

Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights

November 28, 2022

Dear Members of the Parks Department and the County Council:

The Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights (CCCFH) is a coalition of 19 community organizations with approximately 20,000 residents. We are writing to express our concerns about the ongoing changes to Little Falls Parkway (LFP). Why is the Parks Department continuing to transform Little Falls Parkway into a linear park when the communities surrounding the Parkway were never asked if this was a needed or wanted amenity? There are important factors that should be examined before more changes to the Parkway are implemented.

- 1. Traffic: Little Falls Parkway is a main vehicular artery for residents in communities in SW Montgomery County and Northwest DC to get to downtown Bethesda.** These changes narrow the Parkway from 4 lanes to 2 lanes of traffic from Dorset to Arlington Road. The “road diet” has been instated without consideration of the additional future density from significant development in both Westbard as well as the downtown Bethesda area. The Parks Department’s website shows future plans to continue the 2-lane configuration all the way to River Road. Vehicular traffic studies by the Parks Department appear to have been inaccurate and confusing. Requests for more transparent statistics have not been forthcoming. The numbers of pedestrians and bikers recorded that supposedly used the Parkway on weekends, when it was closed until June 2022, do not compute with what community members observed and documented. The counts for both vehicles and pedestrians/bikers are unreliable because there is no baseline measurement. Few people were on the closed Parkway after the first months of Covid had passed. Because of the road restriction, vehicular traffic has been detouring through neighborhoods which have no sidewalks and significant numbers of walkers and bikers that prefer to walk where there is tree canopy. Michael Paylor of MCDOT and Parks Director, Mike Riley have both publicly acknowledged that closing off one lane in each direction of LFP has resulted in cut through traffic in neighboring communities like Kenwood, Somerset, and Kenwood Forest II. Traffic has also increased on Goldsboro Road between River Road and Bradley Boulevard.

- 2. Safety: There are safety issues that should be examined closely.**
The new configuration and electronic signage are confusing. There have been numerous “near miss” head-on collision situations caused by the changes that take the median strip out of the roadway and now have north and south lanes running side by side. There are also new challenges to bicyclists and pedestrians crossing the reconfigured lanes. Past traffic data shows all pedestrian accidents between River Road and Arlington Road have occurred at intersections. Now there are new traffic backups as cars make way for pedestrians and bicyclists using the Capital Crescent Trail. Someone is going to get hurt. This is not *vision zero* compliant.
- 3. Fire and Rescue:** Important safety issues have been openly discussed by the Bethesda and Glen Echo Fire Departments who observe that the narrowed lanes create an impediment to reaching a fire or accident quickly and safely. Also, with added density in progress, this situation will get worse.
- 4. Environment: Does the creation of this linear park meet the Parks Department’s goal of creating natural parks?** Is it based on need for green space and will it actually be green? This linear park, which is less than 1/2 a mile, calls for giant chess sets, corn hole games, benches, ping pong, and picnic tables. The idea is to create an “event space” with food trucks and “acoustic happenings.” Commercial vehicles are not allowed on LFP. People will drive to events and where will they park? Who will maintain and secure the games, benches, and picnic tables? Will there be sanitary amenities like *porta potties*? Who will clean up? Little Falls Parkway has been designated a flyway for migrating songbirds. How will acoustic events, food trucks, and games impact the nature that now exists? The surrounding communities have not received answers to these questions.
- 5. This linear park is not needed nor has it been requested.**
There is an abundance of green space surrounding this sliver of LFP which is located within the Little Falls Valley Stream Park. This small area has large swaths of green space and trails on both sides of the roadway. On the west side of LFP is the Capital Crescent Trail and Railroad Park. Further down the Capital Crescent Trail is Potter Park. Communities on the east side of the Parkway have a trail that runs from Norwood Park to Dorset Avenue. The website from the Parks Department erroneously states that this park will be “in the heart of

downtown Bethesda”. This park is in a residential area, located 2.5 miles from downtown Bethesda. By contrast: there are 15 park and open space projects within the Bethesda Overlay Zone (BOZ) that have asked for funding from the Parks Department to offset the 30,000,000 sq.ft. of development that is existing, approved, or planned in the BOZ. Money should be spent there or in other parts of the county that are asking for green space and told that there are no funds. This location is not within the Equity Focus Area as defined in Thrive Montgomery 2050.

- 6. Cost: How much is this costing us, the taxpayers?** Citizens have repeatedly asked for an accounting as to how much the continued changes to this small stretch of road are costing the County and its taxpayers. We have never received an accounting as to costs over the last 3 years of bollards being moved on a monthly basis, the gates that were constructed, installed, opened and closed twice weekly, the orange cones and barrels that were moved weekly by crews, the changing electronic signs. What is the cost of the traffic studies cited with information that has been confusing and unclear? How much is the cost for the final phase, which includes design, new hardscape, games, tables, and benches?

- 7. Problems: The taxpayers’ money should be spent cleaning up the actual natural problems on Little Falls Parkway.** The Capital Crescent Trail is used by tens of thousands. The trail needs to be widened and the shoulders reinforced. Invasive vines which threaten the Parkway itself should be cleared. Dead trees and fallen trunks should be removed. The dead foliage is a danger to those that use the trail. The stream that runs through should be naturalized.

- 8. Compliance: The Parks Department has not been in compliance with the guidelines implemented by the Capper-Crampton Act of 1930 when this Parkway was designated by the Federal Government.** The National Capital Planning Commission requires a review process before any major changes to the roadways are made. The Parks Department has determined that narrowing the roadway from four lanes to two is not a “major” change. Community members think otherwise. Based on its actions to date, the Parks Department intends to delay all the steps in the review process until June 2023. By that time, when Parks will finally ask for community input, the hardscape will be finished and communities will not have any influence as to the impact of the new traffic lanes or park. It will be a done deal.

9. Lose-lose: Michael Riley, the Director of the Parks Department has described the development of Little Falls Linear Park as a “win-win” situation. This analysis is based on the false proposition that the only alternative is to close the Parkway. But from the surrounding communities’ perspective this is a lose-lose situation. **Lose:** Neighborhoods get an unwanted amenity in an area that already has an abundance of parkland. **Lose:** Surrounding neighborhoods lose a well-used scenic stretch of roadway that is a vital commuter route between the two urbanized areas of Westbard and Bethesda. Neighborhoods get unsafe traffic with cut-through commuters looking for the fastest way to get from Massachusetts Avenue to downtown Bethesda and vice versa.

Please take note of our valid concerns. Stop the continuing work on Little Falls Parkway until nearby communities can have an open hearing led by the Montgomery County Parks Department. The Parks Department should respond to our questions and concerns with detailed verifiable data. We need an in-depth discussion of safety issues, environmental studies, traffic impacts, and a transparent financial accounting for this park, which is not asked for nor needed.

CCCFH website: www.cccfhmd.org

Representing the Communities of Brookdale, Chevy Chase Village, Chevy Chase West, Drummond, 4800 Chevy Chase Drive Condominium, Kenwood, Kenwood Condominium, Kenwood Forest II, Kenwood House Cooperative, Little Falls Place, Somerset, Somerset House Condominiums, Springfield, Sumner Citizens Association, Village of Friendship Heights, Westbard Mews, Westmoreland, Westwood Mews, and Wood Acres