

Report of the Shirlington Dog Park Committee

Caroline Haynes, *Chair*
Keith Fred
Adam Henderson
Nora Palmatier
Edie Wilson

Charge

- **Explore possible future planning guidelines for the Shirlington Dog Park that retain its functionality and appeal while meeting environmental regulatory requirements.**
- **In its deliberations, the committee may consider:**
 - **Information and data gathered by the 4MRVWG to date**
 - **Relevant regulatory and policy requirements, plans, and guidelines (federal, state, and county)**
 - **Actions in the short-term that may address environmental, operational, and aesthetic conditions in the dog park and its immediate adjacent bank of Four Mile Run. Other issues, as appropriate**
- **A final report from the committee is due on September 15, 2017. The findings and recommendations from the committee will be presented to the full 4MRVWG in September 2017 and posted at 4mrv.com.**

Key Issues

Popularity of the Dog Park

The committee recognizes the tremendous economic, social, and placemaking value of the Shirlington Dog Park to the community. It is one of the most heavily used parks in the county, and often noted as one of the most popular dog parks in the country.

- Shirlington Dog Park Receives over 200,000 visits per year
- The visitation rate is increasing by 5-10% per year.



Key Issues

Regulatory Framework, Sustainability and Stewardship

- **Given the array of regulatory and policy issues related to the location of the dog park in a resource protection area [RPA], maintaining or leaving the dog park 'as is' is not a sustainable option over the long term.**
- **Many of the issues discussed in the report apply even without the presence of off-leash dogs.**
- **The overall, long-term objective for the county's management of this area over the next 30+ years must include being exemplary stewards of the stream corridor and working to establish best practices.**

Key Issues

County and Commonwealth Regulatory Framework

- **Commonwealth and County**
 - **Resource Protection Areas and Water Quality Impact Assessment**
 - **Stormwater Management Ordinance**
- **Adopted County Plans**
 - **Watershed Management Plan (2001)**
 - **Chesapeake Bay Preservation Plan (2001, an element of the Comprehensive Plan)**
 - **Natural Resources Management Plan (2010)**
 - **Stormwater Master Plan (2014, an element of the Comprehensive Plan)**

Key Issues

Volunteer Groups

- **Passionate volunteers working many hours have been key to the success of the Shirlington Dog Park.**
- **Enhancing this active volunteerism will be critical to the sustainability of these recreational areas.**
- **Keeping all our dog parks up to date and functioning well requires healthy, effective partnership between the county and the required volunteer support groups.**



Key Issues

Existing Conditions

- **One of the fundamental problems of Shirlington Dog Park has nothing to do with dogs. It is the condition of its 'soil'. The site has previously been used as a railroad line and a trash dump and is covered with a combination of rock dust and other industrial residue.**
- **It has very little actual soil to sustain new trees and plantings. Adding new soil and plantings, without first amending the underlying material, is unlikely to be successful and would be a waste of scarce resources.**



Key Issues

Existing Conditions

- **Long-term sustainability of the dog park, both to prevent erosion and to enhance its environmental conditions, is also tied to the current lack of stormwater management for the 180k sq ft of rooftops on 1950's-era properties adjacent to it. Even in relatively small storm events, large amounts of stormwater runoff sheet across the park, contributing to erosion and adding pollutants to Four Mile Run.**



Key Issues

Existing Conditions

- **One inch of rain yields over 110,000 gallons of runoff over the park. We have had 7 days with an inch or more of rain in 2017.**
- **In a normal year, nearly 5 million gallons of stormwater runoff flows over the park.**



Key Issues

Implications of Current Zoning

- **If, as seems likely, the 4MRV Master Plan leaves in place current M-1 light industrial zoning for the buildings along Four Mile Run Drive, there will be no economic incentive for redevelopment. It will be unlikely, then, that existing businesses will of their own initiative seek to mitigate the impact of stormwater coming off their buildings. There is no requirement for them to do so under existing use.**

Key Issues

Costs v Benefits

- **Given that we are in the master planning phase, there are no engineering or design studies and no testing for surface and sub-surface contamination to serve as the basis for estimating costs of compliance with regulatory requirements. Indeed, those regulatory requirements will continue to evolve. Based on recent experience, however, rehabilitating the ¼-mile long, 110,000 sq ft Shirlington Dog Park would likely be extremely costly. Any county investment initiated here must be made with great care given competing demands on county resources**

Key Issues

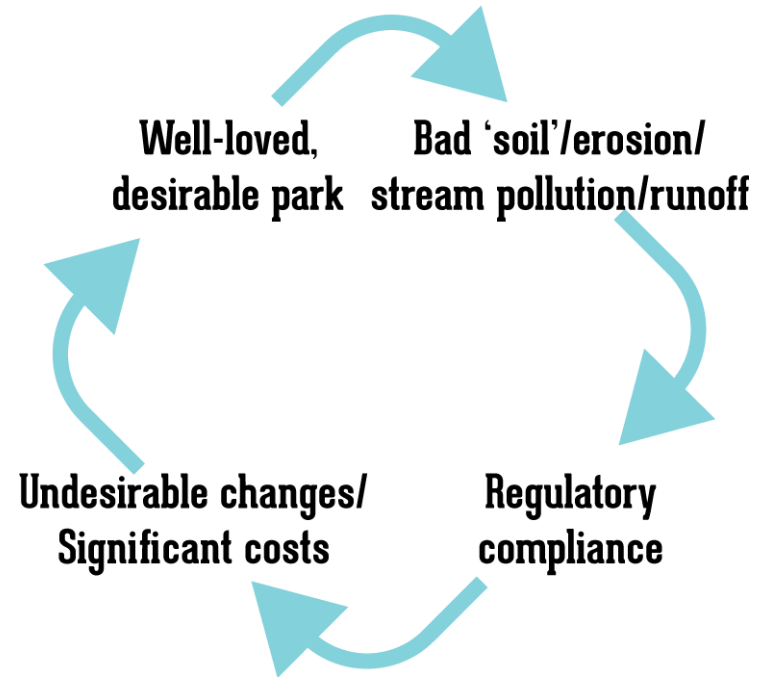
The 'Catch-22'

- The committee explored a wide array of policy and regulatory issues and was left with this conclusion: leaving the park in its current condition is not a viable long-term solution, but efforts to mitigate the environmental issues would trigger significant, costly and undesirable changes to the park.

Key Issues

The 'Catch-22'

- **Retain dog park in current location and configuration in RPA**
- **Existing conditions: lack of 'soil', stormwater runoff, erosion and pollutants into Four Mile Run**
- **Comprehensive efforts to address these issues would trigger regulatory compliance**
- **Compliance leads to excessive costs and undesirable changes to Dog Park**



Key Issues

The 'Catch-22'

- **The committee ultimately focused on the following questions:**
 - **How can we improve the environmental sustainability in the short and medium term without triggering regulatory requirements?**
 - **How can we plan for future changes should a triggering event occur?**

Key Issues

Timelines

- **The committee worked under the assumption that any large-scale improvement and stormwater mitigation to the Shirlington Dog Park is unlikely to be initiated for at least ten years, in part for county budgetary reasons. A major storm event could change this timeline, but unless and until that happens, the dog park will remain largely unchanged.**

Key Issues

Timelines

- **The committee therefore recommends a range of affordable short-term and mid-term steps to improve some of the environmental and park conditions, in addition to a key land-use recommendation and better stewardship of county-owned properties. These would begin to address park area needs and mitigate environmental impacts to some degree, but would not satisfy regulatory requirements.**





Recommendations

Better Management of Stormwater on County Properties and Developing Flexible Use Park on County-Owned Parcel

- **The county should demonstrate leadership by taking steps to minimize storm water runoff from nearby county-owned property.**



Recommendations

Better Management of Stormwater on County Properties

- **Specifically, the committee recommends taking down the warehouse buildings (2704-2706 South Oakland Street), and removing the asphalt adjacent to the dog park and amending and/or remediating the soil to provide a permeable surface that will absorb stormwater runoff, support new plantings of trees and vegetation and retain this as a green, casual use area**



Recommendations

Developing Flexible Use Park on County-Owned Parcel

- **In addition to addressing some adjacent stormwater issues, this would serve an array of complementary objectives such as integrating this new park area and the dog park with the arts district, provide a flexible-use area for festivals and arts events, provide swing space for recreational functions as Jennie Dean Park is developed, and improve connectivity and open up the line of sight from South Four Mile Drive into the park.**



Recommendations

Short-term

- **Block access to informal path outside the dog park fence to minimize soil compaction**
- **Discontinue mowing along fence edge to increase vegetative buffers**
- **Increase plantings along the stream bank, where soil conditions permit**
- **Add park 'snags' such as large stumps or rocks at entrances to encourage dogs to pee on them when they enter the park, instead of urinating on trees**



Recommendations

Short-term

- **Create barriers to protect existing trees**
- **Increase availability of trash containers and bags on both sides of the stream (including in Shirlington Park) to more effectively collect dog waste**
- **Improve signage and public education regarding pollution, stream warnings, environmental issues and dog park rules**
- **Limit access to the stream to designated entry points to reduce stream bank erosion**



Recommendations

Short-term

- **Reclaim county-owned land at Oxford Street and widen the dog park at its narrowest point and reconfigure entrance gates (this choke point is often the site of dog fights due to the lack of space)**
- **Add parking meters and enforce a maximum two-hour parking limit to better distribute usage of existing parking**



Recommendations

Medium-term

- **Develop a pilot program using economic incentives similar to facade improvement grants for existing businesses to capture stormwater run off from rooftops for preventing erosion, watering trees and dispersing stormwater more slowly into the ground to improve water quality**



Recommendations

Medium-term

- **Enhance the existing Shirlington Dog Park sponsoring group by recruiting and training additional volunteers to assist in managing the dog park with specific emphasis on erosion and pollution prevention, tree protection, public education about environmental conditions, invasive species removal, and minimizing use of informal trails**



Recommendations

Medium-term

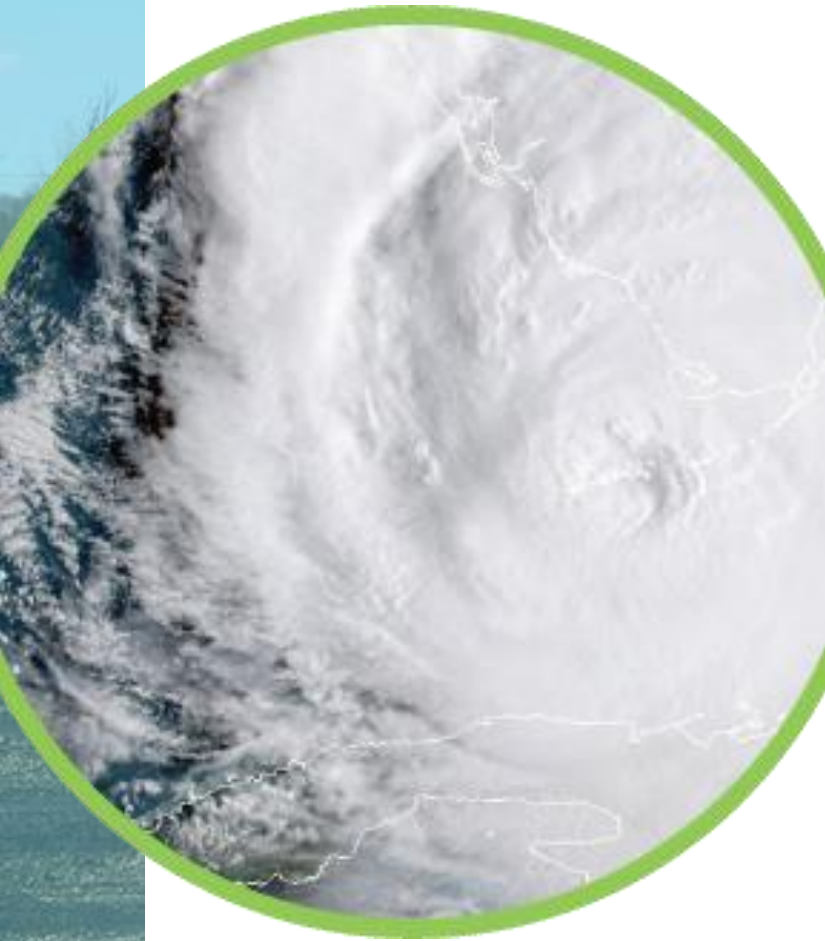
- **Explore alternatives for managing expected growth in dog park usage by considering best practices in other jurisdictions**



Recommendations

Boundaries and Longer-term Considerations

The committee also recommends that for the purposes of the master plan and any future mitigation, remediation and stormwater regulatory compliance, the 'dog park area' boundaries should be recognized as including both the Nelson/Oakland parking area (required by county ordinance for any park) and the pathway at the eastern main gate to the pedestrian bridge as well as the western path from the dog park gate to Walter Reed Drive. This could provide additional areas for reconfiguration, drainage, filtration, planting and buffering.



Recommendations

Boundaries and Longer-term Considerations

Longer term considerations should a triggering event occur:

- **Amend and/or remediate existing hard pack ground to provide soil, improve permeability and better support vegetation and trees**
- **Reconfigure existing walkway from the pedestrian bridge**



Recommendations

Boundaries and Longer-term Considerations

- **Work with owners of adjacent properties to reconfigure the existing walkway from Walter Reed Drive, much of which is already on county-owned land**



Recommendations

Boundaries and Longer-term Considerations

- **Reconfigure existing parking (assuming a long-term parking solution has been developed elsewhere in the planning area) and incorporate existing parking area while retaining ADA parking access directly adjacent to the dog park**
- **Replace existing asphalt with permeable pavers**

In the Full Report

- Our full report details the regulatory and policy framework, existing conditions, considerations and recommendations in much greater detail
- We have also shared information gathered during our committee's tenure, including
 - Staff interpretations of environmental issues
 - An in-depth walk-through of the park focused on tree viability
 - Resources exploring model dog park frameworks in riparian areas in other jurisdictions
 - Resources for public engagement, education, and cooperation critical for the park's future success



Thank you for your time!

Questions?

Discussion?

Report of the Shirlington Dog Park Committee

