



July 14, 2016

MEMORANDUM

July 7, 2016

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Michael F. Riley, Director of Parks *MFR*
Mitra Pedoeem, Acting Deputy Director, Administration
Dr. John E. Hench, Ph.D., Chief, Park Planning and Stewardship Division (PPSD) *JHench*

FROM: Charles S. Kines, Planner Coordinator (PPSD) *CSK*
Brooke Farquhar, Supervisor (PPSD) *Brooke Farquhar*

SUBJECT: **Worksession #2, Countywide Park Trails Plan Amendment**

Board members are asked to bring the Public Hearing Draft (February 3, 2016) of the plan amendment to the worksession on July 14.

Recommended Planning Board Actions:

- Give direction on outstanding issues following worksession #1.
- Approve text changes concerning trail user designations on page 46 of the Public Hearing Draft.
- Approve schedule for the final worksession and plan approval.
- Approve priorities for topics to bring back to the Planning Board following plan approval.

Outstanding Issues

Staff requests the Board's guidance on the following issues:

1. **Finding and mapping unsanctioned trails – and then bringing them into the trails system.** In past worksessions, including the one on May 12, staff recommended to the Board to postpone discussion of this topic until after the approval of the plan amendment, so that we have time to map and evaluate the unsanctioned trails in areas of the County with gaps in service and a need to expand the trail system. Staff is implementing a systematic process for evaluating unsanctioned trails to determine whether each is or can be made sustainable, and therefore could become part of the official, sanctioned network. Staff intends to proceed with this methodology, focusing initial efforts on parks in the Upper Paint Branch and Cabin John watersheds. Over the next year or two, staff will focus on sanctioning trails in areas of low levels of service and in areas that present opportunities to expand service. Some will be part of new plans in areas such as the Upper Paint Branch and Cabin John Stream Valley Park and others will amend existing plans such as Wheaton Regional Park. The first priority is Upper Paint Branch and Cabin John.

Upper Paint Branch Trail Plan and the Cabin John Trail Plan

Immediately following the approval of this plan amendment, staff will present to the Planning Board a draft objectives and outreach report for new trail plans for parkland in the Upper Paint Branch and Cabin John watersheds. These new trail plans will involve mapping and evaluating all unsanctioned trails in these areas of the county, and propose a strategy for establishing a sanctioned trail network that balances park stewardship with trail access, and provides connectivity to key destinations.

- October 2016 – Present draft objectives and outreach reports to the Planning Board
 - November/December – Public Outreach/Meetings
 - Winter 2017 – Staff writing/plan preparation
 - Early Spring 2017 – Present staff draft plans to the Planning Board
2. **24 Hour Trail Use.** This issue is being dealt with within the context of the ongoing bi-county effort to update the Park Rules and Regulations. Accordingly, staff seeks Board concurrence on removing this topic from this plan.
 3. **Identify changes to trail corridor plans as a result of this plan amendment.** During the worksession, staff will present and discuss a map showing any recommended changes to Trail Corridor Plans resulting from this plan amendment.
 4. At worksession #1, the Board requested **a map(s) of all existing trails, and also existing and proposed Loops and Links trails, open to: 1) bicycling; 2) hiking/walking; and 3) horseback riding.** During worksession #2, staff will present and discuss these maps.

Text Changes

The following changes are recommended for page 46 of the Public Hearing Draft (February 3, 2016) of the plan amendment.

~~Strike out~~ = text to be deleted; [brackets] = text to be added

Trail User Designations

This plan amendment recommends, where appropriate and consistent with current or planned programming, all natural surface trails designed and built sustainably should be open to all non-motorized trail user groups.

All trails have impacts to natural resources. Sustainable natural surface trails are capable of accommodating all user groups – hikers, mountain bikers and horses – in such a way that minimizes impacts to natural resources. When trails are sustainably built, used in a responsible manner, and monitored and maintained according to current M-NCPPC Department of Parks standards, [staff believes all users can be accommodated. [The available evidence indicates that hikers and mountain bikes have approximately the same degree of environmental impact. While horses, because of their weight and wider gait, potentially have greater impact than hikers or bikers, natural surface trails built in accordance with contemporary sustainability standards generally can accommodate all user groups.] ~~this plan purports that hikers and mountain bikers have the same impacts to the trail tread. Horses, because of their weight and wider gait, have potentially more impact than hikers and mountain bikers.~~

~~Programming that may preclude multi-use include nature centers and also historic/cultural trails such as the Underground Railroad Experience Trail. Additionally, there may be trails where limited use is warranted to provide a unique experience for a particular user group, or where parks have been~~

~~established as limited use. Examples include bicycle skills areas as well as Woodstock Equestrian Park. For these parks or facilities, limited use is considered acceptable. And finally, there are certain trails or parks for which hiking only is appropriate, including trails near Little Bennett Regional Park campground as well as trails used for natural, cultural or historic interpretive programming.~~

[That said, there may be rare situations during which use would be limited to one or more specific user groups. These situations would be based upon one or more of the following criteria:

- Achieve environmental sustainability
- Minimize/mitigate impacts to cultural resources
- Avoid user conflicts
 - Public safety
 - Provide a specific type of user experience

Exceptions to the general policy favoring multiuse access should be based on specific and objective evidence wherever possible. In cases where limitations are needed in order to avoid overuse of trails or user conflicts, strong consideration should be given to providing multiuse access to other trails in the vicinity.]

Plan Amendment Schedule

Worksession #3 and Plan Approval– September 2016

- Review final text changes and graphics/maps, as well as appendices
- Approve final plan

Priorities for Other Trail Topics

After the approval of this plan amendment, staff will schedule separate worksessions on the following topics:

1. Propose amendments to existing park plans and policy documents for the purpose of converting limited-use natural surface park trails to sanctioned, sustainable multi-use natural surface park trails.
2. Draft a set of operational guidelines for weather-related, environmental, seasonal and/or safety related closures of natural surface trail segments on M-NCPPC parkland.
3. Consider developing a strategy for administering recorded/official trail easements on private land for which M-NCPPC has an identified role or interest.

2016 Countywide Park Trails Plan Amendment

CC:

M-NCPPC, Department of Parks

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