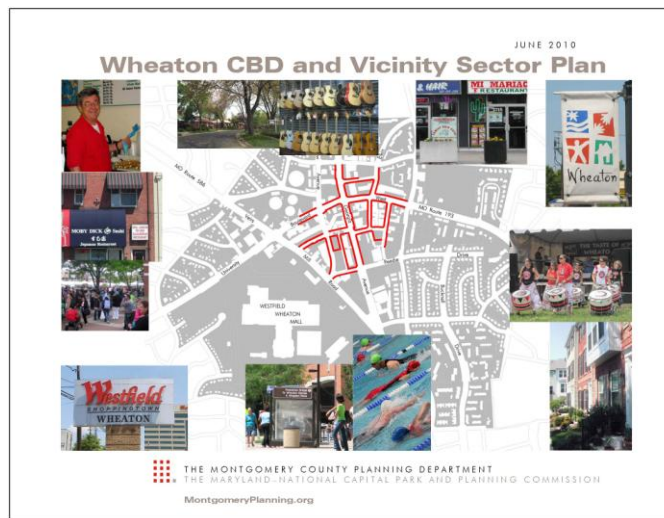


Appendix 4

Park, Trail, and Recreation Facilities

For more information, call the Park Planning and Stewardship Division at 301-650-4380



Wheaton CBD and Vicinity Sector Plan

Existing Park, Trail, and Recreation Facilities

Parks

Wheaton Veterans Park is the only park within the Sector Plan boundary. This 0.7-acre Urban Park, completed in the early 1990s, serves the surrounding area and provides a site for Veterans' and Memorial Day celebrations.

The 1990 Wheaton Sector Plan noted that the Central Business District was urban with no unimproved land available for park development. That Plan proposed creating a new open space in the Wheaton Triangle area for community activities and an attractive setting in which shoppers and employees might relax, read, and eat. The Plan noted that small privately developed public open spaces could be developed as part of the zoning amenity requirements, and recommended that as projects were submitted, staff look at possible locations for such areas, particularly as redevelopment established new patterns of pedestrian concentration and movement.

The Plan area is near some of the earliest examples of M-NCPPC park development, yet the pedestrian connections to them from downtown Wheaton are not well marked. Parks outside the immediate area include the 535-acre Wheaton Regional Park acquired and constructed in the early 1960s to provide a wide range of recreation activities for area residents, including an ice rink, athletic fields, large picnic/playground area with carousel and miniature train, dog park, and Nature Center and Botanical Gardens.

The area is also served by the linear Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park, acquired to protect fragile natural environments and provide visual green relief from suburban development patterns. Smaller parks near the Plan area include Wheaton Forest, Newport Mill, and Pleasant View Local Parks and the Kensington Forest Neighborhood Park.

Several existing trails, sidewalks, and bikeways link the Wheaton CBD to the regional park system to the east, some of which need accessibility and safety improvements. Wheaton Regional Park and Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park are major destinations which CBD residents should be able to reach safely and efficiently by bicycle and on foot.

Recreation

The Wheaton Neighborhood Recreation Center is convenient to the Wheaton Plan area and accessible by public transportation. The Center is a small multi-purpose recreational facility that serves people of all ages. It includes a gymnasium/multi-purpose room with a small stage, weight and exercise room, art room, and billiards room. The Center is about 13,000 gross square feet, roughly half the size of other County recreation



centers. In 1997, this facility was first designated for replacement with a larger, full service facility. Funded in the FY07-12 CIP, the current proposal is to remodel and upgrade the Center and build a full service community recreation center at the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Mason Street, approximately one half mile north of the Plan area. This facility is in the early Facility Planning Stage.

Wheaton residents are served by three regional indoor pools: the Montgomery Aquatic Center (MAC) in White Flint, the Olney Aquatic Center (OAC), and the Martin Luther King Athletic Club Aquatic Center (MLKAC) on New Hampshire Avenue in Cloverly. There is one outdoor pool, the Wheaton/Glenmont Pool. Both the outdoor and indoor pools are minutes from Wheaton by car. The MAC, OAC, MLKAC, and Glenmont pools are also served by transit. This Plan supports adding a fourth indoor pool available to Wheaton residents if the Recreation Department's *Comprehensive Facilities & Services Master Plan, 2010-2030* identifies the need for one.

Trails

Several trails, sidewalks, and bikeways link the Wheaton CBD to the regional park system, particularly Wheaton Regional Park and Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park. These parks are major destinations to which Wheaton CBD residents should have access to by bicycle and on foot and some of these connections need improvements to make them safer and easier to find.

Park and Trail Plans and Policies

The *Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan (PROS)* for Montgomery County guides the countywide pattern of parkland and recreation needs and projects recreational needs in broad planning areas, rather than by small sub-areas such as Wheaton. Plans in urban areas have distinct challenges and opportunities to provide park and recreation resources.

Local and neighborhood recreation facility needs are projected by the PROS Plan based on residential population. Its assumptions are suburban—that housing will be built on large tracts of land and that desired facilities are playing fields and courts. The 2005 PROS Plan indicated that the Georgia Avenue Corridor, which includes Wheaton, needs eleven additional playing fields by 2020, mostly for large multi-purpose rectangular fields. Five fields have been built in the Corridor since PROS was published, resulting in a net need of six fields. In down-County urban areas, playing field users, who normally drive to fields, often have to use fields in other areas. Staff will continue to assess opportunities for new fields within the Corridor. The PROS Plan estimates some local recreation facilities for each planning area. The estimates for the Wheaton Planning area indicate the existing numbers of playgrounds, and basketball and tennis courts are sufficient.

A staff supplement to the PROS Plan, *Parks for Tomorrow* (1998), indicates that urban residential areas need several types of recreation including trails, bike paths and community connectors, neighborhood recreation for new residential areas, and urban recreation and open space for mixed-use development. The document recommends using non-park public space in innovative ways to meet recreational demands.

Current Trends in Urban Parks

As urban areas redevelop to promote walkable, vibrant communities, open space systems around the nation are also changing. Planners and decision-makers are espousing the health, economic, and social benefits of parks and open space in urbanizing areas. As health issues such as obesity continue to increase, providing active recreational opportunities close to urban residences and places of employment has become a priority. An increase in property values near popular open space has been documented. In addition, parks and open space are considered “social capital” because they provide space for participation in events, sports leagues, and other community activities that help to build a sense of civic pride and responsibility.

The type and pattern of parks and open spaces best suited to urban populations is different from the suburban model of large tracts of land filled with fixed, single-use facilities. Flexible, unprogrammed open space is both popular and appropriate because it allows for spontaneous activities and gatherings. Urban parks and open spaces are most successful if located next to activating uses such as shops, restaurants, and residences. Urban residents, workers, and visitors need places to relax, be in touch with nature, gather, and be active. Successful urban park systems draw people outdoors by providing attractions, entertainment, places for relaxation, getting work done (WiFi), spontaneous play, education, recreation, and many other functions.

Several cities around the country known for their parks all share walkability distance of approximately a five minute walk, or 1/8 to 1/4 mile from residences to parks and open spaces. Major roads, such as Georgia Avenue, University Boulevard, and Viers Mill Road in Wheaton, are barriers that add to the walking time and must be calculated into the minimum distance formula. Visibility as well as proximity is important because the ability to see the open space system is critical to its success. Public spaces and facilities should serve the Plan’s projected demographics of residents, workers, and visitors. The urban design vision for the Plan area will help guide the locations, siting, and design of each open space.

Park Planning Issues

Wheaton lacks a cohesive public realm.

The only public spaces in the Plan area are small, underused, and unconnected. To achieve a walkable community, a successful public realm should have a system of destinations including parks, open spaces, sidewalks, shopping, recreation, entertainment, and community services connected by convenient, attractive, and safe walking and bicycling routes.

Public green space/open space is insufficient.

Veterans Urban Park is the only park in the Plan area. It is visually and physically disconnected from the downtown, and is underused. The only other usable open space is a small grassy area next to Parking Lot 13, which is too small to accommodate much activity. Wheaton needs more

public open space to serve its growing population of residents, workers, and visitors. A variety of spaces is needed to satisfy a range of functions, from large grassy areas for active group recreation to small pocket parks for contemplative relaxation.

No dedicated central gathering or civic space exists in the Plan area.

Events and festivals currently take place at the edge of and in Parking Lot 13. Wheaton needs a more permanent location for e gatherings, both programmed and spontaneous, that enliven an urban area.

There is a lack of recreation facilities in the Plan area.

There are no recreation facilities in the Plan area. Urban areas need several types of recreation including large grassy areas for pickup sports and community events; trails, bike paths, and community connectors; neighborhood recreation for new residential areas; and urban recreation and open space for mixed-use development.

Wheaton Regional Park is difficult to find.

All park access points are in neighborhoods and invisible from major streets.

Community trail connections are insufficiently designed, signed, and marked.

Walking and bicycling in the CBD is unpleasant and unsafe. Wheaton's sidewalks are largely unshaded and not enticing to pedestrians and cyclists. Connections to the regional trails in Wheaton, Sligo, and Rock Creek Parks are difficult to find and navigate. To achieve the Plan's goal of a walkable community, connections between destinations must be carefully located and designed.

Park and Trail Recommendations

Public parkland, open space, and pathways play an important role in the well-being of a community by providing social, aesthetic, economic, health, and environmental benefits. Parks can significantly increase the value of adjacent properties, while creating a sense of place, and space to gather, play and celebrate community life. They can contribute to health of people and of the natural environment by providing wildlife habitat, improving air quality, preserving water quality, and an opportunity to connect with nature.

Park and open space systems should reflect the particular needs of a community. As areas urbanize, the roles and functions of public and private open spaces should change to reflect the changing needs of the community. The challenge for any plan is to protect existing park resources while planning for future needs. The range of recommendations should balance environmental stewardship with active recreation needs and the public's right to high-quality, conveniently located open space.

The 2005 *Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan* (LPPRP), which guides the County-wide pattern of parkland and recreation needs, will be updated by the Plan's park and trail recommendations.

The following recommendations address Wheaton’s specific park, trail, and recreation planning issues:

Provide an interconnected system of parks and public open spaces.

This system should include public open spaces where people can gather, enjoy the outdoors, and conduct business. Wheaton’s public use space system should be designed to create connections, both physical and visual, to the parks and trails, as well as to other destinations. Spaces serving the entire planning area and beyond should be owned and operated by the Department of Parks.

Provide a new or improved Veterans Memorial. The County has issued an RFQ seeking a public/private partnership that would leverage the ownership of publicly-owned land in Wheaton.

Veterans Park is a block east of the Metro station and has the potential for redevelopment with transit-oriented uses. The RFQ recognizes that the park and memorial function must be replaced, “at equal value or use,” and any redevelopment proposal must include a replacement location within the Plan area that “enhances its impact on the public realm,” and through its design, pay homage to veterans.

If Wheaton Veterans Park is not redeveloped per the RFQ, it should be renovated to be more visible and inviting from surrounding streets. If redeveloped, the function of memorializing war veterans should be moved to a more central open space. Any redevelopment of the veterans memorial should be closely coordinated with veterans groups.



Provide a central, civic urban park.

This park should be in the Core District, close to the Metro station, for public events and community-wide activities. This space should be located in the vicinity of Parking Lot 13 and eventually become a permanent public use space.

Whether acquired or dedicated, the park should accommodate community events and be designed to:

- accommodate major outdoor activities, public events, gatherings, and celebrations
- allow for local street closures to provide more event space
- draw people from the surroundings to participate in local events.

Provide opportunities for urban recreation in the downtown.

Because developable land is at a premium, a typical 15-acre local park is not feasible in downtown Wheaton. Active and passive recreation facilities may be provided throughout the downtown in a series of several smaller public open



spaces. Some of these recreational facilities will be provided by the private sector in public use spaces, and will be implemented through regulatory review including zoning and/or the Recreation Guidelines.

Design of the public parks and open spaces should consider facilities appropriate to projected demographic groups. Design of the spaces should aim to serve multiple users, by including flexible level grassy areas large enough for Frisbee or picnicking, and a variety of spontaneous activities. Depending on the projected demographics, facilities could include playgrounds, unsupervised skateboarding spots, climbing walls, parcours elements, basketball, rooftop community gardens, and other popular facilities.

Improve connectivity to community recreation centers, Wheaton Library, regional parks and trails near the CBD.

Improve signage on streets that lead to trail connectors as well as on the trails themselves to Wheaton Regional Park and Sligo Creek Stream Valley parks and trails.

Improve access to Wheaton Regional Park.

Provide entry features where roadways lead to the park, and wayfinding kiosks at central locations such as the Metro station and public parking garages.

Consider additional park and trail opportunities.

Address critical urban open space needs by seeking opportunities for land acquisition, such as a park space on the Wheaton Radio Tower site.

