



Vision 2030

Montgomery County Parks and Recreation Vision 2030 and Strategic Plan

Cultural Resources Focus Group Notes

May 17, 2010 7-8:30pm

M-NCPPC 8th floor Conference Room

1109 Spring Street, Silver Spring, Maryland, 20910

Summary:

Participants were asked to discuss the most important *long-term needs for stewardship of historic and archaeological resources on public parkland*. Participants were asked to identify stewardship needs, significant challenges to meeting those needs, and how the Strategic Plan or any Partnerships can help meet the needs and overcome the challenges.

Participants focused primarily on the myriad of challenges facing a Cultural Resources Stewardship Section that is responsible for preserving 110 buildings and protecting 400 archeological sites along with interpreting the important stories associated with these sites with only 4.75 employees and an uncertain budget future. Prince Georges County by comparison has many more staff in its historic museum and building maintenance programs.

Other needs identified include the need to collaborate and connect with related agencies; to connect with immigrant groups; to facilitate working with volunteer groups and creating partnerships. Challenges forming such partnerships were noted especially the need to base such partnerships on an agreed upon set of preservation goals and purposes based on County-wide policy.

The strategic plan could help meet some of these challenges by identifying specific actions that can help facilitate more volunteer and partnership actions. For example, for archeological sites, the lack of a cataloguing system specific to the needs of County is an obstacle to advancing beyond the initial preservation steps.

The strategic plan could also help to provide some guidance on how to better match human resources with preservation needs by increasing staff (based on the Prince Georges County model) and/or by prioritizing the inventory to reflect those properties that have a strong historic preservation and/or historical association component. A prioritized inventory is the best tool for decision making.

The following is a transcript of the discussion (edited for clarity)

1. What are two or three important long-term stewardship needs for historic and archaeological resources on public parkland in Montgomery County?
 - Connection with the humanities and heritage tourism programs (Montgomery County Heritage Area)
 - Better exposure, easier to find out about and get to historic and cultural sites – consider cell phone tours and other technology
 - Encouraging more diverse demographic groups with less of an obvious connection to historic and cultural sites to get them involved and interested; need to connect with leaders of diverse groups

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- Creating a better public face for historic and cultural resources
 - Need to collaborate with Maryland State Office of Tourism Development (DBED?)
 - Preservation is the first responsibility – especially important due to current economic conditions when the political will to preserve may be pressured by the need for more economic development
 - Enjoyment -
 - Education – need to grow your audience to reinforce preservation goals, too late to educate when a site is already endangered; tearing down is not the best way to achieve economic development or environmental goals
 - Stress the “green” aspects of preservation – many ‘new’ buildings are falling apart after 30 years, while historic structures have endured having been constructed with better materials
 - Archaeological sites need research to improve understanding of resources
 - Archaeological work takes a number of steps. Right now the biggest obstacle is the lack of a catalog system. This deficiency is keeping them from doing more with the resources they have. The database they need with this system is broader than is already available (from prehistoric to modern)
 - Preservation plan (s) in need of updating
 - Outside expertise is not always available to meet the preservation needs
 - Preserve maintain and enhance our current historic properties;
 - Develop public interest and appreciation of properties through research and public participation in and sharing of results;
 - Prevent the further loss of archaeological resources and information through adoption of serious archaeological project review process, such as what exists in surrounding counties such as Frederick, Prince George’s and Fairfax.
2. What are the most significant challenges for the County in meeting those needs?
- Staff and dollars are not available to connect with diverse demographic groups and sites
 - Short term needs dominate over a long term vision
 - 400 archaeological sites in need of work
 - 45 in the inventory are top priorities – can’t keep up with the 45
 - 110 buildings in parks; many are in fair to poor condition
 - Expectations from County residents are that more preservation will occur, regardless of the available resources. When they see degrading resources they wonder why.
 - Obstacles to outside funding are onerous, daunting and burdensome – more effort spent on getting the outside funding than adequate funds available
 - Organizational size of Montgomery County Parks can be a challenge. Different Divisions within the organization may have work programs and missions that can come up against historic preservation objectives.
3. How can the strategic plan help to meet those needs or overcome those challenges?
- How does Montgomery County compare with the expenditures/budget of other jurisdictions for preservation of historic and cultural resources. Prince Georges has fewer structures that it owns overall, bigger staff (Each site has a director, a staff, and interpreter). *It was pointed out that their Division has had 30 years of political will behind it.* Fairfax County has only a handful of sites, and is more focused on archaeology.
 - Cultural Resources Stewardship Section has 4.75 total staff for all the sites. The needs, according to the Prince Georges’ County Model would be in the range of 30-32 staff

- Stewardship of cultural resources workload needs to be proportional to the resources of comparable counties
 - Outside funding requirements at the county level needs to be proportional so that smaller grants have more streamlined requirements
 - The capacity of the organization needs to be of prime consideration when considering acquisition of additional properties. The strategic preservation needs must be more focused (but now is a good time to buy). *Suggestion was made to focus on the top 10-20 sites, and "mothball" the rest. With current staff they could work on 1-2 capital projects/ year. (but requires moth balling expertise and the money to do it right)*
 - Consideration could be given to working with fewer top properties and making decisions on how to deal with lower ranked properties accordingly – making better use of available resources.
 - "Mothballing" buildings (securing safely, but not actively using) might be necessary with budget reductions. If mothballing sites, it is important that someone documents and interprets the story associated with that site. You do not want to lose the story as many of the people that know the stories are getting on in years.
 - The strategic plan should reflect actual preservation needs of the sites that Montgomery County is responsible for – they must be able to meet all laws and moral obligations for preservation
4. What potential partnerships could be encouraged to help meet the needs or overcome the challenges for stewardship needs for historic and archaeological resources in the County?
- Partnering with non-profits (e.g. Silver Spring Historical Society) – access to money is limiting, partners have to give lots of information and resources, making the process daunting (e.g. 50,000 goes in to get 50,000 in return).
 - Volunteer groups work better – MNCPPC staff treats volunteers very well, they are open and friendly, respected. Many are retired with many talents and once they are engaged in meaningful work, it is hard to live without them and staff depends upon their expertise
 - Keeping with the core mission and public stewardship responsibilities of a site is critical for a successful partnership. Stick with the plan and put the plan up front prior to discussions.
 - Curatorship program – free or low cost lease in exchange for rehabilitation work on structure (according to agreed upon preservation plan)
 - Of the Top 20 sites acceptable for curatorship, many are vacant. Financing for curators is difficult as well as finding a curator that is compatible with the primary preservation mission (core responsibilities) – example of Hyattstown Mill discussed extensively
 - Lesson learned about curatorships is that they need to be characterized up front as an "adaptive reuse". The Non-profit and County need to be on the same page with their long-term goals, especially about the organizations growth plans. It works best when there is a good match between organization and County that complements the park
 - When volunteers do research, you need a good teacher/leader as well as staff that can monitor the work to make sure it is useful. *It was noted that some volunteer projects are great, others less so, but the others could be utilized in the future in some way. An idea was suggested that Montgomery County Historical Society could have an employee whose job it is to coordinate volunteers*
 - Could collections be partnered (get space together) to meet needs of many
 - Can achieve more with a dedicated partner – follow through is important on both sides
 - Help is needed to navigate partnerships (grant writing, volunteer coordination, partnership liaison)

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- Identify partners and the relationships on particular projects that are of interest to the partners as well as Parks and Recreation;
- Develop political partners and support around the partnerships and the Projects;
- Develop individual researcher partners;
- Develop university, museum, consultant, partners;
- Develop corporate partners who want to develop in ways that are in harmony with MoCo historic fabric and work with them to help overcome unnecessary regulatory and permitting hurdles;
- Don't just see partners as a way of achieving our vision but as a resource for shaping our vision;
- Develop a culture of openness and honesty with the public as a way of distinguishing yourselves from Montgomery County business as usual and as a way of developing strong partnerships and real political support;
- Partnerships should not be limited only to private insiders and private companies but must include the public. partnerships must be focused on the community