

UPDATE

CAPITOL CRESCENT TRAIL CROSSING OF LITTLE FALLS PARKWAY

January 15, 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In January 2017 the current road diet was created without notification, public signage, or public input.
- On June 13, 2019 the Planning Board voted to reconfigure the Trail crossing to the Arlington Road signal with retention of four traffic lanes on Little Falls Parkway. This was done with public input. According to the Parks Department the crossing at the signal is in full compliance with Vision Zero.
- On August 28, 2019 all stakeholders gathered in a positive meeting at the site with concurrence on the draft design for the crossing at the signal, and with expectation that planning would go forward as directed by the Planning Board June 13th meeting.
- On September 12, 2019 the Planning Board in a work session rendered the June 13 decision moot by deferring implementation indefinitely beyond 2026 and using a placeholder that inflated the cost by more than \$500,000. At the discretion of the Chair, The public was not given a chance to testify.

Consequences:

- The current situation is semi-permanent.
- There are no plans for the implementation of the June 13th directive from the Planning Board.
- Taxpayer money will be expended on what may be an unsatisfying solution since a comprehensive traffic plan was not conducted taking into account long-term growth in downtown Bethesda, and Westbard.
- Public input was meaningless, and the best interests of the public with regard to safety and traffic were disregarded, e.g., diversion of traffic too heavily residential Hillandale Road.

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THE SITUATION

June 13 Planning Board Decision:

The Planning Board's laudable decision on June 13 to reconfigure the Capitol Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway crossing to the traffic signal at the intersection of Arlington Rd. & Little Falls Parkway was greatly appreciated. That decision:

- Enhanced the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians utilizing the trail by redirecting the crossing to a signal light
- Enhanced the safety of the many hundreds of residents along Hillandale Road by eliminating diversion of traffic to Hillandale from the congested "road diet" road constriction on Little Falls Parkway to Hillandale (the situation is illustrated in Exhibit A – CCT & Hillandale Rd. - Safety)
- Retained the four traffic lanes which provided primary access to downtown Bethesda and old Georgetown Road for the many thousands of residents south and west of River Road and Massachusetts Avenue,

- Called for a serious look at real costs of a practical bicycle and pedestrian bridge crossing four lanes on Little Falls Parkway from an outside firm with expertise in bridge design and construction.

August 28 Stakeholder Meeting at the Site:

All stakeholders – DOT, Communities, CCT Trail Board and Parks Dept. – were present. A draft design was reviewed for relocation of the CCT to the signal at Arlington Blvd. It adapted the plan suggested by the Communities, and was simpler than the Parks Dept. original design for the signal alternative. Since it was simpler, one would reasonably assume that it was also less costly than Parks’ original design. The meeting was positive with affirmative support for all stakeholders cooperating in moving the plan forward.

September 12 Planning Board Nullification of the June 13 Decision:

The Planning Board’s work session this past September 12 effectively nullified the decisions of June 13. The Board voted to defer reconfiguration of the trail to an indeterminate period beyond 2026, i.e., sometime in the very distant future, thereby rendering the Parks Dept. current “temporary,” preferred design effectively permanent.

The Escalating Estimated Cost of the Trail Crossing at the Signal

1. \$1.5 million (in 2018) - The cost of the trail crossing at the signal (as presented in exhibit D “Comparison Table of Alternatives” handout by Parks Dept., 2018) was estimated at \$1.5 million. Parks added a Trail route along Arlington Rd. and one cutting across the entire wooded area and Trail to reach the Hillandale community north of the swimming pool. This had previously been rejected by both the Planning Board and the Communities but was added back by Parks Dept. anyway. The community proposal was simpler and almost certainly less expensive. (See Exhibit C – Community – Simplified Signal Crossing).
2. \$1.99 million (on June 13th, 2019) - From the web, for the signal alternative, the cost estimate used for the June 13th hearing was \$1,990,000.
3. \$2.5 million (on Sept. 12th, 2019) - The cost of the reconfiguration of the Trail to the Traffic Signal at Arlington Rd. was cited as \$2.5 million with a comment that it might well be higher, which seems on the face of it to be exorbitant. This inflated and unsupported cost was the number used to nullify the June 13th Board decision.
 - a. Upon receipt of a request by a Board member for provision of detail, none was forthcoming. Prior requests for that information by the same Board member had not been complied with.
 - b. The Citizens Coordinating Committee on Friendship Heights has formally requested the cost estimates supporting the \$2.5 million figure and for provision of that information by October 11 (see Exhibit B – CCCFH Request for Costs). That has not been forthcoming nor has there even been any acknowledgment of the request.
 - c. The plan supported by the communities and recommended by the Board on June 13th should have resulted in a cost reduction to a figure less than \$1.990 million. How is it that the placeholder for capital budgeting ballooned to \$2.5 million from the June 13th \$1,990,000 estimate? Why not a lesser figure? Where are the supporting numbers? I would appear that the Boards June 13th decision, not in accord with the Parks Dept. preference, wasn’t given serious consideration – is that correct?

The Consequence of the Inflated Cost

1. Presented with the very high but unverified and unsupported cost of the reconfiguration the commissioners were alarmed. They considered that less expensive projects would be bumped aside in favor of the realignment to the signalized intersection. Hence they voted to defer the project and retain the current temporary solution. *But why defer indefinitely? Why not revisit in a year or two? The June 13th decision has been effectively, deliberately torpedoed by unsupported numbers.*
2. During the Sept. 12th work session the Parks Dept. allocated \$50,000 from Vision Zero funds (not part of the capital budget) to build a speed table at the existing crossing. It was revealing of the mindset at work when discussion of the cost of the speed table came up. Parks Dept. made a passing comment to the effect that one could consider the \$50,000 to be a permanent investment as the situation is studied again in the future, i.e., the implication was that from the Parks Dept. point of view the current temporary configuration is likely to be permanent

Bridge Design

It is also of note that the June 13th directive to obtain a practical bridge design (the safest alternative of all) and real costs thereof from an outside firm was ignored by the Parks Dept. It was apparent that nothing had been done on that matter. The Previous Parks Depart. estimate was repeated to the Board. A Board member requested details on the estimate and none were forthcoming.

Flow of Auto Traffic

The effect on the flow of auto traffic along this primary corridor to downtown Bethesda and old Georgetown Road by a permanent chokepoint, “road diet,” does not appear to be a consideration in spite of the projected 10 million-square-foot growth in downtown Bethesda plus the very considerable growth soon to occur at Westbard. *Parks Dept. Traffic study does not take into consideration future projections of traffic.*

Safety of Hillandale Road Residents

With respect to safety of the residential population along Hillandale Road and the increased risks to residents caused by traffic diverted to Hillandale Road by the chokepoints on Little Falls Pkwy., *Parks Dept. indicated that they would place speed bumps on Hillandale Road. This is of little effect in that the vast majority of Hillandale residents live beyond the portion of Hillandale Road which is controlled by the Parks Department.*

Concern With Regard to Process:

1. *No Public input, January, 2017:* The current “road diet” constriction from four lanes to two lanes was implemented with no notice to the public, no signage on Little Falls Parkway, and no public involvement or public process.
2. *Public input, 2018:* The Parks Dept. conducted charrettes presenting three alternatives, all of which retained the constriction (“road diet”) from four lanes to two. The alternatives: 1) retain the current crossing, 2) cross at the Arlington Road/Little Falls Parkway signal, and 3) build a bridge over Little Falls Parkway (see Exhibit D – Comparison Table of Alternatives).
3. *Public Input 2018/early 2019 – poll:* The Parks Dept. conducted a poll to ascertain the public preference among the three alternatives. *Result: the public preferred the crossing at the signal, and the bridge over retention of the existing crossing.*
4. *Public Input June 13th, 2019:* In the course of the public hearing on June 13, the public testified recommending a simplified and safer configuration (again - see Exhibit C –

Community – Simplified Signal Crossing) and the Planning Board took that testimony into consideration resulting in the common sense decision made in that session, i.e., create the crossing at the Arlington Rd./Little Falls Parkway traffic signal and retain four lanes for the traffic corridor.

5. No Public Input, Sept. 12th, and June 13th Decision Nullified: There was no public input on the September 12 Planning Board meeting. It was a “work session” and as such public input was at the discretion of the Chair. To our knowledge, we were the only citizens present in the room along with the Capital Crescent Trail Board Chair. As a consequence the decision was reached that rendered the public’s preference, and the June 13th Board decision moot.

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CONCLUSIONS

How can safety be the Parks Dept. highest priority given the decision made at the September 12th Planning Board work session? From what we have learned a crossing at the light would be the safest means (absent a bridge) for all users of the trail to traverse Little Falls Parkway. Negotiating the trail configuration at the traffic signal forces all users to stop or nearly so. Whereas, while users are required to stop at the current crossing, they rarely if ever do so. How does that provide movement toward the goal of “Vision Zero?” Isn’t being forced to stop safer than simply slowing down?

What now? It is essential to pursue the following:

- Obtain a realistic cost estimate for practical, simpler, less costly designs for the bridge and the crossing at the signal. The effective nullification of the June 13th Board decision was based on cost with a placeholder cited as \$2.5 million. That figure was grossly in excess of the June 13th estimated cost of \$1.990 million which was very likely considerably in excess of the suggested simplified plan.
- Why has the Parks Dept. never even responded to the request for the cost estimates? If the revised design for the signal was not even considered when the directive was to proceed with that design, then the public needs to know that.
- It is with disappointment that we are filing a Freedom of Information Act requesting a full disclosure of the money that has been spent to date and a justification of spending projected taxpayers’ money. Nothing further should be done in this project till all facts are available.
- Continue to pursue configuration of the crossing at the signal – best compliance with Vision Zero.
 - Safest for all trail users
 - Increases safety for Hillandale Road residents
 - Retains traffic corridor to downtown Bethesda and old Georgetown Road
- Request a comprehensive traffic analysis by MC DOT of the effect of the Little Falls Road diet on current and future projections of traffic flow for the subject area taking into account regional growth and diversion of traffic into alternative routes with the consequent effect on safety along those routes.
- Work to get public input to the process.
- Keep the communities informed.

Unilaterally deferring the implementation of the June 13th decision to relocate the Trail crossing to the signal for many years into the future resulted in making the Parks Dept. preferred solution, i.e., retaining the “temporary” crossing and road constriction, permanent for all practical purposes.

Respect of process is at the core of democracy. This exercise has ignored the public and its clearly expressed, Vision Zero, safer preference for the signal crossing which the Planning

Board endorsed in the June 13th hearing. Wherever the Trail crossing might be eventually located, to shut down the public and railroad the decision to achieve the bureaucratic preference when that preference is not in the public's best interest is just plain wrong.

Residents need to speak out in against the exclusion of the public in a decision that affects many thousands, and in support of inclusion of public opinion. We will provide more on that shortly.

Attachments:

UPDATE REPORT EXHIBIT A - CCCFH REQUEST FOR COSTS

UPDATE REPORT EXHIBIT B - COMMUNITY - SIMPLIFIED SIGNAL CROSSING

UPDATE REPORT EXHIBIT C - PARKS DEPT'S COMPARISON TABLE OF ALTERNATIVES