



TERR WARS

As Arlington's population booms, community leaders are calling for more schools, more housing, more sports fields and more parks. And they're all vying for the same territory in a county where available land is scarce.

By Kim O'Connell

GIVE A GROUP OF KIDS A STICK,

a rock and a patch of dirt, and they'll find a way to play ball. Or tag. Or capture the flag. Or some fantasy where trash cans are alien life forms and the kids are the last humans left on Earth. No matter what they do, most people can agree that getting kids outside in the open air, using their bodies and their minds, is a positive thing.

In Arlington, the good news is that kids (and adults) have lots of places to go out and play, from the Mount Vernon and Custis trails to green spaces such as Potomac Overlook, Lacey Woods, Long Bridge Park and Four Mile Run. This year, the nonprofit Trust for Public Land ranked Arlington sixth on its annual list of the nation's best municipal park systems.

The bad news is that Arlington is a small urban county—only 26 square miles, compared with Fairfax County's 406 square miles or Loudoun's 521—with just over 11 percent of county land devoted to parks and open space. And as Arlington becomes more populated and developed (and its public schools more crowded), competition for use of the county's fields and parks has grown fierce. Many sports leagues are now forced to crowd multiple teams onto a single field all at once, just so the kids

can all get some practice. Other leagues have parent volunteers going out early on weekends to treat rain-soaked fields, using cut-out milk jugs to bail puddled water into buckets, just to keep the fields from closing.

And yet, not everyone sees more athletic fields as the priority. One recently announced plan to fence and renovate a baseball diamond at Bluemont Park drew criticism from area residents who fear that Arlington is losing too much of its unstructured green space, whether it's to commercial or residential development or to structured park uses such as tennis or basketball courts. Those facilities are great if you play tennis or basketball, the thinking goes, but what about people who just want to stroll among the trees, play a game of catch or take the dog out? Who decides who should have to take their ball (or dog) and go home?

"We're not like Loudoun, Montgomery or Fairfax," says John Foti, a board member of the Arlington Babe Ruth youth baseball league. "What those counties have that we don't have is land."

WHEN IT COMES to youth sports in Northern Virginia, soccer is the juggernaut. The Arlington Soccer Association (ASA) has more than 9,000 kids playing

at the recreational, developmental or travel levels. Teams use some 75 fields or sites across Arlington for games and practices—which might sound like a lot, but it's not uncommon for four, six or even eight teams to practice on the same field simultaneously, says ASA executive director Justin Wilt. "That's not a standard way of doing soccer practice, but it's what we've had to do to keep kids active," he says. (And this usage doesn't include the adult leagues that use the same fields at night and on the weekends.)

As a member of Arlington's citizen-led Sports Commission, Wilt says it's possible—but not easy—to balance the sometimes-competing desires for more sports fields and more open parkland, although communication among the various interests is key. "I'm greedy in that I want both," he says. "I want all of that. We can't nickel-and-dime it. It can't be soccer talking about what it needs and baseball talking about what it needs. Because it's really about green space versus schools, restaurants, office space and other development. We're finding it helps if our sports leagues work together because we have a shared interest."

Youth lacrosse, for example, has exploded in popularity, with the Arling-

Arlington Soccer Association's Justin Wilt



ARLINGTON

Park Facts

2,274 Acres of county parkland

19,000 Street trees

35 Diamond fields

43 Rectangular athletic fields

19 Combination athletic fields

7 Community gardens

10 Natural resource areas

126 Playgrounds

4 Spraygrounds

8 Dog parks

SOURCE: PARKS.ARLINGTONVA.US

ton Youth Lacrosse Club now counting about 700 boys and girls on its rosters. That's double the number of players it had just four years ago. Which means that lacrosse teams are now facing the same constraints as soccer teams. "We've had too many kids on the same field to practice—sometimes four or five teams that share the same field," says club commissioner Scott Dalton. With so much competition for space, Dalton has developed a partnership with Marymount University to use its lacrosse fields occasionally, and he's shortened team practice times just to get more cleats on the ground.

Athletes in neighboring McLean face similar pressures. Debbie Felix has three boys who have all played for McLean Little League and McLean Youth Soccer, and her husband,

Shea, is a youth soccer coach. "The space seems harder to get," she says, "because most sports are being played year-round now instead of one each season—such as soccer in the fall only, baseball in the spring only."

The battle for green space also pits youth and adult leagues against each other. Tensions recently arose over the field use at Eads Park in Crystal City (where a "youth-only field" has been designated for kids' soccer practices and games) when the soccer coaches complained that adult Ultimate Frisbee players were using the field during off times, damaging it to the point that it often lacks grass. Frisbee players, meanwhile, claim that they've been squeezed out by nearly every other sport, with nowhere to play.

"I've seen 200-pound adults play-

ing flag football, softball and Ultimate Frisbee on saturated fields," says one youth soccer coach whose team plays at Eads and who asked to remain anonymous. "But what can I do? It's tough to get someone with authority to come to a location in a short amount of time to reprimand [unauthorized users]. Arlington's lack of playing fields will only get worse if rules are not adhered to that allow county fields to seed, regrow and repair from rain and overuse."



The sprayground at Virginia Highlands Park in Pentagon City

One solution on the table is artificial turf, which requires no irrigation or mowing and would allow more fields to remain open after inclement weather, easing concerns about maintenance and makeup games. Yet artificial turf has raised environmental and public health concerns because of its reliance on crumb rubber (granulated tire rubber) as an infill agent, which some studies have suggested has carcinogenic qualities.

Turf has also been criticized because it retains more heat than grass, posing additional safety problems such as heatstroke and turf burns from sliding or tackling. (Retired U.S. soccer star Abby Wambach has been an outspoken critic of synthetic turf, saying it affects how athletes play the game.)

This spring, the Arlington County Board approved plans to redevelop an adult diamond field at Gunston Community Center with artificial turf—a move that promises to add 880 playing hours per year to the facility. In a public-private deal, the project will be funded by a \$180,000 grant from the private Arlington Sports Foundation,

coupled with \$190,000 from the county's Diamond Field Fund. Infill for the turf will be made from ethylene propylene diene monomer, a synthetic rubber manufactured specifically for turf applications (it's already in use at the Williamsburg/Discovery School campus) and that is reportedly a safer alternative to tire rubber.

As someone who regularly rallies volunteers to bail out and rake wet baseball diamonds (there just isn't enough park staff to cover it all), Arlington Babe Ruth Baseball's Foti sees this as a positive prototype for other high-use fields. For those who are concerned about the health risks associated with turf, he adds, there are alternatives to crumb rubber that are worth exploring, including surfaces made from natural cork, sand or coconut fibers.

Lacrosse Club commissioner Dalton says he would also like to see more turf options, as well as greater openness to lighting fields so that more people have access to these spaces into the evening. But lighting fields frequently prompts pushback from neighbors who are concerned about traffic and light intru-

sion, and the debate continues.

"We're not talking about turfing every green space, which is physically not possible and economically not feasible," Foti says. "But there's a list where it makes sense to do so. Our goal is to explore those options. The important thing about the Gunston field is it's becoming a multisport, multiseason field. You can't just have a baseball field and let it sit dormant from November to March."

At least, not in a place like Arlington.

FOR ITS PART, Arlington County is developing a new Public Spaces Master Plan to provide a framework for new parkland acquisition and renovations over the short and long term. (The plan should be open for public comment this summer.) The last parks master plan, issued in 2005, is now somewhat obsolete, given that the county population has grown by 24,000 residents (8.5 percent) in the intervening 12 years.

"It's not that we've been losing parkland per se," says Jane Rudolph, director of Arlington's Department of Parks and Recreation. "It's that there are more people living here and more density. We're creating a vision [with the master plan] that will help us balance people's open-space needs with all the other needs of the county."

However, upgrading and expanding green spaces can come at a heavy cost. In the Four Mile Run Valley near Shirlington, Parks & Rec has begun a planning process to improve the green space in the linear area along the stream, including potential upgrades and expansions of the Jennie Dean baseball diamonds, Shirlington Park and the Shirlington Dog Park, among other areas. To gather input, the county board has convened a citizens working group that includes representatives from the neighborhood and local businesses. And those citizens have had plenty to say.

One major concern is that if the county buys up private property along Four Mile Run to expand parkland, the



AFAC's Charlie Meng is calling for the preservation of light industrial space along Four Mile Run.

"Nobody's going to move [AFAC] to make way for more parkland. You don't kick out your food pantry!"

—Charlie Meng

move could drive out Arlington's only light-industrial district, which includes school bus parking, automotive repair shops, WETA's studios, the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) and other businesses. When the initial planning documents included the AFAC building and other businesses in a so-called "park planning area," it set off some alarm bells.

"The message that the businesses want to get across is that every county needs industrial land to be successful, and every county needs every economic rung of the ladder represented to be successful," says Mike Katrivanos, a member of the Four Mile Run working group and co-owner of New District Brewing Co., which opened last year on South Oakland Street.

Charlie Meng, executive director of AFAC, is a bit more direct. "Nobody's going to move me to make way for more parkland," he says. "I'm just going to look at them cross-eyed. You don't kick out your food pantry!"

While Arlington County could theoretically condemn private property

under eminent domain law, that's not likely to happen, says Lisa Grandle, Arlington's park development chief. But it is entirely possible that the county could urge property owners to sell. "That's the question," she says. "Should the county continue to buy property for parkland, or do we just keep what we have and build a park around it?"

Looking at the bigger picture, county residents like Shona Colglazier would like to see a more integrated balance of development versus green space. A mother of two, Colglazier was a member of the South Arlington Working Group that helped determine the location of the forthcoming elementary school next to Thomas Jefferson Middle School—which is now slated to be built on a parking lot after a proposal to put the building on existing parkland drew criticism. (Similar concerns have been raised over the potential siphoning of green space from Kenmore Middle School, one of three sites under consideration for a new public high school; and at the Wilson School, where H-B Woodlawn will be relocating.)

Colglazier contends that permits issued to developers of new multifamily properties should include a provision for community benefits that add to public space, mitigate transportation impacts and promote the social well-being of both new and existing residents. "Arlington County needs new development to increase their tax base, but they need to stop giving away our precious land without a benefit for the community at large," she says. "With only 26 square miles, we must get the most bang for our buck."

WHERE DOES NATURAL LAND factor into all of this? Local residents want that, too.

Two years ago, plans for a second playground at Nelly Custis Park in Aurora Highlands led to the formation of Friends of Aurora Highlands Parks, a citizens group advocating for natural parkland preservation. Aside from some paved paths, picnic tables and playground equipment, Nelly Custis is almost all open space, with a nearly block-long field of grass. The Friends group had watched as the nearby Virginia Highlands Park in Pentagon City was renovated to include bigger courts and structured play areas, with no new unstructured green space to offset the loss, and they didn't want a repeat of that scenario. After the group waged an outspoken advocacy effort that included testimony to the County Board and email campaigns, plans to add more playground equipment to the undeveloped parts of Nelly Custis Park were shelved.

■ turf wars

"We realized we really need to be actively engaged in how our prime and limited park real estate is used, because otherwise we lose it," the group said in a written statement. "We believe there is a fundamental lack of appreciation for the intrinsic value of natural parkland and open space."

Studies suggest that proximity to green space has many benefits, including improved moods, increased attention spans and a greater sense of self-sufficiency. "Research shows that when children play in natural spaces, they're far more likely to invent their own games than in more structured settings," nature advocate Richard Louv writes in his book *Vitamin N*. "In fact, creativity and learning throughout life can be stimulated by more time in nature."

Though Cindy Olson's daughter plays ball with the Arlington Girls

Softball Association, the Williamsburg mom says her family also values unstructured spaces where they can hike and walk their dog, Princess. When parks are upgraded or fenced off—as was the case in a recent renovation of Tuckahoe Park—it can feel limiting to more casual uses, she says, like the pickup kickball games her family likes to play.

Still, Olson says she doesn't feel cut off from the outdoors. "I've lived in both North Arlington and South Arlington," she says. "In both places, I've felt like we were lucky to have a lot of good open spaces."

In a recent needs assessment as part of its master planning process, Parks & Rec surveyed Arlington residents and found that most want multiuse trails (87 percent) and natural open space (76 percent).

"One of the concerns we hear is that natural open space is just what's left over," says Caroline Haynes, chair of the county Parks and Recreation Commission. "And that's getting chipped away. As we go through all these school expansions, that's a problem too. We have to have trailers, which take up open space. We're really pushing for 'up, not out,' [vertically vs. horizontally oriented buildings] when it comes to school development."

Nature can't be conjured out of thin air; it must be preserved or restored. One option that's gaining traction involves conservation easements, voluntary legal agreements that private landowners enter into to protect their property from development. The Northern Virginia Conservation Trust—whose slogan is "saving nearby nature"—has administered easements



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throughout Northern Virginia, including one at the historic building owned by the Falls Church Scout Building Association in Falls Church City that borders (and, in effect, extends) existing parkland. “Both Arlington and Falls Church face pressure to maximize uses for every place inside their boundaries,” says Andrea Reese, senior land conservation specialist with the Trust. “Balancing these needs is always a challenge, but it’s worth doing.”

To solve the athletic field shortage, Arlington Soccer’s Wilt has encouraged county officials to consider alternatives like more rooftop green space—such as building a deck over the school bus parking site in Shirlington, which would allow for more play space while reducing the heat-island effect of a paved surface.

Cost, of course, is the big hurdle. (When California’s Pomona College built an NCAA-size soccer field

atop a new parking garage, the project’s cost per parking space was nearly double that of an average comparable parking garage.) Features like solar-powered lights and other energy-efficient measures could offset some of the expense. “People are moving here because there are a lot of good things here,” Wilt says. “If we continue to lose ground on things like the arts, sports, etc., the desirability of being in Arlington is going to be diminished.”

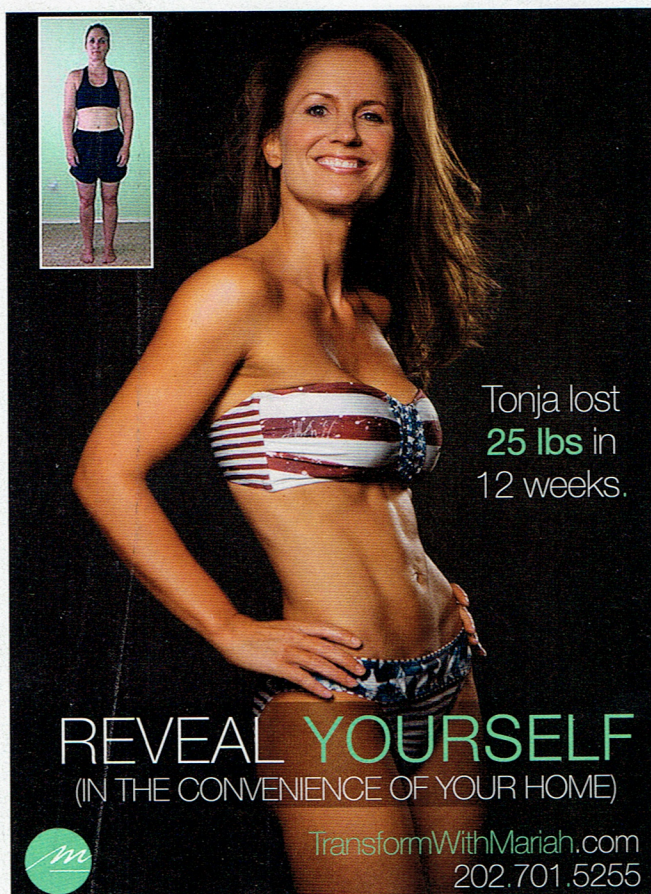
Meanwhile, the tug of war over land use continues. Beth Hicks, a member of the Arlington Ridge Civic Association and mother of two (who also served on the South Arlington Working Group), says she’d like to see county officials and other stakeholders show more flexibility in their problem-solving—whether that means building more multisport fields, allowing more shared school and community space or investigating safer

turf-fill technology. One dream scenario she’s envisioned is the construction of an esplanade over congested Route 1 in Crystal City, with parks and fields above and cars running underneath. If it can happen at the High Line in New York City, Hicks asks, why not here?

“This problem is not going away—it’s just not,” says Arlington Babe Ruth baseball’s Foti. “If we’re going to have this increase in growth as is expected, the status quo is not acceptable. We’re not talking about putting a man on the moon. We have to think of new and creative ways to solve this problem.” ■

Kim O’Connell lives in Aurora Highlands. Her son plays baseball and her daughter runs track, but both love roaming around parks looking for alien life forms, too.

At press time, we learned that Justin Wilt is leaving his post as ASA executive director as of July 1.



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