

**Subject:** Statement from Arlington County Manager Mark Schwartz on Public Spaces Master Plan

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## Statement from Arlington County Manager Mark Schwartz on Public Spaces Master Plan

### Additional Insights on the Public Spaces Master Plan and Level of Service

January 28, 2019

For the past four years, the County has been working to update the Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP), last updated and approved by the County Board in 2005. The PSMP is one of the 11 elements of the County's [Comprehensive Plan](#) – our overarching planning tool that helps guide planning decisions from transportation to affordable housing to storm water to public space. In the last few months, as part of the PSMP update process, some in the community have discussed and disagreed with aspects of the updated PSMP. As County Manager, I want to explain and clarify the approaches used when developing the updated plan.

Four years ago, I appointed an Advisory Committee that included residents with a broad range of perspectives to help update our PSMP. The members of this group have spent hundreds of hours working on the update and in that process have engaged the broader community on the many issues surrounding our public spaces. During this four-year process, the County and its consultant team developed hundreds of working assumptions and working documents; tested and revised recommendations; and reviewed and discussed various methodologies with the Advisory Committee and in many public engagement opportunities. [The draft PSMP](#) includes over 170 substantive recommendations across six strategic directions. The relevant data, presentations, and materials have been posted regularly on the [POPS website](#) following discussions with the Advisory Committee.

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). 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). I would like to clarify how the Level of Service (LOS) of service was determined and why I support this approach.

The Advisory Committee and staff reviewed a wide range of methodologies, which could be used to calculate supply and demand. This included the approach preferred by a group of community members calling for a utilization model for the athletic fields, which uses the number of hours available for field usage and the number of hours needed based on current field usage requests to calculate supply and demand. However, after extensive review and consideration of various methodologies, the Advisory Committee and staff determined to use LOS, using "inventory and population" to calculate supply and demand for the PSMP are based on a few key points:

- Using the total number of amenities (inventory) as the "supply" and the population as "demand" offers an opportunity to apply this methodology equally across all the various park amenities from basketball courts to trail miles to community gardens to athletic fields;
- Population is an easily understood way to project needs and is used regularly by the County and

APS to anticipate future capacity;

When LOS is used collectively with the other PSMP recommendations, it can provide a good foundation to manage the public space system equitably; and can be used comprehensively when making decisions on investment in any specific facility. I encourage everyone to review a summarized version of the LOS approach included in the PSMP, which is on pages 172-173 in the [Final PSMP](#).

The PSMP provides broad policy recommendations on various aspects of the public spaces system, the LOS recommendation is one of the hundreds of recommendations developed in this plan. All recommendations contained in the document should be used comprehensively when making decisions on investment in any specific facility.

The LOS methodology employed by the plan is a proven, frequently used approach to create one of several planning tools to help steward the public space system. Population-based LOS is the basis of the Trust for Public Lands statistics, used in the National Recreation and Park Associations (NRPA) 2017 Agency Performance Review report, a requirement for NRPA accreditation (10.3.1). This methodology is also used by jurisdictions around the country for elements of their system such as Dallas, Texas; Washington, DC; Fairfax County; and Prince William County.

LOS is population-based, and also access-based. Both aspects of LOS will assist the County in managing its assets and demonstrate geographically where additional assets may be needed or where those assets may overlap and could be considered for another park and recreation purpose. Used in combination, the population-based and access standards provide a snapshot of the level of service provided by current public space amenities and a roadmap for addressing the number and location of amenities in the future, depending on need.

As can be expected, any type of LOS will not satisfy every member of the community or have unanimous agreement. However, when used collectively with the other PSMP recommendations, it provides a solid foundation to manage the public space system equitably.

We have much more to do, and I welcome suggestions on how we could do better as a community. We need to ensure our open spaces do the best they can to provide space for recreation, for natural resource protection, and for casual uses. We know we don't have enough space. The final draft of the PSMP works to strike a balance by providing an array of planning tools that will assist the County Board, the County staff, and the public when determining future uses for public place. For this plan, I continue to support the population-based level of service of approach, which is consistent with the [letter from our Board](#).

As the plan recommends, there will be an opportunity to conduct a needs assessment every five years. Such an assessment offers an opportunity to review approaches used for the 19 amenities that are being measured and to explore creating a level of service measure of Casual Use, a new term introduced in this plan (Recommendation 1.2.4., pg. 60). Post-PSMP adoption, staff and I are committed to improve the available data for athletic field use and to work with the community to determine a set of use assumptions that will enable consistent measures of fields utilization and capacity.

Since Jane Rudolph assumed leadership of DPR, we have been working to improve our ability to manage our fields. We do not have it figured out yet – but we are doing better maintenance, better scheduling, and creating more opportunities for the fields to be available for casual use when not scheduled. This includes re-classifying 21 athletic fields from the permit-only designation to the permit-takes-priority designation; removing baseline fencing at Bluemont and Virginia Highlands Parks; and implementing the Field Allocation Guidelines — a multi-year process working with the current sports leagues to ensure that the field time is being efficiently and equitably allocated. [Learn more about that process and the draft guidelines](#).

Finally, I want to note that since I became Manager in 2016, I have made it a priority to enhance our public engagement efforts. I have changed our Communications Office to a Communications and Public Engagement Office. I have added staff and strongly believe that discussion with the community

early and often leads to better results and outcomes. We have spent many long days and nights putting together a framework for public engagement. Members of our staff spend countless evening and weekend hours with members of our community on important plans, programs, policies, and projects. And, after almost 34 years of participating in the Arlington civic process, I am certain that the quality of that discourse is aided and advanced immeasurably by the superb staff we have in this County.



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