



January 18, 2023

Superintendent Charles Cuvelier
700 George Washington Memorial Parkway
McLean, VA 22101

Re: George Washington Memorial Parkway South and Mount Vernon Trail Improvement Plan/Environmental Assessment

Dear Superintendent Cuvelier,

I am writing on behalf of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA) and its more than 7,000 members across the Washington metropolitan area to provide written comments on the National Park Service's proposed plan to improve the south section of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and the Mount Vernon Trail.

For fifty years, WABA has worked to transform the capital region by improving the conditions for people who bike. Our work to advocate for dedicated bike infrastructure, pass laws that promote safe roadway behavior, and provide education programming for all road-users has resulted in a drastically different cultural and political approach to biking for transportation. Biking can and should be an equitable, safe, low-cost, time-saving, and sustainable way to navigate our cities and parks for all users.

We are eager to see the National Park Service reimagine and rebuild the venerable Mount Vernon Trail to ensure it remains an iconic park resource for the next generation. With user safety and comfort in mind, WABA offers and strongly encourages NPS to consider the following as it develops its improvement plan and design concepts:

Space for all users. NPS' current recommendation to widen the trail to 10-11' feet is insufficient for the current volume of users, let alone future projected use as new connections like the Long Bridge open in the future. NPS should develop designs that incorporate a 14' minimum trail width; where this is untenable due to significant tree loss, NPS should consider separated or braided trails with a total combined width of 14'. In addition to being easier to thread through sensitive environmental areas, separated trails can also be used to segment different trail users, thus reducing conflict. Whether physical separation is employed or not, NPS must better demarcate with, for example, a

centerline and signage where the various trail users should be to safely separate travel modes. NPS already has designs for separate bicycle and pedestrian trails at Gravelly Point and should implement such designs there and elsewhere.

Better bridges and underpasses. Memorial Bridge is a major pinch point and the trail must be widened, either by reclaiming space in the roadbed or by exploring a passage through the abutment. Additionally, while we applaud NPS' intentions to replace any bicycle/pedestrian bridges at the end of their service life as part of the improvement project, we believe NPS should go further and ensure all bridges and boardwalks meet the minimum 14' width and are redecked/treated to address dangerous slipperiness of the current wooden surfaces when wet.

Improved trail drainage. Dangerously slick conditions are not limited to bridges and boardwalks; poor drainage, pooling, icing, and other water-related impacts are common throughout the trail. All methods of reducing water impacts – including rerouting or raising the trail – should be considered by NPS during this planning process. This is especially paramount as this riverside park is on the front lines of climate change-related changes in water level; this improvement project is an opportunity to strengthen this vital public resource for the future.

Safer intersections and crossings. NPS should prioritize trail users and non-motorized visitors at every intersection. Suggested improvements include raised crossing walks and installing leading speed bumps for approaching cars, rerouting the trail to improve sightlines and crossing angles, and minimizing crossing distances through roadway narrowing. This is particularly needed where the trail crosses the Reagan National Airport ramps, the Dangerfield Island Marina Access Road, and south of Jones Point. Additionally, where the trail runs close to the parkway, protective barriers and other safety measures should be considered. The communities that the trail passes through all have commitments to Vision Zero, prioritizing the safety and comfort of non-motorized users of public space - it is paramount that NPS adopt a similar approach.

Accessible signage and amenities. NPS must dramatically improve signage and wayfinding along the entire trail. This should include emergency contact information, mile markers, maps, and interpretation placards. Dark sky-friendly outdoor lighting should also be considered for the safety of early morning and evening visitors. As a major local and regional destination and scenic recreation corridor, the trail should be easy to navigate and appreciate for all users.

Better community connections. While the northern section of the Mount Vernon Trail is fairly limited-access, the southern section is important as a more local recreation resource. As such, ensuring safe and easy connections to the surrounding neighborhoods should be prioritized, especially any crossings of the George Washington Memorial Parkway. In the northern section, improvements to the major intersections like Four Mile Run should also be considered to make use of this resource more accessible to more people without cars.

Commitment to trail management. The care and upkeep of the trail should not fall so heavily on the work of volunteers. The trail is as vital a resource as the Parkway and its maintenance should be prioritized in the same way, including in the budget process. This should include treating the trail in the winter to ensure the park is accessible year-round for visitors on foot and on wheels.

We are encouraged and emboldened by this once-in-a-generation opportunity to not just repave the trail as-is but to boldly rebuild it for the enjoyment and benefit of visitors and users for decades to come; one of the region's and nation's most iconic, popular, and successful trails deserves nothing less. We appreciate this opportunity to submit comments and thank you for your careful consideration. We look forward to the next steps in this environmental assessment and planning process.

Respectfully,

Kevin O'Brien

Virginia Organizer | Washington Area Bicyclist Association