Chapter 3.
3. Public Input

Public Engagement

The Watkins Regional Park Master Park Development Plan was developed with an open and collaborative public engagement process. An array of outreach methods were used, including: public meetings and focus groups; an appointed stakeholder group; interviews with key staff and agency representatives; an on-line survey; a participatory dot poster survey with displays at the Watkins Nature Center (WNC) and the Largo/Kettering/Perrywood Community Center; and attendance at park events. Much effort was expended to ensure that the recommended plan grew from a clear understanding of the community’s desires and with its support.

Public Meetings

The project intent initially was to host two public meetings. The first public meeting, held on May 24, 2016, introduced the project to interested neighbors and community members. Attendance from nonstaff members was low. Although the discussion was productive, and attendees were able to gain an understanding of the project’s issues and intent, a more targeted outreach effort was needed for future meetings. Instead of a second meeting, a stakeholder group was formed.

Image from the first stakeholder group, digital voting on interests
Focus Groups
Small focus groups met at WNC on August 2 and 3, 2016. The groups invited to participate included:

- Fitness users (yoga, walking)
- WNC users
- Sports league users
- Summer Operations users and Ambassadors
- Class participants

Convened in small groups, each group was presented with information related to the project’s intent and scope and was asked to provide any insights they had through their affiliation with Watkins Regional Park. Discussions were oriented around these questions:

- How do you use the park?
- How well does the park serve your needs?
- What recommendations do you have?

Some of the responses to the first question are noted below.

“When their kids were young, the respondents used to come with their young kids for the playground, picnicking, to visit the raptors. Now one is a frequent tennis user; the other still comes to visit the nature center raptors and gardens, and to walk the trails. They usually park by the tennis courts and walk from there. They usually stay 2.5 hours on average.”

“She used to bring kids and now is involved in yoga, Tai Chi, walking. Often she walks the loop with friends – they meet at the lot, walk the loop, and then go home.”

Several responses to the second question follow.

“Trails are in good shape and serve her well. She uses the paved trails mainly.”

“Very well, but feel that most other kids are not getting out into the nature trails – they just use the playground and carousel.”

Responses to the third question were more varied, and varied based upon the speaker’s area of interest.

“Tournament play is on the rise and to rebuild the fields to tournament specs would really create a destination that is well-used – that would generate a lot of revenue too. The main issues to address are:

- Better water management (covers, drainage)
- New concessions and restrooms
- More parking
- Upgrade all fields to at least 300 feet (if a focus on adult play)”

“If it rains, there is no place to move programs (like yoga) indoors.”

“The agricultural land needs some interpretation – people don’t know what it is or why it is there.”

“The park’s marketing functions are not centralized. Nature Center markets their programs, so does the farm. We need a more coordinated approach, including a

1 082016 WRP focus group notes
### Stakeholder Group Meeting 1

#### What do you cherish?¹
- Walking and bike trails
- Green space
- Picnic areas
- Summer concerts and courses
- Tennis
- Farm/historic tobacco barn
- Ball fields
- Playgrounds
- Nature Center (Summer Camp)

#### Who is missing; what attracts them?

**Tweens/Teens**
- Skate park
- Archery
- Splash park
- Bike rentals/BMX bike park
- Music venue/Concert in barns

**Ages 20-30**
- Competitive obstacle course
- 5k-10k runs

**Seniors**
- Benches for resting
- Exercise station
- Senior fitness playground

#### What is the most pressing need?
- Lighting
- Parking
- Signage
- Park furnishings
- Food vendors, concessions, food trucks, event space
- Passive area for mediation or reading
- Connecting people to agriculture through expansion of farm learning
- Chelsea history and repurposing barns
- Water feature
- Community garden
- Picnic shelters
- Bike facilities
- Make Nature Center larger

¹ Sample, full responses in Appendix 5
conditions on display boards and to participate in a ‘dot’ survey, similar to the one completed over the summer and fall of 2016 at Watkins Nature Center and Largo/Kettering/Perrywood Community Center. Approximately 30 members of the stakeholder group and 15 Staff members attended the workshop.

Following an introduction to the project, a slide presentation with the findings from site explorations, online survey results, level of service analysis, and initial vision concepts were presented. As a part of this presentation, five interactive survey slides were completed with questions ranging from identifying the reasons people use the park to which area of the park most needs improvement.

Four breakout groups, of 6-8 members each, brainstormed and discussed three questions. Full responses are included in Appendix 5. A sample of responses is illustrated in the sidebar.

- Question 1: What do you cherish about Watkins Regional Park?
- Question 2: Who is missing from this park as a user and what would draw (cause them to use) them to Watkins Regional Park?
- Question 3: What is the park’s most pressing need?

### Stakeholder Group Meeting 2

A second stakeholder group meeting was held on February 15, 2017. A short presentation, rich in imagery, summarized the initial planning concepts. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period, then three breakout groups for further discussion.

The entire group was largely in support of the concepts as presented. Through the discussion and the breakout groups, more detailed concerns and issues were raised.

### Stakeholder Group Meeting 3

TO COME

### Interviews

In addition to the focus groups and the stakeholder group meetings, more than twenty meetings were held with park staff including operations, police, park rangers, program operators, and other agency representatives, such as those from Prince George’s County Public Schools. These interviews were in addition to multiple meetings with the

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**Stakeholder Group 2**

**Meeting Comments**

- Consider use of synthetic turf surface for all existing and proposed rectangular multi-purpose fields
- Life Lab at Watkins Discovery Center
- Retain tee-ball near Community Center
- Make trail connection between repurposed campground area and Community Center
- Add sports oriented activities such as bocce and croquet to Coville’s Picnic Area
- Consider a boardwalk adjacent to the Western Branch for wildlife viewing (eastern side of valley, southwest of current Nature Center near natural trails)
- Add 3 picnic shelters/tables along path near the proposed boardwalk
- Positive reaction to shared images during discussion
  - Ropes course with wheelchair rider as participant
  - Adult fitness equipment
  - Outdoor pavilion
  - Tobacco barn—shadow light show on snow; re-purpose and uses for the barns
  - Beer garden/cafè on terrace with trellis
  - Bike skills park
  - Horseback riders

**Phase 1**

- Fields (earns revenue)
- Parking
- New picnic area (earns revenue) at former Campground area
- Food Trucks (earns revenue)

**Phase 2**

- Misters
- Splash Park
- Concessions at fields (earns revenue)

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1 Sample, full responses in Appendix 5
Online Survey

The online survey incorporated an interactive mapping exercise that provided an opportunity for all park users (residents, visitors, employees, etc.) to share their on-the-ground knowledge about what works and what does not work in the park.

The interactive map is a web-based application developed by Mapita. The tool allows participants to identify and reference specific geographic locations when answering a wide range of questions. Answers to questions are marked with “pins” directly onto an online map. More traditional survey questions and open-ended questions followed, collecting more specific data about the pinned locations on the map. This approach allows for respondents to answer questions about places they know or care about the most.

Respondents

A total of 319 respondents participated in the survey between May 24 and August 31, 2016. Respondents placed a total of 1,020 pins on the map to indicate opportunities or concerns in places they know or care about the most within the regional park. Not all of these 319 respondents answered all the questions. However, for consistency, all the percentages are calculated based on the total number of respondents who have provided answers to at least some of the questions. Where multiple responses were allowed, the percentage is not based on the sum of the answers indicated but rather the number of respondents (319).

Each respondent was asked to self-identify where they lived by placing a pin. Map 1 illustrates the distribution of these points or pins. Overall, most of the pins were placed within the Prince George’s County area and within a 2-mile radius. Many pins were placed in the surrounding suburbs and in

Online Survey Findings

Features noted received highest response under each category noted.

Most Time Spent Sites¹ (59%)
- Wizard of Oz playground
- Nature Center
- Old Maryland Farm
- Miniature Golf
- Chesapeake Carousel
- The Green

Most Desired Improvements
- Trails (26%)
- Nature Center (21%)
- Picnic Grounds (17%)
- Old Maryland Farm (17%)
- Play Areas (16%)

Least Desired Improvements
- Carousel (11%)
- Sports Fields and Courts (11%)
- Campgrounds (6%)

Active Recreation
- More walking and running trails (28%)
- More health and fitness programs (24%)
- Indoor or outdoor pool (21%)
- Mountain biking course (12%)
- Archery range (12%)
- More playground equipment (12%)
- Multi-purpose fields (5%)
- Disc golf (5%)

Community-building/Social Features
- Food and drink vendors (21%)
- More community small events (20%)
- Outdoor café with plaza seating (20%)
- Rentable wedding or event venues (10%)
- Beer garden (10%)

¹ Survey conducted online between May 24 and August 31, 2016; 319 Respondents
unincorporated communities located east of Washington DC. A few were placed in Montgomery County, Calvert County, and in the City of Annapolis. Thirty percent (30%) of respondents identified themselves as African-American, with just under twenty percent identifying as Caucasian/White (19.4%). The largest group by age is between 35 and 54 years (31%), and 26% of the respondents earn more than $100,000 but less than $250,000 annually. Around 27% of the respondents have children under 18 living with them.

**Sample Responses from Online Survey**

“Would love to see the inside of this historic building [likely in reference to Chelsea Historic Site] and see it being utilized.”

“Open restrooms by 6 AM”

“Better integration of farm into the park and park info”

“…alternate location for Old Maryland Farm. Beautiful setting, larger area for meadows, better views during the tractor ride, more space for gardens.”

“increase length of trails or connect them together”

“Add parking”

“….add disc golf, ropes course, dog park, lighted soccer fields, event hall, multi-purpose field, indoor soccer facility, amphitheater, playground near sports complex, large pool, spray ground…”

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1 Survey conducted online between May 24 and August 31, 2016; 319 Respondents
KEY FINDINGS
Mapita was used to obtain place-based feedback from the community about how they use the park and also their recommendations for future improvements. More detailed information regarding the findings can be found in the Appendix 5.

People Are Drawn To Watkins Park To Improve Personal Fitness And To Be Outdoors
Most respondents reported visiting the park a few times a year (31%). Many respondents reported visiting the park once or twice a month (23%) or at least once a week (14%). A nearly equal percentage of respondents reported visiting the park everyday (9%) and once a year or less (7%). When asked what are the main reasons they visit the park, most respondents specified personal fitness and exercise (33%). Other popular fitness and outdoors-related uses were taking children to the playground (30%) and enjoying activities or features at a particular site, such as the carousel, The Green, and Watkins Nature Center (29%). Playing organized or group sports, dog walking, picnicking, and developing skills or abilities were the least popular reasons for visiting the park.

The Most Frequentated Destinations Are The Playground, The Nature Center, And The Old Maryland Farm
Each respondent was asked to place a pin at the location where they spend time in Watkins Regional Park. Of the many amenities and destinations within the park, overall most of the pins were placed on the Wizard of Oz playground, Watkins Nature Center, Old Maryland Farm, miniature golf, and Chesapeake carousel area. If one combines the use of playgrounds, carousel, The Green, and Watkins Nature Center (arguably all destinations geared to families with children), 59% of the responses indicate these destinations are the main reasons respondents visit the park. The sheltered picnic areas in the west and the ball fields and tennis bubble in the east of the park were also places that received many pins.

People Want To See Most Improvements Made In The Trails, Nature Center, Picnic Grounds, And The Old Maryland Farm
When asked where to focus capital improvements, trails were the most frequent answer (26%), followed by improvements to the nature center (21%), the picnic grounds, Old Maryland Farm (17% each), and play areas (16%). Respondents indicated that the carousel (11%), sports fields and courts (11%), and campground (6%) need the least improvements made. These findings support the results on popular park activities presented below.

Park Activities
Respondents were asked to choose which top park activity they were interested in seeing more of within the park. These activities were grouped into seven comprehensive categories, which are listed with the number of times people clicked on choices under them: active recreation; community building and social features; arts and cultural programming; educational and recreational programming; service facilities; expanded cultural and natural features; and picnic facilities.

Active Recreation
Under the active recreation category, the top two choices that respondents were interested in seeing more of in the park were adding walking and running trails (28%) and adding health and fitness programs (24%). These results are consistent with the finding that the majority of respondents were interested in seeing improvements made to trails. Adding an indoor or outdoor pool was also a popular choice (21% of the respondents checked this option). Adding more outdoor multi-purpose fields or adding disc golf facilities were the least popular choices (5% each).
Community-building/Social Features
The largest group of respondents would like to see more food and drink vendors (21%), more small community events (20%), and an outdoor café with plaza seating (20%) in the park. Community-building events received 115 votes, with a slight preference for small events over large festivals. Not many were interested in adding more rentable wedding and event venues or a beer garden (10% each).

Arts and Cultural Programming
The top choice in this category was bringing more concerts, plays, and performances (40%). Food and wine festivals (32%) and outdoor movies (30%) were the second and third most popular choice. Art classes or photography classes was the least popular choice (16% of respondents checked this option).

Educational and Recreational Programming
Under the educational and recreational programming category, the most popular activities that respondents picked were fitness and wellness programs or classes (33%), programs for kids (29%), and kids day camps (19%). Programs for seniors (16%) and general education programs (12% of the respondents) were the least popular choices.

Service Facilities
The most commonly selected facilities to be added were restrooms (30% of the respondents checked this option), expanding parking (23%), and adding more directional signage (21%).

Cultural and Natural Resources
The largest group of respondents were interested in adding more gardens and botanical features (31%) and adding more natural and environmental programs (22%) under this category. Expanding archeological research and expanding interpretive features were the least popular choices (11% each).

Picnic Facilities
Respondents would like to add or improve picnic shelters (20%) and add casual picnic spaces that become available on a first-come-first-served basis (23%). Not many were interested in adding catering services (4%).
OPPORTUNITIES

Each respondent was asked to place a pin to suggest opportunities that could be new attractions or opportunities to improve existing facilities.

Many respondents suggested improving existing facilities such as adding seating and outdoor fitness stations to the loop trail, adding more shading devices to Old Maryland Farm, adding splash pads or spraygrounds near the picnic shelters or at the existing playground area, and opening the Chelsea Historic Site building to the public. Respondents observed that the campgrounds are underutilized and suggested relocating them to a more remote location in the park.

In the open-ended responses, respondents suggested adding more events to the park, such as guided nature walks. They expressed interest in more sufficiently using the park’s resources beyond and outside of the nature center. Respondents suggested adding more educational programs and events around the park. There were suggestions about adding events such as food truck nights and other cultural events. A few respondents suggested adding an event space at The Green.

Opportunities for new facilities were emphasized in the southeast part of the park site. Respondents saw the opportunity in the agriculture fields located in the south of the park and suggested adding an interpretive facility or an educational feature that focuses on agricultural heritage. There were suggestions calling for a new disc golf course after relocating the campgrounds. Respondents noted the opportunity to add a restroom near the information kiosk area that can also be used by the Old Loop Trail users.

PROBLEMS

Each respondent was asked to place a pin to suggest problems and elaborate more on the type of problem as a follow-up comment. Many respondents highlighted park crowding at the Wizard of Oz playground and the carousel. Respondents suggested expanding the adjacent parking areas near these facilities. A few respondents suggested adding more restrooms near the ball fields and tennis courts and Old Maryland Farm. A few comments called for buffering the noise and trucks parked in the maintenance area from the nearby trail.

Are there any additional amenities or services you would like to see in this specific location that would improve your enjoyment of it?
Regarding personal safety, respondents indicated locations along the various trails that were either overgrown or needed some maintenance to improve visibility. Some respondents placed pins to indicate off-leash dog areas as safety concerns. Many respondents also emphasized the need for better signage and wayfinding throughout the site to orient users to the different amenities and trail routes. Respondents suggested adding traffic lights at the park entrance along Keverton Drive to improve traffic safety.

**Interactive Surveys - Dot Posters**

Additional outreach in the form of interactive photos and lists were modeled using the same queries contained in the on-line survey. Placed in Watkins Nature Center and at Largo/Kettering/Perrywood Community Center, viewers were invited to indicate their responses with a variety of colored dots. Colored stickers were also available to place on existing and proposed park features and on aerial photographs to indicate favorite or disliked locations. The posters were up May 2016 through November 2016, with intermittent replacements when the page was filled with dots.
### CURRENT USES—DOT MAPPING OUTCOMES

Table 3-1 Summary of Current Use Dot Surveys, measured in numbers of dots applied to each entry

### PROPOSED USES—DOT MAPPING OUTCOMES

Table 3-2 Dot responses to the question: What uses would you like to ADD to Watkins Regional Park?
Park Events
The dot posters were displayed at special events such as the Prince George’s County Police Family Day that occurred within the park.

Flyers announcing the planning process and meeting dates were made available at many park events and on information tables at sites throughout the park.

Website and Facebook Page
Information was updated throughout the project on the status of the effort, with presentation materials made available following each public presentation on the website.