

The PSMP is a blueprint that sets in motion priorities for planning and spending on park resources for years to come. We should all be working to improve the reliability of the Public Spaces Master Plan, by addressing the substantive concerns regarding methodology, data and transparency.

The reality is there are major problems with the PSMP:

- It does not include [significant, detailed data and analyses completed to date by DPR](#) on past, current, and estimates of future facilities supply and demand.
- In calculating the desired Level of Service (LOS) for various types of facilities, DPR has chosen not to even consider actual supply/demand information in the form of capacity and need. Instead, the PSMP's concept of supply and demand relies on [very subjective foundations](#) such as comparisons of DPR's inventory of facilities with other cities.
- Counting facilities per capita is the only quantitative basis provided in the LOS used to justify needs. [Yet to address supposed needs, the PSMP switches to different metrics](#) such as increasing playable hours by adding turf and lights. This shows that not only is the LOS an inappropriate measure, but that data about capacity (hours needed and playable field hours) is critical to the discussion of facilities from the start.
- There is no explanation, nor public record on the PSMP website, nor in the FOIA documents, for why particular "peer cities" were chosen for comparison, nor documentation about how their facilities (e.g. combination fields, synthetic turf, lit/unlit fields) were counted resulting in the "peer cities average"
- There is no explanation by the County for the [inconsistencies in LOS recommendations between drafts](#) where substantive changes in population goals did not impact the number of fields needed.
- The LOS provided for various facilities are incomplete and count only built-facilities and provide [no LOS determinations for casual use space](#) and natural areas—types of amenities listed as highest priority by respondents in a [County-wide verified statistically valid survey](#).
- [Additional records obtained by a FOIA request suggest](#) that the LOS numbers were "tweaked" to fit predetermined ranges. [This further erodes trust that the LOS recommendations have any validity.](#)
- The County has yet to provide any explanation on these issues even when they were given the opportunity at the January 8th Civic Federation meeting. The County Manager refused to allow knowledgeable staff from participating in order to explain their own internal data and correspondence and answer to the public.

In summary, the PSMPs Level of Service recommendations are incomplete and unsubstantiated on virtually all factors. Residents and commissioners have raised these concerns since 2017 with no explanation from the County Staff. And the concerns were again raised in an overwhelming vote at the [Civic Federation meeting on January 8th](#) with 47 Arlington organizations/associations represented. Furthermore, there are data and reports which directly challenge the field recommendations – some of the most resource (fiscal and land allocation) heavy recommendations in the PSMP.

Residents across the county have invested a great deal of time and effort into developing a sound and useful PSMP and residents continue to try to ensure transparency, data-driven decisions and inclusiveness in all our processes. Instead of devoting so much time to disparaging those who raised these evidenced-based concerns, the County Manager should be focusing on ensuring that these substantive issues are resolved in a way that is most consistent with all of the available objective data.

Corrections to the County Manager’s statement:

1. “The relevant data, presentations, and materials have been posted regularly on the POPS website following discussions with the Advisory Committee.”

FACT:

Important reports, analyses, and even documents specific to the PSMP process were left out of the public engagement process and were never posted on the PSMP website. A FOIA request initiated in December 2017 was necessary to obtain most of this information and that data and information is still NOT included on the PSMP website for any individual who is interested in the topic.

- **Data:** DPR has abundant and detailed data on field usage and demand, which they have worked on since 2015. This information, including analyses specifically intended for the POPS process (e.g. titling of documents: “POPS field estimates v3”), directly challenges portions of the Level of Service recommendations. This information has never been included on any County website or in any public engagement proceeding.
- **Reports regarding field management:** Numerous internal and external expert consultants identified a serious issue within DPR’s management (scheduling) and prioritization of its fields, causing many “reserved” fields to sit empty, but unavailable to others. Instead of acknowledging the significant effect of poor scheduling on field access, the County has pushed a narrative of inadequate field supply, which influenced the public participation and feedback to the PSMP.

2. “It was my decision to ask members of our Advisory Committee to participate in the January 8 Civic Federation meeting after the Civic Federation rejected multiple offers from County staff to present the final draft PSMP (including an offer to present on January 8 in a Q&A format).”

FACT:

- The Civic Federation did not reject multiple offers to present the draft PSMP, but rather clarified that it was not the appropriate forum for a full presentation of the entire PSMP, many of which had occurred throughout the county. County staff were among the participants originally proposed by Mr. Schwartz, but when the Civic Federation leadership clarified that staff should be prepared to discuss and answer questions about the Level of Service, the attendees were changed. County Manager Schwartz instead opted to send two members of the PSMP Advisory Committee—resident volunteers who

lacked the knowledge required to address many specific LOS questions. [Email records from the County Manager's office validate this exchange.](#)

3. “This decision was also based on my concerns about the negative tone of interactions and disparaging remarks about Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) staff regarding the specific methodology on Level of Service (LOS)”

FACT:

- County Manager Schwartz did not back up this accusation with any evidence and in follow up inquiries, there remains no information on when, where, or who is involved in these interactions. Since 2017, DPR has ignored repeated requests from commissioners and residents to provide data and to provide support for DPR's recommendations and methodology. Instead of addressing the concerns raised, Mr. Schwartz himself has disparaged those who have raised substantive concerns about transparency and accuracy.
- The Civic Federation has a long and respected history of supporting balanced debate, and the panel format offered was an ideal opportunity for the DPR to explain the methodology and rebut the concerns raised. Instead the County Manager decided to prevent knowledgeable staff from participating, and thus the questions remain unanswered and residents are left more frustrated.

4. “We have much more to do, and I welcome suggestions on how we could do better as a community”

The overall goal of the wide array of residents pushing this issue is precisely to improve the PSMP and community engagement, so it's easy to summarize a few recommendations:

- Make sure that processes are truthful and not predetermined.
- Make sure that residents have access to all relevant data, even if it conflicts with the County's recommendations.
- Ensure that engagement and discourse is respectful to residents.
- Focus on addressing the numerous issues with the Public Spaces Master Plan raised by residents rather than responding to valid criticism with erroneous statements.

And, most importantly ensure that not just the PSMP is a successful process, but that all processes are successful with improved engagement, data and transparency.

What has been done to address any of these similar concerns?

“Twice, **county staff announced to the volunteer leadership that they did not have to listen to the working group.** It's an accurate statement, but then why have a working group?”

Other Arlingtonians privately provide similar examples yet **fears of being ostracized or tagged as uncooperative keep them silent.** We have a civic responsibility to correct these problems. Our local government plays an enormous role in our lives. Volunteering to improve our communities not only makes us better neighbors but also makes us better people. **Processes that attempt to marginalize, belittle or ignore these efforts must stop.”**

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/has-arlington-lost-its-way/2018/11/09/91191b8e-dc58-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.40415dbd06b9

“The really sad part about this is that it **became clear to us over the many months that this has been going on that the county staff had already made up their minds,**” Carol Fuller of the Crystal City Civic Association told ARLnow before the hearing. “They knew which way they wanted to go.”

<https://www.arlnow.com/2017/09/08/planning-commission-sides-with-neighbors-on-two-crystal-city-vre-station-options/>

“My initial hope is that county staff begins being neutral as they work on requests from organizations that seek to enter our communities or expand within them. **Currently, community activists feel as if we must fight the organization leaders AND county staff,** who it seems often support the organizations’ requests with little consideration for how it impacts the community.”

<https://www.arlnow.com/2019/01/28/progressive-voice-arlington-county-equity-should-start-with-staff/>

“**County staff broke this promise** by inserting language in the [Discovery Elementary School Use Permit](#), providing for synthetic turf and expedited action on lights”

<https://www.arlnow.com/2016/12/01/peters-take-say-no-to-lights-for-williamsburg-fields/>

“DPR’s fourteen-month delay in responding to AHCA’s proposal to eliminate those fields, particularly with the off-hand acknowledgement finally extracted, is **an inexcusable failure of civic engagement** “

<https://www.arlnow.com/2017/04/20/peters-take-department-of-parks-and-recreation-needs-a-civic-engagement-makeover/>