

## Article

# Making Space: A New Way for Community Engagement in the Urban Planning Process

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**Abstract:** The current research shifts from the tradition of researcher-generated and directed community study and explores a new model for data collection based on citizen-directed participation and restorative economies. This is important because the scholarship of urban planning is often separated from the practice, in which scholars undertake the bulk of the academic research and professional planners work in the field, engaging with the community and creating and implementing plans around local issues and opportunities. While urban planning trends support diverse, equitable, and inclusive engagement in visioning and shaping local development, few operationalized examples exist for citizen-led scholarship with local community application. The work outlined herein explicitly partners with local residents to collect data on both community and academic interests, and it also promotes a citizen sense of agency. Community leaders worked with the local public university to design and implement a study to solicit park use ideas and visions among three groups: youth; adults; and returning citizens. Results identify an overall theme of a lack of engagement with the community, relative to other local parks, and they also highlight four common areas of thought between the three populations—concerns about safety among park users, functional use of park space, demand for widespread park access, and desire for natural environment conservation. This work represents a viable local engagement approach including demonstrated investment in a local community and resultant increased trust; also, this work contributes valuable new knowledge about local history and the use of a community resource to inform land use planning and policy around community sustainability.



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## 1. Introduction

Planning theories describing city governance have struggled to articulate the precise role of planners and urban regimes in shaping communities: from expert technicians creating plans and identifying alternatives (Radical–Comprehensive); to exchangers of knowledge recognizing the value of participation (Transactive); to advocates addressing inequities (Advocacy, Equity); to the acknowledgement of the differences in knowledge acquisition (Humanist–Phenomenological). Increasing participation is a critical element of this evolving discourse. Yet even as planners come to understand the value of very local knowledge and engagement in planning and policymaking, local resident participation is often limited to tokenism in the form of consultation or partnership. Rarely does it reach the top rung of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, ‘citizen control’, wherein a community develops its efficacy and power to govern a program, for example, or to negotiate conditions of change [1]. This is despite leading schools of thought that note that ‘ethical goals like social justice...require deliberate action on the field of urban planning’ [2] and call for strong public engagement and trust building [2,3]. Consequently, Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation reveals certain critical gaps that surface within urban planning.

First, the ladder tends to oversimplify participation by presenting a linear progression from manipulation to citizen power. In reality, participation is multifaceted, influenced by context, and can involve simultaneous aspects of tokenism and genuine empowerment [4]. Second, the emphasis on the symbolic and tokenistic rungs of the ladder points to a prevalent issue in participatory urban planning—the risk of superficial engagement. While communities may be involved symbolically, true empowerment necessitates a deeper involvement in decision-making processes [4].

Urban planning's classic tension around the gap between scholars, where planning theories appear crisp and focused, and practitioners, where theories are blurred [5], highlights the value of critically evaluating opportunities *in practice* to address theoretical implementation including, for example, increasing public participation. Bridging this gap requires acknowledging and addressing practices, ensuring that participation goes beyond mere symbolism to genuine influence. In the District of Columbia (DC), limited locally based forums operate to help residents shape their communities. The DC's unique status as the capital city of the United States adds complexity to its land use and urban planning governance. The federal influence, coupled with the local governance structures, necessitates a nuanced exploration of procedural theories. Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs), composed of locally elected representative Commissioners, support the work of District-appointed commissions and professional planners in advising the government on planning and policymaking issues [6]. Similarly local 'friends' groups support District parks and help maintain amenities such as trails. At the same time, deep variability in income and resources is likewise reflected in the variable understanding of planning issues and processes for effective participation. Local leaders including an ANC Commissioner and a Friends of Oxon Run Park president raised the idea of this research, which explores how a historically disenfranchised community can systematically document local voices to shape neighborhood visions within the official planning and policymaking discourse. In addition, it opens the door to understanding the extent of public participation, the role of advocacy, and the emphasis on equity in planning decisions.

Thus, this research has two goals. The first is to investigate an opportunity to partner with local leadership to undertake timely, relevant research. This involves articulating a mutually understood research objective, outlining responsibilities for the partnership, and exchanging knowledge to design and host focus groups. It also involves documenting this effort for its replicability. The second goal is to explore differences and similarities by subpopulation (youth, adult, and returning citizen) about the experience of and vision for the local park space.

### 1.1. Community Background

The District of Columbia (DC) has a history of displacement, partly as the result of gentrification including green infrastructure development. This has occurred mostly in low-income communities of color and has included the displacement of residents as well as businesses. A total of "20,000 black residents were displaced between 2000–2013" [7]. The physical changes to the Navy Yard area in DC (Ward 6 until January 2022 when, due to burgeoning, population portions were added to Ward 8, which had decreased in population size) both highlight neighborhood rebranding and economic development, as well as, a stunning change in demographics with an influx of affluent white households earning \$100,000 or more: the neighborhood experienced a 29% increase between 2006–2010 and a slightly slower 18% increase from 2011–2015 [8]. This global issue is critical in DC, where the impact seems especially pronounced and the opportunities to mitigate appear uncoordinated. At the same time that DC has been ranked as one of the most gentrified cities in the USA [9], the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) is a leader in green infrastructure and offers training and workforce development in this field, and graduate academic coursework includes practicums focused on local implications of land use development, including green infrastructure implementation.

Residents in some DC communities report feeling disenfranchised, marginalized, and excluded from planning processes [10]. These communities are often characterized by lower incomes, lower education levels, fewer employment opportunities, and higher numbers of racial minorities compared to the broader region. The neighborhood around Oxon Run Park in Ward 8, which its own leaders describe as ‘disfavored’, shares these concerns. Furthermore, they are concerned about the potential impacts of improving the Park on the surrounding neighborhood. Residents want to understand the planning process; they want to be heard and shape development; and they want opportunities to remain in their community over time as it changes, gaining amenities and benefiting from increasing property values.

This Park, as shown in Figure 1, comprises 106 acres transferred to the DC in 1971 from the formerly federally controlled Oxon Run Parkway. It is bounded by 13th St., Valley Ave., Livingston Rd., South Capitol St., 1st St., Wayne Pl., and Mississippi Ave, located entirely in Ward 8, across the Anacostia River. Ward 8 is characterized by low income (23% of the households fall below the poverty line, compared with 10% in DC as a whole); low educational attainment (18% of residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher compared with 60% for DC as a whole); and high levels of unemployment (16% unemployment compared with 7% for DC as a whole). Moreover, most Ward 8 residents are Black (92%, compared with 43% for DC) [11].

This area around the Park is facing significant changes over the next decade or so. The District Department of the Energy and Environment (DOEE) plans include reforestation, the installation of trash pickup sites, and the naturalization of the Oxon Run stream to restore natural hydrology, prevent erosion, and enhance wildlife habitat. Construction is slated for 2027 [12]. In March 2022, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser presented her FY2023 budget which includes \$2 million for an Oxon Run Regional Dog Park [13]. These proposals build on recent changes to the Park; in 2020, the DOEE completed the construction of a 2.65-megawatt (7000 panel) community solar farm on 15.4 acres of contaminated brownfield property in Oxon Run Park [14].



**Figure 1.** Map of Oxon Run Park. Map courtesy of the Ward 8 Woods Conservancy [15].

### 1.2. Project History

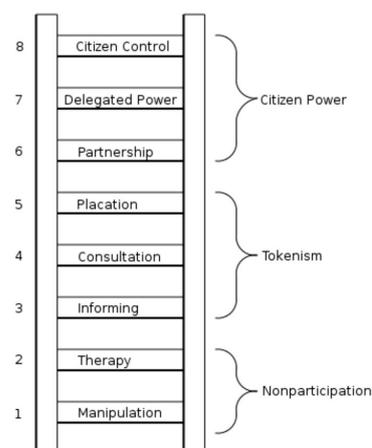
It was a concern about these upcoming changes that sparked the partnership between UDC and the Friends of Oxon Run (FOR). FOR leadership shared community concerns over development plans for the area, admitting that residents had little knowledge of nor agency to participate in local land use processes. In response, the Spring 2021 graduate-level Urban Land Use Planning (ULUP) course was organized to capture key stakeholder experiences of and visions for the Oxon Run Park. Students surveyed community elders for their

experiences in the Park; identified themes from the surveys and a subsequent community listening session held to gather additional perspectives; and prepared and presented a report to FOR leadership and the DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) staff that documented stakeholder experiences and provided overview technical information in response to issues raised in the surveys and session. This included brief primers on topics such as gentrification, park infrastructure, and citizen participation.

FOR reflected on the utility of this report and subsequently identified the desire for additional survey work to capture a broader range of neighborhood voices, acknowledging the diversity of residents in and around the Park. They considered their work to date activating the Park and reflected on the populations using the Park space, in a variety of sometimes competing ways. They reached out to partner with UDC on these research questions and outlined their goals—to capture the voices of youth, of the general adult population (not just the long-time residents and stakeholders who had been included in the original interviews), and of returning citizens. UDC was happy to work with FOR to identify tools for this, scope research, and undertake institutional review board approvals, as it implements the University’s Equity Imperative by engaging in urban research that strengthens links to our community and stakeholders [16]. UDC supported a citizen-controlled proposal, elevating the participation process to the higher rungs of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation.

## 2. Literature Review

Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, originally published in 1969, is still—more than 50 years later—regularly cited to illustrate traditional community engagement processes (Figure 2). Arnstein noted that most citizen (resident) involvement occurred in the lower rungs of her ladder—in the areas of nonparticipation and tokenism, which includes ‘informing’ and ‘consultation.’ The upper rungs, or levels, are defined as ‘partnership’, ‘delegation’, and ‘citizen control’, and are characterized as ‘citizen control’ levels of participation [1]. They involve not just including community representatives in the discussion around an already defined process, but facilitating the community identification, scoping, and addressing of issues, all with planning and policymaking expertise by professionals in service to this work. More recent work on community engagement in planning practice [17] underscores the tradition of inviting the community to participate well into the process, assuming the problem identification, scope, and process to address are already appropriate: *We’re making a cake; what kind of frosting do you want?* This analogy highlights the very limited, very focused opportunities available; moreover, it ignores “residents’... inherent wealth of creative ideas” [17] (p. 91).



**Figure 2.** Arnstein’s Ladder showing Degrees of Citizen Participation [18].

Citizen-controlled levels of participation are vital to the work of adding knowledge, or broadening the ways of knowing, of epistemology, in planning work. Broadening knowl-

edge sources means adding knowledge, including, in the field of planning, experiential knowledge. While we are missing this critical perspective in land use planning, research suggests that disfavored communities perceive planning, policy, and other decisions as originating fully outside their community [19]. The lived experience and the place attachment of residents can add valuable information to local planning processes and energize the community around change [20,21]. Further, meeting residents where they are and taking the time to understand their environment also empowers residents to fully engage in a way that transcends survey fatigue especially in disfavored communities [22].

Other recent research underscores the value of community participation to increase community support for a given development and vision, decrease critiques of development, and prevent conflicts [20], and notes that the conversation around participation has evolved from whether it should occur to the recognition that effective and thoughtful engagement is invaluable for decision making [23]. Similarly, planners and scholars seek ways to engage the local community around environmental amenities in part to address the ‘gentrification dynamics’ associated with the development of new parks or the redevelopment of existing ones [24–27]. One focus for improving engagement is how to constructively identify and encourage local participation in ways that elicit local knowledge and empower local communities.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Focus Group Rationale

Focus group methodology was selected to build on existing neighborhood group dynamics and promote conversation about key topics. Facilitated focus groups can encourage sharing information, building on comments, and fostering a robust conversation. They can be valuable as a tool to invite participation from both those who feel they have a great deal to share, as well as those who are more reticent but likely to align themselves with others’ comments [28–30]. In addition to facilitating broad participation and representing a tool to solicit information in a way that is equally accessible to various subpopulations, the data derived from a focus group methodology can be analyzed to uncover differences among user groups. This analysis between groups in a focus group study can identify valuable differences in experience and vision among subpopulations. In a diverse or changing community, this provides a fuller picture of the issues at hand; and virtual focus groups, considered more informal, may elicit higher show-up rates due to convenience, and richer participation than traditional methods [31] (pp. 161–163).

The demand for a broader base of knowledge and more inclusive participation is especially critical to the current efforts to provide local green space or open space to communities. There are no monolithic park users; well-planned urban parks may include basketball courts, nature trails, dog runs, community gardens, and public infrastructure such as bathrooms and recreational facilities. Even within the focus groups for this paper, three distinct groups were designed to provide a broad-strokes perspective. The subpopulation of returning citizens is dealing with other stressors that impact the nature of their responses. Lastly, the community members are voices that have long been in the background of Oxon Run Park. Even as we continue to learn how different subpopulations use park and open spaces, we know the benefits of nature to urban residents are widespread. Regular access to nature improves our mental health [32,33], reduces symptoms of ADD/ADHD in children [34,35], and links to decreased crime [36,37]; immersion in and even mere views of nature are associated with improved physical health [38–40]; natural light mitigates against shortsightedness [41]; and walking in nature results in greater attention and decreased blood flow to the subgenual prefrontal cortex—a calmer mind [42]. Buildings with accessible greenery and other biophilic features benefit from long-term reduced operating costs, productivity gains among workers, and rent premiums; and proximity to nature and open space increases property values [43].

Given this information, which is increasingly well known, residents around the Oxon Run Park are unsurprisingly both eager for safe, accessible access, and concerned about the

potential impacts of improving the Park. The installation of green infrastructure generally, including parks and park improvements, can result in raised property values, displaced residents and businesses, and the obliteration of local culture—a process that is known as eco-gentrification or environmental gentrification [44–48].

Thus, focus groups were identified as an appropriate approach to collect local perspectives more systematically. Because this methodology emphasizes the importance of engaging community members in the urban planning process and making them feel heard, it may yield two positive results: more inclusive and thorough planning outcomes; and trust between community members with different perspectives. By engaging community members directly in the process, urban planners can better understand the community's needs and preferences, community members can better understand each other's needs and preferences, and public agents and private citizens can work collaboratively to develop plans that reflect shared interests and outcomes [23]; local engagement is needed to accomplish local sustainability objectives [49]. Additionally, this kind of engagement can contribute to the community's sense of agency and ownership over their local space [50].

### *3.2. Coordination with Neighborhood*

The research team was sensitive to historical practices of tokenism in general and over-surveying specifically regarding this neighborhood. Thus, UDC researchers worked with FOR leaders to outline the steps of a best practices focus group methodology and to identify research tasks and responsibilities. UDC shared with FOR the mechanisms for successful focus groups, including a generally consistent meeting format and questions, neutrality in facilitation, and best practices for research with individuals. UDC and FOR together shaped the questions and outlined the format for the focus group discussions. FOR undertook advertising and the solicitation of participants. The community partner, FOR, was responsible for the recruitment of the focus group participants. FOR used several methods to contact potential participants including emails sent to their listserv, flyers distribution in the neighborhood, phone calls, and announcements at community events. Each group was comprised individuals who expressed interest in participating, and based on responses, individuals were assigned to one of the groups—youth, returning citizens, or community members. The total number of participants across all three focus groups was 19 (youth—9, returning citizens—2, and community members—8). (See a sample of the Focus Groups flyers in Appendix A). UDC obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) and honoraria approvals. During the virtual focus groups, FOR welcomed participants, UDC introduced the process and led the discussion, and FOR helped UDC receive permission to participate and distribute honoraria. UDC then took ownership of the focus group survey results, as per IRB protocol, and analyzed the data.

### *3.3. Focus Groups*

Three groups were identified (Youth, Returning Citizens, and Community Members) by FOR to engage in the proposed focus groups and were recruited by FOR leadership and community organizations. Focus groups were held on three weeknight evenings during a nine-day period in June 2021 (22 June, 28 June, 30 June). Given pandemic restrictions, focus groups were held virtually, which presented discrete challenges. To ensure consent form completion in advance of discussions, electronic versions were provided and reviewed at the onset of each meeting. While focus groups were selected as a methodology for encouraging group discussion because in practice, users with similar interests or other characteristics meet to share responses, replicating this sense of community in a virtual room demanded additional participation guidelines. Participants were encouraged to keep their cameras on where possible, and facilitators employed traditional engagement methods such as reviewing visual and other cues to encourage sharing (neutral expressions, nods), but also monitored participants coming off mute. Community Members and many Youth participants were responsive to these practices, while some Youth remained reticent to participate. Helpfully, one of the research team members is a trained counselor working

in the local public school system and used her professional training to engage Youth and encourage their participation.

Each of the three groups was asked the same set of questions (excerpted below, with full script in Appendix B).

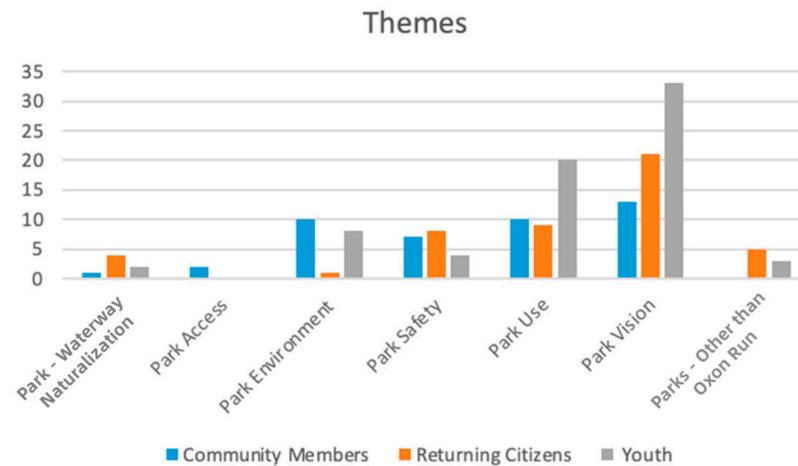
- What brought you to Oxon Run? How long have you been here? What keeps you here? How long do you imagine or think you will be here?
- What are you proud of about Oxon Run? What do you think is good about Oxon Run? How would you change it?
- How do/did you use this space? How have you seen others use this space? In a perfect world, how do you see this space being used? [And do you know that the trail is not a roadway?]
- Right now, the waterway has a concrete-lined channel in much of the local park. Do you know about plans to naturalize the waterway (or make it more natural)? What do you think or how do you feel about that?

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Focus group recordings (8 h over 3 sessions) were transcribed using the online service, Rev, which provides 90% accuracy along with participant labeling. The research team corrected and edited the transcripts (24 pages) to accurately reflect participant responses based on notes taken during the focus groups and referencing the recordings. For the analysis of the transcripts, the research team used the open source software package Dedoose 9.0. Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose and labeled based on focus groups—community members, returning citizens, and youth. Once uploaded, the data analysis was conducted in three parts. First, the team compared transcriptions of the three recordings with notes taken during each focus group session to identify common themes and concerns. The coding technique utilized to analyze the recordings was word frequency, similar responses, and response lengths. Then, the data were coded based on tone of voice, length of discussion, and the number of participants engaged in the discussion. Lastly, the transcripts were coded in Dedoose to identify the series of themes related to the Park expressed within the three groups.

Seven themes were identified based on the frequency of words and phrases and affirmation to shared experiences (Figure 3). Each incorporated a related set of comments and issues raised during focus group discussions:

- Access covered how people with various accessibility abilities engage with the space, the availability of restrooms, and the hours the park is open;
- Environment included dumping, aspects of nature, and playgrounds and trails;
- Safety covered harmful activities, security cameras, emergency phones, lighting, and police presence;
- Use focused broadly on activities and users including children, families, education, fitness, sports, and special events;
- Vision included amenities, community connections, employment, and regular maintenance;
- Other Parks highlighted other DC parks including Anacostia Park, Haynes Point, Meridian Hill, and Rock Creek Park;
- Waterway Naturalization covered the concrete slabs currently in parts of the stream in the Park as well as extensive long-range plans for stream bed restoration.



**Figure 3.** General themes. Responses categorized by themes based from each group.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General Themes

The seven general themes—Access, Environment, Safety, Use, Vision, Other Parks, and Waterway Naturalization—covered major concerns raised across the focus groups. Access covered how people with various accessibility abilities engage with the space, the availability of restrooms, and the hours the park is open. Environment included dumping, aspects of nature, and playgrounds and trails. Furthermore, safety covered harmful activities, security cameras, emergency phones, lighting, and police presence. The themes of Environment and Safety received the same number of responses (19). However, there were notable differences in the scope of the concerns expressed by the focus groups. Returning Citizens showed less concern about Environment (1) and greater concern about Safety (8), whereas both Youth and Community Member participants displayed a greater interest in the Environment, with a combined response total of 18, and expressed less interest in Safety, with combined response total of 11.

Note that Park Access was only addressed in the Community Members group and, therefore, had the lowest number of occurrences. Additionally, Community Members failed to reference any other park than Oxon Run. The composition of the Community Members group included residents who have lived in the area for over thirty years; their connection to Oxon Run was closely related to their place in life and how the areas covered in Access are important to them. Further, Returning Citizens and Youth were less aware of the details around the waterway naturalization, with only one person from each group responding to the question.

*“I’ve been living over here for 27 years, I’m a native Washingtonian. I had some concerns about Oxon Run because part of the Oxon Run is down by my end. We don’t have as much as they have down there on the Mississippi Avenue side. So that’s why I’m here to be more active when I can.”* ~ Community Member

*“I probably need to go visit that area so I can visualize it. Cause, I’m gonna be honest I didn’t see that part of the park. Like I said, the park is big.”* ~ Returning Citizen

### 4.2. Primary Themes

For a general theme to move into a primary theme, coding for the theme appeared at least once in all three focus groups. Out of the seven general themes, five primary themes emerged: Environment, Safety, Use, Vision, and Waterway Naturalization. Additionally, four areas within the five primary themes yielded a higher, more passionate level of engagement from the groups including elevated voices, emphatic language, non-verbal cues for on-camera participants, and repetition or agreement among users. These areas of higher engagement were Safety, Use, Vision, and Environment (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Primary themes.

#### 4.2.1. Vision

Participant groups' discussion and commentary around Park Vision varied with their experience, including their time in the Park; and for Community Members, with their history working to create a vision for the area. The data analysis revealed several areas of shared interest among all three groups. Of the 63 coded responses for Park Vision, 34 (54%) of the responses were for Park amenities and building connections to the Park. However, there were also areas of divergence where groups did not share the same level of interest. Returning Citizens and Community Members' concerns appear shaped by past experiences and memories of Oxon Run Park, with Community Members interested in structures and equipment for greater access to utilizing the Park with a focus on community access. Youth and Returning Citizens specifically called for increased activities.

*"When Park amenities start coming in, especially the folks on the border, they start coming over here. They're gonna run us out because they wanna move us this way and that way, because other people...Then the house that becomes for sale, somebody from somewhere else moves into the neighborhood. And all of a sudden before, you know, it looks like Georgetown, and so that's the kind of flow you gotta kind of manage."*

~ Community Member

*"...[I want to] introduce our teens today to volleyball and badminton like when we were young. I don't, I don't see many of our children playing volleyball, badminton. I don't see them playing, they're too many handguns."*

~ Returning Citizen

*"It is like a gray space, but I feel like if the park was more colorful, and it had more activities..."*

~ Youth

*"If we were to engage people with people that look like them doing things that they could possibly aspire to do, so it could be like soccer in the park with somebody who I'm sure cares about engaging young people, majority of which are young people of color about sports outside of just the sports that are the popular ones, which is baseball, basketball, and football."*

~ Youth

Community members expressed concerns about the negative impact of improved park amenities, specifically related to people from neighboring areas, especially those with more resources, which could lead to the displacement of existing community members. This concern reflects a broader issue of gentrification and the need to manage changes in the community carefully.

Returning citizens highlighted a desire to introduce recreational activities, specifically volleyball and badminton. Their concern about the lack of engagement in these activities among children is linked to the presence of handguns, suggesting safety concerns that impact the types of recreational activities perceived as suitable for the park. This perspective emphasizes the need for a safe and family-friendly environment.

A Youth participant sees the park as a “gray space” and envisions it becoming more vibrant and engaging with additional activities. This desire for a colorful and activity-filled park reflects a youthful perspective on creating an appealing and dynamic recreational space for the community. They also emphasize the importance of representation in sports activities. They propose engaging individuals who share similar backgrounds in organizing sports events.

There is a shared concern about the potential negative impact of park development on existing community dynamics, specifically addressing the fear of gentrification. Additionally, there is a common desire for a vibrant and safe park environment that caters to a range of recreational activities, from traditional sports to more unconventional ones.

#### 4.2.2. Use

The consensus was that park use was important. Focus group discussion comments on Park Use were organized into four areas around the functional use of park space: activities for children like arts and crafts; general leisure and enjoying nature; special events and festivals; and sports activities including basketball. Heightened emotions with the discussion of Park Use were in regard to functioning as a place of commonality, and differences were observed especially with the Youth and Community Members. More than half of the Community Members (given their history with the Park) shared experiences of going to the Park for events in the past and wanting to see more such opportunities to share the Park with the community going forward. Youth and Returning Citizens did not have similar comments.

*“I almost teared up a little bit when he was talking about everybody getting in the park and being together because that’s, that’s the dream. Right. I use the park, mostly, for long runs with my dog. I see a lot of other folks who, who use it for the exact same thing. I run into folks who are walking their dogs. A lot of times we’ll stop we’ll chat, we’ll, you know, talk about what’s going on with our dogs and comment on the weather and all that jazz. And, and then we’ll move along.”*  
~ Community Member

*“I see it being used for families. So, you don’t have to go so far out to have a little picnic. The children [can] enjoy their self, just play till they tired. Even if they can put a little carousel in it, you know, something, just a space for children and just go and enjoy the carousel and maybe a little train, to go through the whole Oxon Run. Cause it’s a big park.”*  
~ Returning Citizen

*“Other people, they seem to enjoy the parks more. I like when you see like people you ride pass, like they seem like they’re enjoying themselves or they’re with their kids or something. Like, I think mostly it’s for kids, like a playground is for kids, but younger people can also there too.”*  
~ Youth

An area of agreement and tension focused on the type of activities in the Park that can differ based on age and interests. The use of ATV vehicles in the Park created the most tension in the Community Members group and overlapped Safety and Environment concerns; Use and Safety focused on the elderly, young children, Park design, and crowd control, and Use and Environment focused on Park design and the lack of functionality as roadway.

*“We want to enjoy the park, too, and maybe we can make a space for the ATV bikes.”*  
~ Community Member

*“There aren’t any roads in the park. It’s not for driving.”* ~ Community Member

*“I visited the park more when I attend school (Hart Middle School). We played some games there.”*  
~ Youth

*“I use to go to the park with my dad, not so much anymore.”*  
~ Youth

The transcripts from community members, returning citizens, and youth offer a diverse perspective on the utilization of the park. Community members emotionally connected

with the idea of everyone gathering in the park, highlighting the role of the park in personal well-being. In contrast, returning citizens envisioned the park as a family-friendly space, advocating for amenities like carousels and trains for children's enjoyment. Youth appreciated the communal joy in the park, emphasizing its versatility for both families and younger individuals. However, shared enthusiasm for park use is juxtaposed with tension, particularly concerning the use of ATV vehicles, revealing divergent opinions among community members. This tension is indicative of underlying safety and environmental concerns, emphasizing the intricate relationship between recreational activities and the well-being of park-goers. Notably, one youth participant shared a decline in park visits with their father, shedding light on the evolving dynamics of personal engagement with the park over time. This highlighted the multifaceted nature of community perspectives, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and expectations regarding park usage.

#### 4.2.3. Safety

The term 'safety' was deliberately left broad, allowing everyone to respond using their personal, internal definition. With no formal definitions provided, the level and type of safety varied among participants. The words safe, safety, fear, fearful, scare, bad, and angry or any form of the word was coded as safety, and discussion comments were organized into eight areas: activities that (potentially) hurt people (vehicles, ATVs); cameras; (need for) emergency phones; feeling fearful or insecure; lighting; (plainclothes) police; signage; and increased comfort seeing good people in the Park. That concept is where all three groups agreed—seeing other people use the Park provides them with confidence and a sense of security in using the Park as well.

*"I think the more people we, we get in the park. . .the more, I think the more people will feel safe because there's a little bit of sense of, you know, if there are enough people in the park, then you know, it, it's harder for like one person or a few people to, to, to be bad actors."*  
~ Community Member

*"I agree with the cameras, because if we're out in public, you shouldn't be doing anything that shouldn't be, you know, that can't be seen on camera. So, cameras would be awesome. That would definitely tame the community, without making them uncomfortable with police least just kind of hanging around."*  
~ Returning Citizen

*"If they know it's safe and at night it, it's light up. And then like to say it's closed at a certain time, that'll be, that'll be a strong, new, good light, good lighting...All good lighting for the cameras. Yeah. Just make it safe. Safety. Safety is first."*

~ Returning Citizen

*"Unless I haven't seen it. I would definitely like an emergency phone, something so that I wouldn't have to run all the way to the street. Like if I'm in the middle of the park and something happens and I don't have service, I think we should be able to notify, MPD or fire or EMS that they can get to us in a timely fashion."*

~ Youth

Community members expressed a deep emotional connection to the idea of everyone gathering in the park. Their personal use of the park involves long runs with their dog, where they engage with fellow park-goers, discussing various topics. This sentiment reflects a strong desire for the park to serve as a unifying space for the community, emphasizing shared experiences and connections between individuals.

Returning citizens envisioned the park as a family-oriented space, emphasizing the convenience of having a local area for picnics and children's play. Their suggestion of adding amenities like a carousel and a train underscores a desire for diverse recreational activities catering to families. This perspective highlights the park's potential role in fostering family bonds and providing diverse entertainment options.

The tension arises in discussions about specific activities in the park, particularly the use of ATV vehicles. This creates a conflict between community members, with differing opinions on whether ATVs should be accommodated in the park. The disagreement reflects concerns about safety, environmental impact, and park design, indicating a need for a balance between recreational preferences and overall park functionality.

#### 4.2.4. Environment

In talking about the Environment, the groups focused on the natural parts of the park and how the community either utilized or overlooked opportunities. The term “environment” was also left open for participants to provide their own definition and context for the park. Youth participants shared experiences that were shaped by school engagement with flexibility in seeing the park. Returning Citizens found new ways to appreciate the Environment through programs that used the park, while Community Members were more aware of the environmental factors that are impacting Oxon Park itself.

*“So I’ve heard about the stream bed restoration plan. That what it was, I mean, it’s like a decade in the making, you know. There’s starting to be some movement on it. I think Brenda shared recently that you you’re looking around for contractors now, to begin work on it. I’m not a hundred percent sure. So, I’d love to see more like public information that’s like on a website or something like that, or in a news report so that that folks in the community can understand what might be about to be happening to the park.”*

~ Community Member

*“Um, it can be sad to look down into the, the stream bed and see these like huge concrete slabs that have been, you know, lifted up and shifted due to, you know, however many winters of the ice, just lifting them up and then getting carried away by, you know, whatever storm. I’m excited to, to see it, uh, restored a little bit to, what it used to be. And hopefully, obviously it can accommodate, you know, storm and, and whatever, you know, the practical needs of a waterway in the middle of a city. But, um, I’m excited to see it be restored a little bit to its natural beauty.”*

~ Community Member

*“My science teacher was great. They took us out, we studied the different types of animals that were in the actual stream and all the little smaller things.”*

~ Youth

*“So I just enjoyed it. It made me open up more and it just opened me up. We need to keep our environment clean and safe for the birds, the trees and the people. Some people can go and enjoy it, and help keep it clean.”*

~ Returning Citizen

The transcripts highlight diverse perspectives on the environment, particularly focusing on the stream bed restoration plan in Oxon Park. The first community member expresses an awareness of the long-standing plan, emphasizing the need for more accessible public information, such as a website or news reports. This suggests a desire for transparency and community engagement in the restoration process.

The second community member conveys a mix of sadness and excitement about the current state of the stream bed, emphasizing the impact of weather conditions. Their enthusiasm for restoration is rooted in a desire to witness the return of the park to its natural beauty, showcasing an emotional connection to the environment.

The youth participant reminisces about positive experiences with a science teacher, highlighting educational engagement with the park’s ecosystem. This perspective introduces an educational dimension, emphasizing the importance of utilizing the park as a learning environment for young individuals.

The returning citizen emphasizes the significance of maintaining a clean and safe environment for the benefit of various elements, including birds, trees, and people. This viewpoint underscores a sense of responsibility and community involvement in preserving the park’s ecological balance.

A common thread emerges—community members desired more information and involvement in the stream bed restoration plan. Community members expressed emotional

connections to the park, linking the restoration to the overall well-being and aesthetics of the environment. The Youth perspective introduced an educational aspect, suggesting that environmental initiatives can have a positive impact on the younger generation. Returning citizens focused on the communal responsibility for environmental stewardship.

Overall, these diverse viewpoints highlight the importance of community engagement, emotional connections, educational opportunities, and shared responsibility in the context of Oxon Park's environment. This synthesis contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the community's perceptions and aspirations regarding the park's environmental initiatives.

#### 4.3. Other Themes

While the seven primary themes and four areas of significant engagement were shared by all the focus groups, there were also themes that emerged only in one or two focus groups. Park Access was only mentioned in the Community Members group and related to safety and use. Community Members perceived access to the park as related to feeling safe to use or enter the park.

*"I just don't feel comfortable walking that tiny little trail that's in a circle by myself if there's nobody else around. I think that is one of the things that I struggle with."*

~ Community Member

*"This is a huge park and we're not just doing things where the amphitheater is. People down at the other end near first and Atlantic have complained that we're not doing anything down there. So we're starting to activate that part of the park as well. So my thing is the territorialism."*

~ Community Member

This sentiment of this community member was supported by nods of those on camera and similar affirmative comments to those off mute. Parks other than Oxon Run were mentioned in Returning Citizens and Youth groups. Both expressed interest in other parks in DC and the use of those parks based on safety, amenities, and location.

*"Like we used to, like back in the day we used to go to Haynes Point, Rock Creek Park, and Anacostia Park have nice times, cookouts, picnic. We just wanna bring it back, live entertainment, skating, you'd be there all day."*

~ Returning Citizen

*"You're talking about, uh, fishing. I love fishing and I want... I haven't been fishing at Rock Creek Park yet. So yeah, I actually wanna go there."*

~ Youth

*"And I feel like I had the privilege of [walking] out of my house and not being fearful of whether or not something was going to happen to me. If I go use my park, which was Sherman Circle, which was like two blocks away from me. So I could leave, go use that park, walk, go to another circle for a while. When I bought my house in ward eight, I did not use this park and I didn't do a lot of walking because I was fearful for my own safety."*

~ Youth

Returning Citizens and Youth groups expressed interest in parks other than Oxon Run. Both groups discussed the use of parks in DC, such as Haynes Point, Rock Creek Park, and Anacostia Park. Returning Citizens emphasized the desire to revive community activities like cookouts and live entertainment in various parks.

## 5. Limitations

As with all focus groups, surveys, and similar tools, the reliance on self-reported responses introduces potential biases and subjective interpretations of the data. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Regarding this research specifically, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study related to both the virtual focus group format and to the unique partnership with a local community group.

First, the Returning Citizens focus group was ultimately too small to be truly representative of either its target population or to be a peer group relative to the youth and adult groups. This small group size may be a function of the historical context during which the groups met (spring 2021, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic) given that the evening of the scheduled focus group for Returning Citizens, several confirmed attendees notified the research team that they could not attend because they were attending a funeral. Second, because the focus groups were facilitated virtually (including use of electronic consent forms), it was difficult to confirm participant numbers until the onset of each group as participants joined the electronic forum, resulting in uneven numbers within each group. Regarding Youth, for whom we needed guardian consent, we over-recruited and ended up with 16 participants. In comparison, the Community Member group had 8 participants, and Returning Citizens had two (2). Another limitation with the virtual meeting format was variable use of participants' cameras. About half of the Youth participants had their cameras on and actively engaged in discussion throughout the session.

Third, the structure of the partnership between the UDC research team and Friends of Oxon Run (FOR, a local leadership group) posed additional challenges in terms of trust and education. The Community Members group included two FOR members who requested UDC assistance in creating and evaluating these focus groups and who were instrumental in reviewing the focus group questions and who were at times heavily engaged in discussions. At the same time, the partnership with FOR contributed to the successful recruitment and engagement of participants.

## 6. Conclusions

This research yields valuable, timely information that informs scholarship and practice. First, the study's findings highlight the widespread importance of safety among distinct urban park user subpopulations; and these findings identify varied approaches to achieve this safer park experience and articulate a shared vision. Near-universal interest in increasing park safety among the participants of the three focus groups supports the prioritization of safety planning in the Park, and underscores the value of local knowledge in identifying park planning goals for a diverse population. An observation from all three focus groups, that seeing others using the Park addresses safety and use concerns and makes them feel safe and welcome themselves, echoes William Whyte's 1960s studies of New York City parks to discover characteristics of safe, inviting urban spaces: "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people" [51]. To improve safety at this Park, it is necessary to provide more opportunities for more people to use the Park.

This research also extends opportunities to apply planning theory to practice or implement a practitioner-articulated interpretation of theory. At an overarching level, the design and implementation of local focus discussions may provide a replicable way to work with communities to meet their needs. This research in particular documents a successful partnership between an academic entity and local grass-roots leadership, moving from tokenism to citizen-controlled research and positioning this local research and local knowledge as valuable and valid. Friends of Oxon Run (FOR) leaders identified the research question they wanted studied and advertised and recruited participants; UDC researchers outlined the process, completed Institutional Review Board (IRB) and literature review processes, led the focus groups, and analyzed the results. A presentation of the process and findings was made to FOR (December 2023). Documenting and sharing this process and the resultant findings is especially critical when working with historically disenfranchised local voices in the discussion around community change. As planning theory evolved to acknowledge and then call to address inequitable local participation, governance has similarly struggled to provide more than superficial engagement. This research was designed with local leaders and captured local voices, and results were shared in local venues. Such an approach reflects universities' obligations to actively consider local context for identifying and working toward sustainable development outcomes, including soliciting local perspectives and knowledge and placing these voices in the policymaking

dialogue [52]. This citizen-controlled participatory approach highlights contributions from local experts and provides for better, more accessible and safe green space as well as improved local capacity.

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## Appendix A



**Figure A1.** Flyer for Oxon Run Youth Focus Group.

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Script

- INTRODUCTION

Good evening, welcome to the focus group. Thank you for your time to talk with us about Oxon Run tonight. My name is Elizabeth Gearin and assisting me is Carletta Hurt. We're both with the University of the District of Columbia.

We want to understand your views of Oxon Run. Last spring UDC graduate students held stakeholder interviews about the cultural and historical uses of Oxon Run and presented these findings to the community and to Dept Parks & Rec. Community leaders asked UDC to conduct focus groups—like this one tonight—to obtain a broader sample of community perspectives. (A focus group is a series of questions asked in a group setting so that we can hear a broad range of opinions and perspectives).

You are here because you responded to outreach for these sessions, outreach that was targeted to those familiar with Oxon Run; and those whose opinions we are especially interested in.

The results from this focus group will be used to prepare a report on community understanding of and vision for Oxon Run; this report can be shared as information for any future plans for the area. And we will be happy to provide summary details once the study is complete. Be sure we have your email/contact info for that and for other follow-up.

Let's begin. We have a few guidelines for our discussion. We want you to do the talking; we may call on you if we haven't heard from you in a while. AND, there are no right or wrong answers, only different points of view; so please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said; we are just as interested in negative comments as positive comments. We will take notes! We can't always write as fast as you speak, and don't want to miss anything so we are recording this session; that said, information shared is confidential; no names will be used in the report, and after we review the recording, it will be destroyed. Please only one person speak at a time.

This discussion should last about an hour to an hour and a half. Please silence your phones.

And a final reminder that we are collecting your informed consent forms. These are the statements that describe how best to conduct any research with people. Our informed consent form describes purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, any risks or discomfort (none expected here), benefit to be derived, your right to refuse and/or withdraw from the study, our confidential handling of the data, any compensation for more than minimal risk, and whom to contact for more information. The form requires your signature. Are there any questions at this point?

- SCRIPT

Oxon Run refers to the community around the District's Oxon Run Park as well as to the waterway and the Park, running from 13th Street SE to DC-Maryland border in the District's Ward 8. The Oxon Run waterway was originally a meandering stream with a sandbed but parts of the area within the District were fortified by flood control projects in the 20th century.

Now we're going to ask you some questions. The first time you speak, please introduce yourself, using your first name.

1. What brought you to Oxon Run? How long have you been here? What keeps you here? How long do you imagine or think you'll be here?
2. What are you proud of about Oxon Run? What do you think is good about Oxon Run? How would you change it?
3. How do/did you use this space? How have you seen others use this space? In a perfect world, how do you see this space being used? [and do you know that the trail is not a roadway?]

4. Right now, the waterway has a concrete-lined channel in much of the local park. Do you know about plans to naturalize the waterway (or make it more natural)? What do you think or how do you feel about that?

- CLOSING

Thank you for a great discussion. We heard lots of thoughtful opinions. We want to recap our purpose which is to identify perceptions of local open space in Oxon Run and hear visions for this space among different members in the community. We will analyze the data and share it with the community and ideally in a scholarly journal.

Is there anything we missed? Is there something else you want to tell me about Oxon Run?

Thank you. [end recording].

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