

**Greenbelt Forest Preserve Advisory Board
Report to City Council**

Report #2020-03

Subject: Zoning for the Greenbelt Forest Preserve

Date: March 12, 2020

1. Recommendation

Based on the protection that the Greenbelt city code gives to the Forest Preserve, the Forest Preserve Advisory Board recommends that the city work with the county to have the Forest Preserve re-zoned as Reserved Open Space (ROS). In municipalities adjacent to Greenbelt, a wide range of green space is zoned as Reserved Open Space, including forests and also parks with mowed lawns, paved paths, and athletic fields. Green space is valued in Greenbelt, which draws attention to the incongruity of Greenbelt's zoning compared with how green space is zoned in neighboring towns. The Forest Preserve Advisory Board also believes that the forest in two additional city-owned tracts is worthy of Reserved Open Space zoning: Greenbrier Park (next to Eleanor Roosevelt High School) and Schrom Hills Park.

2. "Reserved Open Space" Defined

On October 23, 2018, the county council approved a rewrite of the county's zoning ordinance, and in that rewrite, the purpose of the Reserved Open Space zone was stated:¹

The purposes of the Reserved Open Space (ROS) are to encourage the preservation of large areas of agriculture, trees, and open spaces; to protect scenic and environmentally-sensitive areas; to ensure the retention of certain areas for nonintensive, active, or passive recreation uses; and to provide for a limited range of public, recreational, and agricultural uses. The use of the ROS Zone is intended to facilitate the permanent maintenance of certain areas of the County, both publicly and privately owned, in an undeveloped state.

This language from 2018 is almost word-for-word the same as the zoning ordinance's definition of Reserved Open Space that has been in-force since the county council created this zoning category in 1994. The county's zoning map gives a rather broad interpretation to Reserved Open Space that includes nature preserves, forests, athletic fields, paved tennis courts, recreation centers, and the parking lots that serve them.

The county considers Reserved Open Space to be "undeveloped" land while the county uses other zoning categories for land that is available for "low density" development. An example of a low-density-development zone is "Open Space" (OS). This zone allows subdivisions with lots at

¹ Quoted text is from Section 27-4201(b) of the document "Part 27-4 Zone and Zone Regulations" (PG County, 2018). Essentially identical language existed in the county's zoning ordinance prior to the 2018 rewrite and as of February 2020 can still be located in the Prince George's County code, Section 27-424.05(a), https://library.municode.com/md/prince_george%27s_county/codes/code_of_ordinances .

least 5 acres big. The 2018 zoning rewrite gave this 5-acre-lot zone a new name of "Agriculture and Preservation" (AG) while retaining the idea that land in this zone is available for "low density and development intensity" [sic] and for "economic use" that includes "residential estates." ²

Zoning has a limited but important purpose. While zoning can change from time to time, it is always meant to reflect the highest-density construction possible on a particular land parcel given the currently-in-force county master plan, applicable local planning documents, and any exceptions approved by the county zoning authority. The county's zoning map serves as a "cheat sheet" so that developers, politicians, and residents can quickly remind themselves of what, if any, further development is conceivable on any given parcel at the present time. The county applies zoning to government land (local, county, state, and federal). Such zoning lacks the compulsory force that zoning has on private land. The zoning of government-owned land nonetheless serves to announce the maximum level of development that is appropriate for that land in light of currently-in-force planning documents.

3. Map of "Reserved Open Space" in or near Greenbelt

The map that accompanies this report shows in light green the land that is currently zoned Reserved Open Space in Greenbelt and neighboring towns. Dark green indicates land in Greenbelt that the Forest Preserve Advisory Board recommends as Reserved Open Space but that is currently zoned otherwise.

The map shows that the county, state, and federal government have all worked hard to purchase and preserve green space along stream valleys in the Greenbelt area, including along Paint Branch, Indian Creek, Still Creek, and the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River. The land that the Forest Preserve Advisory Board recommends as Reserved Open Space in Greenbelt contributes to this sort of ecological preservation. The North Woods and Hamilton Woods tracts of the Forest Preserve contain Goddard Branch, which flows into Beaverdam Creek and from there into Indian Creek. Greenbrier Park contains a water feature that flows into Goddard Branch and the Boxwood tract of the Forest Preserve contains a water feature that flows into Indian Creek. The Sunrise tract of the Forest Preserve and Schrom Hills Park contain the main tributary to Still Creek.

4. Current Zoning in Greenbelt

The following table lists the current zoning of the five tracts of the Greenbelt Forest Preserve and two other high-quality forested tracts that the Forest Preserve Advisory Board has identified.

² Quote from 2018 zoning rewrite taken from Section 27-4201(c) of PG County (2018). Prior to the 2018 zoning rewrite, see the zoning ordinance, Section 22-444 (b) (6a).

Table 1. Land in Greenbelt that appears to qualify as Reserved Open Space (ROS)

Location	Current Zoning and Acreage ^a
North Woods tract, Forest Preserve	R-R (102.6 acres) O-S (52.9 acres)
South Woods tract, Forest Preserve	O-S (88 acres)
Boxwood tract, Forest Preserve	O-S (8.8 acres)
Belle Point tract, Forest Preserve	O-S (12.9 acres)
Sunrise tract, Forest Preserve	R-18C (10.0 acres) R-R (0.6 acres)
Greenbrier Park next to Eleanor Roosevelt High School	R-18 (7.0 acres)
Schrom Hills Park	O-S (40.5 acres) R-R (1.2 acres) R-T (0.6 acres)

^a Multifamily Medium Density Residential-Commercial (R-18C), Multifamily Medium Density Residential (R-18), Rural Residential (R-R), Townhouse (R-T), One-family Detached, and Open Space (O-S).

Reserved Open Space in Greenbelt is currently limited to the following land:

- State conservation land: A 75.5-acre parcel of forest and wetlands along Indian Creek south of the Greenbelt Metro station, established by the Greenbelt Metro Sector Plan and Sectional Map Amendment (MNCPPC 2013).
- Two parcels of PG County Board of Education land: A 16-acre parcel that contains forest and the city-maintained Mandan Park south of Greenbelt Road; and a 10-acre parcel of forest that contains a fitness trail north of Greenbelt Road and adjacent to NASA Goddard.
- National Park Service land: Greenbelt Park and the Baltimore Washington Parkway.³

5. Greenbelt's Zoning History

For reasons related to Greenbelt's history as a planned community, Greenbelt's municipal government has greater responsibility over its parkland and recreation programming than do neighboring municipalities. To a large degree, Greenbelt is responsible for purchasing parkland, maintaining parks and forests, and developing planning documents that govern green space within city limits. Neighboring towns merely advise the county government on such green-space issues within their boundaries. The county government does hold zoning authority over Greenbelt, which requires the city government to call on the county for redress when zoning becomes out of sync with Greenbelt's own vision for its future.

³ The National Park Service's Baltimore Washington Parkway was zoned Reserved Open Space in 1998 although pgatlas.com today does not show the zoning of roads. See amendment #2 of MNCPPC (2013).

When Greenbelt was established during the New Deal, the federal government envisioned that the town would be surrounded in perpetuity by a belt of green and that the town's center would feature a large block of recreation space, parkland, and forest centered on Greenbelt Lake. In the 1950s, the federal agency that inherited responsibility for Greenbelt lacked enthusiasm for the original plan and sold off most of the town's forestland to developers. A few years later, the precursor to Greenbelt Homes Inc. sold much of the remaining belt of green to developers.

Greenbelt residents never forgot the original vision for Greenbelt. Beginning in the 1960s, the city council and Greenbelt residents began the long-term project of reclaiming the town's green space. In 2007, this effort culminated in the strong environmental protections for the Forest Preserve that were enshrining in the Greenbelt City code. The city clearly intends to continue being a good steward, as evidenced by the town's 2019 master plan for parkland (*Recreation and Park Facilities Master Plan*) and in the 2019 update to the management guidelines for the Forest Preserve (*Forest Preserve Stewardship Guidelines*).

Deviating from this pro-conservation story is the fact that Reserved Open Space zoning has not yet been applied to the town's large tracts of green space. For example, the Sunrise tract of the Forest Preserve and portions of nearby Schrom Hills Park retain the town-house zoning or medium-density-residential zoning that existed prior to the city purchasing the land. For another thing, the Greenbelt City Council in 1998 declined the county's invitation to have green space in town rezoned as Reserved Open Space. In so doing, the city council rejected the Greenbelt planning department's recommendation that was in favor of Reserved Open Space zoning.⁴ As a result, the county excluded Greenbelt's city-owned land when it applied, in 1998, the Reserved Open Space zone to thousands of acres of public parks, forest, athletic fields, and other green space.

On October 23, 2018, the county council approved a new zoning ordinance that retains the Reserved Open Space (ROS) zone for undeveloped land and recreation land. Also in October 2018, the county began work on a "Countywide Sectional Map Amendment" (CMA), a bill to revise the county's zoning map to reflect the newly approved zoning categories. By December 2019, the county allowed the public to see a draft map of the county zones that would occur once the county council approves the pending Map Amendment in 2020. This information was disseminated in various ways including via an online "swipe tool."⁵

As of early March 2020, the Countywide Sectional Map Amendment does not show any parcels in Greenbelt being added or removed from the Reserve Open Space zone. Nonetheless, there may still be time for the Greenbelt city council to request that parcels in Greenbelt be

⁴ Minute of 26 Jan 1988 Greenbelt city council meeting; See also *Greenbelt News Review* (5 Feb 1998).

⁵ See "Proposed Zoning Comparison Tool", <http://zoningpgc.pgplanning.com/zoning-swipe-tool/>.

zoned Reserved Open Space as part of this Map Amendment. The Forest Preserve Advisory Board recommends that the city council work toward having Reserve Open Space zoning for all tracts of the Greenbelt Forest Preserve whether or not this rezoning can occur within this Countywide Sectional Map Amendment.

References

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- City of Greenbelt, Jan. 2019: *Recreation and Park Facilities Master Plan*. 143 pp. Available online at <https://www.greenbeltmd.gov/>.
- County Council of Prince George County sitting as the District [zoning] Council, 1994: An ordinance for the purpose of creating a Reserved Open Space (ROS) zone. Council Bill CB-73-1994. Introduced 27 September 1994 by Council Member Del Giudice. Enacted 25 October 1994. Taking effect 31 December 1994.
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- GIS Open Data Portal. website. <https://gisdata.pgplanning.org/opendata/>. This data was used in QGIS to create the map that accompanies this report. The data can also be displayed using the online GIS at <https://pgatlas.com/>.
- Greenbelt City Council, 26 Jan 1988: Minutes of City Council meeting. Available online at <https://www.greenbeltmd.gov/>.
- MNCPPC, March 2013: *Approved Greenbelt Metro Area and MD 193 Corridor Plan and Sectional Map Amendment*. MNCPPC Prince George's County Planning Department. 440 pp. Available online at http://mncppcapps.org/planning/publications/BookDetail.cfm?item_id=278.
- MNCPPC, May 1998: Approved Countywide Map Amendment (CMA) for the Reserved Open Space (ROS) Zone in Prince George's County. Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. 84 pp. Available online at <http://www.mncppcapps.org/planning/Publications/PDFs/115/Approved%20Countywide%20Map%20Amendment%20for%20the%20Reserved%20Open%20Space%20Zone%20in%20Prince%20Georges%20County%20May%201998.pdf>. The CMA was initiated by Council Resolution CR-73-1994, and the CMA was approved by Council Resolution CR-42-1998.
- Oberg, D., 5 Feb 1998: Council opposes rezoning parks as open space. *Greenbelt News Review*, page 1.
- Prince George's County, 2020: Code of Ordinances. Available online at https://library.municode.com/md/prince_george%27s_county/codes/code_of_ordinances. The "county code" that includes the definitions of zoning categories that are currently in force as of March 2020 and that are expected to be superseded later in 2020 by the new zoning ordinance approved by the county council on October 23, 2018.
- Prince George's County, 2018: Part 27-4 Zone and Zone Regulations. Available online at <https://princegeorgescountymd.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=7137958&GUID=109F2762-E70F-45F4-85A3-F631FE6C0ECE>. To find this document in early 2020, go to the county's zoning rewrite portal (<https://pgccouncil.us/589/Zoning-Ordinance-Rewrite-Portal>) and click on CB-013-2018 to go to the legislative history of the zoning rewrite bill (<https://princegeorgescountymd.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3482803&GUID=0ABC9FC5-E9D8-4850-A8A5-3C1CDC0D6CE3&Options=ID%7CText%7C&Search=>). This document describes the new zoning categories.