Revitalizing Alexandria, VA: The Role of Street Art and Curb Extensions

Alexandria, Virginia, is home to 19 regional parks and numerous neighborhood green spaces, providing residents with opportunities for recreation, social connection, and physical activity. Among them, Ben Brenman Park in the city's West End stands out as a vital community hub. Located on the east end of the former U.S. Army base at Cameron Station in Alexandria, the park serves as a gathering place for thousands of residents. Yet, despite its popularity, parts of the trail network have become deteriorated and underutilized, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity.

Team:

The project was led by Dr. Iulia Fratila of George Mason University, in close collaboration with the Alexandria Parks and Recreation Department, community partners, and local organizations. The West End Farmers Market provided outreach opportunities through weekly events in the park's parking lot, and many local businesses supported survey distribution and feedback collection. This coalition ensured that the project reflects community needs, builds local pride, and creates shared ownership of the space.

Goals and Vision:

- Upgrade the Ben Brenman Park trail segment through repairs and creative enhancements
- Engage residents in shaping priorities for park improvements
- Incorporate community desires for social activations, new equipment, and public art
- Encourage more walking, gathering, and healthy habits through improved park amenities

Examining trail conditions in Ben Brenman Park.

Background:

Ben Brenman Park is a major regional park in Alexandria, and its size and amenities make it a cornerstone of daily life for West End residents. Despite its popularity, a key trail segment within Ben Brenman Park has fallen into disrepair, with cracked pavement and underutilized space. This has limited safe and accessible walking, reduced opportunities for community gathering, and left room for improvement in terms of beautification, and social activation. Recognizing the potential of this space, Alexandria's VWAI team launched a project to repair and reimagine the trail as a model for community health, recreation, and engagement.
Work began with close collaboration with staff at the Alexandria Parks and Recreation Department, which ultimately became the project's anchor partner. The team secured $9,000 in special project funding from VWAI, while Parks and Recreation reprioritized its budget to contribute an additional $10,000, ensuring resources for both trail repairs and enhancements.

For community engagement, flyers were shared along the trail and throughout the park and a booth was hosted at the West End Farmers Market to spread awareness. Printed QR codes linked to a survey that allowed residents to select their top three desired improvements. Options included planting native species, resurfacing asphalt, installing little libraries, adding adult fitness equipment, introducing outdoor games, educational asphalt, and manual play stations. The results were as follows:

- 414 survey responses, with an 84.7% completion rate
- 70% of participants prioritized planting more native species
- 42% requested adult fitness equipment, emphasizing the need for multi-generational amenities
- 28% called for improved signage

Based on these results, the team is now pursuing installation of an adult fitness station, complemented by new trees and shaded seating areas, with implementation anticipated by early spring 2026.

Signs installed around the park to stimulate survey completion.
Source: Iulia Fratila

Outcomes and Impact:

- Pavement repairs to create a safer, more accessible walking trail
- Integration of social activation equipment
- Feedback from 414 residents guiding the design and ensuring inclusivity
- Greater opportunities for walking and recreation in Alexandria's West End, where many residents rely on local parks as vital outdoor space
- A strong partnership with the Department of Parks and Recreation