

Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights

August 7, 2020

The Hon. Jamie Raskin, Congressman
412 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: The Integrity of Process in Democratic Governance.

Dear Congressman Raskin:

Our organization, the Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights (CCCFH), represents 20 communities on planning on zoning matters in Montgomery County. We have been doing so for half a century.

We believe that integrity of process is fundamental to successfully functioning democratic governance. We have recently experienced a process that was autocratic and as such was atypical of Montgomery County conduct, deeply offensive, and engendering distrust of public policy. With that in mind we solicit your advice and your assistance if possible.

The proximate matter is a decision taken unilaterally by the Montgomery County Parks & Planning Dept. and achieved via Planning Board approved deferral, without public input. This was contrary to explicit public input and a prior Planning Board decision and directive. Traffic congestion accessing downtown Bethesda is severe, especially along Wisconsin Ave. A second corridor under the control of the Parks Dept., Little Falls Parkway, is a major traffic route for residents and commuters from River Road, Massachusetts Ave., areas west, and areas surrounding the Parkway. The attachment illustrates the situation. It is anomalous that the LFP is under control of the Parks Department, which seems to consider it to merely be a park rather than a major busy traffic route for residents and commuters.

In 2017 without notice to the public and without community involvement, the Parks Dept. reduced Little Falls Parkway (LFP) from four lanes to two at a mid-block crossing of the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT). This was done subsequent to a bicycle fatality at the crossing. Parks then developed and in charrettes presented three permanent alternatives for the CCT/LFP crossing – a bridge (exorbitantly expensive), crossing at a nearby traffic signal (only 150' distant), and continuing to cross at the mid-block, all with a permanent constriction of Little Falls Parkway from four to two lanes. Parks polled the public for its preferred alternative. The preference was for a bridge, but until that could be funded the public preference was for crossing at the nearby traffic signal.

Then, on June 13, 2019, the Planning Board held a hearing on the alternatives with public input, and the Commission decided to implement the crossing at the nearby traffic signal and directed the Parks Dept. in so doing to restore the LFP to four lanes. The vote was four to one with the Chair dissenting.

It turns out that the charrettes, the poll and the hearing had little meaning on the outcome. Parks & Planning had no intention of proceeding with any alternative other than the mid-block crossing with permanent closure of two lanes. This became apparent upon learning that Parks Dept. had prepared 30% complete construction drawings at considerable expense for the mid-block crossing two months prior to the June 13 hearing and in complete disregard of the public preference for the signal crossing expressed by the poll previously taken on the alternatives.

**Representing the Communities of Brookdale, Chevy Chase Village, Chevy Chase West, Drummond,
Glen Echo Heights, Green Acres, Kenwood, Kenwood Condominium, Kenwood Forest II,
Kenwood House Cooperative, Kenwood Place Condominium, Somerset, Somerset House Condominiums, Springfield,
Sumner Village, Village of Friendship Heights, Westbard Mews, Westmoreland,
Westwood Mews, and Wood Acres**

The Parks Dept. achieved their end in a September 12 Planning Board work session on capital budgets without public testimony. The alleged cost of the signal crossing was arbitrarily inflated, and that alternative was deferred to an indefinite period beyond 2026, i.e., for all practical purposes, the temporary mid-block crossing became permanent.

The argument for the mid-block crossing was said to be made on the grounds of safety and cost. This is specious.

Safety:

- The signal crossing meets the County policy of Vision Zero requirements according to Parks Dept.
- Arlington Rd. is used with the signal crossing for vehicular access to downtown Bethesda. It has no residents.
- Parks & Planning ignored the danger of increased traffic diverted as a result of lane reductions to densely populated Hillandale Rd. This street has many families with children. How does this comport with Vision Zero?
- It is a priori obvious that the intersection of Arlington Road with Bradley Blvd. (state hwy. – commercial buildings at the intersection) is much safer than the intersection of Hillandale Rd. with Bradley Blvd. (residential – many pedestrians). How does this comport with Vision Zero?
- Parks & Planning ignored the danger of increased traffic diverted as a result of lane reductions through neighboring Kenwood with its many walkers and which has no sidewalks. How does this comport with Vision Zero?

Cost:

- No account is given to the costs to Montgomery County DOT that will be incurred as a result of diverting traffic to other streets to increase safety there. The street constriction was presented as a fait accompli to MC DOT.
- Substantial funds are being invested in the “temporary” crossing given the long-term nature projected for “temporary.”
- No cost estimate was made for a simplified crossing at the nearby traffic signal as was proposed by the community and endorsed by the Planning Board June 13 decision.

It is also worth noting:

- Parks & Planning conducted its traffic study taking into consideration only current conditions.
- It took no account of the huge increase in development planned for Bethesda.
- It took no account of the major increase in development at Westbard along River Road.
- It ignored the role of the Little Falls Parkway as a major corridor not only now but in the future.
- Parks & Planning did not consult the MC DOT traffic master plan nor involve MC DOT in its planning.

The consequence of all of this is removal of a minor inconvenience to bicyclists, but at the cost of decreased safety for residents and pedestrians, increased future traffic congestion, increased costs to MC DOT, and greater difficulty in accessing downtown Bethesda.

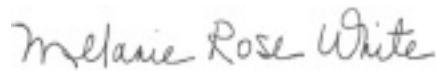
It is of interest that via Public Information Act we requested all communications from Parks & Planning on this subject and requested the same from MC DOT. MC DOT responded graciously and promptly, whereas Parks & Planning has advised us that there will be a considerable cost to us and that it will not be waived. CCCFH has been active in planning and zoning matters in Montgomery County for half a century, and has always conducted its discourse with professionalism. The refusal to provide a waiver is inappropriate given the long history of the organization and its constructive engagement. This is the third time we have requested information.

The Parks Dept. never reached out to meet with us, which has been very disappointing to the citizens. We reached out several times and we been totally ignored by an agency with which we had a working relationship over many years.

Given that the Parks Dept. is making permanent improvements to the “temporary” mid-block crossing, it would fulfill at least part of the Planning Board’s vote and the public’s preference if the roadway were restored to four lanes.

We look forward to any advice or assistance that you may be able to provide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melanie Rose White".

Melanie Rose-White, Chair
Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights

Attachment

cc: Rep. Doris Matsui

Little Falls Parkway is a four lane primary corridor to Bethesda and Old Georgetown Rd. for areas immediately south of Bethesda through the regions south and west of Massachusetts Ave.

Old Georgetown Rd.

Bradley Blvd.

Choke Point to Two Lanes Imposed by Parks & Planning

Little Falls Parkway
Arlington Rd.

Wis. Ave.
Severely Congested

River Rd

Massachusetts Ave.

