

Statement on the FY 2023 Fairfax County Budget to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

By Carolyn J. Gamble, member of the Board of Directors of the Friends of Dyke Marsh on behalf of the Friends of Dyke Marsh

www.fodm.org

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On behalf of the more than 400 members of the Friends of Dyke Marsh, we urge you to increase funding for Fairfax County's parks in the FY 2023 budget.

Local Parks Affect the Larger Environment

Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve is a freshwater, tidal wetland, a unit of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, a national park. The health and sustainability of the natural resources of the parkway and marsh are connected to the larger environment. Water, birds, insects and plants, for example, do not respect human-made boundaries. They are all connected and interdependent. What happens on the land and water beyond the parkway, affects the parkway's natural resources.

Mount Vernon Park is a good example. At our request, the Board of Supervisors addressed the severe erosion occurring in the park and the sediment flowing into Dyke Marsh after we sent photographs to the Board in 2014 showing the marsh turning orange because of sediments flowing from a failing stormwater outfall in the park. Thank you for addressing that problem and for restoring the disturbance caused by the project.

One of the reasons the Friends of Dyke Marsh have conducted water quality testing in that park's streams since 2016 is because it flows into Dyke Marsh and affects the marsh's water quality, flora and fauna. Given their proximity, Mount Vernon Park, the Westgrove Dog Park and Fort Willard Park and their visitors and infrastructure clearly impact Dyke Marsh.

Increase Parks Funding to Improve Environmental Health

We urge the Board to increase parks funding for several reasons.

Fairfax County's remaining natural resources are suffering from ever-increasing development and urbanization, over-use and invasive plants and animals. In addition, stormwater runoff from impervious surfaces, for which the county bears some responsibility by giving permits, produces pollution and sediments which flow into parks, into Dyke Marsh and into our streams and rivers.

While the Potomac River is improving, the Potomac Conservancy, concluded in their 2020 report, that “. . . excess nutrients and sediment from polluted urban runoff is increasing over time and threatens to undo decades of progress. . . sediment in urban and suburban stormwater runoff continues to increase.”

The county's 2019 data indicate that 88 percent of Fairfax County's streams are in fair to very poor condition. “This indicates that many of our streams are significantly impaired and lack biological diversity.”

(<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicworks/stormwater/stream-quality-assessment-program>)

In addition, stormwater runoff exacerbates erosion in our parks and on the river and streams' shorelines, which especially the intertidal areas of tidal shorelines can smother aquatic species and disrupt their life cycle.

Preserving, expanding and creating more natural resource parks can help reverse these disturbing trends. Natural areas, for example, can filter pollutants and curb stormwater runoff.

Board of Supervisors' Decisions Devalue Natural Resources

Funding for FCPA natural resource management is only \$159 per managed acre annually, far below the national average of \$3,000 to \$6,000.

The Fairfax County Park Authority has been underfunded for many years. In 1988, 63 percent of the Park Authority budget was from tax-based revenues (the General Fund). Now only 35 percent of the budget is tax supported and 65 percent of the operating budget comes from user fees. The inadequate funding by the Board of Supervisors and the over-reliance on user fees creates an adverse incentive for park managers to prioritize revenue-generating activities, thus

underfunding natural resource preservation and restoration that do not generate revenue.

This is a short-sighted approach that does not recognize the full value of our natural resources. Natural areas like Huntley Meadows Park provide free ecological services, like absorbing polluted stormwater runoff and cleaning the air, services that the county does not have to provide. More funding from the Board could reduce reliance on user-fee-based activities and more appropriately recognize the value of our natural resource parks and the ecological services they provide.

Board of Supervisors' Decisions Should Reflect their Stated Principles

Natural resource management and staff have long been underfunded in the parks system and have historically been given a lower priority than active recreational uses.

Fortunately, the county is increasingly recognizing the value of natural resources by preparing climate action, resiliency action and natural landscaping plans. More revenues for natural resource parks and more natural resource parks can complement those efforts.

The Board of Supervisors espouses a “One Fairfax” policy, a policy that “commits the county and schools to intentionally consider equity when making policies or delivering programs and services.” User fees disproportionately and adversely affect low-income park users and discourage them from visiting our parks. This is not an equitable way to deliver a service to the public. This is not consistent with One Fairfax.

Fund our Parks to Improve Our Health

We request that the Board of Supervisors increase funding for FCPA to the following levels:

1. \$5 million to provide funds for the implementation of the One Fairfax program, with continued funding at this or higher level for FY 2024, FY 2025, FY 2026 and beyond.
2. \$751,954 to provide funds to implement sustainable natural resource management and to improve management of natural resources in Fairfax

County Parks, with continued funding at this or higher level for FY 2024, FY 2025, FY 2026 and beyond.

3. Reject the County Executive's proposed FY 2023 bond cycle change, maintaining the four-year bond cycle and increasing this to \$150 million every four years. This should include the option to approve an off-cycle bond issue that would cover the unfunded backlog of capital maintenance and repair projects (\$250 million) in our aging FCPA buildings and infrastructure.
4. Increase FCPA's allocated share of the General Fund (before revenue sharing with schools) from 0.6% to 1.0%, specifically to increase funding for sustainable natural resources management.

Being outdoors in nature is therapeutic, as our experience with the covid-19 pandemic has shown. Many people sought to alleviate isolation and found that being outdoors enhanced their well-being.

We look forward to working with you to increase parks funding, to improving the environmental and human health of Fairfax County and to bringing better balance to the Fairfax County Park Authority's budget. We look forward to your response.