

THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION
8787 Georgia Avenue • Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3760

October 14, 2004

MCPB Item No. 4
October 21, 2004

Memorandum

To: Montgomery County Planning Board

Via: Jeff Zyontz, Chief
Countywide Planning

From: John E. Hench, Ph.D., Supervisor
Park Planning and Resources Analysis Unit

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Park Planning and Resources Analysis Unit

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Subject: Planning Board Work Session: Public Hearing Draft Blockhouse Point Conservation Park Master Plan -- *Review Public Hearing Testimony and Approve Plan with Recommended Changes*

Recommendations

Staff recommends that the Planning Board take the following actions:

1. Adopt the Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park with the addition of the Trail Concept Plan (**Figure 1**).
2. Amend the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Corridor Plan (M-NCPPC, 2002) to reflect the trail recommendations in the Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park.

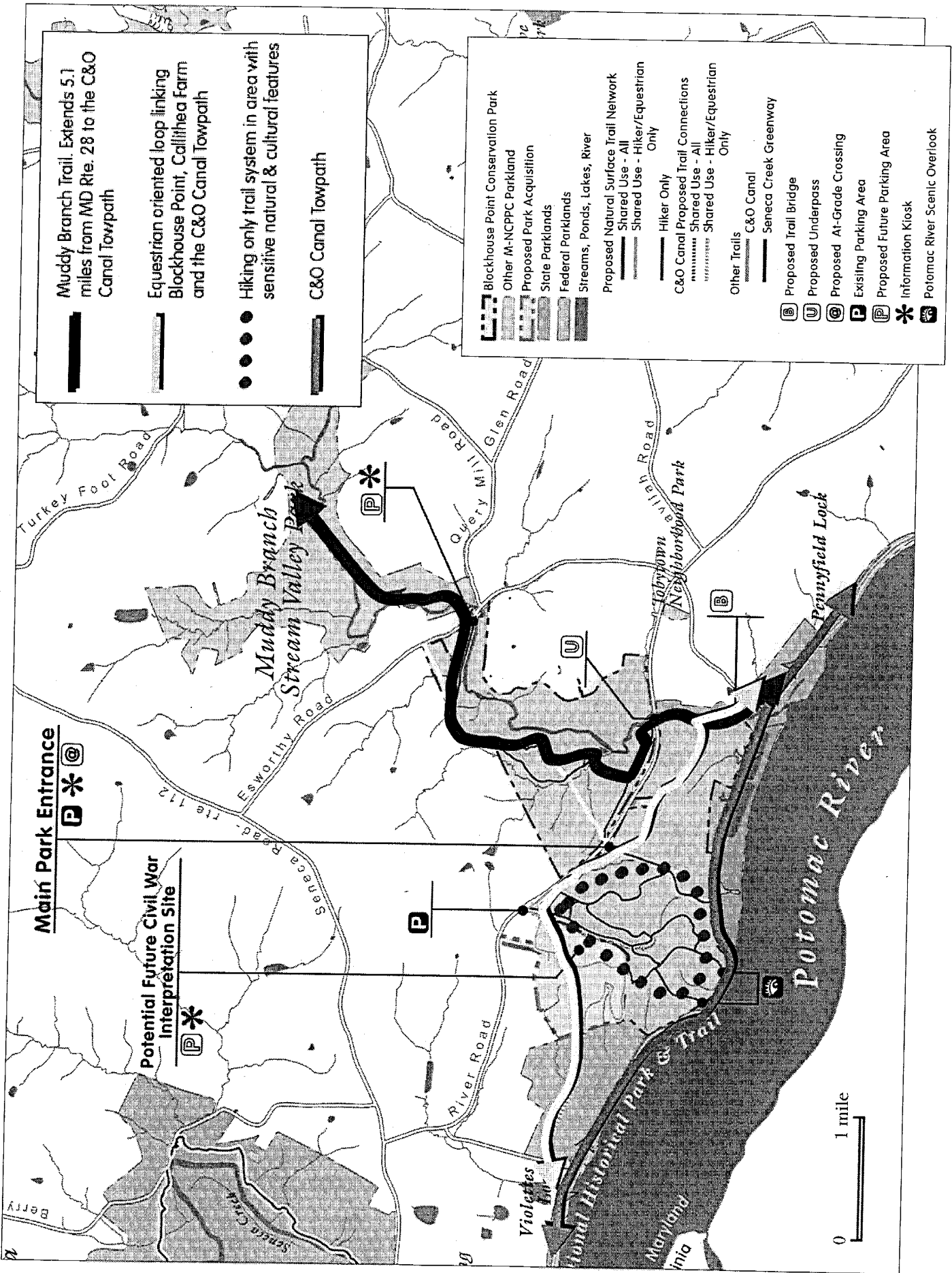


Figure 1 - Blockhouse Point Conservation Park Trail Concept Plan

Background

The Public Hearing for this plan was held on December 18, 2003. A work session was held with the Planning Board on October 7, 2004. The work session addressed the following topics:

Topic 1: Overview of staff recommended Planning Board Actions.

Topic 2: Staff responses to Planning Board questions during the Public Hearing.

Topic 3: Staff responses to Public Hearing Testimony.

During the work session, three of five Planning Board members indicated that equestrians should have access to the two Potomac River overlooks via an existing gate on the south side of Callithea Farm. This access would require modifying the Trail Concept Plan presented herein by designating select trails between the gate and the overlooks as *Natural Surface Shared Use – Hiker/Equestrian Only* rather than *Hiker Only* as proposed by staff in **Figure 1**. The Board majority also indicated that equestrian access to the overlooks should be by permit only and that the permit system should be administered by staff at Callithea Farm. Park staff would be responsible for policing equestrians to ensure that they were properly permitted. Park staff would also be responsible for monitoring the condition of the trails, the overlooks, and adjacent natural, archaeological, and historical resources as well as overseeing maintenance and restoration efforts as necessary. The Board majority did express some degree of flexibility with regard to allowing access to either one or both of the overlooks, allowing equestrian access to one or some segments of the trails suggested by staff as *Hiker Only*, and trail closure to equestrians during periods of inclement weather.

As argued on October 7th, staff believes equestrians should not be granted access to the Potomac River overlooks.

The Park Recreation and Open Space Master Plan, *i.e.*, PROS Plan, (M-NCPPC, 1998) defines conservation parks on pages 24-25 as generally large areas that preserve specific natural, archaeological, or historical features; are typically located in upland areas (but also include stream valleys); and are acquired specifically for environmental preservation purposes. Conservation parks may include outstanding examples of natural communities, self-sustaining populations of rare, threatened, endangered or Watch-list plant or animal species, or unique archaeological and historical resources. Given the sensitive nature of resources in Conservation Parks, development is very limited and generally restricted to passive recreational activities such as hiking on natural surface trails, fishing, informal picnicking, and nature study. Opportunities for interpretation of the protected environmental, archaeological, and historical resources are maximized through natural-surface trails and staff and/or volunteer led programs.

There are currently 16 conservation parks totaling 3,316 acres in the County's 32,164-acre park system. The largest conservation park is Hoyle's Mill Conservation Park (766 acres) whereas the smallest is Goshen Elm Conservation Park (about three tenths of an acre). Conservation parks include five of the park system's 12 best natural areas; these Conservation Parks are Hoyle's Mill Conservation Park, Potomac Serpentine Barrens Conservation Park, River Road Shale Barrens Conservation Park, Rachel Carson

Conservation Park, and Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. The other best natural areas are located in stream valley parks and regional parks.

Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is one of top five conservation parks in the County park system. Blockhouse Point contains a variety of exceptional resources including mature upland forest, floodplain forest, palustrine wetlands, streams, river-rock outcrops, grand views of the C&O Canal National Historic Park and the Potomac River, and important archaeological and historic sites. The majority of important archaeological and historical sites in the park are associated with the Potomac River overlooks and river-rock outcrops. To date, nine species of threatened, endangered, or Watch-list species of plants have been identified in the park along with 25 species of fish, 9 species of amphibians, 4 species of reptiles, 39 species of nesting birds, and 10 species of mammals. In addition to its rich natural history, the park also contains some important remnants of American history. The 19th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry built three blockhouses in 1862 to guard Violet's Lock and Pennyfield Lock on the C&O Canal. The earthen rampart remains of one of the blockhouses are located in the park. In fact, the original Greek Cross design of the blockhouse is discernable to the careful observer. The blockhouse was part of a much larger military complex called the "Camp at Muddy Branch," which also included an array of military roads, springhouses, officers' and enlisted men's quarters, bake ovens, and other yet unidentified support structures.

The acquisition of Blockhouse Point Conservation Park was completed in the late 1960s. Federal dollars from the Land and Water Conservation Fund were used to pay for the acquisition. The park was acquired to protect the scenic landscape, protect wildlife habitat, protect clean water, protect historic and archaeological resources, and provide compatible recreational opportunities. Staff believes that the Trail Concept Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park (**Figure 1**) provides compatible *trail-based* recreational opportunities that will also ensure protection of the park's natural, archaeological, and historical resources for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Park, Recreation, and Open Space Survey for Montgomery County (M-NCPPC, 1997) revealed Montgomery County residents appreciate the importance of conservation and value the protection and preservation of natural, archaeological, and historical resources. Slightly over 75% of the survey respondents indicated that they had visited a County park in the last year (*i.e.*, 1996) to enjoy nature or the outdoors. Protecting wildlife was a much higher priority of the survey respondents (*i.e.*, 73.1%) than building new recreation facilities (*i.e.*, 17.5%). Of 21 recreational activities surveyed, walking or hiking to enjoy nature was the most popular activity engaged in by County residents whereas horseback riding was the second least popular. The more recent Park User Satisfaction Survey (M-NCPPC, 2003) reaffirmed that natural area use continues to be the most popular recreational activity of County residents.

Balancing the protection and preservation of natural areas and cultural resources while concurrently providing a variety of recreational activities for County park users is perhaps the greatest challenge we face as stewards of the County park system. Toward this end, staff have assembled and mapped an extensive amount of information on natural, archaeological, and historical resources over the past decade. This

information includes the location of rare, threatened, and endangered species of plants and animals, the relative size and health of their populations, and threats to their continued existence. Staff have also identified and mapped concentrations of rare, threatened, and endangered species (Biodiversity Areas) as well as the Best Natural Areas throughout the park system. Monitoring efforts allow staff to up-date this information on somewhat regular basis. Not surprisingly, staff found that these important resources occur not just in a few Conservation Parks (as listed above), but a limited number of stream valley and regional parks as well.

Staff focuses stewardship efforts on the most sensitive natural, archaeological, and historical resources while concurrently working to implement park improvements through the Capital Improvements Program or Public/Private Partnerships in areas with the greatest recreational need. Staff have recognized that areas in the “down-county” area often have the highest recreational need. Unfortunately, these areas also have the least amount of developable parkland -- that is parkland that is not environmentally constrained. Nevertheless, staff have successfully advocated for park improvements (e.g. the Matthew Henson Hiker-Biker Trail) in environmentally constrained areas (e.g., the Matthew Henson Greenway) by demonstrating balance through park planning and park management efforts on a countywide basis. To be successful, this process requires regular dialogue and periodic negotiations with a variety of park user groups -- including those interested in nature, environmental issues, hiking, biking, horse-back riding, field sports, archaeology, and American history. No one user group ever comes away from the negotiating table completely satisfied; but, by-in-large they do come away willing to support staff’s proposals for balancing stewardship and recreation across the park system.

Staff was aware through meetings with various user groups interested in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, that equestrians primarily wanted three things (in priority order): 1) formalized natural surface trail connections from Callithea Farm and Blockhouse Point Conservation Park to the C&O Canal National Historical Park; 2) a smaller “internal” loop trail for shorter rides; and 3) access to the two Potomac River overlooks. The Trail Concept Plan (**Figure 1**) addresses the equestrian’s top two priorities. Staff would like to make the Planning Board aware that with regard to the first priority, the National Park Service was initially reluctant to grant the formalized connections given the history of unauthorized equestrian access across National Park property west of Callithea Farm and equestrian damage to the berm of the C&O Canal on the east side of Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. Staff worked hard to meet the wants and desires of equestrians at Callithea Farm and delivered their two highest priorities.

Staff believe that a decision to allow permitted equestrian access to the Potomac River overlooks in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park will negatively impact important and sensitive natural, archaeological, and historical resources; user groups interested in nature, environmental issues, archaeology, and American history believe this as well. Staff also believe that a Planning Board decision to allow equestrian access to one or both of the Potomac River overlooks will make it much more difficult to successfully advocate for park improvements located in environmentally sensitive areas elsewhere in the County, especially in the “down-county” area where there is the greatest

recreational need. The decision will also likely leave park users interested in nature, hiking, biking, history, and archaeology feeling "short-changed" as well.

The Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning currently offers five equestrian facilities in the County park system: Meadowbrook Stables in Rock Creek Stream Valley Unit 1, Wheaton Stables in Wheaton Regional Park, the Maryland Horse Center in Potomac, Woodstock Equestrian Park northwest of Poolesville, and the Rickman Therapeutic Riding Center northeast of Poolesville. These facilities are clustered in the southern and western portions of the County. In addition, 76 miles of the County's 118 miles of sanctioned, natural surface trails are open to equestrian use. (Sanctioned trails are defined as those natural surface trails currently existing in County parks that are named, signed, mapped, and regularly maintained.) From staff's perspective, the Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning can not be accused of failing to support the equestrian industry in Montgomery County, even though horse-back riding is one of the least popular, park-based recreational activities participated in by adults, teens, and children (M-NCPPC, 1997).

Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is one the few parks in the system not significantly impacted by non-native exotic invasive plants. Callithea Farm on the other hand is heavily impacted. Staff expects that by opening up the interior of the park to horses originating from Callithea, Blockhouse Point will soon be impacted by non-native invasive plants as well. This is because the seeds of many plant species are transported on horse's hooves, can attach to horse's hair, and are in horse's droppings.

Staff in the Shady Grove Area of the Northern Park Region provides maintenance at Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. The same staff are also responsible for 20 local parks, four stream valley parks, and five other conservation parks as well as the inspection of 123 play equipment units and the Adventure Playground in South Germantown Recreational Park. The primary maintenance activity at Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is the inspection and maintenance of natural surface trails. Staff also maintains the gravel parking lot on River Road. Trail maintenance involves visually inspecting trail surfaces and adjacent areas for hazards, excessive wear and tear, vandalism, washouts, etc., and performing repair work as necessary. Trail volunteers currently assist staff with trail maintenance and repair efforts. The ideal frequency target for trail maintenance and repair at Blockhouse Point is quarterly. Given FY05 budget levels, the current frequency of trail work is semi-annually.

Staff anticipates that Planning Board adoption of the Trail Concept Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park (**Figure 1**) will increase trail maintenance needs in the Shady Grove Area. A major element of the proposed trail plan, *i.e.*, the Muddy Branch natural surface trail, has yet to be built. Staff also anticipates that if the Planning Board allows equestrian access to one or both of the Potomac River overlooks and additional segments of natural surface trails currently proposed as *Hiker Only*, trail monitoring and maintenance needs will increase further still. Staff also believes that periodic monitoring of equestrians for proper permits will be necessary to ensure an acceptable level of program compliance. Given that the Trail Concept Plan (**Figure 1**) allows for equestrian access to Blockhouse Point from three other locations other than Callithea Farm (*i.e.*, the C&O Canal at Pennyfield Lock, the Muddy Branch natural surface trail, and the gravel parking lot on River Road, staff believes this will be a somewhat challenging task.

Staff plans to have estimates of the increased costs for trail monitoring and maintenance, and well as periodic surveys of equestrians for permit compliance by the time of the Planning Board's work session on October 21st.

In closing, staff reiterates that the desire of equestrians from Callithea Farm for access to the Potomac River overlooks should not take precedence over the need to adequately steward sensitive natural, archaeological, and historical resources at these sites. For little gain in the overall quality of equestrian related recreational experiences offered in the park and surrounding area, we risk degrading -- or worse yet losing -- high quality resources that are valued by the current generation of park users and will not doubt be even more highly valued by future generations.

The remainder of the current packet is identical to that which was previously submitted to the Planning Board in preparation for the October 7th work session.

Topic 1: Overview of staff recommended Planning Board Actions.

1. Adopt the Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park with the addition of the Trail Concept Plan (**Figure 1**).
2. Amend the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Corridor Plan (M-NCPPC, 2002) to reflect the trail recommendations of the Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park.

The Trail Concept Plan (**Figure 1**) consists of three major elements:

Element 1

- A Shared Use Natural Surface Trail for Hikers, Equestrians, and Bikers (*i.e.*, *Shared Use – All*) linking the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park, Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, and the C&O Canal National Historic Park.

The major purpose of this element of the plan is to identify a specific location for the segment of the Muddy Branch Natural Surface Trail located in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. This action was specified in the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Corridor Plan (M-NCPPC, 2002).

As requested by members of the environmental community in late October 2003, the alignment is based on staff's best attempts to avoid and/or minimize impacts to environmentally sensitive areas (*i.e.*, streams and their buffers, 100-year floodplains, non-tidal wetlands, steep slopes, highly erodible soils, habitats of rare, threatened, endangered, and Watch-list species, archaeological resources, and historic sites) and avoid additional fragmentation of the high quality forest (**Figure 2**). Between River Road and Esworthy Road, the proposed trail relies to the greatest degree possible on the alignment of old River Road, established non-sanctioned "people's choice" trails, and underground utility rights-of-way. (Non-sanctioned trails are defined as those natural surface trails currently existing in County parks that are not named, signed, mapped, or regularly maintained.) South of River road, the proposed trail utilizes an existing gravel maintenance road originally constructed to allow access to infrastructure associated with the public water supply system.

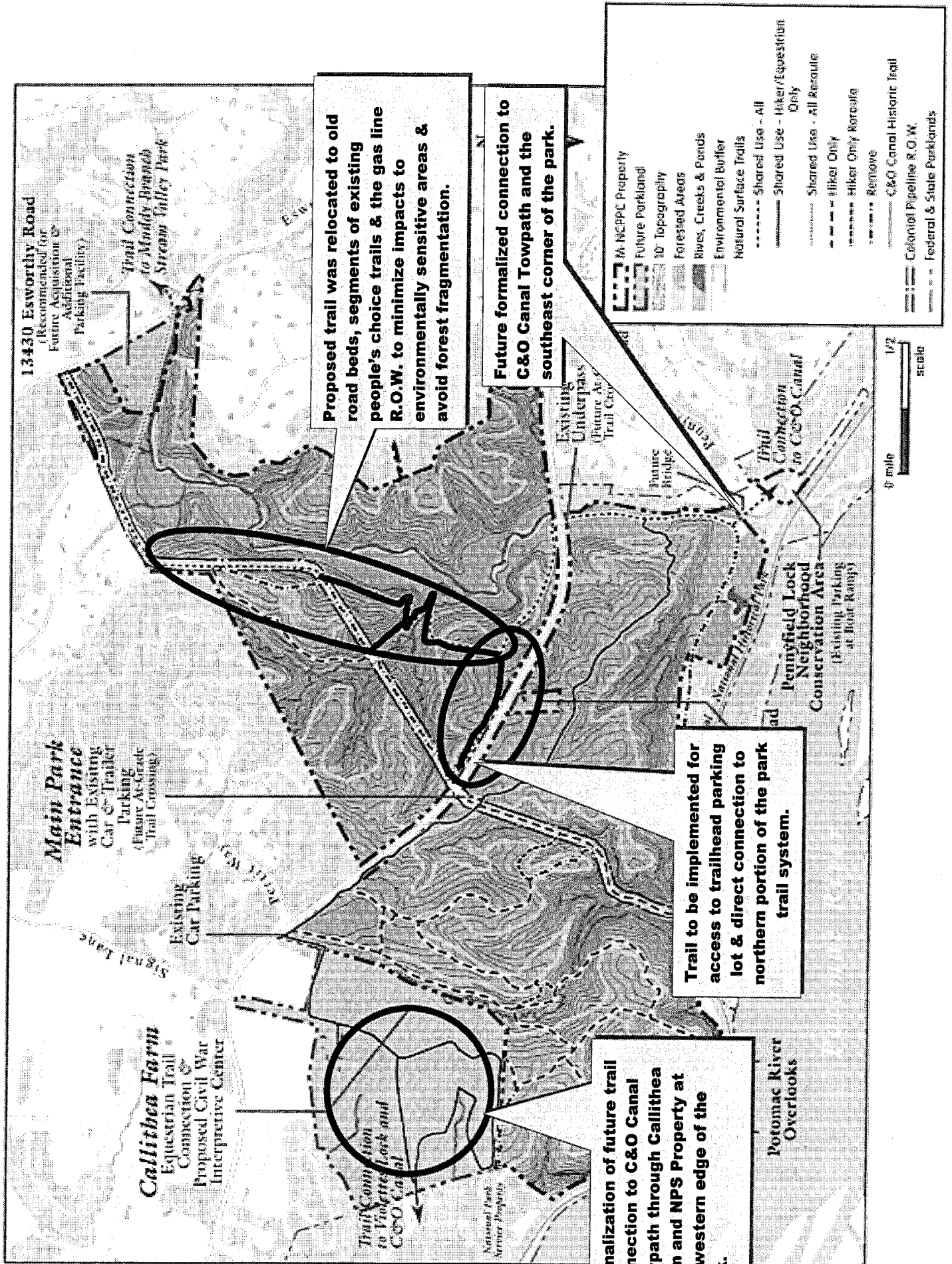


Figure 2 - Staff Changes to Trail Plan Concepts Prior to Public Hearing

Element 2

- A Shared Use Natural Surface Trail for hikers and equestrians (*i.e.*, *Shared Use – Hiker/Equestrian Only*) linking Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, the Commission's newest Equestrian Facility at Callithea Farm, and the C&O Canal National Historic Park.

The major purpose of this element of the plan is to provide a natural surface trail loop for hikers and equestrians linking Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, the C&O Canal National Historic Park between Pennyfield Lock and Violet's Lock, and Callithea Farm.

Thus, the Trail Concept Plan presented herein formally establishes two connections to the C&O Canal National Historic Park for hikers and equestrians (**Figure 2**); whereas the former trail plan *i.e.*, The Trail Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park (M-NCPPC, 1989) recognized only the *potential* for one. This potential connection was shown in the southeast corner of Blockhouse Point Conservation Park immediately adjacent to the C&O Canal National Historic Park and near M-NCPPC's Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area (**Figure 3**).

Staff from M-NCPPC and the National Park Service have agreed that as soon as possible, this trail connection should be improved with a bridge crossing of Muddy Branch that would bring trail users along a very short section of natural surface trail on the east side of Muddy Branch paralleling Pennyfield Lock Road to the C&O Canal. Until that time, trail users will have direct access to the C&O Canal via an existing non-sanctioned "people's choice" trail on the west side of Muddy Branch.

Within Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, the proposed *Shared Use – Hiker/Equestrian Only* trail utilizes an existing natural surface trail roughly paralleling River Road and previously approved for use by hikers and equestrians (M-NCPPC, 1989). Within Callithea Farm, the proposed trail will be "sandwiched" between environmentally sensitive areas and fenced pastures. The loop will also provide equestrians ready access to the natural surface, *Shared Use – All* trail north of River Road in the Muddy Branch Stream Valley.