

Virginia Highlands Park- West Side.
Balancing Community Needs and Facilities
PROPOSAL

to

The Department of Parks and Recreation
Arlington County, VA

Submitted by
Friends of Aurora Highlands Parks



Title: **Virginia Highlands Park: West Side Rebalancing Proposal**

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Principal Leads: Kari Klaus, Chair of Friends of Aurora Highlands Parks.
Stacy Meyer, Co-Chair.
Active Volunteers of Friends of Aurora Highlands Parks.

info@friendsofAHParks.org
www.FriendsofAHParks.org

Friends of Aurora Highlands Parks

Established August 2015.

Mission

Preserving and growing parkland and green spaces. Balancing park use for all ages and uses. Working together to give a stronger voice for our parks in Aurora Highlands.

Goals

- Preserve existing parkland; identify and counter proposals to use parkland for other purposes.
- Increase awareness and participation in the neighborhood for park advocates.
- Identify opportunities to add more natural tree-filled parkland in Aurora Highlands.
- Promote balance in park use and improvement/expansion recommendations to ensure that the needs of our age-diverse populations are met with the proper mix of playgrounds, courts, athletic fields, and un-programmed open green space and natural areas.
- Continue to work closely with Arlington Parks Coalition to inform residents of the importance of protecting our parks.



Virginia Highlands Park West Side Rebalancing Proposal



How Virginia Highlands Park Could Look: Imagining a Park for Everyone

Introduction

This proposal presents an opportunity to restore balance in Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) by replacing restricted-use fields on the west side of the park with creatively designed open green space that complements the existing extensive active-recreation areas on the east side.

A re-envisioning of the west side of VHP will simultaneously correct public green space deficiencies and transform VHP into a vibrant public park with large-scale visual appeal and with the broadest possible constituency, a park that benefits all neighborhood residents, adjacent commercial areas, and the county as a whole.

Current Imbalance in Park Use and Neighborhood Needs

Virginia Highlands Park

Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) is a popular and heavily used 18-acre park in the heart of the Pentagon City area of South Arlington. Its location surrounded by both high-rises and single family neighborhoods is within easy walking distance from the most heavily populated area of Pentagon City and it is metro accessible.

Over the last 30 years, the park has been developed in a piecemeal fashion, resulting in a park that today is dedicated primarily to athletic space and playgrounds with no unifying design or feel. Land dedicated to specific purposes is removed from general use, limiting the open space left for socializing or unprogrammed recreation. ***With a dramatic rise in the neighborhood's density already underway, we need to rethink the way our limited parkland is used so that it is better utilized and benefits the whole community, not just limited segments.***



Areas of VHP infrastructure dedicated to specific uses. Green areas: natural turf softball fields, soccer field, playgrounds and a sand volleyball court. Yellow: artificial turf soccer field. White areas: Buildings, paved surfaces - tennis and basketball courts and a spray ground. Unbuilt spaces primarily consist of small patches of woodland and hill.

The Changing Community

In the past decade, the area around VHP has undergone major increases in population through new developments in Pentagon City.

- As of the 2010 census, Arlington was the 12th most densely populated jurisdiction in the country (7,994 people per square mile).
- In 2010, the population of Arlington Ridge and Aurora Highlands neighborhoods was 15,449, about double the density of Arlington as a whole.
- Since 2010, the county population has increased by 4.4%. [\[Arlington County Profile\]](#)
- 5,289 housing units are being added (not including RiverHouse proposals); estimating at 1.5 residents per unit, this will add 7,933 residents, increasing total neighborhood population to 23,382, approximately 18,700 per square mile.



- 🌳 Arlington Ridge and Aurora Highlands currently share 45.13 acres of parkland.
- 🌳 With projected density, parkland in our neighborhood will be **1.94 acres per 1,000 residents**. According to the 2014 [Trust for Public Land](#) City Park Facts this is far less than other cities' averages citing acres per 1000 residents: Baltimore (7.9), Boston (7.7), Philadelphia (7.2).

Facilities Imbalance

Over the years, available passive green space and mature trees in Virginia Highlands Park have been usurped by facilities specific to only two uses: sports and playgrounds. Organized league sports predominate, while excluding the majority of the neighborhood's age-diverse population. Currently under construction, the county is continuing to add more facilities, leaving only a tiny fraction of green parkland for other uses.

Facilities at VHP include:

- 🌳 2 soccer/athletic fields
- 🌳 2 baseball diamond fields
- 🌳 6 tennis courts
- 🌳 2 practice tennis courts
- 🌳 1 half basketball court
- 🌳 1 youth basketball court
- 🌳 1 sand volleyball court
- 🌳 2 public playgrounds
- 🌳 3 petanque courts
- 🌳 1 spray ground
- 🌳 1 pavilion
- 🌳 1 gazebo



The majority of these facilities are so use-specific that people are prohibited to use them for any other activity, even when they are not in use which is the majority of the time. In fact, **the softball fields are greatly underused relative to other facilities and especially to open space**: Each field is used for approximately 600 hours per year out of a potential of 4,380 hours (12 hours each day), less than 14% of the time.

What is missing?

- 🌳 A variety of public spaces to serve the community's diverse and growing needs.
- 🌳 A balance between opportunities for active recreation and leisure activities.
- 🌳 A large civic space for socializing and events.
- 🌳 Opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the outdoors and connection to nature.
- 🌳 Access: 3.5 acres occupied by two softball fields are locked off from the community. For 5 months of the year they lie completely unused, and for the rest of the year they are accessible only to paying leagues.

Correcting Imbalance and Meeting Resident Needs

Vision

The primary element of this proposal is the removal of the two softball fields from the west side of Virginia Highlands Park. This area can then be opened up and integrated into a general purpose space available for use year-round that can achieve designs shared by great public parks:

- They comprise both an outer park, with a lively pedestrian space abutting a commercial area, and an inner park with varied spaces.
- They have a large area of open green space with flexible use.
- Their layout and amenities benefit different groups of people using the park—active recreation, informal socializing, special events.
- Pathways provide connections with the outer commercial/pedestrian spaces and with the different areas of the park itself.
- They develop strategies to attract people during different seasons so that the park retains its function as a community asset all year long.
- They create attractions and destinations throughout the park: artfully placed amenities such as fountains or sculptures act as focal points; gardens with seasonal variety maintain interest.
- They create an identity for the park and project an image for the community.



Central Park, Great Hill. Olmsted designed. Paths connecting spaces. Mix of trees and green spaces.



Singapore Botanic Gardens. Simple gardens flank open multi-purpose green space. Children playing soccer in background. Young couple picnics under a tree with their dog on left side.



A civic lawn for events or socializing.

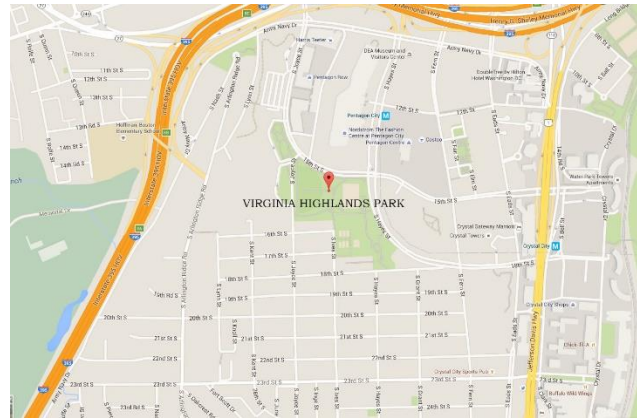
Opportunity in Timing

The CIP for FY15–FY24 funds design replacement of the facilities, walkways, lighting, site furnishings, fencing, irrigation and landscaping in the west side of VHP. Construction is anticipated to begin in FY 2017 and 2018. Now is the ideal time to ensure VHP is redeveloped to meet current and future needs.

Opportunity of Location

The west side of Virginia Highlands Park is an ideal location for a large, open, multi-purpose neighborhood and county park.

- 🌳 The park is easily accessible by walking or metro to people of all ages and varied interests in being outdoors.
- 🌳 With facilities for sports, playgrounds, and spray park concentrated on the east side, the proposed redevelopment of the west side would provide a balance of active and passive park space.
- 🌳 Being central to Aurora Highlands and Arlington Ridge neighborhoods, near an active commercial center, and within easy distance from Crystal City, it will foster greater interaction among the communities.
- 🌳 The bustling activity along the park's periphery at Pentagon Row, Pentagon City, and the east side of the park will draw a steady flow of users into the park.
- 🌳 Conversely, as an inviting urban park, it will attract visitors that will in return support the businesses at the fringes.
- 🌳 Adjacent residential landlords and businesses along Pentagon Row are potential partners.



Benefits of a Redesigned Community Park

- 🌳 **Parks Are Economic Engines.** High-quality parks spur economic development, increase municipal revenues through their impact on property values and shopping revenue, attract homebuyers and renters, and retain and attract affluent retirees.
- 🌳 **Parks Create Community Cohesion.** Community parks provide opportunities for diverse residents to come together for civic and environmental activities. Community cohesion is especially important for communities like Pentagon City, which has a diverse mix of established, new, and transient residents, young millennials, families with young children and seniors aging in place.
- 🌳 **Parks Reconnect People with the Natural World Through Site-Based Learning.** Open space allows people of all ages opportunities for unprogrammed recreation and exploration of the natural environment.
- 🌳 **Parks Reduce Crime and Create Safer Communities.** Research shows that there is less crime in residential areas close to parks, in part because these green spaces are frequent gathering places that engendering greater community cohesion.