



WASHINGTON AREA BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

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October 20, 2017

Director Al Roshdieh
Montgomery County Department of Transportation
101 Monroe Street 10th Floor
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Re: Safe, convenient alternate routes for Georgetown Branch Trail

Mr. Roshdieh,

Now that the Purple Line construction has begun and the Georgetown Branch Trail (GBT) is closed, thousands of residents and commuters who depended on the trail need safe alternatives for the large variety of trips the GBT once served. The GBT was an integral part of the walking and bicycling network, serving trips east to west, north to south, to school, to work, for errands and for recreation.

Unfortunately, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation's (MCDOT) signed interim route is inconvenient for most trips, unsafe at multiple points, stressful and unsuitable for bicycling on at least half of the route. In downtown Bethesda, bicyclists following the route must ride on narrow sidewalks, squeezing into pedestrian space and onto pedestrian islands. The Jones Bridge Road sidepath and sidewalk are too narrow, creating unavoidable conflicts between people biking, walking, and waiting for the bus immediately next to high speed traffic. Major road crossings, like the intersection of Connecticut Ave and Jones Mill Rd, require up to four road crossings through multiple light cycles. No amount of signage can remedy these challenges. Changes to the built environment are needed to provide reasonable, safe alternatives to the GBT for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The ideal solution would replicate the trail's convenience and safety exactly, but we acknowledge that the Purple Line's aggressive construction timeline and space constraints make this infeasible. Therefore, MCDOT should work to provide a variety of routes that serve different needs and different former GBT users. While MCDOT missed the chance to plan adequate routes in advance of construction, it is not too late to provide safe transportation options that serve residents during construction and after the Capital Crescent Trail extension is complete. Given the current conditions of the small number of east-west corridors, changes to the built environment to calm traffic or create new protected spaces for biking and walking will be necessary. Many of these changes could be quickly implemented with inexpensive materials like flex-posts and paint, as successfully demonstrated in programs across the US.

We request that MCDOT study and implement as many of the following alternate routes and improvements as possible:

1. A road diet and separated bike lanes on Montgomery Ave and East West Highway, the planned separated bike lanes on Woodmont Ave, and the Capital Crescent Trail surface crossing of Wisconsin Ave. We ask that MCDOT prioritize implementation of these applicable pieces of the Bethesda Master Plan bicycle network.
2. Improve the signed route along Jones Bridge Road to safely accommodate both biking and walking: Widen the existing sidepath to a minimum of 8 feet and prioritize sweeping and leaf collection to maintain that width. Where the sidepath ends, implement a road diet and install a separated bikeway (protected bike lane or side path) on Jones Bridge Road as proposed in the draft recommendation from the County's Bicycle Master Plan. Widen and straighten the intersection approaches and curb ramps to be more easily navigable by a bicycle.
3. Coordinate with the Maryland State Highway Administration ("SHA") to implement separated bike lanes on East West Highway. Install sidewalks on East West Highway to complete a continuous pedestrian pathway on both sides of the street from Bethesda to Silver Spring. Currently, 1.4 miles of sidewalk are missing along this 4 mile route.
4. Continue working with the town of Chevy Chase to implement a neighborhood bikeway through the town's low-traffic streets and assist with traffic calming on streets and intersections where traffic volumes or speeds are higher than recommended in the Bicycle Master Plan's new Bicycle Facility Design Toolkit. Coordinate with SHA to address intersections of this low-stress route where it crosses state highways to provide safer crossings.

As you consider how to accommodate the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians displaced by the GBT closure, please prioritize alternative routes that (1) are direct and logical, (2) provide the same level of safety and comfort as a trail, (3) accommodate the different uses and varying skill levels of all trail users, including pedestrians, youth, people using mobility devices, strollers, bicyclists transporting young children, etc., and (4) anticipate and appropriately accommodate the volume of use for any given route. Heavily used areas should be sufficiently wide and have adequate sight lines, lighting and signage.

We ask that MCDOT prioritize new infrastructure improvements (upgraded sidewalks, new protected bike lanes, etc.) over solutions that do not contribute to permanent safety improvements for non-motorized travel (ie: signed routes), and implement solutions quickly. Within weeks of a fatality at the Little Falls crossing of the Capital Crescent Trail, the County took action to dramatically improve the safety of the intersection. Similar swiftness needs to be applied here. The agency should plan to evaluate these new routes regularly and make adjustments as necessary to respond to changing conditions during the entire Purple Line construction period.

At the September 28th Montgomery County Council Committee on Transportation and Environment meeting, there was a fruitful discussion about MCDOT's need to improve the existing Jones Bridge Road route and a clear demand to implement additional safe bicycling and walking options north and south of the closed trail. We applaud you for empowering your staff to consider new solutions to this important safety and access problem, and especially for your assurance that there are no limitations on your staff as they explore solutions that keep people safe. We were encouraged by MCDOT's willingness to rapidly improve

this situation. As we heard at the hearing, members of the Council are willing to explore additional funding, if needed, to create better alternate routes.

Biking and walking are becoming primary modes of transportation for many Montgomery County residents. As more people come to rely on the current and planned walking and biking infrastructure, maintaining safe and convenient access during construction in the public right-of-way will be a growing issue. As is done with motor vehicle traffic operations, maintenance of traffic plans should keep bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure open without detour.

The District of Columbia provides a model for addressing this issue. The District government recently took legislative and regulatory action to require safe accommodations for people walking and biking through construction areas occupying public space. We encourage the County to work with the Department of Permitting Services to follow this example and become another leading jurisdiction for protecting bicyclists and pedestrians during the maintenance and construction of transportation infrastructure.

On behalf of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association and our 10,000 members and supporters in Montgomery County, thank you for your efforts to create new options for safe and convenient bicycling in Montgomery County. Under your leadership, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation has made a clear shift in its priorities from a sole focus on promoting fast automobile trips towards developing a multimodal and active transportation network in the County. There is more work to be done, and the Washington Area Bicyclists Association stands ready to be a partner in these efforts.

Sincerely,



Greg Billing

Executive Director

CC:

Montgomery County Council

Town of Chevy Chase Council

Tim Cupples, MCDOT, Purple Line Coordinator

Todd Hoffman, Town of Chevy Chase, Town Manager