

July 20, 2020

The Trust for Public Lands  
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Dear Sir/Madam:

As a local public interest group focused on improved planning for growth and protecting the environment, [Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future](#) (ASF) takes pride in the fourth place national ranking of Arlington County's parks this year by the Trust for Public Lands (the "Trust"). We are forwarding for your interest a feature article from a recent Washington Post article by Melanie D.G. Kaplan, "[As Summer Gets Underway, A Look at This Year's Ten Best U.S. Cities for Parks.](#)" Ms. Kaplan highlighted the top cities as great travel destinations, an idea we support. Rather than accepting this ranking on face value, however, ASF offers some qualifications to the Trust's ranking, and Ms. Kaplan's featuring, of Arlington, Virginia. As Ms. Kaplan noted, "the Trust looked at four factors in making its decision: access, investment, acreage, and amenities. Each factor was given a grade out of 100." Arlington parks received a score of 100 for investment, 99 for access, 89 for amenities and a 38 for acreage.

ASF believes Arlington's [perfect investment score](#) is skewed by an imbalance between spending on green space vs. recreational facilities (and we wonder if the investment rankings overlap with the "amenities" rankings, allowing jurisdictions such as ours to enjoy inflated outcomes.) A May 2020 [Arlington Civic Federation \(CivFed\) white paper](#) best illustrates this point, noting that "of approved bond funds, less than 5% has been spent on land acquisition and just over 2% spent on natural habitat and open space combined." ASF believes that the county's pursuit of gold-standard recreation facilities (a rebuilt Lubber Run Recreation Center, the

Long Bridge Park Fitness and Aquatic Center) masks this underinvestment in natural space and skews our Trust score. While Covid-19 has stalled new facility spending, it has illustrated the critical importance of "more outdoors" when pandemics close playgrounds and County rec centers.

ASF hopes the Trust will consider, in future rankings, of a 2019 Arlington County Board policy to acquire 30 acres of new public space over ten years (as per the [Public Spaces Master Plan](#)). But the CivFed accounting of County spending and more recent decisions show a County Board content to deemphasize parkland expansion. In March/April 2020, the board passed up a potential [purchase of a 9-acre parcel](#) on Wilson Blvd. in North Arlington; the land is apparently now under contract to developers. Another [2.9 acre residential parcel that was only sparsely developed](#) was sold some time ago, but the board rezoned it in April 2020 to allow a six-story senior facility, even though we have other areas for dense infill. In June, as reported by this newspaper, [Arlington lost an additional 9 acres](#) of land as part of a federal plan to acquire property for Arlington National Cemetery; the county obtained no natural resource offsets. This may explain how Arlington (at 11%) falls below the 15% reported national average for municipalities to devote to parks and recreation, and why it ranks fairly poorly (38) in the Trust's "acreage" category. It likely also explains how Arlington fell from 1995's 10.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents to [7.9 acres](#) by 2014 ([reported by CivFed](#) in 2016).

The Trust awarded Arlington a score of 89 on "amenities," meaning play equipment, sports facilities, dog parks, and the like. Here Arlington deserves its score on the face of things, unless the study double credits for investment.

Arlington received a 99 for "access," assessing how many residents can walk to a park in ten minutes. ASF hopes this doesn't reflect Arlingtonians' access to the National Park Service's (NPS) George Washington Memorial Parkway, which is full of cars. However, it IS likely that the bike path along the parkway, which traverses 6 miles of Potomac River shoreline, does contribute to our ranking. The Parkway example also points up the extent to which Arlington and the District both enjoy a distinct advantage in their Trust rankings. They are among very few municipalities with substantial NPS acreage/facilities. Arlington also benefits from parks owned by regional authorities, including the W&OD bike path, Upton Hill Regional Park and Potomac Overlook Regional Park owned by the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority (NOVAParks) that may skew statistics across all

four categories. In fact, almost 50% of the acreage considered in the [Public] Trust ranking for Arlington is owned/managed by the federal government or [the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority] NOVAParks.

ASF fully enjoys the green spaces provided by our local, state, and federal governments, but does not give a pass to Arlington leaders who have accelerated population growth without increasing critically-needed green space controlled by the county. Their actions threaten environmental consequences such as increased carbon emissions, erosion, storm runoff, flooding, heat island effects, air pollution, and psychological stress as more people compete for access to our precious natural spaces. There is more to our green rating than meets the eye.

Sincerely,

Anne Bodine  
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Arlingtonians for Our Sustainable Future

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