

**CRITICAL AREA COMMISSION
CHESAPEAKE AND ATLANTIC COASTAL BAYS**
1804 West Street, Suite 100
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

MEMORANDUM

To: Project Committee, Critical Area Commission

From: Michael Macon, Natural Resources Planner

Date: January 14, 2026

Subject: Elms Beach Park - Preliminary Review (St. Mary's County)

St. Mary's County is requesting preliminary feedback from the Project Committee regarding the proposed improvements for the Elms Beach Park on the Chesapeake Bay, located in Lexington Park, St. Mary's County. Due to the various impacts detailed in the memorandum, this project will require Conditional Approval under COMAR 27.02.06 by the Critical Area Commission.

A copy of the site plan is attached.

Background and Existing Conditions

Elms Beach Park (referred to as the Park hereafter) is a public waterfront access park that is located in the southeastern part of St. Mary's County adjacent to the Chesapeake Bay. The park is located on 783 acres, with 565.49 acres within the Critical Area on land designated as Resource Conservation Area (RCA). The facility offers over 500 linear feet of sandy beach areas, a playground, and passive outdoor recreation opportunities, such as swimming and fishing. The park is currently improved with a gravel parking area, a playground, a large pavilion, informal picnic areas with metal grills, scattered benches, metal shipping container for park maintenance equipment, a small changing room structure, portable bathroom units, and a floating pier.

Existing habitat protection areas (HPAs) on the site include forest interior dwelling species (FIDS) habitat, nontidal wetlands, and the Critical Area Buffer, which has been expanded for hydric soils. The park is almost entirely forested, excluding those existing amenities that are noted above and the roadway that provides access to the park.

This is a heavily used park, which is constrained by limited parking and lack of suitable restroom facilities. The park is most heavily used on the weekends, especially on holiday weekends in the summer. Visitor population is diverse and ranges from individuals who come to the park to fish to multi-generational families who come to picnic and play. Approximately 110-120 cars can be accommodated on site during busy weekends with parking extending along portions of the access road. Park staff estimate that there is an average of 3.5 people per vehicle during peak usage. Given the rural location of the park within the County, the area is not currently accessible through public transport and lacks the capacity for offsite parking.

Elms Beach Park Conditional Approval

Project Committee Memorandum

January 14, 2026

Page 2 of 3

Proposed Impacts

The County is proposing to construct additional parking, public restrooms, enhanced trails and picnic areas to benefit users of this park. Proposed improvements specifically include:

- An expansion of existing parking from approximately 120 total spaces to 164 designated parking spaces, including 6 Americans with Disability Act (ADA) spaces;
- A new structure to house restrooms, changing rooms and storage;
- A renovated pavilion;
- Replacement of the existing playground with a brand new playground;
- Construction of ADA-compliant boardwalks and walkways;
- Installation of 13 Picnic pads; and
- Installation of stormwater best management practices (BMPs), including a submerged gravel wetlands with two pre-treatment facilities, non-rooftop disconnects, grass swales, and 37 parking spaces with permeable pavement

Buffer Impacts

Most of the proposed improvements, including non-water dependent uses like parking, the playground, bathroom facilities, and the picnic amenities, are proposed in the Buffer (see Attachment 1). The proposed permanent Buffer disturbance is approximately 1.25 acres for non-water dependent improvements, including the installation of parking spaces, a playground, sidewalks, picnic tables, and permanent bathrooms. In addition, 1.07 acres of canopy is proposed to be removed. Mitigation will be required at a 3:1 ratio for permanent Buffer disturbance, with an additional 1:1 required for the area of canopy coverage removed.

Lot Coverage

The proposed project will result in 1.43-acres of new lot coverage within the Critical Area for a total of 3.53-acres (0.62%).

Tidal and Nontidal Wetlands

The proposed improvements will have no permanent impacts to tidal or nontidal wetlands. There will be 397 sq. ft. of temporary disturbance to nontidal wetlands. Impacts to the 25-ft nontidal wetland buffer include 12,257 sq. ft. of temporary disturbance and 2,267 sq. ft. of permanent disturbance.

Stormwater Management

The project is located in the RCA; therefore, the Critical Area 10% phosphorus reduction requirement for stormwater is not applicable. The County plans to treat local stormwater requirements through the use of the BMPs noted above.

Proposed Mitigation

Total mitigation for canopy clearing and Buffer impacts is approximately 5.9 acres. This amount may increase, as the proposed area of forest clearing may contain FIDS habitat. Additional evaluation of this area will be required.

At this time, the county has not determined where mitigation will be located. Offsite options will be necessary since the remainder of the park is forested.

Lease with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources

In 2004, St. Mary's County signed a 25-year lease with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to manage approximately 476 acres of the Elms property, with an emphasis on environmental education and recreation. DNR has conditionally supported the park improvements, contingent on the County providing adequate mitigation as determined by the Critical Area Commission.

Permits and Review by Other Agencies

Review by other agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife and Heritage Service (WHS), Maryland Historical Trust (MHT), MDE, and local Soil Conservation District is pending.

Coastal Resiliency Assessment

The project site is waterfront to the Chesapeake Bay. However, based on desktop analysis, the site does not appear to be vulnerable to sea level rise, coastal flooding, or storm surge.

Project Committee Discussion

The purpose of this preliminary discussion is to allow the Project Committee to hear directly from the County about this potential conditional approval request, including the need for the project, the proposed Buffer impacts associated with the proposal, and potential measures to offset impacts.

The Committee may want to include the following as part of this discussion:

- Potential design alternatives to reduce overall impacts, such as:
 - Relocating areas of lot coverage outside the Buffer;
 - Reducing canopy coverage cleared; and
 - Redesigning pathways to align with the Critical Area Commission's Public Pathways Guidance; and
- Offsite options that the County can provide to meet mitigation requirements, since onsite mitigation appears to be infeasible.

Representatives for the project (County staff and consultant) have been invited to attend the Project Committee meeting to present information, help answer questions and receive feedback.

If you have any questions regarding the proposed project prior to the upcoming discussion at the January 14, 2026 Project Committee meeting, please contact Michael Macon at (410) 260-3467 or Michael.Macon2@maryland.gov.

Attachment:

1. Proposed Site Plan

