

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Parsing the PROS Plan**

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The *2012 Park, Recreation, and Open Space (PROS) Plan Update* will estimate future parks and recreation needs and offer strategies for meeting those needs. On April 12, the Parks Department staff presented their draft of the 2012 PROS Plan to the Planning Board, and the Board voted to submit that draft to the state. The Board also scheduled a public hearing on the draft Plan for Thursday, May 24.

The PROS plan is an important step in the facility development process. Estimates of parks and recreation needs in the PROS Plan are cited as indisputable *needs* in the county's Capital Improvements Program (CIP) process. So, knowing what is in the PROS Plan gives you a preview of how your tax money will be spent over the next ten years. Thus it is important to look very closely at what is included in the plan and how the estimates are derived, especially for those estimation methods that are not based on actual facility use data.

We also need to look beyond the individual facility types and consider the Plan's totality. In these tough financial times it is important to develop consensus on what we really need and what we can afford. Do we need state-of-the-art facilities for every conceivable sport and hobby? Is it more important to have convenient, nearby facilities or to have regulation-sized facilities? Should we be building new facilities when many existing facilities cannot be adequately maintained?

Each community also needs to assess how the PROS Plan will impact nearby parks and recreation facilities. The PROS Plan is essentially a "top down" planning process meant to guide the type and distribution of facilities in the county. Communities, however, may have very different ideas about what park and recreation priorities should be from a local ("bottom up") perspective.

What's new? The draft 2012 PROS Plan contains a new definition of urban parks which calls for "more green space than paved surface" (including urban wooded areas). The new urban park definition also incorporates the concept of a "civic green" as "predominantly flexible space for community gatherings and festivals, as well as active and passive recreation activities that may include Frisbee, pickup sports, picnicking, skateboarding, community gardens, etc."

This is good because it recognizes the need for natural areas in high-density communities as well as the multiple benefits of such areas. This is something residents in highly-developed portions of the county have been advocating for years. In fact, in all recent statistically valid countywide surveys citizens countywide have given natural areas a high priority.

What's missing? Guidance from the *Vision 2030 Strategic Plan* recommends the co-location of facilities of two or more public agencies, yet the PROS Plan envisions no co-located facilities. Like the concept of residential co-housing communities, sharing common areas between agencies allows for smaller individual building footprints, saving both capital and maintenance expenses. Also, when facilities don't need to be as massive, they are easier to site in developed areas where land is scarce.

Most of Prince George's County recreational facilities are co-located. For example, community recreation centers are often co-located with schools. In Prince George's County, Parks and Recreation (part of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission) and the public school system have an

agreement which governs management of the joint facilities. Surely Montgomery County could do as well.

In addition to saving money, co-location with schools means facilities are conveniently distributed within neighborhoods around the county. Users also benefit from "one-stop shopping" when, for example, a parent can work out while their child attends team practice or rehearses the school play.

What's coming later? The draft 2012 PROS Plan does not contain updated needs estimates for ballfields. Instead, it contains the estimates from the 2005 plan. These old estimates are highly flawed, and the way they were derived led to an overestimating of ballfield needs for most areas of the county.

That is why the Vision 2030 Strategic Plan, using a more sophisticated method, concluded that most areas of the county have sufficient fields to meet demand. Of course if fields are not in playable condition, having lots of fields becomes meaningless. The Parks Department needs to demonstrate the capability to manage its existing field inventory before asking taxpayers to fund new fields.

Much has changed since the 2005 Plan. New fields have been built. Permitting is now centralized, instead of being scattered between three agencies. And ballfields are permitted by the hour. These changes have reduced the practice of booking multiple fields, a practice that increased a group's chance of getting a playable field come game day. In addition, these changes should make it easier to generate accurate use statistics.

The Parks Department does intend to generate new estimates by conducting an Athletic Field Study, but results may not be available before the PROS Plan is finalized. Aspects of the study which would be an improvement over the 2005 methodology include:

- conducting extensive outreach efforts to athletic field user groups and various governmental partners, (e.g., MCPS, and the Recreation Department);
- identifying athletic field issues and associated solutions unique to each of the seven athletic field areas;
- considering the contributions of alternative providers (e.g., Olney Boys and Girls Club) in meeting countywide athletic field needs; and
- comparing and contrasting M-NCPPC Department of Parks current method of predicting future athletic field needs with methods used by other jurisdictions throughout Maryland and elsewhere.

It is not possible to discuss all the issues associated with the draft 2012 PROS Plan in a short article such as this. Readers are encouraged to review the Plan themselves. It is available online at: [www.montgomeryparks.org/PPSD/ParkPlanning/Projects/pros\\_2012/pros\\_2012.shtm](http://www.montgomeryparks.org/PPSD/ParkPlanning/Projects/pros_2012/pros_2012.shtm)

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*