

**Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights  
Melanie Rose White, Chair  
5500 Friendship Blvd., #2221  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815**

April 24, 2020

Ms. Asuntha Chiang-Smith  
Public Information Act Representative  
The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission  
6611 Kenilworth Avenue, Suite 402  
Riverdale, MD 20737

Re: Capital Crescent Trail Crossing of Little Falls Parkway – Stakeholder Concerns on Lack of Transparency and Engagement & PIA of February 24, 2020

Dear Ms. Chiang-Smith:

Our organization, the Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights (CCCFH), is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and is currently comprises 19 member communities. This letter is in reference to materials provided in response to our PIA request dated February 24, 2020, copy attached. Below we review the situation and the PIA response which was disappointing.

The proceedings of the Planning Dept. and Parks Department in conjunction with the Capital Crescent Trail crossing of Little Falls Parkway are disheartening in the lack of transparency and engagement in discussion with the stakeholders. Absent a consensus among stakeholders the project work should be held in abatement.

**2017** Little Falls Parkway was unilaterally reduced by the Parks Dept. from four lanes to two lanes at the intersection with the Capitol Crescent Trail. This lane reduction was done without public notice or public hearing. It was done without proper coordination with Montgomery County DOT. It was done without consideration of future traffic generated by the growth of Bethesda, and by the redevelopment of the Westwood shopping center on River Road. Only current traffic volume was taken into consideration in the plan. The Parkway is one of two primary corridors from River Road and areas west to downtown Bethesda and Old Georgetown Road.

**2018** Subsequently three alternatives for permanent change at this crossing were presented by the Parks Dept. to the public in charrettes in 2018. All three retained the road constriction from four lanes to two. The alternatives:

- 1) Retention of the existing crossing,
- 2) Crossing at the nearby traffic signal
- 3) Building a bridge to cross the Parkway.

**June 13, 2019** The Planning Board held a hearing with public input on these alternatives. A strong preference was expressed for removal of the road constriction to two lanes, for restoration to four lanes, and for moving the crossing to the nearby Arlington Road traffic signal using a simplified plan suggested by the public which is in complete compliance with Vision Zero.

The Board voted to adopt the public's simplified plan and directed Parks Dept. to proceed accordingly. The rationale: crossing at the signal was safest for bicyclists and pedestrians, traffic movement to Bethesda and old Georgetown Road was retained, and diversion of traffic to heavily populated Hillandale Road and other neighborhoods was eliminated. This directive was contrary to the Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. strong preference for the road reduction to two lanes and making permanent the current temporary crossing with much additional construction.

**August 28, 2019** All stakeholders convened at the site for a planning session with the understanding that the project was going forward in accordance with the Planning Board's directive of June 13.

**September 12, 2019** The Planning Board held a Capital Improvement Project (CIP) work session for Parks Dept. proposed six year CIP plan. The move of the Trail crossing to the signal was postponed to an indefinite period for reconsideration beyond 2026. The "temporary" crossing was to be retained and improved during that prolonged interim. The rationale was that crossing at the signal was then estimated to cost \$2.5 million and that such expenditure would limit funds available for smaller projects elsewhere. This was an increase of \$500,000 over the June 13<sup>th</sup> estimate.

**September 23, 2019** The CCCFH wrote to Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. requesting background information on the cost estimates underlying the stated figures, and requesting that a hold be placed on the project until all of the relevant facts are known. No reply was received nor was there even an acknowledgment of the letter.

**February 24, 2020** Cost estimates were requested again via the Public Information Act (PIA). Three documents were received in response:

- 1) Concept Site Plan Sketches (these had been utilized for public review before the June meeting and during much of the preceding year)
- 2) June 2019 Cost Estimates (for each alternative)
- 3) 30% Completion Drawings (dated April 19, 2019).

*Either the above is woefully inadequate and non-responsive or the information that we requested does not exist.* The cost estimates provided were those used for the June 13<sup>th</sup> meeting, whereas the PIA specifically requested the elevated costs used as the basis for the September Planning Board meeting decision to defer the Boards approved alternative.

Let us assume that the above materials are complete and were provided in accordance with applicable PIA law. If so, we find the above PIA response to be conclusive in this regard:

- 1) **The Planning Dept. Board directive of June 13 was ignored.** Nothing was done in response to that directive. No cost estimate was made for the simplified crossing at the signal and no studies conducted.
- 2) **It is apparent from the 30% construction drawings that Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. had committed to making the temporary crossing permanent long before the June 13<sup>th</sup> meeting.** The existence of 30% completion construction drawings for improvements at the site of the “temporary” current crossing as of April 19, 2019 is a level of detail and expense far beyond that required for engineering cost estimating.
- 3) **Nothing was provided supporting the inflation of the signal crossing cost to \$2.5 million from the June number of \$1.99 million** – and this \$1.99 million utilized the overly complex plan, not the simple plan provided by the communities. It worth noting that this complex, expensive plan was similar to one which both the communities and the Planning Board had rejected several years ago in a previous review of the crossing. What would the cost estimate have been for the simpler community plan?

**The unfortunate conclusion is that the Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. proceeded with their already substantially engineered preference in spite of the Planning Boards June 13<sup>th</sup> directive.** The approach taken was to continue with the “temporary” crossing and road constriction indefinitely with the inclusion of a number of improvements, i.e., render this situation permanent by default.

**The communities of the Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights have always been supportive and positive in working with The Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. on the Capital Crescent Trail.**

We want to continue this with consideration of Little Falls Parkway as an integral part of the larger road network, consideration of the increased risk to the densely populated Hillandale Rd. neighborhood as traffic is diverted through there, and for the risk to other neighborhoods.

The current situation shouldn't proceed further without consensus. Our strong preference is for positive discussion of any issue with full engagement of all stakeholders in a fair and transparent way. This issue/situation has regional impact and affects all of us.

Fundamental to this work is for the Parks Dept. and Planning Dept. to provide a professional, reasonable cost estimate for the communities' simplified plan for the Trail crossing at the signal light, which includes retention of the four lanes of traffic on the LFP. We look to work with the Parks and Planning Depts. in accordance with the high standards of conduct that we have come to expect from them and all of Montgomery County's public servants.

Sincerely,

Melanie Rose White, Chair  
Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights

- c. Hon. Jamie Raskin, Congressman
- Hon. Brian Frosh, Maryland Attorney General
- Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Executive
- Sidney Katz, President, Montgomery County Council
- Andrew Friedson, Member, District 1, Montgomery County Council
- Casey Anderson, Chair, Montgomery County Planning Board
- Mike Riley, Director, Montgomery County Department of Parks