



Clarendon Courthouse Civic Association

29 April 2021

Mr. Chairman and members of the County Board,

The Clarendon Courthouse Civic Association strongly urges the County to **increase funding for the Long Branch and Gulf Branch Nature Centers**. We fully understand that this is a challenging time for Arlington and that the budget is under pressure due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet we have also seen how in the face of the pandemic our community members and many Arlington residents are visiting the Gulf Branch and Long Branch Nature Centers grounds for unstructured, safe and healthy outdoor activities. Exposure to the natural environment has been a vital source of peace and solace for families under stress. The pandemic has been a forceful reminder of just how important, and perhaps under-valued, our natural resources are.

We have followed Arlington's expression of support for the Biophilic Cities initiative. And we are aware that the Arlington County Civic Federation conducted a study of capital funding allocations for natural resources. What is evident is that there is a significant disconnect between Arlington's needs and aspirations for nature and the historical and currently planned levels of investment in our natural resources.

Arlington is fortunate to have two County nature centers. Gulf Branch and Long Branch are both over 50 years old. Both occupy former residences acquired by the County by visionaries of the early environmental era in Arlington. The centers incorporate both the charm and the limitations of their origins as private homes. They are tucked away in attractive stream valley parks.

As the Civic Federation observed and documented, the nature centers have received little support in CIPs through FYs 2013-2020, even as other community facilities like the community centers have received significant upgrades. The Friends of Gulf Branch Nature Center organization is beginning to expand its scope to include Long Branch Nature Center, and we in the Clarendon Courthouse Civic Association support recommendations developed by the Friends.

Specifically, we urge the County to include in its next CIP proposal the following:

1. Gulf Branch Nature Center
 - a. Upgrade/expansion of animal exhibits
 - b. Installation of A/V stations and programming
 - c. Upgrade of the Native American Room
2. Long Branch Nature Center
 - a. Upgrade/expansion of animal exhibits
 - b. Installation of A/V stations and programming
 - c. Possible upgrades to be considered include:

- i. Enhancing the turtle rehabilitation spaces so the public can better observe and understand that environmentally beneficial work.
- ii. Upgrading the children's outdoor environmental learning and playground.
- iii. Renovating the raptor enclosure similar to the one at Gulf Branch Nature Center.

We recommend that a minimum of \$1.5 million be requested for these projects (\$750K per nature center). This is a very reasonable amount compared to line items of previously-funded projects at community or recreation centers. (For example, the renovation of Lee Community Center in FY2016 received funding of \$2.1M, including both bond funds and PAYGO).

In addition, the County should fund an initial concept study to evaluate the potential and benefits and costs of a new Long Branch Nature Center facility as part of the redevelopment of the contiguous 601 S Carlin Springs Rd site now owned by the County. A state-of-the-art nature center would be a logical part of a multi-purpose, environmentally-focused facility that could also address energy, climate, biophilic design, and sustainability education and demonstrations.

We also note that appropriately-increased funding for both nature centers would provide an opportunity to advance the equity agenda for the County. At Gulf Branch, there is the opportunity to enhance the Native American room to better highlight the heritage of Native Americans in Arlington; and at Long Branch, there is the opportunity to provide more nature exposure and education for underserved populations in south Arlington.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Clarendon Courthouse Civic Association

Casey Nolan
President

CC: Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director of Department of Parks and Recreation
Clarendon Courthouse Civic Association membership