National Recreation and Park Association

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Commissioner Carol Mitten
Chairperson
District of Columbia Zoning Commission
441 4th St NW; 2nd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20002

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Dear Commissioner Mitten:

We write to support the proposal by the District of Columbia Department of Parks and Recreation to create a 'matter of right' provision in zoning regulations for public park and recreation capital investments. The continuing positive actions to upgrade the park and recreation system create an imperative for zoning regulations that extend to public recreation and parks the same planning, management and investment efficiencies available to the public school system. This action and continuing departmental practices will fully protect opportunities for timely and continuing citizen participation. The District's long-standing practice of using selected school sites for recreation is evidence of parallel (and supportive) community values and access.

From the earliest nationwide development in the late 1800s of public recreation facilities, these resources have been considered community assets. Earlier facilities accommodated a diversity of then-traditional recreation sports, social games and "special" events (for example, a local recreation agency in Delaware was well known for its annual pet contest, and the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Recreation Commission was officially responsible for managing the famous Mummer's Parade). Hundreds of agencies hosted marbles and jump rope tournaments, activities that today are rarely observed in an organized way.

The basic dual objectives of public recreation and parks – then and now – are to create opportunities for individuals and society to engage in healthful lifestyles, and the conservation of physical environments, including management of recreation access compatible with sustaining these public places in the long-term.

The basic objectives of public recreation and parks have changed only little since the earliest agencies and public facilities were created under the public "health and welfare" clauses of state law and local ordinances. However, the imperative for and demands on public recreation and park policymakers, executives, planners and managers at all levels of government have changed in dramatic ways as a result of demographic and social change and economic (among many) demands. Extended human longevity, for example, has provided both opportunities and demands on many public systems, including recreation.

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Exhibit 47

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Similarly, local recreation agencies nationwide are increasingly viewed as a preferred site and program option for single parents and working couples seeking secure full day and/or before and after school recreation services for their children. Often described today as "child care," it is a modern day extension of public recreation services, often resulting in necessary upgrades of sites and facilities. The more relevant and progressive local governments and park and recreation agencies are also engaged in a combination of services and collaborations referred to as youth development. Services range from creation of work experiences and development of leadership skills, and many forms of education, including tutorial programs. Services of this nature tend to emphasize the efficiencies of collaboration with other public agencies and private partners.

While the National Recreation and Park Association and local recreation providers have historically cited the health outcomes of active recreation, now others, particularly health policymakers, planners and practitioners seek opportunities to partner with recreation agencies. Health providers utilize accessible public recreation facilities for community health screenings and referrals. This practice tends to reach individuals and families not otherwise likely to access health care. Parallel partnerships and services emphasizing the potential of public recreation and park agencies to address juvenile delinquency create 'one-stop' sites for information on public assistance, transportation, housing and other necessities of a diverse population.

The modern public park and recreation agency best services the public when it can focus maximum attention on anticipating social and environmental conditions and demands, then acting to address them. Revising the District's zoning regulations will enable the Department of Parks and Recreation to focus more efficiently on necessary capital investment strategies while continuing to encourage and facilitate public participation in its activities and plans to serve.

I would, of course, be happy to discuss this communication further.

Sincerely,

Barry S. Tindall
Director of Public Policy

CC: Neil Albert, Director
D.C. Parks and Recreation