

Park Design

Parks and Active Uses

RVA300 Objective 1.3 – Complete Neighborhoods (Pg.100) Develop new parks at Nodes and Priority Neighborhoods and connect them via greenways to one another.

RVA300 Objective 4.3 – Urban Design (Pg.129) Utilize conservation easements to expand the open space network.

RVA300 Objective 17.1 – Resilient and Healthy Communities (Pg.194) In designating and designing new parks, consider and mitigate potential negative effects, such as increased adjacent property values, cultural displacement, and increased regulation of public space.

Parks and open space may take a wide range of forms from grass and playing fields (green space), civic space with hard landscaping (grey space), play areas, informal spaces, residential amenities, natural/semi-natural places, community gardens, and incidental 'pocket' parks.

Public parks are integral to the quality of life found in any urban landscape. Parks should respond to the environment in which they are located and should be designed in accordance with their intended use. The design of small neighborhood parks will vary from the design of large regional parks. Passive natural parks should have adequate trails and access. Active parks should have adequate facilities (i.e. sports fields, trash receptacles, benches, running paths, etc.).

Successful public parks, both small and large, active or passive - share certain qualities which include the ability to attract and entertain visitors, access and connectivity to surrounding areas, and safety and comfort. Specific design will vary from park to park based on intended use, but should respond to all of these general characteristics in some way.

It is important that the design of public parks facilitate programming that furthers placemaking, or the creative patterns of use that leverage physical, cultural, and societal identities to define a place. Aspects of a park design that are unique and take inspiration from surrounding character or history are encouraged. Park space can also be used to protect important viewsheds.

Greenspace and active park uses located on school properties can be open to the public. When school projects come before the Committee, it should be confirmed if proposed facilities will be open to the public, while balancing the need for security and safety.

Greenspace and active park uses should be prioritized in historically underinvested neighborhoods. Incidental City owned land and underutilized ROW is encouraged

to be used as “pocket parks.” Private entities are encouraged to create and maintain such spaces.

Opportunities can be made to connect existing and new parks to one another via greenway and linear parks. An example of a linear park would be the “Low Line” along Dock Street in Shockoe Bottom. An example of a greenway could be the Monument Avenue corridor, with the large greenspace median intended for use by pedestrians; or the various rails to trails projects across the city. Opportunities can be made for utilizing public alleys as biodiverse, multi-use streets and active transportation corridors

Planning for all Users (Universal Design)

RVA300 Objective 4.3 – Urban Design (Pg.129) Integrate natural features, history, culture, and art to enhance public open spaces throughout the city.

RVA300 Objective 12.4 – Tourism (Pg.167) Include accessible public restrooms throughout the city, including at City facilities and parks.

Public park design should incorporate design elements that ensure equal access to all users. Site limitations should be evaluated, and access to all sites and site features should be universal. Accessible ramps and other physical accommodations should be components of the overall design and not a separate feature, protecting the dignity of all users. Access limitations of each site should be evaluated and informed by public engagement during the design phase of projects.

Accessibility should be considered. Spaces with grass ground cover can be less accessible to some. A variety of surfacing materials can be employed to ensure spaces can be used by all – this may include both hard and soft surface paths. Consideration for baby strollers and children's bike/scooters can encourage families to arrive by active means.

Opportunities for uses within a park include creating age-appropriate play space for both younger and older children, including teenagers, with the goal of a range of provisions which respond to local needs (e.g. swings, off road bike tracks, trampolines, skate parks, games areas, table tennis tables, marked running/walking routes and outdoor gyms). Opportunities for play and active use also includes young adults and young adults at heart.

Spaces for younger children and splash pads should include seating for parental supervision and discourage younger children from escaping supervision through intentional use of landscaping and hardscaping, especially when located adjacent to vehicular circulation.

Artistic and whimsical elements are always encouraged, and need not always be related to younger users. Future potential art locations should be shown on site plans to ensure a space for the arts. Concrete pad, electric service, and lighting can be pre-emptively included in City projects, where appropriate, to reduce future costs of art related projects.

Space can be made for non-active uses both for individuals to enjoy a quiet moment and for groups to be able to socialize together. This can be achieved by creating nodes

of seating separated by landscaping. Movable seating is encouraged in larger groupings and adjacent to other uses or facilities. Seating can prioritize interesting views such as of the river or city skyline.

The provision of simple infrastructure such as public toilets, changing spaces, secure cycle parking, seating, signage, lighting, trash receptacles, and drinking fountains can increase the number and variety of users. Such facilities may influence whether some users feel they can visit a space, participate in an activity there, and how long they will participate. Facilities should be safe and within or adjacent to prominent locations.

Design Considerations

RVA300 Objective 4.3 – Urban Design (Pg.130) Encourage the creation of a balance of natural rather than hard landscape in creating and improving parks.

RVA300 Objective 17.1 – Resilient and Healthy Communities (Pg.194) Rely on principles of crime prevention through environmental design rather than police presence to ensure park safety.

Certain design considerations should be addressed in any project, regardless of the type of park. Historic elements should be surveyed and preservation should be considered for both facilities and landscapes.

Impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques that improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality.

Lighting and landscaping should encourage safety and security through visibility. Visibility can be prioritized from the street, avoiding creating spaces that are secluded and far from typical users. Entrances should be easy to locate and accessible from sidewalks, trails, and bike routes. Lighting should be dark sky compliant, or similar, where possible and appropriate. Open sightlines and thoughtful well-defined circulation routes improve comfort.

On-site signage should be consistent in style and convenient to visitors, but should be inconspicuously integrated into the overall landscape. Multilingual, intuitive signage should support wayfinding and comfort for community members of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Educational signage can be provided along green stormwater infrastructure, pollinator gardens, community gardens, and other opportunities for encouraging public interests.

Pathing should be intentional and thoughtful, connecting entrance spaces to the site with different points of interest. Typically the most direct path is prioritized by pedestrians, placing landscaping areas between entrances and primary points of interest can result in the creation of “desire paths” (unofficial trails carved through landscapes by repeated pedestrian or animal traffic).

Opportunities should be made to connect to wider networks of open spaces, looking beyond the site boundary. Wherever possible, all open spaces should be integrated with nearby non-vehicular travel networks for both leisure and commuter users. These connections should showcase any existing natural or landscape areas as well as streams, ponds, and other water features. Provision of sidewalk in the ROW adjacent to

park projects should be prioritized, especially in historically underinvested neighborhoods.

Specific multi-use hardscaped areas with vehicle access (which can include dedicated space in parking areas) can be provided to allow community uses such as food trucks, vendor carts, merchant spaces, farmers markets, and other events to take place. Storage facilities and electrical power points for equipment may be appropriate to support public events such as concerts, street parties, markets, festivals, etc. Location and design should be considered to ensure usability, but still be out of the way of primary activities. Shade, seating, queuing space, and signage should be considered. These spaces may be most successful when visible from the street or main entrance.

Electric Vehicle charging is encouraged. Renewable energy installations are encouraged where effective, while minimizing impact to park users. Renewable energy locations should prioritize integrating into historical settings with minimal impact and where possible, while balancing the need for renewable energy. Lighting fixtures are encouraged to include solar power, especially in park settings where utilities might be difficult to reach.

Paved "slow" streets may be suitable in larger park settings to allow for low stress bike riding, roller blading, or skateboarding, and especially as active space for children and families.

Pet users should be considered in most uses. Dog waste bins, drinking water for dogs and, where appropriate, dedicated space for dogs to be let off the leash should be provided in a way that prevents conflict with other open space users. Design of dog parks should take into account health, runoff, conflict between dogs, and noise. More urban areas may require more space for pets, since apartment dwellers with pets need somewhere to exercise their pets.

Community gardens are most successful when they include a place to store tools and materials, a water source, and some form of fencing to discourage wildlife from entering the area. Community gardens should be located with adequate sun and being accessible to the full public. Gardens offer a great opportunity for community art, which can be used to enhance the "curb appeal" of the garden, especially during winter months.

Maintenance

All park projects should include a maintenance plan that addresses all phases of the project, including both landscaping and facilities.

Maintenance is also addressed in the Richmond Sustainability Design Standards document, including long-term energy and water usage conservation.

Additional Guidance

The Parks Master plan is currently under development, expected to be approved at the end of 2026, and will include references for new park locations and goals of park design.

Parklets, or private spaces created in public parking spaces in City owned Right-of-Way, are allowed by City Code Sec. 24-241 through Sec. 24-248 and the Planning Commission has approved design guidelines.