


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 2005

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: RECEIPT OF THE OPEN SPACE STEERING COMMITTEE'S
RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROPOSED POCKET PARK PROGRAM
AND SETTING THE REPORT FOR PUBLIC HEARING ON SATURDAY,
MARCH 12

ISSUE: City Council receipt of the proposed Pocket Park Program from the Open Space Steering Committee.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council receive the recommendations from the Open Space Steering Committee on the proposed Pocket Park Program and schedule a public hearing on the report on Saturday, March 12.

BACKGROUND: As part of its open space discussions, Council highlighted the need for pocket parks in the City and the particular problem involved with small, local pocket park proposals, competing with larger sites for priority or funding. On June 11, 2004, Judy Guse-Noritake and Eric R. Wagner, the co-chairs of the Open Space Steering Committee, wrote Council and proposed that the Committee formulate a specific recommendation to Council on the subject of pocket parks (Attachment 1). On June 22, 2004, City Council, requested the Committee to create a separate category for Pocket Parks, prepare a process for the consideration of pocket parks in the Open Space nomination process and report to the City Manager, for subsequent discussion with Council, on the subject.

DISCUSSION: The Open Space Steering Committee met several times to discuss the pocket park issue, and has considered funding, definitions, existing pocket parks, density of population, location of areas of the City not served by park land, and the process by which pocket parks should be selected, prioritized and ultimately created. On October 28, 2004, the Committee hosted a community meeting to discuss open space, and the pocket parks was one of the subjects of public discussion. Based on the information reviewed and the comments from the community, the Committee proposes that the attached Pocket Park Program, which staff also recommends for Council's approval. This program includes the Open Space Steering Committee's definition, criteria, funding and process (Attachment 2). In the City Council Strategic Plan Goals, Open Space is listed as Goal 2, a top priority, "Open Space Plan Implementation." The Pocket Park Program is part of the Open Space Plan Implementation process.

FISCAL IMPACT: The Committee is recommending that an equivalent of 20% of the 1 cent tax set aside for open space acquisition be set aside for the Pocket Park Program each year. It is not possible to predict the costs of acquiring, developing and maintaining pocket parks in the future, but 20% of the approximate \$2.8 million in the annual one cent open space set aside (at the current tax rate) should amount to \$560,000 annually, and will limit the acquisition costs for pocket parks. City staff recommend that the 20% allocation of open space funds to the Pocket Park Program should be a goal and not a hard and fast annual percentage set-aside. This is because the cost of land acquisition and the timing of acquisition for both large parcels, as well as small parcels, will be highly variable in any given year. By establishing the 20% as a goal, there will be more flexibility to meet City open space needs and acquisition opportunities as they arise.

Funds for the design and development of the parks are planned for and budgeted in the City's Capital Improvement Program, and funds for parks maintenance, in the operating budget of the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Attachment 1. Noritake/Wagner letter to Council, June 11, 2004.
- Attachment 2. Recommended Pocket Park Program including attached Criteria
- Attachment 3. Example of "Vest-Pocket" Park
- Attachment 4. Map of "Existing Pocket Parks"
- Attachment 5. Map of "Areas of the City Served by Open Space, including Pocket Parks"
- Attachment 6. Pocket Park Criteria

STAFF:

Kirk Kincannon, Director, Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities
Aimee Vosper, Supervising Landscape Architect
Eileen Fogarty, Director, Planning and Zoning
Barbara Ross, Consultant, Planning and Zoning
Open Space Steering Committee

June 11, 2004

TO: Philip Sunderland
City Manager

FROM: Judy Guse-Noritake and Eric R. Wagner
Co-Chairs, Open Space Steering Committee

RE: **FOLLOW-UP ISSUES FROM CITY COUNCIL WORKSESSION**

During the Open Space Steering Committee's May 12 worksession with City Council, Councilwoman Woodson and Councilman Krupicka raised concerns that the Committee's recommendation of priority sites did not include any opportunities for pocket parks in the more urban neighborhoods of the City. As they noted, the focus of the Committee's recommended sites and its proposed refinements to the evaluation criteria tends to favor larger undeveloped sites, particularly those that provide opportunities to expand existing open spaces or that allow for trail connections.

In response to those concerns, the Committee discussed at its meeting yesterday the possibility of creating a separate category for pocket parks that would not compete against larger sites for priority or funding. There are several methodologies that could be used to achieve this objective, and members of the Committee discussed some of them yesterday. While we were not in a position to adopt any specific recommendation during the meeting, there was general agreement among Committee members that we should move toward creating a separate pocket park category and/or criteria. To that end, the Committee would like to undertake the development of a recommendation concerning pocket parks to be reported to the City Manager during September for subsequent discussion with City Council.

In formulating its recommendation, the Committee will consider at least the following issues:

- How should "pocket parks" be defined? What is the maximum site area that would qualify as a pocket park?
- In what parts of the City are pocket parks to be given priority? Should this be defined based on underlying zoning, planning districts, or in some other way?
- What should be the mechanism for placing a priority on pocket parks? Should there be a designation of a certain proportion of the annual open space funding for pocket parks?
- Should there be a nomination process developed for sites to be considered as pocket parks?

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- What criteria should be used to evaluate the nominated sites? Should preference be given to sites where the neighborhood commits to provide resources (dollars or sweat equity) to help acquire or maintain the proposed park?
- Do we challenge neighborhoods to help acquire and develop sites through cost sharing and/or "sweat equity"?

To the extent possible, the Committee will consider how other jurisdictions handle pocket parks and the creation of other types of small green neighborhood-oriented spaces. We are certain that other questions will arise as we formulate our recommendations.

We would be pleased to discuss our thoughts on this issue with you prior to the June 21 City Council public hearing on the Committee's recommendations.

cc: Members of the Open Space Steering Committee

PROPOSED
POCKET PARK PROGRAM

The purpose of the Pocket Park Program is to enhance and expand the existing City of Alexandria public park system by ensuring a network of small scale park spaces designed to meet neighborhood needs. The concept of the “pocket park,” also called “block park,” also called “vest pocket park” (Attachment 3), has been incorporated in many jurisdictions’ park programs as a way to create and provide additional community amenities in both residential and commercial areas. Specific parks range in their function from wild, woodland settings, to tot lots and man-made, urban environments.

1. Pocket parks defined

The Committee recommends that the City define a pocket park as follows:

Pocket (block) parks are intended to meet the needs of residents or workers within about a tenth of a mile. Pocket parks are less than 20,000 square feet, with no minimum size. No parking is needed. Pocket parks may include such elements as small scale play equipment, public gardens, seating areas, passive open space, landscaped areas, important natural features, or trees.

The definition includes several important concepts. One aspect is that a pocket park is intended to be public. While limited in its defined service area, and ideally supported by volunteer citizen efforts, a pocket park is part of the City’s official public park system. The tenth of a mile (528 ft.) service area is the current standard used by the City and is consistent with the one to two block dimension used in the Open Space Plan. The importance of the service area is to distinguish Pocket Park space from larger parks that serve an entire neighborhood or region of the City, or a City Wide Parks that serves all of Alexandria.

The size of a pocket park is part of its definition. The fact that there is no minimum size is important, allowing very small spaces to be eligible. While there is no minimum size, it is also important that the space be small, less than 20,000 square feet of land area. Larger spaces begin to serve a larger population and other park needs. Parking is not part of the typical pocket park, because the park is designed to serve pedestrians able to walk the tenth of a mile or one to two block distance.

The proposed definition includes uses anticipated in a typical pocket park, but written specifically so as not to exclude the occasional unusual situation. Most pocket parks may be passive spaces within residential or commercial areas, used for contemplation, relaxation, and walking, with landscaping and benches. The definition leaves open the possibility for other opportunities, however, in the appropriate setting.

In drafting the proposed definition, the Committee reviewed the City's existing 24 pocket parks. The Committee also reviewed the two following maps (Attachment 3&4), identifying pocket parks in the context of the City park system:

1. The "Existing Pocket Park" map shows existing pocket parks as well as other public parks in the City. It also shows, as to each, the 1/10th mile service area surrounding the parks. Finally, the density data from the 2000 census is shown on the same map, allowing an analysis of park location and population.(Attachment 4)

2. The "Areas of the City Served by Open Space including Pocket Parks" map shows pocket parks, other public parks, and other open spaces, both public and private, including private areas with and without public access. Again, the 1/10th mile service radius is highlighted, thus allowing a determination of the areas of the City for which no land is easily available for relief. The map answers comments from City Council and others about private amenities in apartment complexes, at schools, and in other forms that serves some of the population, even if public access is not permitted. (Attachment 5)

Existing parks and playground area are not part of and are not affected by the pocket park program. Those parks are managed, maintained and funded by the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, as part of its ongoing parks program. The pocket park program as proposed here is new, and designed to add land to the City park system. There may be improvements to existing parks that are desired by a neighborhood, but they should not be confused with nominations and discussions about proposed pocket parks. For example, if there is a desire for a tot lot on an existing public park, that recommendation should not be part of the pocket park analysis and prioritization. The suggestion would be directed to the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities for consideration as part of its ongoing work.

2. Criteria

The proposed criteria for judging potential pocket parks and prioritizing them is attached and includes the following elements: (Attachment 6)

a. *Public benefit.* The recommended criteria focuses on the benefits to be derived from the use of the land as a park, citing as significant natural or historic features, the extent of the population to be served, and the fact that the users have no current alternative park land. This criterion requires that the City identify the public benefit or public value to be achieved by creating the pocket park.

b. *Use.* The criteria require that the proposed use of the park be identified and considered as part of the prioritization process. The criteria further stress the importance of the park being open and inviting to the public. The Committee recommends that the City not support land for a pocket park if it is hidden, hard to access and otherwise perceived as a private space only for use by its immediate neighbors.

c. *Neighborhood commitment.* Another important element in a potential pocket park is the degree to which the neighborhood is committed to its creation, and specifically with its acquisition, development and/or maintenance of the park. Because pocket parks are uniquely local in nature, and given the competition for resources, it is appropriate that those benefitting from this particular type of park show their commitment to it with their time, money and energy. While a neighborhood commitment and volunteer effort is only one of several criteria, the Committee believes strongly that pocket parks are particularly suited to a local effort to assist with the acquisition, development and/or maintenance of the park.

d. *Land status.* The criteria also include a review of the land itself, and a determination that it is appropriate for a pocket park. First, if the land is public, it may be capable of being converted to a pocket park use, but would not be a competitor for the prioritization for pocket park acquisition money. In addition, there may be alternatives to acquisition of private land that are appropriate for a pocket park. One landowner has already suggested that his vacant commercial property be leased by the City for at least ten years for use as a park while he foregoes development during that time. Without assessing the appropriateness of such an arrangement or of that particular site, the Committee endorses creative means of establishing parks and includes a criterion to identify the status of the land being proposed. The Committee does not include the cost or price of the land as part of the criteria, because, as discussed previously with City Council, that issue is the province of City Council.

e. *Support for the park.* It is important that any pocket park recommended by the Committee to Council be one that has a broad base of support. The proposed criteria therefore asks that the support for the park or its proposed use be identified, and if there is known opposition to it, that be identified as well.

f. *Geographical need.* Finally, the Committee discussed at length the issue of providing parks in areas of the City that currently lack such amenities. Review of the attached maps shows that there is currently service with some sort of park use for much of the City. Where park service is lacking, that fact should be part of the consideration in prioritizing new park opportunities. At the same time, the Committee recognizes that there may also be good reasons for establishing a pocket park in an area of the City that already is theoretically served by other parks, where there is an agreed upon use, readily available land, and assistance with the acquisition costs. Thus, the notion of geographical need is included in the criteria, but is not the only determinative issue.

3. *Funding*

It is recommended that the City set aside an amount of money in each year's budget for pocket park acquisition, equivalent to 20% of the 1 cent tax set aside for open space acquisition. Additional funds for the design and development of the parks must be made part of the City's Capital Improvement Program, and maintenance funds, as part of the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities' budget, must be part of the City's operating budget.

To expand the ability to place pocket parks across the City, the Steering Committee recommends that neighborhood "friends" group be supported, to assume the routine maintenance of these parks. Also, other mechanisms for cost sharing should be considered to acquire the parcels for these pocket parks, including contributions, easements, development exactions, city land swaps and use of the Development Fund. As a recent example, in both the Hennage and Postmasters development projects, pocket parks were included and helped create successful private development partnerships.

4. *Process*

The process for pocket parks should be similar to but separate from the one the City has been using for priority open space sites. The Open Space Committee will create a separate list of Pocket Park priorities for City Manager consideration. The list will include ranked recommendations selected from nominations received from neighborhood groups, as well as additional nominations for areas of the City without nominations. In 2005, the Committee anticipates that pocket park nominations will be filed by March 30, and recommendations will be made to City Council, along with the Open Space Priority list for 2005, in May 2005.

The Committee will be making a recommendation to City Council regarding the nature and structure of a group to manage the open space efforts on a long term basis, which may be a mechanism similar to the Open Space Committee. As part of that recommendation, the Committee will address a specific mechanism for processing pocket park recommendations in the future.

It is important to note that with annual recommendations for open space priority sites as well as pocket parks, there will inevitably be out of cycle park and open space land proposals. If and when those occur, the Committee will not hesitate to forward its recommendations to the City Manager for consideration. The committee also intends to continue its outreach effort regarding the benefits of open space generally, and the specific rewards of donating land, easements and other interests for use as parks and open space.



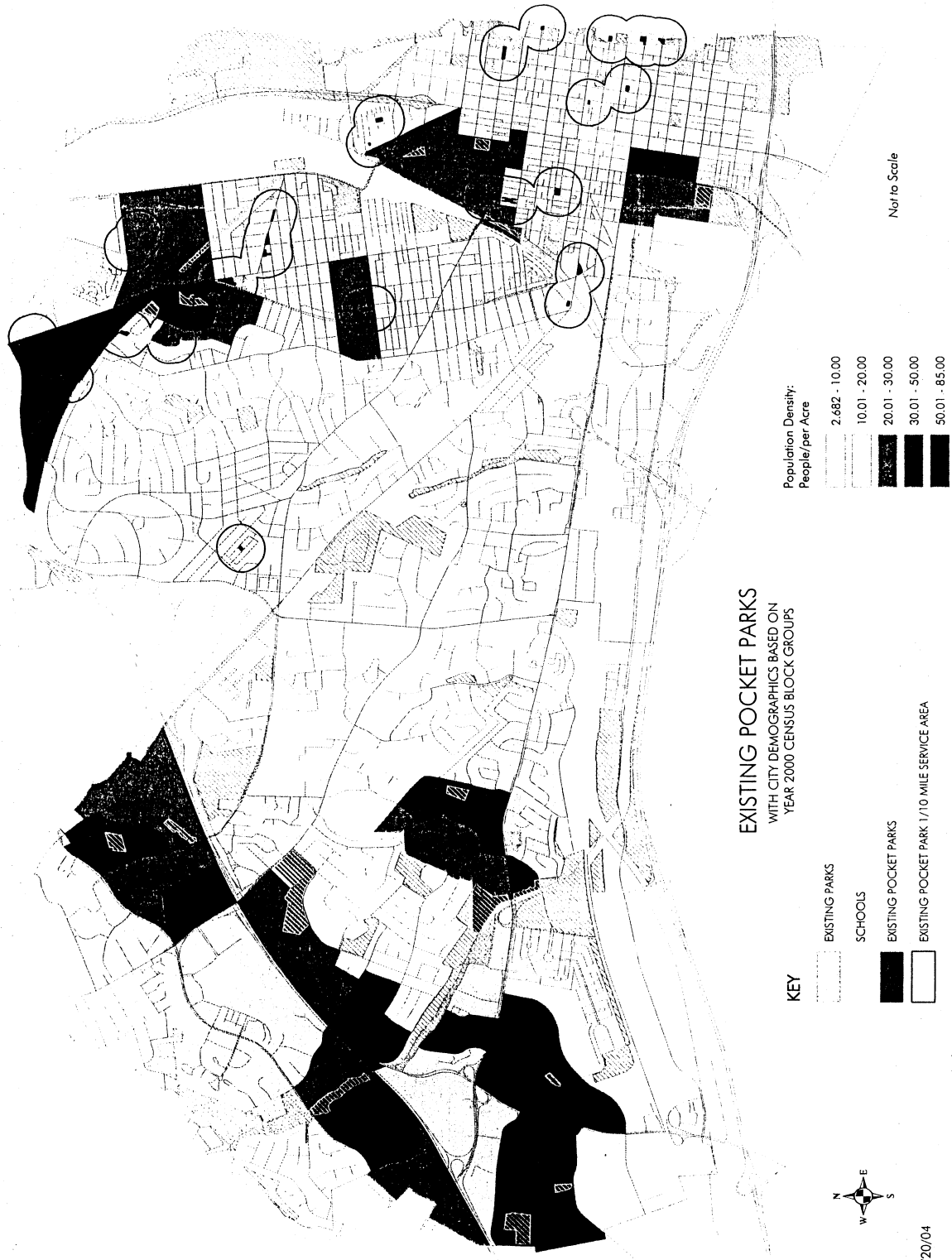
Rotary Gateway Park

The Paint Creek Walkway and Gateway Park in downtown Rochester is the embodiment of a beautiful, serene vest-pocket park within a suburban community. It is a melding of typical park elements, perennial gardens and sculpture, which contribute to the ambiance of the setting along Paint Creek.

A combination of architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture, work in concert to create the end result. Phase I of the Paint Creek Walkway is the portion of the Walkway from Main Street to East University. Gateway Park, sponsored by the Rochester Rotary, is the jewel of this project and is the key entry point to the entire Walkway. The Park is located on the south side of Paint Creek along Olde Town Road at the end of Water Street.

Gateway Park was completed in 1997. The Paint Creek Walkway is a continuation of the original Paint Creek Trailway, which now extends from Lake Orion and along the north side of Rochester Municipal. The Walkway continues along Paint Creek, under Main Street, around the Library, crossing University and then on to Bloomer Park in the future.

Dr. William Ebinger, Past President of Rochester Rotary and General Chairman of the Gateway Park Project, worked in partnership with Rochester Rotary, the Rochester Downtown Development Authority (DDA), Rochester Library, and Greater Rochester Area Community Foundation (GRACF) to create a magnificent place for local residents and visitors of our city. Funding was provided through the sale of paving bricks, park benches and pedestrian lighting.





"POCKET PARKS"
AND IMMEDIATE AREAS SERVED BY PARKS

KEY

- EXISTING POCKET PARKS
- EXISTING PUBLIC PARKS
- PRIVATE OWNED WITH PUBLIC ACCESS
- PRIVATE OWNED WITH NO PUBLIC ACCESS (AMENITY IS PROVIDED)
- 1/10 MILE SERVICE AREA (628 FEET OR APPROX. 2.5 BLOCKS)



Not to Scale

CRITERIA FOR POCKET PARKS SELECTION
(not listed in order of importance)

1. What is the benefit to the public from the proposed pocket park?
 - a. Are there important natural features, such as trees, water resources or habitat, to be preserved?
 - b. Are there important historic resources to be featured or preserved?
 - c. Will the park provide uses for a population without alternative sites?
 - d. How wide an area will be served by the park? Will it be used by more than just a few neighbors?

2. What is the proposed use of the park? Will the park be perceived as open and inviting to the general public? Will the park be compatible with surrounding uses?

3. To what extent has the neighborhood demonstrated a commitment to assist with funding or other contributions to the park?
 - a. initial acquisition
 - b. development, including equipment, furniture, plantings and “sweat equity.”
 - c. long term maintenance
 - d. is a Friends of the Park organization proposed?

4. How available is the land for the park? (Without considering cost *per se*)
 - a. Is it already in public ownership?
 - b. If not in public ownership, is the owner willing to sell it?
 - c. If not for sale, is the owner willing to donate it, grant a permanent easement on it, or lease it to the city? Will the park be available in perpetuity and, if not, how practical will it be to convert the park use to private use at the end of that time.

5. To what degree does the nomination reflect broad support from the neighborhood to acquire and develop the park, and is there agreement about the specific type of use? Is there a known dissenting view?

6. Is there a need for a pocket park or additional pocket parks in the geographical area of the city where the proposed site is located?