



Citizens Task Force for Parks

A local ordinance that ensures that the diverse perspectives of all citizens are respected and valued in significant recreational projects

**The Greater Good Initiative
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Table of Contents

POLICY BRIEF.....2

CITIZENS FOR EFFECTIVE PARKS ORDINANCE.....5

PRELIMINARY REPORT.....7

POLICY PROPOSAL AND ANALYSIS.....13

CONCLUSION.....17

REFERENCES.....19

POLICY BRIEF

Even amidst shifting political priorities nationally, local governance has retained many of the key principles that guide legislators. Community members consistently expect that local officials will provide reliable services—namely utilities, economic development, environmental regulation, and recreational amenities.¹ Given the often divisive nature of state and national politics, local governments are uniquely positioned to provide these services without partisanship and gridlock stalemating democracy. The lack of toxicity in local politics allows localities to facilitate a vibrant and active form of self-government in which legislators coordinate with and are responsive to the opinions of their constituents. Through the meticulous consideration of local procedures, localities can ensure that public funds are allocated most effectively for the betterment of the entire community.

Unfortunately, in practice, there exists some barriers that result in unequal representation in local government. In addition to problems with voter registration and participation, many socioeconomic factors limit citizens' time and access to the transportation required to make a significant change in local government.² These factors are often disproportionately prevalent in minority communities that face the fallout of centuries of targeted, systematic discrimination. With the compounding effects of redlining and limited social mobility,³ these issues require more than mere recognition. In order for localities to truly embrace democratic governance, they must actively seek to amplify the voices of disadvantaged populations, whose perspectives are integral

¹ (2020, January 15). *Roles and Responsibilities of Local Government Leaders*. MRSC for Local Government Success. Retrieved August 29, 2020, from <http://mrsc.org/Home/Explore-Topics/Governance/Offices-and-Officers/Roles-and-Responsibilities.aspx>

² Petriwskyj, A. M., Serrat, R., Warburton, J., Everingham, J., & Cuthill, M. (2017, March 20). *Barriers to older people's participation in local governance: The impact of diversity*. Educational Gerontology. Retrieved August 13, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601277.2017.1293391>

³ Rigolon, A., & Németh, J. (2018). *What shapes uneven access to urban amenities? Thick injustice and the legacy of racial discrimination in Denver's parks*. Journal of Planning Education and Research. Retrieved October 11, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X18789251>

to a cohesive and positive community. Fortunately, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and social unrest create the necessary conditions for reform. Local governments across the country are reconsidering their procedures, from police protocol to school policy, and this introspection should be extended to see how else legislators can reaffirm their commitment to representing the interests of all citizens.

One key service that nearly everyone relies on is local parks and recreational facilities. Oftentimes, these managed spaces are crucial to the preservation of local ecosystems, while simultaneously providing the valuable physical and psychological health benefits associated with getting outdoors. A meta-analysis affiliated with Norwich Medical School found that increased exposure to the outdoors resulted in a wide-range of health benefits. These included but were not limited to decreases in all-cause mortality, diabetes, resting heart rate, along with good self-reported health.⁴ These effects are exacerbated when scaled to entire communities. Using Gallup-Healthways Wellbeing Index (WBI), one *Plos One* study found that increased spending and access to parks helps the community's physical, community, social, financial, and purpose.⁵ These benefits inspire public support for local parks; a 2018 report found that over 90 percent of Americans “agree that parks and recreation is an important local government service.”⁶ With communities still reeling from the gloomy transition into quarantine and social distancing, providing valuable outlets for recreational pursuits is a crucial way to rebuild community morale. This is especially true considering the wealth of scientific data that suggests that being outdoors,

⁴ Twohig-Bennett, C., & Jones, A. (2018). *The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes*. *Environmental research*, 166, 628–637. Retrieved October 5, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2018.06.030>

⁵ Larson, Lincoln R., Jennings, Viniece, & Cloutier Scott A. (2016, April 7). *Public Parks and Wellbeing in Urban Areas of the United States*. PLOS ONE. Retrieved October 5, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0153211>

⁶ (2018). *Americans Engagement with Public Parks Report*. National Recreation and Park Association. Retrieved October 5, 2020 from <https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/engagement-survey-report-2018.pdf>

assuming control of other factors, helps limit the transmission of the coronavirus.⁷ Thus, considering that these parks are designed for as much engagement as possible, it is important that public officials work closely with their community in the designing and commissioning of new recreational projects. Beyond working closely, constituents need a more formalized and significant role in the process, ensuring that they have access to an open and active line of communication with legislators. Throughout this process, as local legislators try to clarify the needs of their fellow community members, it is important to develop systems that combat existing inequalities in representation. Through whatever means local legislators pursue democratic citizen participation, they must try to counteract the barriers that hold some individuals back.

Montgomery County, Maryland, just north of Washington D.C., is a model example of a local government that is committed to rigorous environmental and social justice standards. On Montgomery Parks' website there is an expressed commitment to provide "residents safe and accessible places to gather, enjoy the outdoors, and participate in healthy, recreational activities" while valuing diverse backgrounds and perspectives.⁸ This rhetoric has been the focus of a number of initiatives and programs of the Montgomery County Parks, which has extended town halls, online forums, and public discussions to concerned citizens. These programs have been well-received, but if the county plans to fully realize their goals of inclusivity and responsiveness, there must be more specific systems in place to provide a reliable connection between citizens and their local representatives.

⁷ Freeman, S., & Eykelbosh, A. (2020). *COVID-19 and outdoor safety: Considerations for use of outdoor recreational spaces*. National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health. Retrieved September 13, 2020 from <https://nccceh.ca/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20Outdoor%20Safety%20-%20April%2016%202020.pdf>

⁸ (2020, September 16). *About the Parks*. Montgomery Parks. Retrieved September 12, 2020 from <https://www.montgomeryparks.org/about/parks/>

ORDINANCE

RESOLUTION URGING THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL TO ADOPT THE *CITIZENS FOR EFFECTIVE PARKS ORDINANCE* INTO ITS FUTURE PARK PROJECT PROCEDURES

WHEREAS Montgomery County serves as a model locality—demonstrating award-winning governance and fostering a vibrant and close-knit community

WHEREAS M-NCPPC of Montgomery Parks is especially committed to developing excellent recreational facilities that promote physical and psychological well-being for all community members

WHEREAS Montgomery County values the input of community members in crafting local greenspace—currently providing town halls, online forums, and public hearings—but lacks long-lasting, active lines of communication between public officials and engaged citizens

RESOLVED, the Council will adopt an amendment to existing procedures that creates a temporary task force of concerned citizens for all significant park projects; and therefore be it

RESOLVED that 1) all stand-alone projects requiring budget and appropriation approval by the County Council, further denoted as CIP Projects, merit the citizens task force described; 2) every task force reserves five citizen-held positions—each designated for one legal resident of the five service regions in the county (Upcounty, Mid-county, Bethesda, Eastern Montgomery, and Silver

Spring); 3) citizens can get involved through a short, generalized interest form provided online or in-person at regional service centers, developed and reviewed by M-NCPPC Montgomery Parks; 4) these task forces outlive temporary public forums, lasting from the project's CIP classification until their approved facility plans; 5) these boards democratically identify a sufficient meeting schedule, convening to discuss public details about the ongoing project; 6) as unelected volunteers, the task force serves as a citizen advisory council that works alongside Montgomery Parks, but does not hold any official role in the approval process; and therefore be it

FURTHER RESOLVED, given the complexity of ongoing park projects and budget alterations, alongside the subtleties involved with adding this procedure, this ordinance will not take effect until the upcoming 2022 fiscal year starting on July 1, 2021.

PRELIMINARY REPORT

What is the problem that you're trying to fix?

As racial justice and the ongoing pandemic continue to dominate headlines, environmental policy remains sidelined barring an extremely compelling case. While this is traceable in the news cycle,⁹ it is also indicated in public opinion polling. When voters were asked “the most important problem facing our country today,” before and after the pandemic began, “the environment” experienced one of the largest drops of any answer.¹⁰ Any policy crafted must account for these political realities.

This policy recognizes our current political climate and seeks to work at the intersection of the environment, civil rights, and public health. The main problem that this policy seeks to solve is the disparity in parkspace attendance between White and Black populations. While data to demonstrate this at the local level is limited and varies slightly, a 2014 National Park Service Study found that visitors were overwhelmingly, 95 percent, white in 2010 with only 1 percent of visitors being African American. This is disproportionate in comparison to the 72 percent white and 13 percent African American populations in the 2010 country-wide census.¹¹ In combating these disparities, the policy should also help increase overall attendance and ensure continued citizen engagement with the outdoors. One added benefit of this policy is the positive mental and physical health outcomes of increased participation with greenspace, which is especially helpful as communities continue to bear the brunt of social distancing measures.

⁹ Daly, N. (2020, March 20). *Fake animal news abounds on social media as coronavirus upends life*. National Geographic. Retrieved July 13, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-fake-animal-viral-social-media-posts/>

¹⁰Gallup (2020, July 1). *Most Important Problem*. Retrieved July 17, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>

¹¹ Vaske, Jerry J., & Lyon, Katie M. (2014). *Linking the 2010 Census to National Park Visitors*. National Park Service Technical Report, 20. Retrieved September 23, 2020 from <https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/DownloadFile/495294>

What is the solution proposed?

The solution proposed will take the form of an ordinance. This ordinance would establish a localized procedure through which significant park projects will be managed. The policy will specify that local governments must source a commission of 5 concerned citizens to provide additional perspective in this process. These citizen volunteers will represent the different regions of the locality, ensuring that the designed parks can be enjoyed by all people.¹² This temporary commission of citizens will coordinate with parks and rec departments to ensure that there exists an active and open line of communication for community members. However, in order to increase the feasibility of this piece of legislation, the volunteers will serve as advisors and not hold political power in the final approval processes.

There are a number of positive downstream impacts that this type of solution will provide. First, by considering the geographical location of the citizen representatives, this policy will simultaneously provide a view into different racial communities perspectives on local parks—hopefully inspiring increased attendance from those same communities. Second, by providing an additional connection between citizens and their governing bodies, especially one which considers the perspectives of all communities, hopefully there will be a general increase in the excitement for and attendance of local recreational facilities. Moreover, increased engagement with the outdoors is scientifically proven to provide various physical and mental benefits at the individual level, not to mention a general boost in morale for communities at large. Essentially, the solution is a clear procedural reform that advances these basic goals and helps further democratize the parks system in Montgomery County, Maryland.

¹² (n.d.). *Regional Service Centers*. MontgomeryCountyMD.gov. Retrieved September 5, 2020 from <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/Government/rsc.html>

Why was this specific issue chosen?

This policy was, to some extent, a natural extension of our handbook. While recognizing the intersectional nature of environmental issues, this policy seeks to amend existing disparities while increasing engagement with the environment. This is heavily connected to the third tenant in our local environmental handbook—which stressed citizen engagement and responsiveness in government. Also, because this policy works at the intersection of the environment, civil rights, and public health makes it suitable for the current political climate in which environmental issues are not necessarily the top priority. By pursuing another local policy, the potential for legislative success is higher which helps to establish the environmental policy team at GGI as a legitimate source of policy for legislators—thus enabling pursuits at higher levels of government. So while the policy is slightly innovative and unconventional, it addresses key issues and is conceivable for our advocacy team’s abilities.

What were the broad questions that guided research into this issue?

As we begin to look into the policy, much of our research is guided by questions revolving around different localities. Essentially, in order to craft a policy that is adoptable and applicable at the local level, it must contain information specific to that community. This means that, unlike the previous ordinance we released, we need to comb through different municipalities and find one that works best. However, that being said, there is some broader research necessary as well. It was crucial that we established a solid background for our framing (i.e. proven the positive impacts of increased engagement with the environment and demonstrated the racial disparities in environmental access/engagement). We also needed to answer some specifics about the process, some of which will require increasing amounts of

analysis as we start to craft the policy itself. Essentially, we wanted to hone in on the specifics of Montgomery County and other possible vehicles for the policy, while retaining the necessary understanding of the broad concepts associated with this piece of legislation.

What is the relevance of the issues to the (state at hand) and its citizens?

As we continue to cope with the seclusion brought about by CDC social distancing guidelines, communities are increasingly seeking to reevaluate their relationship with the outdoors. If localities can galvanize this uncertainty, we can potentially inspire newfound appreciation in public parks—and a broader cherishing of the environment. The psychological and physical benefits of spending time in the outdoors are uncontestable truths—which are especially important as public health remains one of the most important subjects in public discourse. Not only does this policy address park attendance, but also the disparities found in attendee’s backgrounds. By providing a voice to communities who traditionally are disconnected from parks and recreation, this will inspire increased attendance and excitement from communities and populations who have been unable to experience the benefits of valuable parkspace. In Montgomery County specifically, the diverse and urban nature of the county make it especially important that a wide variety of perspectives are incorporated in innovative plans to preserve greenspace. A leading county in Maryland and the DMV area, Montgomery has a potential to adopt a policy that could inspire other localities to revisit their procedures and reconsider how they commission recreational projects. This policy furthers citizen representation in greenspace—inspiring appreciation for the environment from all communities—in order to better park turnout and community well-being.

Why is this an issue that requires governmental response?

This policy deals directly with governmental processes. The ordinance seeks to reform parks and recreation procedures such that citizens from all communities can become active representatives in the drafting and approval processes. Obviously, given that localities establish their own committees and boards, this must be done through local reform. While we could have potentially pursued a public advocacy campaign in order to inspire a similarly newfound love for the outdoors, this policy ensures that long-term, localities will have a system in place that allows for everyone to engage with new recreational projects.

What are the arguments for the creation of the programmatic or policy response to issues that will be proposed?

Our policy proposal is an easy, low-cost reform that gestures to constituents that the government is considerate of different perspectives and citizens' preferences. The only way to ensure that different communities hold positive opinions about new recreational projects is to give them a platform to present their opinions. By opening up a temporary connection between those communities and government boards, projects will not be subject to relentless citizen backlash and therefore will be productive uses of government funds. This policy can also be implemented in such a way that it avoids creating unnecessary bureaucratic red tape—by not granting this temporary commission unreasonable amounts of power in approval processes and retaining a primarily symbolic involvement in the project commissioning. The policy finds the perfect balance between utilizing the most engaged and informed citizens without threatening the integrity and legitimacy of existing processes.

What is the basic form of your policy response?

The policy will take the form of an ordinance, which will stipulate the specific processes through which the citizen commission will be designed. The ordinance will first provide some background research necessary for understanding the intentions behind the reform, followed by an explanation of what changed will actually take place as a result of the ordinances' passing. The ordinance will follow a similar format to the sustainability promise ordinance from our last policy release, in terms of length, structure, and register.

POLICY PROPOSAL/ANALYSIS

What is the programmatic or policy response to the problem that was chosen?

In response to concerns about local greenspace attendance and the disparities between the backgrounds of park attendees, we have designed a local ordinance that elevates the voice of all communities through a temporary citizen board. Commissioned for large recreational projects, the group will work alongside regular government employees and volunteers as an additional body representative of citizen opinion. This group will serve a primarily advisory role, not officially influencing approval processes. However, by working alongside the official board and providing valuable recommendations, the task force will not be superfluous. This council will be sourced from different regions of the community, in order to diversify opinions and hopefully incorporate different racial backgrounds in the process. This is especially important given that the county is the largest locality in the state of Maryland and is relatively diverse.¹³

Outline the process your policy proposal will take once implemented. Explain any systems that will be in place, administrative changes, agency authority changes, etc.

Once implemented, the ordinance would not require any immediate alteration of policy. It would only, in practice, take effect with the next fiscal year. This delay is helpful because it allows ongoing projects to continue undisturbed and provides some time for legislators to prepare for procedural changes. That being said, the policy should be publicized immediately so that people are aware of its passing and can consider potentially being involved with the commissions in the future. The policy will not require any notable expenses. Minor corrolorary costs, such as developing interests forms and reviewing citizen recommendations, would all be

¹³ (2019). QuickFacts for Montgomery County, Maryland. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved October 10, 2020 from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montgomerycountymaryland>

handled with the Montgomery Parks budgets. Other than small process costs and time, legislators are not expected to assume a burden with the adoption of this ordinance.

Why is this something that should be addressed at this level?

Given the complex, intersectional nature of environmental issues, with limited time and resources, it would be an especially difficult undertaking to specialize in nationwide environmental issues. As a result, we have limited the scope to Montgomery County. This policy revolves around the specific needs and characteristics of Montgomery County, namely the regions of the county and the specific existing local procedures for parks and recreation. Essentially, Montgomery County has demonstrated a verifiable commitment to equality, diversity, and open communication. This policy plans to help advance these goals, while providing helpful environmental and social benefits in the process.

Are there alternative responses that should be taken into account?

One alternative to systemic reform would be a public advocacy campaign to try and accentuate the perspective of minorities and underprivileged populations in Montgomery County. Working outside of the legislative process, this response would try and ensure voters were educated on local park projects and used existing channels to voice complaints—potentially threatening with votes if local officials did not properly respond to public opinion. This type of response is certainly valuable, but ideally systematic reform can help create a community that does not need an advocacy campaign to catalyze effective parks and rec management. It also provides a lasting solution, whereas temporary efforts would potentially have a limited impact.

Why is the policy you have proposed the appropriate/best response to the problem you have identified?

This policy provides a valuable reform that enables citizens from historically underrepresented communities to have a say in the local recreational facilities and services that help shape Montgomery County, Maryland. However, at the same time, this reasonable reform does not drastically reshape existing procedures and does not present unnecessary bureaucratic red tape that would hinder developments. This simple procedural change helps justify governmental decisions and ensures that local communities can hold legislators accountable. While many of the existing forums and town halls provide some temporary means for citizen expression, this reform would open up an active line of communication for all areas of Montgomery County.

What are the resources that will be needed to carry out this programmatic or policy response?

Our policy response requires very few resources to be carried out. The ordinance would only take effect at the next significant parks and rec project, at which point the commission would be formed. Serving on the commission would be a low-commitment volunteer position, with no pay being offered for their service. That being said, the volunteers would be credited online in order to recognize the time and effort given to the betterment of the community. The policy would require slightly more time and collaboration between public officials, but this is a small sacrifice to pay for the benefits of open communication with the communities parks and rec are meant to support.

What criteria are you using to determine if your policy is successful?

We would like to see the ordinance adopted and implemented effectively through active participation from all communities of Montgomery County. If successfully marketed, the commission would easily be able to find members who would serve with diligence and passion, effectively representing their friends and fellow community members. If successful, this policy's downstream effects would result in increases in park attendance, excitement surrounding local recreational services and facilities, and general satisfaction with governance. The policy would help citizens feel adequately represented in local government, while allowing Montgomery officials to justify their use of public funds.

What would happen with the problem if no action is taken and the problem were to continue on unchanged and undisturbed?

Community members would continue to express dissatisfaction with parks and rec decisions, potentially citing the insufficient existing infrastructure for communication between citizens and public officials. This would contribute to general sentiments that some perspectives are omitted from Montgomery's local government. By not encouraging discussion on recreational projects, there would also likely be a consistent lack of attendance and engagement with parks. Essentially, this policy is designed to inspire more excitement around local parks and services; without it, these positive impacts would not be seen.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Montgomery County officials are sincere in their attempts to open up decision-making processes for local parks.¹⁴ An exemplar community in terms of citizen engagement and environmentalism, Montgomery County has the chance to further these efforts by adopting this ordinance and creating temporary commissions for big park projects. This ordinance recognizes the current avenues for citizen expression, but asserts that more can be done—particularly in a way that actively seeks to promote diversity, inclusion, and coalition building. The plan balances citizen involvement with the necessary efficiency of a functioning local government, meaning that the ordinance does not create harmful gridlock. The policy helps ensure local officials are held accountable to public opinion which ultimately will correspond to an improvement in the use of public funds on local greenspace.¹⁵ By connecting citizens with their local government, this policy fosters increased excitement surrounding new recreational projects—increasing turnout and building on the unique sense of community in Montgomery County. This will be especially true as more people are brought into the conversation surrounding local amenities.¹⁶

As the shifting political landscape offers opportunities for reevaluation, Montgomery County can help establish a precedent of self-governance in relation to public greenspace, realizing the goals that the county has been working tirelessly to fulfill. This policy provides a secure and legitimate platform for citizen's voices; one that is enshrined in law and will serve as

¹⁴ (2016, December 14). *How Are Parks Made?* Montgomery Parks. Retrieved September 12, 2020 from <https://www.montgomeryparks.org/about/resources/how-parks-are-made/>

¹⁵ Sofyani, Hafiez, Riyadh, Alden, & Fahlevi, Heru (2020). *Improving service quality, accountability and transparency of local government: The intervening role of information technology governance*. *Cogent Business & Management*, 7:1. Retrieved October 6, 2020 from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311975.2020.1735690>

¹⁶ Kuklinski, J., & Stanga, J. (1979). *Political Participation and Government Responsiveness: The Behavior of California Superior Courts*. *The American Political Science Review*, 73(4), 1090-1099. Retrieved October 6, 2020 from <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953991>

an unwavering tribute to democracy. Through the community park system—one of the most appreciated services provided by local governments, this ordinance relieves overburdened officials and encourages citizen activism. The policy simultaneously combats unequal representation in government and helps forge a healthy citizen-politician linkage—all with the same end goal of producing a vibrant park system that suits the needs of everyone in Montgomery County’s diverse community.

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