

Open Work Session
Draft 2022 Land Preservation Parks and Recreation Plan
January 18, 2022

Mr. Steve Miller, Director of Recreation, Parks and Tourism, came before Council and said he is here to talk about the draft of the 2022 Land Preservation Parks and Recreation Plan (LPPRP). He said this is a very large and detailed document of over 190 pages, so he does not intend to dive into the weeds on any particular item, but he wants to present Council with a very general overview of where they are in the process, and he will divide this into three simple parts.

Mr. Miller said first he will remind Council of the real purpose of the LPPRP and why they do this every five years, and secondly, he is going to give a handful of highlights of the plan, particularly related to Recreation and Parks issues and how it ties to recommendations, and then lastly, he will touch on next steps in the process with where they go with both local and State approval processes. He said, once that is done, he will be happy to field any comments or answer any questions Council might have.

Mr. Miller said, in terms of the purpose of the plan, Counties do an LPPRP every five years for two primary reasons; number one, it is a State requirement to be eligible for Program Open Space to have an updated plan, and then secondly, it is a valuable planning tool for Recreation and Parks agencies to identify or assess their facilities and open spaces, and identify gaps in services and where needs of the population are not being met; and thirdly, to help them develop long-term plans to address whatever gaps might exist where practical and feasible. He clarified, though this is a State requirement and they have to do this to be eligible for Open Space, he will tell Council it is a very practical document and does not just sit on the shelf for five years. He said they use it often and refer to it every year when they plan their budgets and plan the CIP, so this is a very valuable and practical document from a Recreation and Parks standpoint. He said they will use this throughout the life of the plan and then, of course, update it as conditions change, but that is the purpose of why they do this every five years.

Mr. Miller said secondly, he would like to touch on a few highlights that are included in the draft plan. He said most of his comments are going to focus on Chapter 4, which is the Recreation and Parks chapter and includes a lot of the capital recommendations, and he is going to focus on three main areas. He said one area he will touch on is facilities and open spaces and how they analyze facilities. He said secondly, he will touch on stakeholder input they received and how that helped to shape priorities, and lastly, how they use both of those, the analysis and the public feedback, to build capital recommendations, which are explained in more detail in Chapter 4 by planning area.

Mr. Miller said, in terms of analyzing facilities, there are a number of different tools used, and he is going to highlight two very quickly. He said the first is called a proximity analysis, which is a mapping tool that shows how a park's facilities and amenities are located in proximity both to population centers and to one another. He then referred to a map and said they draw green circles and plot all the different public park facilities in the County. He said the green circles in rural areas use a five mile radius, and in more populated metro areas they do a half mile circle. He said then they can physically see on the map where gaps in service might be, so if there is white space and no services at all, that would show itself on the map. He said the map in his presentation is basically covered in green and encompasses all of their park facilities, so they are blessed to have pretty good coverage throughout the County of different types of facilities. He said, in the plan, there are also specific proximity maps that look at water access,

picnic facilities, trail access, etc., so they can physically see where there are gaps in services, and maybe that can be a focus for the future. He said, again, for the most part, for all of their different park types, they are pretty fortunate to have pretty solid coverage throughout the County in most places.

Mr. Miller said another tool that was incorporated into this plan is new and was developed by the State called a park equity tool, which not only analyzes how parks are physically spaced out from one another, but looks at facilities from an equity lens to see how they are meeting needs with various census block groups and segments of the population. He said, in addition to where a facility is located, the equity tool looks at things such as community demographics, socioeconomic factors, and even factors in access to public transportation, such as if there is a park in a rural area and if there is public transportation, so it puts all of these factors together and gives each area of the County a park equity score. Referring to a map, he said the darker shaded areas are low equity and the lighter shaded areas are higher equity scores. He clarified, they have made this comment to the State as well, but this is a brand new tool the State developed and, unfortunately, they did not include all of their facilities, so it is hard to get a full picture as to what the equity is because not all of their facilities are included, so they are working with the State on that for the next plan. He said the State did not have the capacity to do that this time, but he thinks it could be a very valuable tool as they develop and refine it over the next few years and will give them another tool to address equity issues in terms of access to their parks to all residents.

Mr. Miller said lastly, he will touch on stakeholder input and that they had a tremendous amount of feedback on this update of the plan. He said, obviously, they had participation from their Recreation and Parks Commission, and also worked with several recreation councils located throughout the County, and worked with other stakeholder groups including Wicomico County Public Schools as to how they can interact and utilize their facilities better. He said they also received official input from municipalities, which was a new requirement from the State this year. He clarified, this has not been a big issue here, but in some Counties there is no input at all from municipalities, so the State made it a requirement of this plan that they had to engage municipalities both on the front end and throughout that process.

Mr. Cannon asked if that is just municipalities or all townships, to which Mr. Miller responded, his understanding is that it was just municipalities.

Mr. Miller continued, they reached out to all municipalities, and some did not respond at all, but some engaged, so they have included that information. He said he thinks that process went very well and they had a lot of very good productive conversations that they could incorporate into the plan.

Mr. Miller said, last but not least, when doing a plan like this they want public input, so they did a public input survey, and he is very pleased to tell Council that to date they have received 832 responses to the survey. He said, for reference, in 2017 they had just over 100, so they have nearly 1,000 responses to the public survey, which is a great amount of feedback. He said there is a lot to digest in the survey, and it is in the appendix if Council wants to look at all the specifics, but he will give a quick highlight of the top things residents identified that they want to see developed or improved. He clarified, he just picked the top three, but one was trail based recreation, such as walking and running trails, hiking, biking, etc., but 61 percent wanted that. He said second is passive outdoor leisure, such as playgrounds and picnic areas, and third is water access and water recreation type activities. He clarified, this is very consistent with what they see in State and national surveys, so the County is very similar, but these are the types of thing people want. He said they also calculated write-in responses, and pickleball actually was one of the top write-ins, disc golf was a top write-in, and trails and water recreation were also repeated dozens of

times, but they had over 100 different write-in responses to the survey. He said all of this is interesting and great timing as they consider plans and as they are looking at West Metro and Connelly Mill, and whatever other opportunities are out there. He said all of this is great input as they build their plans.

Mr. Miller said, last but not least, they took the facility analysis and public input and used both to help build capital recommendations, which Council will see in Chapter 4. He said the State asked them to build out capital recommendations for 15 years, which was a very difficult task to project that far out, so they did the best they could. He said he will give Council a quick highlight of what the sum total of that was, but he wants to remind Council that the capital recommendations in here are simply that at this point. He clarified, they are projecting out 15 years, but nothing in this plan obligates the County to any particular project, it does not obligate them to any amount of funding, and it does not identify funding sources. He said, as a Department, they work really hard to try to identify federal, State, or any type of grant they can get their hands on, but they are not committing to any of that by endorsing the plan by any stretch. He reiterated, they are strictly recommendations for planning as they move ahead.

Mr. Miller said, in summary, over the next 15 years they are projecting 62 projects at around \$38 million dollars, but, of course, who knows where prices will go over the next five to ten years. He said each of the projects is listed by planning area, and he would be happy to touch on any specifics if Council would like.

Mrs. Acle said, going back to the equity chart, the low equity was in the west side of the County. She then asked if they need to address the low equity areas first, to which Mr. Miller responded, again, this is not a complete tool at this point, but the purpose is to see if there is an equity issue. He said he thinks that can be part of the decision making process as to where they prioritize and where there are opportunities, so he thinks that is something to consider.

Mr. Miller said, to highlight the next steps in this process, unless there are concerns on behalf of the Council, their deadline to submit a draft plan to the State is the end of this month. He said they will then receive comments back from the State in addition to comments already received from the public and different stakeholder groups. He said, over the next couple of months will revise the plan and come back to Council hopefully by mid to late spring to look at a revised version of this plan, and right now the State deadline is July 1 to submit a final locally approved plan. He clarified, they do not have to cover everything today, but he is happy to cover whatever Council would like, and Council will see this again after it goes through some revisions over the next few months as they get State and local comments.

Mrs. Acle said, looking at the number of projects and looking at equity, central has the highest amount currently, but that has the highest amount of projects, to which Mr. Miller responded, again, he does not want to put too much stock in the equity map because it is not a complete tool. He said he thinks the central area was one of the areas of deficiency where they did not have everything listed, but central is also where the bulk of the population is, so it deals with Salisbury.

Mr. Cannon asked if the equity map is based on how much equity they are getting out of their investment, to which Mr. Miller responded, he thinks the State is referring to access to all members of the population, so they factor in demographics such as age, financial status, minority populations, and if there is not access to a park or the ability to get to a park. He clarified, he does not know the formula as the State developed this tool, but they factor all of that in, calculate the formula, and say there is equity in terms of access to folks. He said they would want to have a high equity score because where there is a

low score they might have a deficiency and they would try to meet that need. Mr. Cannon said equity is usually used as a term for return on investment. He said, if it is high equity, they get a lot of bang for their buck, to which Mr. Miller responded, he thinks this is more like a measure of equal opportunity.

Mr. Mitchell asked if they are including what is in the park and the fact that some parks have some things and others have different things, to which Mr. Miller responded, in the proximity analysis, definitely. He said they have analysis based on different amenity types, so they can evaluate that in different ways. He clarified, he will double check if the equity analysis includes that because it could get complicated as not everyone would have water access if they do not live in a place near water.

Mr. Hastings said he does not know if other Counties had as many responses percentagewise, but that is really great for the survey to have 832 responses. He said he saw that the State Park Investment Commission said in November that the State of Maryland is looking for places to turn local parks into State parks, but they definitely do not have enough places for State facilities, so a place like Pirate's Wharf might be an area that could be planned for something like that in the future. He clarified, he does not know where those communications will go in the future, but they listed that as he was reading through their 86-page report, and it said they might be looking to a place like Wicomico County, or something completely different. He clarified, he cannot imagine that is integrated with this document given that it was just released, but that is something Mr. Miller can put on his radar.

Mr. Cannon said, as an aside, it was brought to his attention that because of supply chain issues with biking, a lot of people are turning to running. He then asked if Mr. Miller has witnessed that as there are a lot of running events escalating simply because of the fact that those who may want to get into biking cannot do it right now, to which Mr. Miller responded, he does not have a lot of insight on that. He said a lot of their running events continue to gain a lot of popularity, but he does not have data on that.

Mr. Cannon said Council looks forward to Mr. Miller getting back to them as he develops this further and whatever the recommendations might be from the State level. There was no further discussion.



John T. Cannon, President, At-Large

absent

Ernest F. Davis, Vice President, District 1

William R. McCain, At-Large



Nicole Acle, District 2

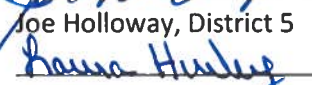


Larry Dodd, District 3

Josh Hastings, District 4



Joe Holloway, District 5



Laura Hurley, Council Administrator