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Improve Playfields



Big Idea in Action

In the future, Washingtonians will be able to enjoy playing a wide array of team sports on high quality, safe fields. Multi-purpose turf fields distributed across the city accommodate team play of all types, including soccer, baseball, lacrosse, football, cricket, ultimate Frisbee, rugby, field hockey, softball, and kickball.

As a highly sought after recreational resource, athletic facilities will be accorded the highest level of design, construction, and upkeep.

Athletic fields will be enhanced by the addition of synthetic turf and lighting where possible. This will allow more intensive use of these spaces while still ensuring superior playing conditions. Fields that retain their natural turf will be improved with grass species that are better designed to withstand Washington's intensive field play and hot and humid summers. At various times throughout the year, fields will be closed to play to allow the turf a sufficient time to regrow. Both natural and artificial turf fields will benefit from a dedicated funding stream for capital projects and maintenance.

A new online permitting system will allow organized sports leagues and informal pick-up teams alike to easily locate, reserve, and permit any sports facility in Washington regardless of which agency has management jurisdiction over the field.

Well-maintained playfields like this one at Upshur Recreation Center in Upper Northwest encourage an active lifestyle and can become one of the central gathering spaces of the community.

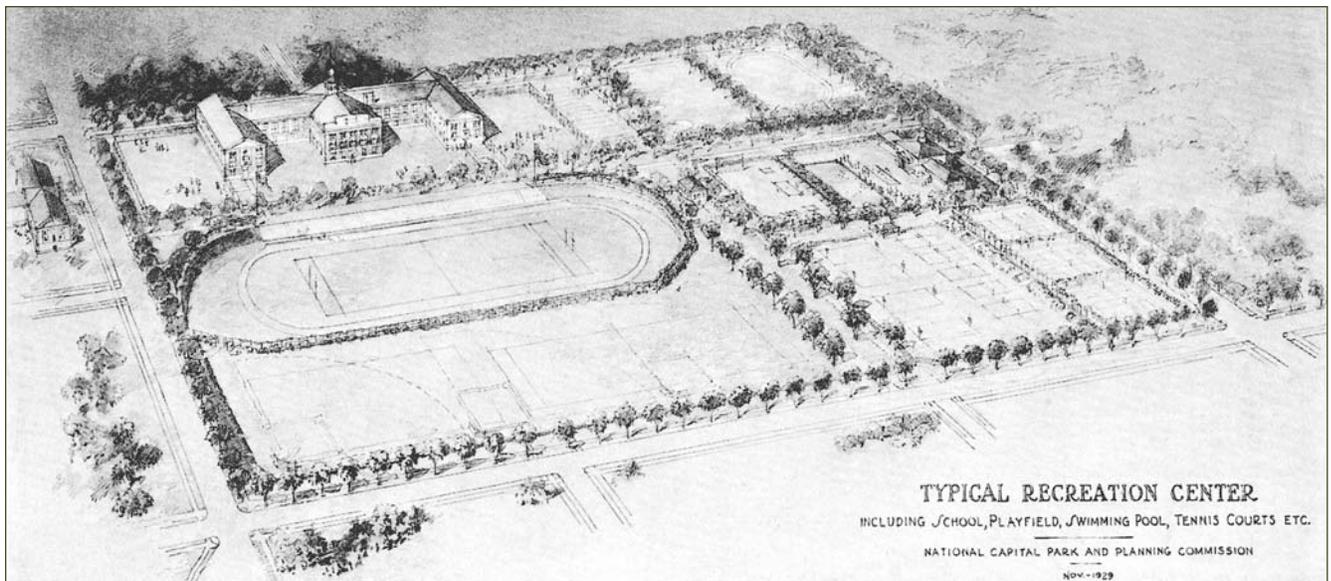
Brief History of Active Recreation in Washington

The first active recreation facility in Washington available to the public opened when the privately operated Neighborhood House constructed a playground in 1901. Active recreation facilities were not provided by a government agency until 1911, when the Playground Department and Board of Education were authorized to provide community-oriented recreation. In 1911, the District Commissioners created the Department of Playgrounds to administer municipal land used for playgrounds and athletic fields. A second municipal agency, the Board of Education, also planned to increase recreational use at their facilities by increasing the number and size of playgrounds and athletic fields at all of Washington's schools. In 1916, a collaborative agreement between the Board of Education and the Department of Playgrounds resulted in public recreation facilities on school grounds becoming increasingly accessible to children after school hours and during the summer.

Prior to the 1930s, most active recreation facilities in the District were located at District operated playgrounds or public school sites. However, between 1933 and 1942, the National Capital Parks, a division of the National Park Service, had a recreation division charged with the construction, maintenance, and operation of many recreational facilities in the parks of Washington. While it was the policy of the federal government not to engage in supervised recreation, National Capital Parks built and maintained facilities for 30 major sports. Almost every conceivable type of athletic activity was available for park users through permits, and National Capital Parks arranged and supervised public events, such as band and symphony concerts, as well as major celebrations, ceremonies, and dedications in the parks.

In April 1942, Congress authorized creation of a District of Columbia Recreation Board. With both federal and District representation, the board was given authority to determine general policy for public recreation in the District and to supervise and direct the expenditure of all federal appropriations and local funds made available for recreation in Washington.

This 1929 NCPPC plan included athletic fields as a typical component of recreation centers in Washington.



The board developed a comprehensive public recreation program offering physical, social, emotional, and creative opportunities in the major parks, publicly-owned buildings, and other recreational facilities agreed upon by the Board and the agencies with jurisdiction over them. The public properties utilized by the Board included those designated by National Capital Park and Planning Commission as suitable and desirable units of the District's recreational system.

In 1949, the District and the National Park Service entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) detailing the roles and responsibilities of the NPS and the District government regarding the use of lands subject to the agreement, the maintenance and improvement of these lands and facilities, and the transfer of funds. To carry out the terms of the agreement, the Recreation Board was authorized to transfer to the relevant agencies such funds, equipment, and personnel as may be necessary.

The original MOA was to remain in effect until cancelled by either party. The MOA was amended several times to include additional federal park areas. In 1966, and again in 1972, its duration was changed to 25 years "at the end of which period it shall remain in effect until cancelled upon 30 days' notice by either party to this agreement."

In 1974, the Home Rule Act abolished the Recreation Board and Superintendent of Recreation. The functions of the superintendent were transferred to the Mayor of the District of Columbia. Since Home Rule, most recreational properties under title of the government of the District of Columbia, and some, but not all of those still titled to the United States government but with administrative jurisdiction of the District, are managed by the DC Department of Parks and Recreation. The NPS maintains overall management of the designated national parks within Washington, although DPR provides permitting services for certain NPS fields.



The Watkins Hornets, who practice on the football field at Watkins Recreation Center, won the 2009 Pee Wee Division One National Championship

DC Department of Parks and Recreation



DC Department of Parks and Recreation

The playfield at Fort Stanton before (left) and after (right) a 2008 - 2009 renovation. The field now uses Patriot Bermudagrass, a warm season grass that is drought and heat tolerant, resistant to most pests, and holds up well to heavy use year-round.

Challenges

Washington, like many cities and suburban communities across the country, faces pressure to increase the number of playfields for team sports, including soccer, football, and baseball. The growing population in Washington, along with the demands for active recreation spaces, is exerting pressure on the existing fields. As such, meeting needs for active recreational fields in Washington's urban environment is becoming challenging.

Locating new fields is both difficult and expensive because of the limited amount of available land. Because of the nature of organized competitive play, it may not be as important to have competition-quality athletic fields located within close proximity of people's homes as people are likely to travel to another part of the city to play. It may be more important to ensure that the District maximizes the capacity of the existing fields to accommodate new demands and, where feasible, locates new fields closer to public transit.

The quality of Washington's playfields can mitigate the lack of quantity. The condition of a recreation field has a direct relationship to the usability or performance of the field for active recreation purposes. Field condition is influenced by many variables such as weather, topography, type of use, frequency of use, budget, maintenance standards, and programs. The impact of field conditions can extend beyond capacity issues; some jurisdictions face legal questions and liability issues associated with poorly designed, constructed, or maintained fields.

Maintenance of athletic fields in Washington is a critical challenge for the NPS, DPR, and DC Public Schools. Maintenance is constrained by a variety of reasons, including increasing user demand, an insufficient supply of field facilities and field types, a growth in sport leagues and tournament play, over-use of facilities, limited funding, lack of expertise, and overall coordination. Over time, deferred maintenance can accelerate field deterioration or even lead to unsafe playing conditions.

Both DPR and the NPS experience high demand for recreational field permits in Washington and in most instances, capacity for permits is reached soon after the permitting season opens. High demand is driven by the large number of league teams that compete for space and the limited number of suitable playing fields and available hours. Multiple separate and uncoordinated recreation field permitting processes exist (mainly through DPR and the various NPS park units within Washington) with their own application process, season, requirements, and fees.

Opportunities

DPR, the NPS, and DCPS can cooperatively implement a comprehensive strategy to increase the capacity of existing playfields in Washington. This strategy can include facility and maintenance improvements to improve field conditions, as well as simplifying the permitting process so that individuals, teams, and leagues have an easier time accessing existing playfields.

Currently, DPR, the NPS, and DCPS have methodologies in place to prioritize fields for improvements following a condition evaluation. Field evaluations and surveys conducted on a regular basis could help guide infrastructure investments to areas that are underserved and/or experiencing declining facility conditions. A more detailed condition analysis could be a factor for identifying target areas for improvement and increasing capacity. Improving field conditions or installing features that allow fields to be used more often could also help alleviate current demand. Examples include converting grass fields to synthetic turf or installing lights. Condition assessments and inspections can be conducted regularly to ensure field conditions are adequate and safe and that any issues are addressed within a reasonable timeframe to ensure fields can be used to their full capacity.

As part of its mission to conserve natural and historic areas, the NPS management policies restrict certain improvements to playfields, such as artificial turf or artificial lighting. As such, District playfields are better suited for physical improvements that can accommodate formal league play.

More progressive and sustainable maintenance practices can be pursued if resources are available after basic maintenance requirements are met. Currently, field maintenance standards either do not exist (DPR) or if they do exist, are only modestly followed (NPS) due to limited funding and/or lack of expertise. In addition, the demand for playing time routinely takes priority over field maintenance, contributing to deferred maintenance and poor playing conditions. Closing fields to give them time to regenerate may reduce short-term capacity but can provide significant long-term benefits through improved playing conditions.

Ongoing fiscal restraints exacerbate the underfunding of field maintenance programs in Washington, lowering turf quality and field capacity. Dedicated funding for field maintenance by the public agencies, as well as new opportunities for public-private partnerships to provide high-quality fields, should be explored.

Improving access to fields by permit process coordination and improvements can help increase the capacity of Washington's fields. While underlying regulations and rules need to be retained based on a field's jurisdiction (NPS or DPR), more seamless and coordinated permitting could result in a more user-friendly process.

Although land availability is tight in Washington, one strategy to pursue is the creation of consolidated recreation facilities with multiple fields and other new recreational amenities at available sites. This can alleviate the specific shortage of fields in the city and the existing pressures on existing fields.



DC Department of Parks and Recreation

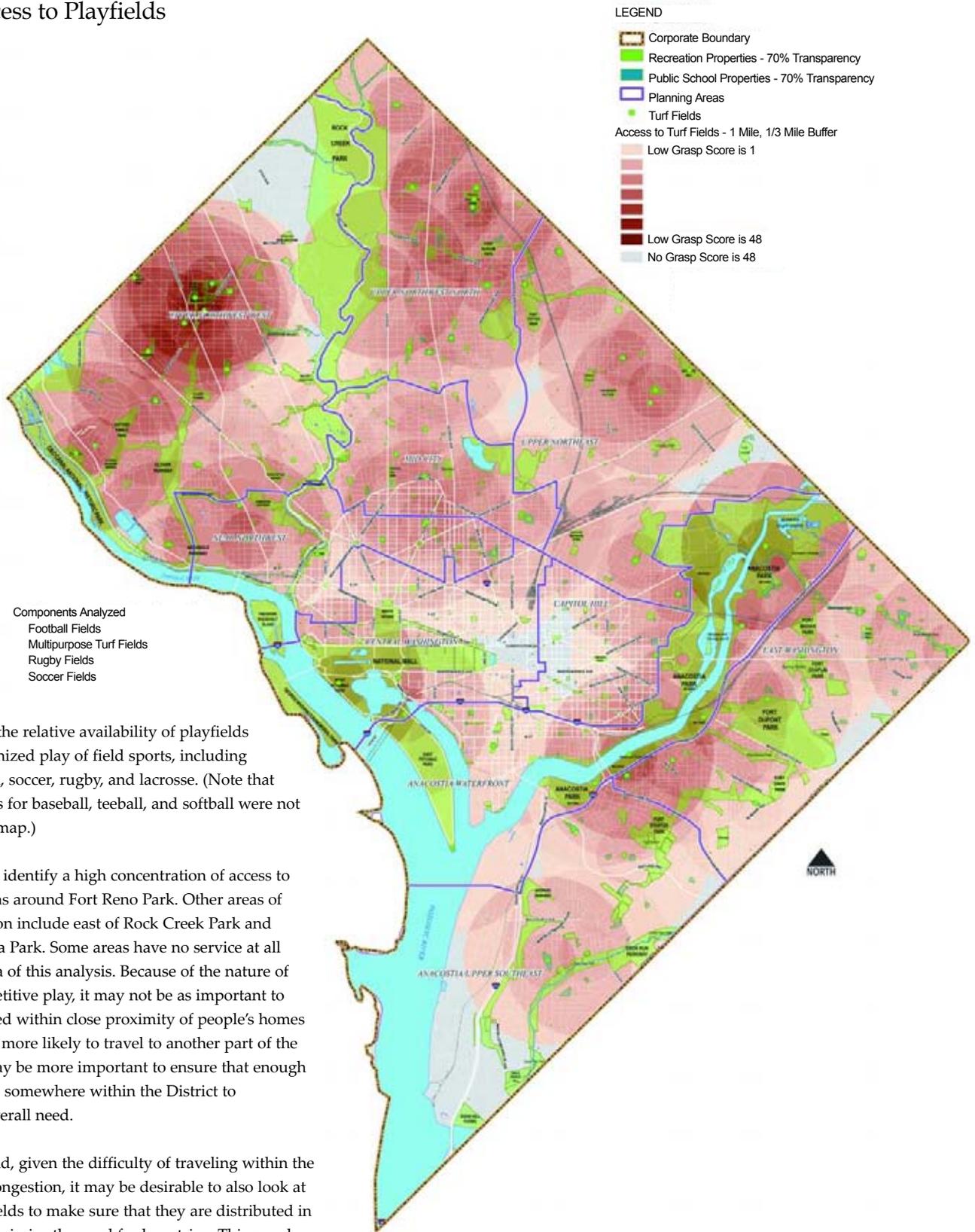
Maintenance of Playfields

Maintenance has not kept pace with user demands. Ongoing fiscal restraints result in challenges to playfield maintenance programs, lowering turf quality and field capacity. Neither the NPS nor DPR currently have the ability to dedicate significant specific funds for athletic field maintenance. On some DPR fields, users (permit holders) assist with providing field maintenance activities so that fields are ready for play.

In 2007, the DC Sports & Entertainment Commission Board of Directors approved a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with DC Public Schools to manage the \$21.5 million renovation of five athletic fields and associated facilities on DCPS facilities. Renovation schedules are based on the DCPS Master Facilities Plan. All facilities will receive high quality tracks and synthetic field surfaces used at many college and professional stadiums, as well as upgrades to bleachers, press boxes, and other amenities where feasible.

Certain projects funded by DPR can build in costs associated with maintenance if related to a warranty; however, this approach is project-specific and maintenance needs are District-wide. DPR uses the capital improvement process to address field renovations on a yearly basis but only a certain amount of fields can be funded each year. Likewise, the NPS does not have a specific fund for field maintenance and volunteers play a less active role in field maintenance.

Access to Playfields



The map shows the relative availability of playfields suitable for organized play of field sports, including those for football, soccer, rugby, and lacrosse. (Note that “diamond” fields for baseball, teeball, and softball were not included in this map.)

The darker areas identify a high concentration of access to playfields in areas around Fort Reno Park. Other areas of high concentration include east of Rock Creek Park and around Anacostia Park. Some areas have no service at all under the criteria of this analysis. Because of the nature of organized competitive play, it may not be as important to have fields located within close proximity of people’s homes because they are more likely to travel to another part of the city to play. It may be more important to ensure that enough fields are located somewhere within the District to accommodate overall need.

On the other hand, given the difficulty of traveling within the District due to congestion, it may be desirable to also look at the location of fields to make sure that they are distributed in such a way to minimize the need for long trips. This may be a combination of scheduling and programming, as well as providing facilities. Placing fields at transit-accessible locations whenever possible would be another option.

Permitting Playfields: Learning from Local Jurisdictions

Both DPR and the NPS experience a high demand for recreational field permits and in most instances capacity for permits is reached soon after the permitting season opens. This high demand is driven by the large number of league teams that compete for space and the limited number of suitable playfields and available hours. Improving access to fields by permit process improvements could result in increased efficiencies and capacity. While underlying regulations and rules need to be retained based on a field's jurisdiction (the NPS or DPR), a more seamless and coordinated permitting process could result in a more user-friendly process. To develop recommendations on improving the permitting process for playfields within Washington, the CapitalSpace partners analyzed the processes of other jurisdictions in the region, including the City of Alexandria and the counties of Fairfax, Arlington, and Montgomery. Information analyzed included permitting trends, agency responsibility and organization, and revenue.

Key points learned from this analysis are summarized below.

- ◆ New athletic field amenities, such as synthetic turf, help communities meet increased demand and can increase the capacity level for a number of different active recreation fields and facilities. Furthermore, maintenance programs can be structured to further streamline maintenance and provide more play time.
- ◆ Permit fees are not typically linked to specific field improvements, but instead, are directed to a general fund that is used for multiple purposes.
- ◆ Fee structures vary and are tailored to each jurisdiction. However, based on the communities studied, fees are higher (significantly in some cases) than those fees charged by either DPR or the NPS.
- ◆ Fees increase substantially for non-residents and for use of synthetic turf fields.
- ◆ Multiple ways to apply for permits help expedite and simplify the permitting process.
- ◆ Enforcement is a common issue that is being addressed in different ways based on available resources such as contracting with local police, hired field monitors, or through a dedicated unit within a parks department.

Various application systems used by other jurisdictions were studied, such as this online permit application form used by Montgomery County, Maryland.



Recommendations

Improve Playfields

Community benefit agreements from new development near playfields could be a resource for ongoing maintenance and improvements.



Maintain or Expand Current Recreation Field Capacity (REC-1)

The relatively good access to athletic fields that District residents across the city share should be maintained.

- ◆ Thoroughly evaluate the impact of any proposed change to (including reduction of) any recreation field, and ensure facilities are provided and appropriately located consistent with the neighborhood context and citywide demand.

Increase Field Capacity Where Feasible (REC-2)

The NPS and DPR both experience high demand for athletic fields, and capacity is soon reached after permitting season opens.

- ◆ Develop a coordinated field assessment and evaluation program for the NPS, DCPS, and DPR so that public investments are guided to those fields in the poorest condition and to areas of Washington experiencing the highest needs.
- ◆ Develop a field use report inclusive of DPR, DCPS, and the NPS fields for improving capacity through access, scheduling, and improving field allocation.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated field improvement plan and capital program for the NPS, DCPS, and DPR fields that uses a collaboratively developed methodology for assessing field conditions based on where the greatest needs for improvements are located.
- ◆ Develop multi-use sports complexes that can accommodate a range of sports uses and include new athletic fields.
- ◆ Convert selected fields to synthetic surfaces to achieve goals of increased capacity, improved durability, and enhanced safety where environmental impacts can be mitigated.
- ◆ Explore opportunities to add lighting to DPR and DCPS fields to expand the time that they can be used.
- ◆ Pursue opportunities for private sector recreation providers to help agencies meet active recreation needs through new facilities and programs.
- ◆ Establish a mechanism to regularly coordinate athletic field programming, capital improvements, and permitting between federal and local agencies.

Recommendations

Improve Field Maintenance *(REC-3)*

More progressive and sustainable maintenance practices can be pursued if resources are available after basic maintenance requirements are met.

- ◆ Develop field maintenance standards that maximize opportunities to integrate sustainable practices.
- ◆ Revise sports field availability schedules to accommodate:
 - ◆ Full maintenance program requirements (pre and post- season maintenance)
 - ◆ Required in-season recuperative down time (closing fields/field rotation)
 - ◆ Playing time caps, practice time caps, and team/league caps
 - ◆ Unstructured play in certain locations
- ◆ Set up a dedicated funding stream for field maintenance to ensure that fields are ready for play and that conditions do not further deteriorate.
- ◆ Link developer contributions to field upgrades and/or long-term maintenance of fields within proximity of the subject development.
- ◆ Explore opportunities for agencies with jurisdiction to jointly fund field improvements and maintenance.
- ◆ Develop an adopt-a-field program to help attract private funding sources for field improvements.

Simplify the Permitting Process *(REC-4)*

Improving access to fields by permit process coordination and improvements can help increase the capacity of Washington's fields.

- ◆ Develop an on-line permit application system that integrates the NPS, DPR, and DCPS properties.
- ◆ Develop allocation policies to ensure accessibility to fields by managing the increasing demand for field time and reducing the monopolization of fields by a few user groups.
- ◆ Align permitting authority with park jurisdiction to simplify the process, give greater control for permitting to the jurisdictional agency, and ensure that permit costs are directed to the jurisdiction responsible for maintenance.
- ◆ Increase the permit fees to partially recover impact costs and align with permit fees levied by neighboring jurisdictions.
- ◆ Develop a coordinated permit enforcement strategy (urban rangers, volunteers, etc.).
- ◆ Provide consistent signage at all fields to indicate which agency manages the field, what the regulations are, and whom to contact for more information.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Connect with Rivers



Celebrate Urban Parks



Expand Park System Capacity



Link the City with Green Corridors



McPherson Square

OBJECTIVES

Center City parks are appropriately maintained, enhanced, preserved, and programmed in a manner that values their role as places of national, cultural, and historical significance, and recognizes their recreational and environmental contributions to the health and well-being of downtown neighborhoods.

Center City parks are supported by an engaged park constituency that includes strong partnerships between District and federal managing agencies and individuals, businesses, and organizations.