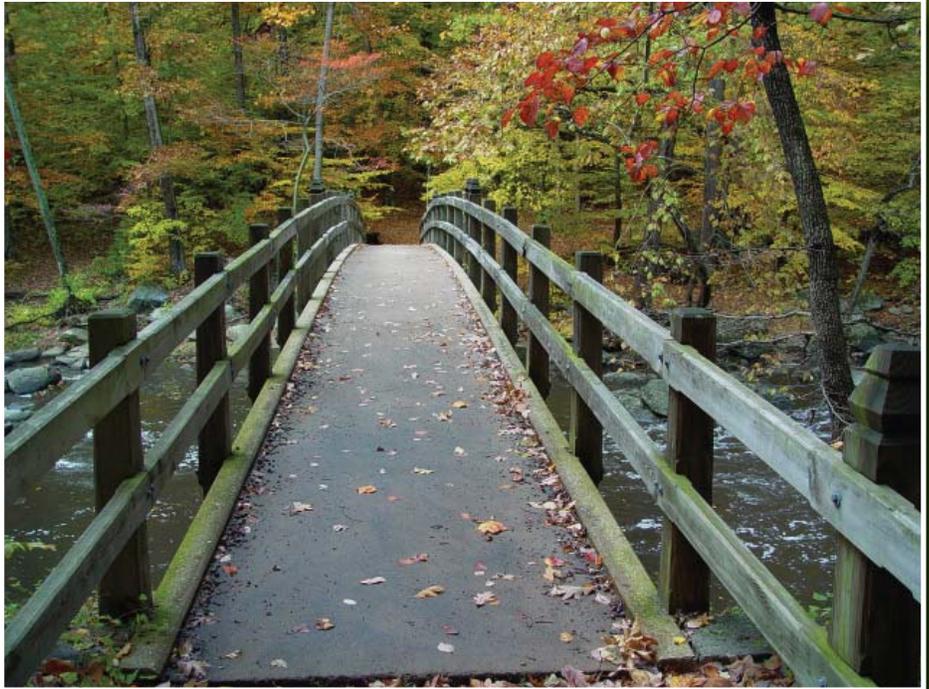




Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway



How to Comment on This Plan:

Comments on the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement, Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway* are welcome and will be accepted for 60 days following publication of notification in the *Federal Register*. You can submit your comments via mail or electronically.

Send written comments to:

National Park Service, Rock Creek Park
Superintendent
3545 Williamsburg Lane NW
Washington, D.C. 20008-1207

You may comment via e-mail by sending comments to: rocr_superintendent@nps.gov

Complete, electronic versions of the *Final General Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement, Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway* and its 26-page summary can be reviewed and downloaded as PDF-format files from links at the National Park Service's Rock Creek Park Internet site at:

<http://www.nps.gov/rocr/pphtml/documents.html>

There also is a link at this location through which you can provide comments electronically.

Regardless of how you comment, please include your name and street address with your message. Please submit electronic comments as a text file, avoiding the use of special characters or any form of encryption.

It is National Park Service practice to make comments, including names and addresses of respondents, available for public review. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. However, we will not consider anonymous comments. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety.

Final
General Management Plan
Environmental Impact Statement

**Rock Creek Park and the
Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway**

Washington, D.C.

Four alternatives were identified for the management of Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway.

Alternative A: Improved Management of Established Park Uses, is the NPS' preferred alternative. It would improve visitor safety, better control traffic volumes and speeds through the park, enhance interpretation and education opportunities, and improve the use of park resources, especially cultural resources. It would retain the current scope of visitor uses.

Alternative B: Continue Current Management/No Action, would continue the current management approach into the future.

Alternative C: Nonmotorized Recreation Emphasis, would permanently eliminate automobile traffic along three segments of Beach Drive, and better control traffic volumes and speeds elsewhere. Management of resources other than traffic would be the same as in Alternative A.

Alternative D: Mid-Weekday Recreation Enhancement, would eliminate automobile traffic along three segments of Beach Drive from 9:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. each weekday. Management of resources other than traffic would be the same as in Alternative A. This would be the environmentally preferred alternative.

Alternatives A, C, and D would improve management of the resources of the park and parkway relative to Alternative B. Impact topics that would experience major improvements would include native wildlife, historic structures and cultural landscapes, and visitor safety. Major adverse effects on the existing pattern of park use of automobile travel along the length of Beach Drive would occur with Alternative C.

Alternative A, the NPS' preferred alternative, would not impair park resources or values. As a result, it would not result in a violation of the Organic Act.

For more information concerning this plan, contact:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

This general management plan and environmental impact statement is the basic guidance document for managing Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. The purposes of this plan are to specify resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved in the park and parkway, and to provide the foundation for decision-making and preparation of more specific resource plans regarding the management of the park and parkway.

This document consists of two volumes.

Volume 1 is the general management plan and environmental impact statement. It describes the purpose and need for general management planning; identifies the alternatives for managing the park and parkway; summarizes the existing natural resources, cultural resources, and visitor and community values that could be affected by the management plan; and evaluates the effects of each of the alternatives on these resources and values.

Volume 2 provides the public comments and National Park Service (NPS) responses regarding the draft environmental impact statement that were received from the public between the publication of a notice of availability on March 14, 2003 and closure of the comment period on July 15, 2003.

The final general management plan will be the first comprehensive plan prepared for Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway by the National Park Service. When completed, it will represent the shared vision of the National Park Service and the public on how the park and parkway will be used and managed in future years. This plan represents the results of a planning process that began in 1996. This plan complies with applicable NPS planning guidance, including *Management Policies 2001* (NPS 2000a) and *Director's Order #12 and Handbook: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision Making* (NPS 2001a).

The area covered by this plan includes the 1,754 acres administered by the National Park Service in the Rock Creek valley from the Maryland state line south to the National Zoo, the 2-mile-long Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway from the National Zoo to Virginia Avenue, lands along selected tributaries of Rock Creek, and roadways that are associated with these areas.

A pivotal management issue to be resolved by this plan involves the use of park roads. This issue includes determining the level of nonrecreational traffic in Rock Creek Park and the degree to which park values would be affected by such use. The other two key management issues include the currently limited ability to provide orientation, interpretation, and education services to visitors in the park, and the problems that park administrative and operation activities encounter at their present locations in historic structures.

These key management issues are summarized in three questions, called decision points. The decision points helped define the management alternatives that are described and evaluated in this final general management plan. The decision points ask

how should traffic be managed in Rock Creek Park and on the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway?

what are the most appropriate levels of service and locations for visitor interpretation and education in the park?

what are the most appropriate locations to support administration and operations functions with respect to minimizing resource disturbance?

Current management practices include closing portions of Beach Drive and other park roads to motorized vehicles on weekends and holidays. These closures provide outstanding recreation opportunities that are unmatched in the District of Columbia, and are very popular with park visitors. Therefore, all of the alternatives for future management of the park will continue the practice of weekend and holiday road closures.

As with all NPS units, management of the park and parkway is guided by numerous congressional acts, executive orders, and NPS policies. In addition to the approaches contained in the alternatives in this final general management plan, the National Park Service strives to implement all of these legislative, executive, and policy requirements in the park and parkway. The section “Servicewide Policies and Mandates” identifies the optimum conditions that the National Park Service will work to attain regardless of the alternative that is selected, and the types of actions the National Park Service will take to achieve those optimum conditions.

Specific resources and values, called impact topics, were used to focus the planning process and the assessment of the alternatives’ consequences. Four criteria were used to determine the impact topics. They included resources cited in the establishing legislation for the park or the parkway, resources critical to maintaining the significance and character of the park, resources recognized as important by laws or regulations, and resources of concern to the public, as expressed during scoping. Impact topics were organized into the following three categories:

- natural resources, including air quality, Rock Creek and its tributaries, wetlands and floodplains, deciduous forests, protected and rare species, and other native wildlife

- cultural resources, including archeological resources, historic structures, and cultural landscapes

- visitor and community values, including traditional park character and visitor experience, public health and safety, regional and local transportation, and community character

Four alternatives were developed to provide different approaches for addressing the decision points. To design the four alternatives, the National Park Service first conducted public scoping, and then screened a larger number of alternatives, refining them based on public input. Following the general definition of the alternatives, the National Park Service identified management prescriptions that could be applicable to implementing the alternatives.

The management prescriptions identify how various parts of the park and parkway would be managed. Each prescription is defined in this general management plan based on desired visitor experiences and resource conditions, and the kinds of activities or facilities within the prescription that would achieve the targeted conditions. The management prescriptions were then mapped to specific areas of the park to define the details of the four alternatives.

Twelve management prescriptions define all of the target visitor experiences and resource conditions that could occur under the four alternatives for Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. Each alternative is a combination of several management prescriptions. None

of the alternatives would use all of the prescriptions, and the locations where some of the prescriptions would be applied vary among alternatives.

Consistent with the high level of concern expressed in scoping about the use of roadways, seven of the prescriptions apply to roads. The others emphasize desired conditions and visitor experiences for forests, cultural resources, recreation areas, visitor facilities, and administration and operations areas.

DESCRIPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVES

Four alternatives were identified for the management of Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. The key features of the alternatives include the following.

Alternative A: Improved Management of Established Park Uses. Alternative A is the NPS' preferred alternative. It would improve visitor safety, better control traffic volumes and speeds through the park, enhance interpretation and education opportunities, and improve the use of park resources, especially cultural resources. It generally would retain the current scope of visitor uses.

Alternative A would improve traffic management within the park and parkway. The existing park roadway system would be retained and nonrecreational through-traffic would be accommodated. However, to improve visitor safety and the quality of the visitor's experience, traffic-calming devices such as speed tables would be installed on Beach Drive to reduce volumes and speeds compared to those that would occur if current management were continued (Alternative B). Alternative A also would include the following actions.

- Upgrade some trails, rehabilitate deteriorating segments, and construct up to 1.75 miles of new trail.

- Rehabilitate the Peirce Mill complex to focus on the history of milling and land use in the area. This would expand on the already in progress rehabilitation of the Peirce Barn, which serves as a visitor contact point with exhibits on the history of the Peirce estate and milling in the Rock Creek valley.

- Move the park administrative offices out of the Peirce-Klinge Mansion at Linnaean Hill to commercial office space outside the park, or to other office space, potentially including a new office facility constructed within the park. The park maintenance yard was evaluated as a representative site for this action.

- Rehabilitate the Linnaean Hill complex for adaptive use compatible with park values.

- Move the U.S. Park Police substation out of the Lodge House on Beach Drive at Joyce Road to commercial space outside the park, or to other space, potentially including a new park police substation constructed within the park. A site near the existing U.S. Park Police H-3 stables was evaluated as a representative site for this action.

- Convert the Lodge House to a visitor contact station to provide park orientation, information, and interpretation.

- Rehabilitate and expand the nature center and upgrade the planetarium to improve effectiveness of public programs.

Alternative B: Continue Current Management/No Action. Alternative B would continue the current management pattern into the future. It represents the "no action alternative" required by

the Council on Environmental Quality (1978) guidelines for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act and *Director's Order #12 and Handbook: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision Making* (NPS 2001a).

Under Alternative B, Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway would be maintained as they have evolved thus far. There would not be any major changes in resources management, visitor programs, or facilities beyond regular maintenance. The current park road system would be retained and existing traffic management would continue.

Alternative C: Nonmotorized Recreation Emphasis. Alternative C would address comments by members of the public who want to promote nonmotorized recreation. Alternative C would eliminate traffic in much of the northern part of the park by closing three sections of Beach Drive to automobiles. These would be the same three segments that currently are closed on weekends. It also would implement traffic-reducing and traffic-calming measures on roads in the southern portion of the park and on the parkway. The Alternative C management proposals for resources other than traffic would be the same as those listed above for Alternative A.

The intent of closing the road along portions of the Rock Creek valley floor would be to manage this area as a quiet refuge from urban automobile traffic and to promote nonmotorized recreation throughout the week. This section of the park would become a destination for nonmotorized activities, rather than a through drive. Alternative C also would convert the road into a paved trail through the Rock Creek valley and connecting to the Potomac River, as envisioned in regional bicycle plans.

Alternative D: Mid-Weekday Recreation Enhancement. Alternative D is the environmentally preferred alternative. Alternative D was developed in response to a letter sent to the National Park Service by the Mayor of the District of Columbia. The mayor suggested “implementing weekday vehicular traffic restrictions on sections of upper Beach Drive in non-rush-hour periods.”

On weekdays, Alternative D would close three segments of Beach Drive in the northern portion of the park to motorized vehicles for a 6-hour period, from 9:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. These would be the same segments that currently are closed on weekends. For the other 18 hours of each weekday, including both rush-hour periods, traffic management would be similar to Alternative B, although traffic-calming measures like those in Alternative A would be used to reduce volumes and speeds. Alternative D would manage resources other than traffic in the same manner as presented above for Alternative A.

Alternative D was intended as a compromise between traffic and nonmotorized recreation. During rush-hour periods, the alternative would attempt to facilitate traffic flows and minimize the diversion of rush-hour traffic from the park into nearby neighborhoods. Between rush-hour periods on weekdays, it would promote nonmotorized recreation and provide a quiet refuge from the surrounding urban area.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The environmental impact statement portion of this plan describes the affected environment of the park and parkway in terms of 12 impact topics. The environmental consequences section describes the effects of each alternative on each impact topic.

Determining environmental consequences first included identifying the regulations and policies that were applicable to the impact topic, and then defining the methods that were used to conduct the analysis. This included defining relative terms such as “minor” or “major” effects for the impact topic and establishing timeframes for long-term and short-term effects. The analysis was then performed both for the park and parkway and in a more regional context to determine cumulative impacts. Most analyses involved comparing conditions that would occur with changes in management (Alternatives A, C, and D, commonly called the “action alternatives”) to conditions that would occur if current management practices continued (Alternative B, the “no action alternative”).

The analysis of environmental consequences found that all four alternatives would have fairly similar effects on air quality, the water quality and hydrology of Rock Creek and its tributaries, wetlands and floodplains, deciduous forests, and protected and rare species. These findings would be expected, based both on the NPS’ mandate to protect these resource and the development of the alternatives from decision points that focus on traffic management, visitor interpretation and education, and effective administration and operations.

Some differences to natural resources would occur. However, except for roadkill reductions that would occur with all of the action alternatives, none of the differences to natural resources among the alternatives would be major.

In the area of traditional park character and visitor experience, the improved education and interpretation facilities included in Alternatives A, C, and D would provide greater opportunities for the public to learn about and experience the park’s natural and cultural resources, compared to Alternative B. The action alternatives would also enhance the efficiency of park administration and improve police services.

The traffic management measures of all three action alternatives would produce major improvements in visitor safety. Most of the improvements would be associated with the implementation of engineered traffic-calming devices, such as speed tables on Beach Drive, which would reduce vehicle speeds and the associated frequency and severity of accidents.

The greatest benefits on nonmotorized recreation would be associated with Alternative C. However, Alternative C would eliminate the current practice of automobile travel along the length of Beach Drive, including the gorge area. This would result in a major adverse effect on the existing pattern of park use and visitor experience.

Historic park roads are considered a cultural resource. By closing them to motorized traffic, Alternative C would modify some of the design features that define their significance.

Cultural resources would be the only impact topic where one or more of the alternatives could cause irreversible and irretrievable losses of resources. Under the three action alternatives, the disturbance of sites in association with new construction could result in some irreversible and irretrievable loss of archeological or historic resources.

For Alternatives A, C, and D, the effects on traditional park character and visitor experience, regional and local transportation during rush hours, and community characteristics that are associated with traffic levels were evaluated based on improvements or declines in levels of service relative to Alternative B in the year 2020.

Alternatives A and D would produce 2020 rush-hour conditions similar (no differences in levels of service) to those in Alternative B. This result was expected, because the focus of Alternative A is on reducing traffic speeds in the park and Alternative D is designed to minimize effects both on rush-hour traffic and neighborhoods.

Within the park, improvements in levels of service from Alternative C would be noticeable to major. Effects would include the elimination of automobile traffic on most of Beach Drive north of Broad Branch Road with Alternative C. This alternative would produce noticeable (change of one level of service) improvements in traffic along most of the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway.

Eight road segments outside the park would have benefits on traffic and community character under Alternative C associated with improved levels of service, while nine road segments would have decreased levels of service with associated adverse effects on traffic and community character. There would not be a disproportionate routing of traffic to disadvantaged areas or ethnic neighborhoods.

During the middle part of workdays, Alternatives C and D would have similar effects, diverting traffic that would use park roads under Alternative B onto nearby city streets. However, nearby streets and intersections would be operating well below their capacities during the mid-day period, even in the year 2020. While the diverted mid-day traffic would be perceptible on some city streets, it would not cause any changes in levels of service or in traffic-related community character.

With regard to the first decision point, Alternatives A, C, and D would substantially reduce automobile traffic speeds and/or volumes in the park compared to Alternative B.

Alternative A would accomplish this by implementing traffic-calming measures while maintaining the roads as part of the city's transportation system on weekdays.

Alternative C would permanently remove some segments of Beach Drive from the city's motorized vehicle network, and would implement traffic-reducing and traffic-calming measures in other areas.

Alternative D would implement traffic-calming measures, and would also close sections of Beach Drive to motorized traffic during the middle part of each weekday.

Regarding the second decision point, the levels of service for visitor interpretation and education would be equally improved under the identical measures of Alternatives A, C, and D. This would be accomplished by moving administrative and operations functions out of historic buildings and by rehabilitating these and other historic and educational structures. For the third decision point, Alternatives A, C, and D would provide the same levels of improvements compared to Alternative B by moving administration and operations functions into modern facilities.

Alternative D is the environmentally preferred alternative for managing Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. Alternative D would best satisfy the six national environmental goals at a relatively high level.

Alternatives A, C, and D would not result in impairment of any natural or cultural resources in Rock Creek Park and the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway.