



Plan Elements & Recommendations

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top : A tiger swallowtail butterfly enjoys stopping to feed at a thistle plant.

bottom: Members of the M-NCPPC Resource Analysis Staff study the fish population as a gauge of stream health.

Blockhouse Point Conservation Park contains a variety of exceptional natural and cultural resources. As a conservation park, development will be limited to: a natural surface trail system; signage; and gravel parking areas. The master plan map (*figure 2, page 4*) illustrates the concept development plan.

Protection of Natural & Cultural Resources

Natural Resource Protection

The following recommendations are related to the implementation of the the park master plan and help to ensure the right balance between stewardship of natural and cultural resources and recreation in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park.

Recommendations:

- 1) Park improvements (e.g., trails, kiosks, signage, and parking areas) should avoid and/or minimize impacts to sensitive areas. Sensitive areas include: streams; stream buffers; steep slopes; highly erodible soils; 100-year floodplains; wetlands; wetland buffers; habitats of rare, threatened, endangered and watch-list species; archaeological resources; and historic sites.
- 2) Unnecessary fragmentation of the park's forest should be avoided.
- 3) Use of the park should not significantly impact natural and cultural features.
- 4) Existing trails (as shown in *figure 2, page 4*) should be realigned as necessary to eliminate erosion problems.
- 5) Duplicative and dead-end trails should be closed and the immediate area restored to facilitate maintenance of high quality forest.
- 6) This park master plan formalizes the location of two sites overlooking the Potomac River and C&O Canal. The passage to these overlooks is environmentally sensitive and additional maintenance is required to monitor and maintain this corridor on a regular basis as well as to minimize impacts to highly erodible soils, native plants, river rock outcrops, and cultural resources.

Access to the overlooks has traditionally been by hikers only. On a trial basis, the *Callithea Trail* and a section of the *Blockhouse Trail* will be opened for equestrian and hiking use starting January 1, 2006. This will specifically link horseback riders from Callithea Farm to the southeastern bluff overlooking

the river. Commission Staff will conduct monitoring and data collection studies to assess impacts associated with the new usage and monitor the additional impact on the trail. After approximately one year, Staff will report the findings of the studies to the Planning Board and a decision will be made as to whether access to the bluff by equestrians will be allowed to continue.

7) A program for the regular and routine monitoring and maintenance of trails should be established. The program should be supervised by staff and primarily manned by volunteers. The program should promote stewardship of the park's natural and cultural resources.

8) Recognized trail impacts should be mitigated. Mitigation may include structural repairs or improvements, seasonal or weather dependent trail closures, or adjustment in user groups.

9) Interpretation of the park's natural and cultural resources should become a priority.

10) Ongoing inventory and monitoring of the park's natural and cultural resources should continue.

Natural Resource Management

Blockhouse Point conservation Park contains a variety of exceptional natural resources. Natural features include upland forest, floodplain forest, palustrine wetlands, streams, river-rock outcrops, species of rare, threatened, endangered and watch-list plants, a wide variety of wildlife -- especially forest interior birds, large unbroken blocks of relatively undisturbed upland forest, and grand views of the Potomac River. Based on the exceptionally high quality of its natural and cultural resources, its intrinsic natural and cultural resources, its intrinsic natural beauty -- especially the breath-taking views of the Potomac River and C&O Canal, and it's large size, staff considers Blockhouse Point Conservation Park one of the top five conservation parks in the County park system.

Recommendations:

1) Develop a comprehensive natural resources management plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. The Plan should include goals, objective, implementation strategies, costs, and schedules for the best management of natural resources in aquatic and terrestrial environments. Special attention should be paid to the large, unbroken blocks of upland and floodplain forest; wetlands; habitats of rare, threatened, endangered and watch-list species; and river-rock outcrops overlooking the Potomac River and C&O Canal.

2) Routinely monitor forest stands to qualify and quantify the impacts of white-tailed deer, gypsy moths, non-native invasive plant species, and trail users.

3) Investigate a cooperative agreement with Colonial Pipeline Company to jointly manage the pipeline right-of-way (*figure 2, page 4*) to improve wildlife habitat diversity and protect forested areas from non-native invasive species.

4) Design and construct a stormwater management facility on the east side of Callithea Farm. This facility would mitigate erosive storm flows coming off of the hayfields and pastures and significantly lessen stream bank erosion in a tributary to Muddy Branch.

5) Continue on-going stream monitoring efforts in support of the *Countywide Stream Protection Strategy*.



If maintained properly, this open field space along the Colonial Pipeline gas line right-of-way can significantly help protect forested areas from non-native invasive species.

above: The view along the northern portion of the gas line.

below: The perspective along the southern portion of the gas line right-of-way.





above: Wetlands provide unique habitat for many species of flora and fauna.

below : A State of Maryland endangered fern, Pinnatifid spleenwort (*Asplenium pinnatifidum*), still has a home in the park.



6) Continue maintenance of the pond north of River Road in accordance with Maryland Dam Safety Regulations.

7) Conduct comprehensive inventories of wildlife using vernal pools and non-tidal palustrine wetlands in the Muddy Branch Stream Valley and along the C&O Canal and Potomac River. Incorporate this information into the decision-making process related to use and maintenance of natural surface trails.

8) Identify concentrations of non-native invasive plants. Implement management in accordance with the *Management Plan for Non-Native Invasive Plants in Montgomery County Parks* (M-NCPPC, 2003).

9) Continue cooperative efforts with State and Local Governments to manage gypsy moths. Encourage utilization of least toxic methods in order to minimize impacts to non-target species of butterflies, moths, and aquatic insects.

10) Continue on-going management of white-tailed deer. Efforts were initiated in December, 2002 as part of the comprehensive management plan for white-tailed deer in Montgomery County.

Archaeological & Historical Resource Protection

BHPCP is one of the most important Archaeological sites in the County. Recent publicity in forensic anthropology has made the public aware that removing evidence from a crime scene hinders and prevents researchers from reconstructing and solving the crime. Because archaeological investigations share similar principles and techniques as forensic anthropology, "pot hunters" and unsupervised users of metal-detecting devices steal publicly owned artifacts and destroy any information that archaeological methods can tease from the ground.

Civil War sites have high visibility, contain valuable artifacts and, thus, are particularly vulnerable to looting. The Park Police should step-up monitoring of BHPCP for illegal removal and disturbance of archaeological artifacts and park regulations and fines should be adjusted as described in the following section under "*Increase Police Presence*".

Recommendations:

1) Continue archaeological surveys to further document the cultural history protected within the park.

2) Work with local historic groups and organizations to establish a volunteer base and constituency for the park to facilitate protection and interpretation of cultural resources.

3) Work to establish a cultural learning visitor center at the Callithea Farm to interpret and possibly reconstruct, through living history exhibits, the civil war encampments and fortifications found on the site.

4) Work through park police to prevent theft and damage to cultural resources - see "*Increase Park Police Presence*" below.

Trails & Public Access

Trails

Natural Surface Trails provide the primary opportunity for people to experience Blockhouse Point Park and enjoy its natural areas. They are therefore a major focus of this Master Plan. In developing the trail system, the Master Plan Committee first identified the key destination points within the park (e.g. the Potomac River overlooks, unique natural communities, and cultural sites) and connections to other trail systems. The current trail system was evaluated in terms of connectivity to these sites and trail condition. Next, potential trail use impacts and assigned trail user designations were evaluated as one way of minimizing impacts. Staff is committed to provide safe and enjoyable access for a variety of trail users while maintaining the environmental health and protection of the special resources of Blockhouse Point Conservation Park.

Currently, most of the existing trail use is within the parkland south of River Road. Here, most of the informal, natural surface trail system is in good condition requiring only minor repairs and realignments and replacement of one small bridge. The park trail map (*figure 2, page 4*) shows park points of interest, connecting trails coded to user groups, trail connections to areas outside of the park, parking areas and other park amenities.

Almost half of Blockhouse Point extends north of River Road to its boundary at Esworthy Road. With the exception of a wide gasline corridor and a WSSC pipeline there is little evidence of current human presence.

The Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Plan proposes a multi-use natural surface trail for hikers, equestrians and bikers that extends through Blockhouse Point Conservation Park to the C&O Canal. The challenge is to avoid steep slopes along the gasline, minimize impacts to interior forest habitat, minimize erosion, and maintain sensitive populations of rare, threatened, endangered or watch-list plants. This plan supports the construction of this trail with the understanding that despite our best efforts to design and build a trail that minimizes impacts to the environment, some negative impacts will occur. Efforts must be made to monitor and mitigate any adverse impacts and take appropriate remedial actions to protect park resources.

Trail Connections to the C & O Canal. Through a questionnaire distributed to patrons of Callithea Farm, the horse boarding facility adjacent to the park, and in a subsequent meeting held at the farm in Spring of 2002,

two important destination points outside the Park were identified. A system of informal trails has been used for many years to create a loop through BHPCP to Violets lock on the C&O Canal, down the Canal to Pennyfield lock and Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area and back into BHPCP. It is recommended that this loop trail be formalized.

Both of the Canal connections require approval and cooperation from the National Park Service (NPS) as short sections cross their property. Initial discussions with NPS representatives indicate a willingness to cooperate in making these connections. Maintenance of the trail on NPS land is to be by M-NCPPC park manager assisted by volunteer groups from Callithea Farm, etc.

In addition to creating the loop trail, establishing a formal trail connection to Pennyfield Lock and Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area is critical to completion of the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Trail System connecting Gaithersburg to the Canal, already approved by the Planning Board. The trail will require the construction of a bridge across Muddy Branch to eliminate the current informal path on NPS property along the Canal berm, which is a cultural resource.

To complete the loop it will be necessary to provide a trail through Callithea Farm. Establishing appropriate stream buffers and relocating some fence lines could accomplish this once the park acquisition of Callithea Farm is finalized.

Trail Maintenance. The long-term maintenance of park trails is the responsibility of the park manager. In order to ensure that trails remain in good condition and do not become subject to over-use that could negatively impact park resources, regular inspections should be conducted. Such inspections should be conducted by staff and/or members of volunteer groups. One option might be biannual trail walk/ inspections that include park staff and interested citizens. These evaluations will provide information to be used by the park manager in making decisions on trail maintenance or, if deemed necessary, temporary or permanent trail closures.

Recent years have seen a greater emphasis placed on natural surface trails and recognition that construction and maintenance of these trails requires specialized techniques and expertise. The development of a specialized regional trail crew that would receive special training in order to fill this need is an idea that has been suggested. The BHPCP Master Plan Committee highly recommends the development of such a crew.

Trail Related Recommendations:

1) Plan, design and construct a natural surface trail system that provides safe public access to Blockhouse Point.

2) Provide a natural surface trail connection available for trail users on foot, horseback, or bike from Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Unit 1 through Blockhouse Point Conservation Park to the C&O Canal and Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area. This connection will provide a continuous shared-use natural surface trail, via the Muddy Branch Stream Valley, from the City of Gaithersburg to the Potomac River. South of River Road, the trail will utilize an existing WSSC access road to the C&O Canal towpath.

3) Provide hiker only access to natural surface trails in the most environmentally sensitive and/or culturally sensitive portions of the park. The majority of trails in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park are recommended for hiking only.

4) In keeping with the intent of the Planning Board approved Trail Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park (M-NCPPC, 1989), provide joint hiking/equestrian use natural surface trails oriented to Callithea Farm. Continue planning efforts with the the National Park Service to formalize a 5.5 mile "loop trail" for equestrians by linking the equestrian trail in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park to the C&O Canal Towpath at Pennyfield and Violette's Locks and trails in Callithea Farm.

5) Establish a volunteer-based program to help with monitoring and maintenance of park trails.

6) After purchase of Callithea Farm, establish stream buffers as outlined in the Environmental Guidelines. Relocate fencing to allow for a trail to be established around the perimeter of the property to allow access to future connections to C&O Canal.

7) Establish trail use as follows: the Muddy Branch Trail connection from Esworthy Road to the C&O Canal will be open to hikers, horses and bikes; the trail from the northeast portion of Callithea farm running east, parallel to River Road and connecting to the Muddy Branch Trail will be open to hikers and horses; all other trails are designated for hiking only.

8) Develop and implement a trail marking system and publish a trail map to improve user access and clearly identify user groups for each trail.

9) Develop an educational program on trail etiquette (county-wide effort).

10) Establish a specialized trail crew that would receive special training and develop expertise in construction and maintenance of natural surface trails. This crew would help reduce the increased burden that has

been put on regional staff to maintain our quickly growing trail system (region-wide effort).

Public Access & Parking

The current parking lots in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park are well located and should provide adequate parking for the foreseeable future with no changes or upgrading. Extensive parking and a boat launch facility are also available at Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Park. In addition, the on-going acquisition of the Callithea Farm will provide the potential for additional future parking as well as access to park trails. Proposed acquisition of land on Esworthy Road will allow for a small parking facility to allow access to the Muddy Branch shared-use natural surface trail.

Recommendations:

1) Maintain current parking until such time as additional acquisitions recommended in this plan are made. At that time re-evaluate parking needs along with any development that takes place at Callithea Farm and establish small parking area on Esworthy Road.

2) At such time as use of the area warrants it, install port-a-john at main parking area.

Interpretation

Blockhouse Point Conservation park is an area rich in the natural and cultural history of the Potomac Valley. It holds numerous prehistoric archeological sites, historic Civil War ruins of national significance, major geologic formations, mature upland forests and views of the Potomac Valley not equaled elsewhere in Montgomery County. With no interpretation currently on site these unique features are largely unrecognized or enjoyed by current visitors. The preservation of the natural and historical character of this park is dependent on passive and educated use. This provides a key opportunity for interpretation to assist in controlled management and promoting better stewardship by park users. Key topics for interpretation include:

Important Natural Ecosystems - i.e. River Rock Outcrops, Upland Forest, Stream Valley, Potomac River Floodplain

Views of River - Geology; emphasizing the transition between the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain as dramatically seen at BHPCP.

Archaeology - Evidence of man's prehistoric past on the land.

Civil War Ruins - Tell the story of the complete complex including the Civil War Camp and the roads that served the camp spread out along the Canal from Violettes to Pennyfield Locks.

Many of the existing trails in BHPCP are part of the historic Civil War complex for which the park is named. They are in fact, a vestige of the transportation system that furnished material and supplies to the men who were stationed there. These historic routes have been used for more than 140 years, whether for military or purely aesthetic reasons. If abandoned, or permanently closed, they will be lost to history. Each one needs to be looked at on a case-by-case basis to determine its historical context to the park and what if any use should continue.

Recommendations:

1) The Park Manager, Interpretive Staff, Natural Resource Specialists and History/Archaeology Staff should work in conjunction with the exhibit shop to develop a comprehensive interpretive plan for BHPCP.

2) Permanent interpretive signs should be installed to inform and educate the casual park visitor about the unique natural and cultural features of BHPCP. Information should also stress the importance of staying on designated trails, not trampling vegetation or cultural areas.

3) Due to the fragile nature of park features, interpretation should be limited to kiosks located at trailheads and parking areas until such time as funding is available for a visitor center. Kiosk interpretation would only discuss the park history in a general manner and not lead people directly to important sites.

4) After the purchase of the Callithea Farm a visitor center with associated parking should be developed on the Farm to serve as a focal point for the park's interpretation - see next section.

5) Continue research to determine which of the current trails and abandoned roads were actually used during the Civil War. Those that were extant should be considered as part of the overall complex and afforded some degree of maintenance to preserve their footprint on the land. Methods of maintaining the footprint of these roads, without them being used regularly as trails will need to be investigated.

Increase Park Police Presence

As use of BHPCP increases there will be a greater need to patrol the park and enforce regulations designed to protect park users and resources. There is a particular concern for illegal scavenging of historic and archaeological sites. Civil War sites have high visibility, contain valuable artifacts and, thus, are particularly vulnerable to looting. Evidence of looting has been observed on various occasions at Blockhouse Point. Enforcement is also needed to ensure appropriate trail use and protection of natural resources.

In addition to professional police staff, the Park Police currently manage a very successful program that trains and utilizes volunteers to patrol parks and park trail systems. Volunteers notify park police of any park violations or safety problems.

Recommendations:

1) Increase Park Police presence in the park. Officers should patrol access points and trails to prevent illegal use of the area with particular attention paid to illegal removal and disturbance of archaeological artifacts, wildlife, plants and other natural materials.

2) Expand the Park Police's volunteer patrols in BHPCP. Volunteers should follow trail use designations, e.g. volunteers on bikes or horses should only travel on trails designated for those uses.

3) County laws on "pot hunting" should be reviewed and penalties for stealing archaeological artifacts from public County lands be made more consistent with State and Federal standards, which can require such penalties as confiscation of equipment, etc.

Additional Park Acquisition

Two parcels of privately owned land are nearly enclosed by BHPCP and the purchase of this land would greatly benefit trail connectivity and the protection of resources within the park. The parcel located at 14700 River Road contains high quality forest and is completely surrounded by BHPCP. Addition of this property is important to maintaining the resource quality within the park. The parcel at 13430 Esworthy Road is critical for making the Muddy Branch trail connection, providing access to the north section of the park and protecting the Muddy Branch stream (this is the only section of the stream not within parkland).

Recommendation: M-NCPPC should purchase, for inclusion in BHPCP, the two properties located at 14700 River Road and 13430 Esworthy Road at such time as they become available.

Callithea Farm & Civil War Interpretive Center

The Callithea Farm is a 97-acre, commercial, equestrian facility that lies adjacent to BHPCP on its western side. The Planning Board recommended in the Potomac Master Plan that Callithea Farm be acquired as public parkland. Purchase of the property was initiated in July of 2003 and will be completed in five installments with the final acquisition being completed in 2006. While the primary purpose for the acquisition is to preserve and maintain the farm as an equestrian facility, it will also provide the opportunity to develop an interpretive center that would focus on the role of Montgomery County in the Civil War. Building such a center in BHPCP proper would not be compatible with the approved uses of a conservation park as noted in the Park Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Master Plan.

Recommendation: A separate plan for Callithea Farm should be prepared at some future date. The plan should focus on maintaining the property as a publicly owned horse farm (*M-NCPPC, 2001, page 21*) and consider the possibility of developing and interpretive center that would focus on the role of Montgomery County in the Civil War. Planning for this future facility should be guided by the following principles: 1) the viewshed of the farm should be protected; 2) the proposed facility should compliment the existing equestrian enterprise and vice versa; 3) the size (i.e., square footage) of the proposed visitor center should be consistent with existing buildings on the site; and 4) the facility should reinforce the rural character of the area.

Implementation & Costs



- This section will be available at the time of Planning Board work sessions.