



February 25, 2005

MEMORANDUM

To: Montgomery County Planning Board
Via: Carl Falcone, Chief, Natural Resources
David Vismara, Horticultural Manager, Brookside Gardens
From: Stephanie Oberle, Horticulturist III, Brookside Gardens
Subject: Master Plan for Brookside Gardens

Requested Board Actions:

1. Hear public testimony about the Staff Draft Brookside Gardens Master Plan
2. Approve the Staff Draft Master Plan for Brookside Gardens.

Overview

The Master Plan for Brookside Gardens was initiated by staff to articulate the need for a renewed facility to meet the needs of present and future visitors. The Plan creates a timeline to guide our work, including prioritizing essential maintenance, planning renovations to existing structures, and anticipating the development of new amenities and facilities.

Brookside Gardens is a unique facility of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, a “living museum” with a dynamic collection of plants arranged in an artfully designed landscape. Our mission to promote the art of gardening and science of horticulture inspires our visitors to not only enjoy the gardens during their visit, but to re-create their own visions of beauty at home.

Our most frequent users are our closest neighbors, who enjoy the Gardens on a daily basis for relaxation and rejuvenation. As the Wheaton community enters a period of county-supported redevelopment, the Gardens should become a cornerstone of the renewal efforts. For county residents, the Gardens are known as a site for not only beautiful gardens, but stimulating educational programming. Within the region, Brookside Gardens has become renowned for its special events, including the summer Butterfly Show and winter Garden of Lights.

Background:

Since November 2000, a staff committee has worked closely with the firm EDAW, Inc., to develop the Plan. An integral part of the planning process was to solicit input and feedback from not only Brookside Gardens and Commission staff, but from our community of users, including volunteers, neighbors, Friends of Brookside Gardens, and peer professionals in related horticultural, educational, public service and cultural arts fields. To this end, a series of three public meetings were held to invite the scrutiny of the Garden's most frequent users. These meetings were held in January, March and May 2001. A successful effort was made to solicit input from Commission experts in planning, safety, and natural resources management.

The staff draft was presented to the Planning Board on October 18, 2001. A public hearing occurred on November 15, 2001. Two work sessions were held with the Planning Board, on December 13, 2001 and April 18, 2002. While the Board generally favored the vision of the Plan, three issues were not resolved: the overall cost of the plan and feasibility of funding, a desire to incorporate more garden renovations earlier in the plan, and a concern over the viability of the Event House. Staff initiated a new contract with EDAW in July 2004 to revise the staff draft Master Plan to address the Planning Board's concerns. While the majority of the Plan remains unchanged from the original 2001 document, there are several changes, as well as a significant re-ordering of the implementation plan.

An informal public meeting was held on December 4, 2004 to gather feedback from the community. Direct mail notices were sent to approximately 800 members of the Friends of Brookside Gardens and 120 neighborhood associations. E-mail notifications were sent to Brookside Gardens volunteers and *Xperience* registrants. Press releases to the media were distributed by Brookside Gardens and the Community Relations Office. The response from those attending the public meeting was positive and supportive, with some disagreement over the value of proposed future food services at the Gardens.

A third work session was held with the Planning Board on January 6, 2005. The revisions to the Plan were found to be responsive, appropriate and acceptable to the Board. But, since three years had elapsed since the previous public hearing, it was recommended that the plan once more be made available for official public review prior to Board approval. A public hearing date was set for March 3, 2005.

Summary of the Changes to Staff Draft of 2001

Change 1: Modifications to the Visitors Center to accommodate Rental Functions

In the 2001 Plan, staff proposed that the footprint of the existing Conservatory at 1500 Glenallan Avenue be re-used as the basis of a new Event House to accommodate Garden and Commission events, rentals, and community events. The concept of the Event House was not favored by the Planning Board. In the 2004 Plan, it is proposed that the functions of the Event House be absorbed by the existing Visitors Center.

Change 2: Creation of Tent Terraces adjacent to Visitors Center

To accommodate outdoor events and ceremonies, the 2004 Plan includes the creation of two Tent Terraces adjacent to the Visitors Center Auditorium. The Tent Terraces are intended to provide an outdoor venue for events, but with low-impact hardscaping features to minimize effect on the landscape. The Tent Terraces will be accessed by a new service road, a larger paved patio for service use, and new accessible pathway connecting the Visitors Center to the Azalea Garden.

Change 3: Creation of New Native Wetland Garden on the former Conservatory Site

After the new Conservatory is built adjacent the Visitors Center, the old Conservatory will be demolished. This portion of the Garden is located on a 100-year flood plain, is adjacent to the Brookside Nature Center, and is the terminus of formal water features running from the Visitors Center down the hill. The Native Wetland Garden gives the opportunity to develop a new garden feature with great design and interpretive possibilities, as well as creating a graceful transition from formal water gardens to the informal wetland garden to the natural wetland that form the perimeter of the Gardens.

To make best use of the existing utilities on that site, a Garden House will be built. This structure will offer shelter, orientation, restrooms, and storage. Additionally, a small café is proposed, to meet demands from the public for food service. Adjacent to the café, a picnic lawn is proposed, for school groups or others who bring their own food. Although current policy prohibits food at the Gardens, except for organized events with catered food, repeated requests from visitors make us ready to entertain the possibility to change this policy in the future.

Change 4: Parking: The 2004 plan has a total of 300 parking spaces, which is a net gain of 119 spaces. This total is 25 fewer parking spaces than the 2001 plan, due to the revised use of the old Conservatory site as the new Native Wetland Garden.

Change 5: Phasing

In accordance with the Planning Board's request, the emphasis in the implementation plan has shifted to focus on renovations first and new construction second. In particular, more garden improvements have been included in earlier phases. Major new construction projects, like the Visitors Center Addition, New Conservatory, and Native Wetland Garden are in the final phases of the implementation plan. Additionally, the number of phases has been increased to make initial projects smaller in scale and easier to fund and implement.