

# SIX BIG IDEAS

1

Link the Fort Circle Parks by implementing a greenway and making the parks destinations.

2

Improve public schoolyards to help relieve pressure on nearby parks and better connect children with the environment.

3

Enhance urban natural areas and better connect residents to encourage urban stewardship for natural resources.

4

Improve playfields to meet the needs of residents, workers, and visitors.

5

Enhance Center City parks and open space to support a vibrant downtown.

6

Transform small parks into successful public spaces, forming a cohesive urban network of green spaces.



Fort Reno

**T**hrough the many community parks spread across the city, the extensive stream valley corridors, forest preserves, the sweep of the Fort Circle Parks, the formal Center City parks, and the National Mall, parks and open spaces have defined and set Washington apart from other American cities. To their users, however, Washington's parks and open spaces are often fragmented, not clearly discernable, and are not meeting their full potential as the treasured places they can be. For example, many triangle parks along L'Enfant's grand avenues have lost much of their greenery, ecological corridors have become reduced in size, and trail systems have significant gaps that limit their use. Throughout the city, parks suffer from both under- and over-use.

CapitalSpace examined federal and District parks and open space comprehensively and found that within Washington's park system, the wide variety of park types, sizes, and traits, coupled with shared jurisdiction between local and federal authorities, presents challenges in meeting both local and national needs and difficulties in park planning, enhancement, and maintenance.

CapitalSpace also found that there are tremendous opportunities with Washington's park system as a whole to ensure that parks are accessible to everyone who lives in, works in, or visits the city; that they help connect various communities; that they provide a diversity of passive and active recreation; that they offer myriad natural, cultural, commemorative, and historic spaces; and that they contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and livable city.

The Six Big Ideas identify recommendations that can best be accomplished by the CapitalSpace partner agencies working together and are intended to maximize existing assets, address current and future needs, and seize upon existing opportunities. They include ideas for new planning and development policies, additional physical improvements and alternative uses, and approaches to operation and maintenance.



Schoolyards provide diverse opportunities for learning, healthy living, and recreation, and are recognized as a vital part of Washington's open-space system.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Weave a Greenway through neighborhoods



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Protect, Connect, and Restore Natural Resources



Expand Park System Capacity



Link the City with Green Corridors



**OBJECTIVES**

The Fort Circle Parks are appreciated, both locally and nationally, as historic, cultural, natural, and recreational treasures, providing opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize their history.

Public access is increased through improved connections between the Fort Circle Parks and other parks, schools, and civic destinations.

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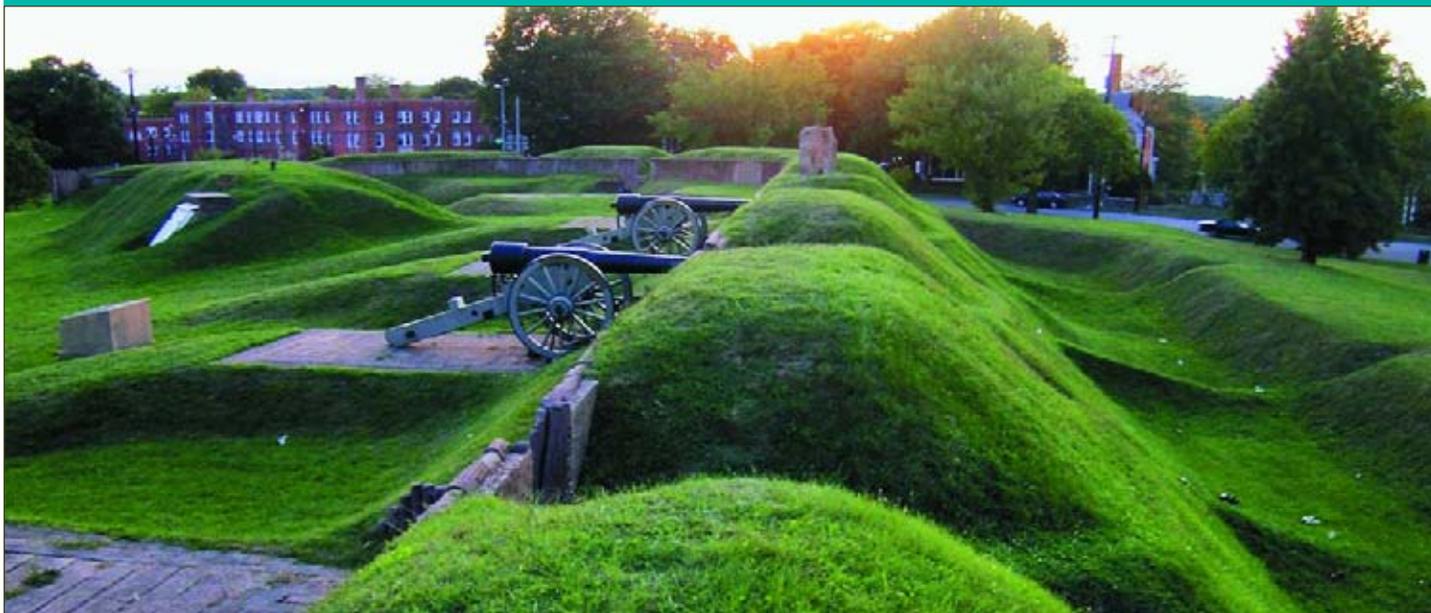
*Guns at Ft Stevens. 3<sup>rd</sup> Mass A*

Fort Stevens, 1865

692

## 1

# Link the Fort Circle Parks



Fort Stevens

## Big Idea in Action

A ring of forts was erected around Washington during the Civil War to protect the nation's capital. In the early 1900s, the McMillan Park Commission proposed that the Civil War forts be memorialized in a unified system connected by a scenic, uninterrupted parkway. Ultimately, the forts and many of the adjacent connecting parcels were acquired, and the sites were placed in the National Register of Historic Places and became part of the National Park System.

In the future, the Fort Circle Parks will be connected by a picturesque, lush Greenway that links Washington's neighborhoods with adjacent communities, the Anacostia riverfront, and diverse recreational opportunities, including an extensive regional trail system.

Residents and visitors will find within the Fort Circle Parks a myriad of opportunities for recreation, leisure, enjoyment of natural resources and wildlife, historical interpretation, and cultural education. Individual fort parks will have features that attract the interests of tourists, local historians, and Civil War enthusiasts. They will also provide much needed green space for activities and recreational opportunities for local residents, workers, and visitors.

In 1937, the Civilian Conservation Corps partially reconstructed Fort Stevens. The fort is the only battleground on which a United States President, Abraham Lincoln, came under enemy fire in war while in office. It is also the only restored fortification in Washington and offers a unique opportunity to begin interpretation of the history of the Fort Circle Parks.



## Brief History of the Fort Circle Parks



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Fort Totten, ca. 1865



### The Civil War Defenses of Washington

In 2004, the NPS released *A Historic Resources Study: The Civil War Defenses of Washington*. This narrative history and accompanying historical analysis provides a comprehensive study of the Fort Circle Parks and includes detailed research on subjects such as non-federally owned sites related to The Battle of Fort Stevens, logistics, roads, day-to-day activities within the forts, relationship of minorities, pre-Civil War background, the Fort Drive, and the post-Civil War history of the fortifications.

One of the legacies of the Civil War in the Washington region is a system of forts and defensive earthworks. Stretching over 37 miles, with 68 enclosed forts and batteries, 93 unarmed batteries, three blockhouses, and 20 miles of trenches, the original system of fortification extended into Virginia and protected the capital from Confederate attacks. When the Civil War ended, the forts were abandoned and the original landowners reclaimed much of the fort property. By the 1890s, organizations and neighborhoods began to advocate for the preservation of these war defenses. The War Department ultimately kept eleven forts and one battery for historical interest.

In 1902, the McMillan Plan proposed a regional park system that included a parkway. The "Fort Drive" would memorialize the remaining forts, maintaining them as parkland and linking them with a scenic ring road. In accordance with this proposal, two significant federal initiatives created what is now known as the Fort Circle Parks—the Capper-Cramton Act and the New Deal. Congress approved funding for the system through the 1930 Capper-Cramton Act. The legislation included a specific requirement that the forts should be recommissioned as parks if they were no longer needed for military purposes.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Capper-Cramton Act provided the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (predecessor of the National Capital Planning Commission), with the authority and funds to acquire many of the Civil War forts and adjacent land parcels for the parkway. By 1937, the Commission had acquired all but one of the 23.5 miles planned for the parkway. Under the New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corps completed a section of Fort Drive at Fort Dupont, south toward Good Hope Road. The Works Progress Administration completed a section of Fort Drive in the Fort Reno area. Other segments, such as Military Road through Rock Creek Park, were also completed in the 1950s, but there was no further progress on Fort Drive following construction of these segments.

After World War II, support for the Fort Drive shifted from developing it as a pleasure drive to a limited access highway. However, critics claimed that this idea was too expensive and impractical, and by the early 1960s, the idea of connecting the Fort Circle Parks with a continuous roadway was abandoned because citizens and planners were concerned with neighborhood and traffic impacts of the proposed roadway. As a result, in 1965 NCPC issued *The Fort Park System: A Re-evaluation Study of Fort Drive, Washington DC* that proposed that the Fort Drive be renamed the Fort Park System and the scenic drive concept be abandoned in favor of a Greenway trail connecting the forts. This plan resulted in construction of a short section of a bike and pedestrian trail between Forts Stanton and Mahan.

Although there was increased interest in the forts at the one-hundred-year anniversary of the Civil War, development pressure on the parks increased, and encroachment upon the spaces for public uses other than recreation became a continuing reality. For example, Fort Reno over time became the site for a reservoir, Federal Aviation Administration monitoring equipment, a Secret Service K-9 Division facility, and a Department of Public Works storage yard.

Following a period of jurisdictional transfers between federal agencies, the National Park Service (NPS) was given jurisdiction over the fort parks in 1933. In 1968, the NPS released a master plan for the Fort Circle Parks. The master plan envisioned the forts as neighborhood parks offering a broad range of recreational and interpretative programs, including day and overnight camps. The parks would be connected by a 23-mile bike and pedestrian trail. However, few of the recommendations and plans from the 1968 plan were ever implemented. In 2004, the NPS completed *The General Management Plan: Fort Circle Parks* to provide a unified management concept for the significant cultural and natural resources associated with the specific NPS fort parks, now referred to by the NPS as the Fort Circle Parks. This was done because of the lack of implementation of the recommendations in the earlier master plan, and because the management of these sites is divided among three separate NPS units—National Capital Parks-East, Rock Creek Park, and George Washington Memorial Parkway.

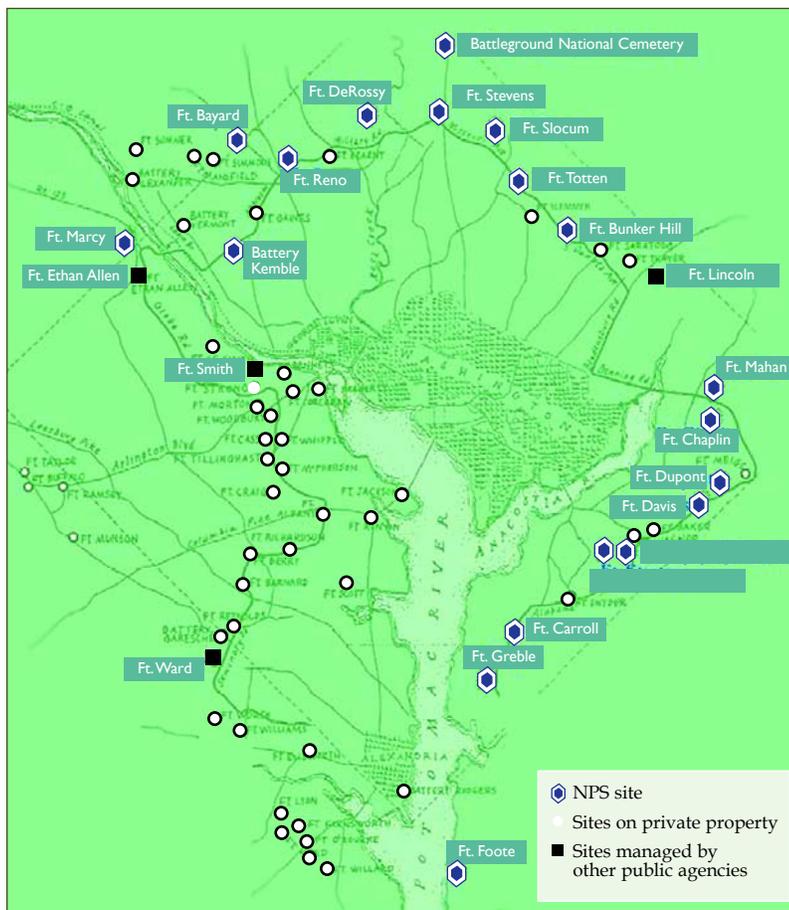
This plan will guide the management of the parks over the next 10-15 years, and sets a general vision for the management of the fort parks as a system, without setting site-specific management objectives for individual park forts.

The plan has three stated goals:

- ◆ Preserve and interpret the historical resources.
- ◆ Conserve the urban green space linkages.
- ◆ Provide compatible recreational opportunities.

The management plan also provides a direction for visitor use of the fort parks by describing in detail the resource conditions and visitor experiences that should be maintained in each of the park's management (or use) zones.

Implementation of NPS's management plan for the Fort Circle Parks is underway. In 2009, the NPS hired their first full-time site manager whose primary focus is to coordinate improvements and programming for all the Fort Circle Parks. Linking the Fort Circle Parks creates opportunities for federal and District agencies and the public to promote the management plan's recommendations. It also builds upon these opportunities through ideas for better use of the fort parks as community assets by linking them to surrounding communities, waterfronts, and local and regional trail systems.



This 1919 topographic map shows the strategic location of the ring of Civil War forts around Washington. The dots, signifying elements of the fortification system, were spaced to ensure that no part of Washington was vulnerable to enemy penetration and were located at natural high elevations. The high vantage point of the forts that surrounded Washington commanded unobstructed sweeping views of the city, inspiring the McMillan Commission in later years to recommend their incorporation into the park system.

The resources of the Fort Circle Parks are not fully appreciated due to inadequate programming, maintenance, and signage. This image shows the DPR section of Fort Mahan prior to a service clean up day by the DC Building Industry of America in September 2009.



## Challenges

As the forts were abandoned after the Civil War, many were deemed surplus and the surrounding land returned to its original owners. Most forts were abandoned to the elements; as the forests and native vegetation rapidly reclaimed the land, the earthworks were oftentimes completely obscured. Now the forts' stunning views toward the capital city have been blocked.

Unfortunately, today few residents know about the forts, the role that they played in defending Washington from attack during the Civil War, or the unique role they played in the city's African-American history. Many freed or escaped slaves sought refuge at the forts, where they found safe haven and work. After the war, many settled in the surrounding areas, establishing early African- American neighborhoods.

The residents who do advocate for the Fort Circle Parks today are passionate, yet diverse in their interests and visions. Some believe that restoration and preservation of the historic elements are paramount. Others believe that the fort parks should provide more active recreational opportunities, especially in the areas of the city that do not have enough recreational facilities. Balancing the various interests are challenging, especially given the shortage of funding available for capital improvements and maintenance.



Trails throughout the Fort Circle Parks provide a connection to natural resources in the urban setting of Washington.

## Opportunities

Together, the Fort Circle Parks represent a significant landscape element that played an important role in Washington during the Civil War. The NPS is committed to improving cultural and natural resources and recreational opportunities to create parks that tell the stories of the Civil War Defenses through interpretation, educational programs, and other experiences.

Each individual fort park has tremendous potential to provide both national and local amenities to attract the interests of tourists, local historians, and Civil War enthusiasts. They also have the potential to provide much needed green space and activities for local residents and workers. Cultivating diverse and passionate users of the Forts Circle Parks will help to protect and sustain the parks and the Greenway in the future.

While each fort park is unique, the ability to link together the major fort parks into a cohesive system is its greatest potential strength. A united system would provide activity hubs with their own appropriate uses, creating a verdant connected Greenway around the city. The Greenway could then have a series of loop segments that thread together surrounding neighborhood parks, recreational facilities, and other important cultural, historical, and community features like schools, community centers, transit, and other local and regional trail systems.

## Fort Circle Park Model Project

### Fort Mahan and Fort Stanton

Model approaches to link the Fort Circle Parks were studied at Fort Stanton and Fort Mahan. These fort parks were selected because they are in communities that currently have comparatively less access to parks and are experiencing significant new development. Challenges specific to each park were researched and analyzed, and opportunities were identified. Together, these informed the recommendations to link the Fort Circle Parks at the end of this chapter.



#### *Fort Mahan—The Gateway to Fort Circle Parks East*

Fort Mahan is an NPS park consisting of a cleared, grassy plateau with a multi-purpose recreational field that is surrounded by heavily wooded hillsides. Along the eastern edge are small, flat grassy areas. Historic fort earthworks are near the top of the eastern edge of the hillside. The park receives limited use, even though it is adjacent to a redeveloping commercial corridor and is situated between the Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road Metro stations. The park has the opportunity to be a vibrant community connector rather than a barrier, as it is now.

Specific issues and opportunities include:

- ◆ Increase the limited interpretive and visitor resources associated with the Civil War and fort, including enhancing the incredible views to the United States Capitol that are currently obscured by trees, while respecting existing forest resources.
- ◆ Improve existing on-site sidewalks, and install new ones as needed, along the perimeter and on trails throughout the park.
- ◆ Improve connections to Marvin Gaye Park, Miller Park, the Metro stations, bus routes, nearby schools, and the Boys and Girls Club.
- ◆ Capitalize on nearby residential development and the redeveloping commercial corridor adjacent to the site by positioning the park as a true community asset and east side gateway to the Fort Circle Parks.
- ◆ Improve and connect the park's active recreational facilities to the adjacent DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and DC Public Schools (DCPS) properties to better serve neighborhood recreational needs.

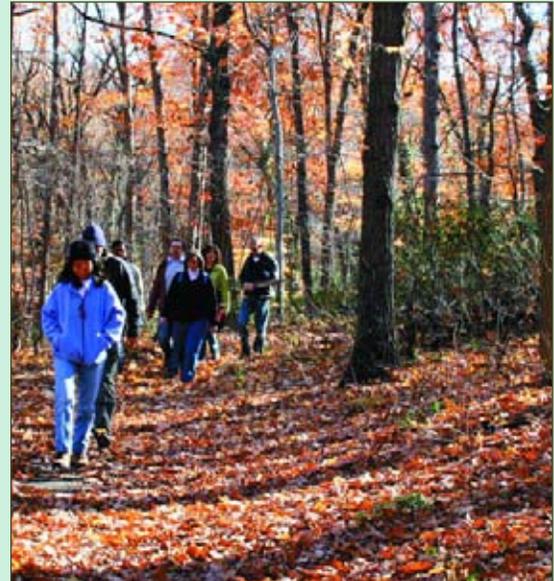
## Fort Circle Park Model Project

### Fort Stanton—*A Grand Vista in the Nation's Capital*

Fort Stanton is located on a heavily forested ridgeline site, most of which falls under NPS jurisdiction. A reservoir and active recreational facilities are located on the site and are under the jurisdiction of the DC Water and Sewer Authority and DPR. DPR has both outdoor and indoor active recreational facilities at Fort Stanton, including an outdoor baseball field renovated in 2009. The remains of Fort Stanton are on the park's west side in an area that straddles the property line between the park and Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church. The earthworks of Fort Ricketts are on the east side of the park.

Specific issues and opportunities include:

- ◆ Increase the interpretive and visitor resources associated with the Civil War and forts. One of the most significant views to downtown Washington is on the church property adjacent to the park, near where Fort Stanton once stood. This view should be protected permanently and made part of the park experience.
- ◆ Improve the trails through the park and link them to surrounding cultural destinations, including the Frederick Douglass House and the Smithsonian Institution's Anacostia Community Museum.
- ◆ Improve the existing recreational amenities and recreation center to meet neighborhood needs and changing demographics.
- ◆ Preserve the stream corridor and floodplain in the park's interior and enhance the recreational experience in this area.



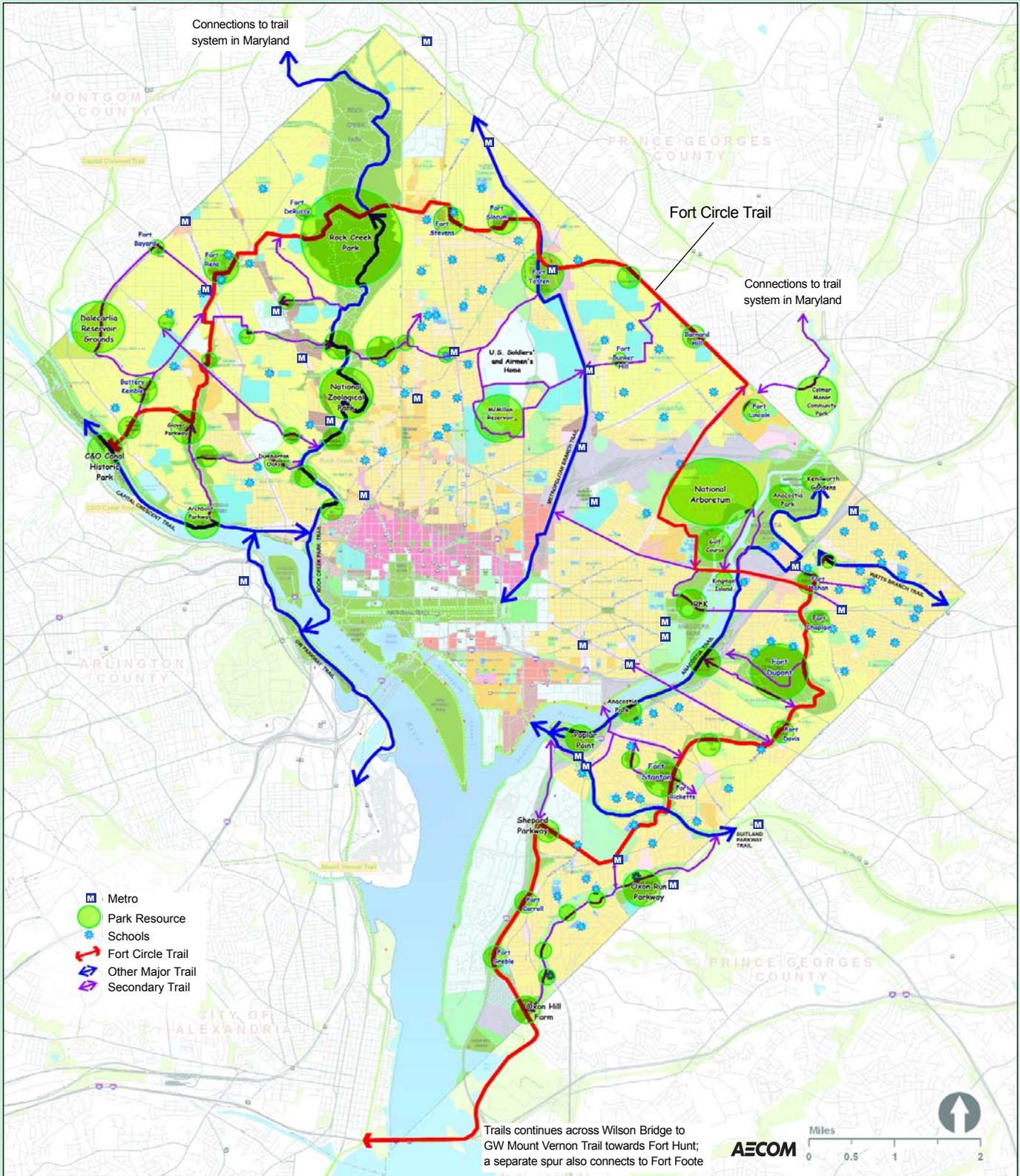
The existing trail at Fort Mahan is not easily identifiable due to lack of maintenance and signage.



The existing recreation center at Fort Stanton is scheduled to be replaced with a new facility in 2010.

## Potential Fort Circle Parks Trail Connections

This map identifies opportunities for strengthened connections between the fort parks and other parks, schools, and access points. It also illustrates conceptual trail connections. Refer to current trail maps for actual existing, planned, and proposed trail alignments.



# Link the Fort Circle Parks

## Promote the Fort Circle Parks and Greenway as a National Historic, Cultural, and Recreational Treasure (FCP-1)

Provide opportunities for residents and visitors to explore, interpret, and visualize the history of the Fort Circle Parks. Remains of many of the forts are slowly vanishing.

- ◆ Install park and trail signage and interpretive stations to provide information, celebrate important vistas, and describe the park's role in the Civil War.
- ◆ Increase visitor resources and programming, especially near trail heads.
- ◆ Build public awareness about the Fort Circle Parks and the Greenway.

## Increase Public Access by Connecting the Fort Circle Parks to Other Destinations (FCP-2)

Connecting the Fort Circle Parks to other parks, schools, neighborhoods, and other destinations increases accessibility to the parks.

- ◆ Design and build the entire Greenway trail to link all of the fort parks.
- ◆ Improve existing trails, including the hiker-biker trail, with increased maintenance, signage, and interpretation.
- ◆ Strengthen connections from the Greenway to transit, schools, and other parks with improved streetscape conditions, street crossings, on-road bike lanes, and signage.
- ◆ Provide low-impact trails within the fort parks to offer opportunities for discovery of views, exploration of interior woodlands, and native habitats.

## Activate the Fort Circle Parks and Greenway for Residents and Visitors (FCP-3)

The Fort Circle Parks were once community gathering places. Selective park activities can once again engage residents and visitors in the parks' rich natural environment and cultural history.

- ◆ Improve existing recreational facilities, with an emphasis on recreation fields.
- ◆ Enhance cultural and natural interpretive amenities provided within the parks.
- ◆ Enhance the park edges to be more welcoming to residents and visitors.

## Protect and Celebrate the Diverse Natural Resources of the Fort Circle Parks (FCP-4)

The Fort Circle Parks preserve significant natural features, including mature native hardwood forests and diverse critical habitat for indigenous flora and fauna that are rarely found in an urban setting.

- ◆ Restore upland and stream habitats by managing invasive species and daylighting stream channels where feasible.
- ◆ Interpret natural resources through identification of native vegetation, habitat, and species.
- ◆ Expand nature-based educational programming with schools and other organizations to educate students and visitors about habitats and natural systems, and build park appreciation.
- ◆ Utilize innovative techniques, such as low-impact stormwater management, to address impacts to natural resources and landscapes.

PLANNING CONCEPTS



Weave a Greenway through Neighborhoods



Increase Access to Great Local Parks



Expand Park System Capacity



21st Century School Fund

Teachers, volunteers, and students at Bancroft Elementary School attend an outdoor classroom workshop in August 2009.

**OBJECTIVES**

Schoolyards are maintained and improved to provide diverse opportunities for learning, healthy living, and recreation, and are recognized as a vital part of Washington's parks and open-space system.