



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

8787 Georgia Avenue • Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3760

MCPB
ITEM NO. 3
8-4-2005

July 29, 2005

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Jeffrey Zyontz, Chief
Countywide Planning Division JZ / RCH

Richard C. Hawthorne, Chief
Transportation Planning RCH

Callum Murray, Team Leader
Community-Based Planning LC for CM

FROM: Larry Cole: 301-495-4528, for the LC
Park and Planning Department

PROJECT: Falls Road Hiker/Biker Path
From River Road to Dunster Road
CIP No. 506747

REVIEW TYPE: Mandatory Referral No. MR#05806-DPW&T-1

APPLICANT: Montgomery County Department of
Public Works and Transportation

APPLYING FOR: Plan Approval

COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING TEAM AREA: Potomac Subregion

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Staff recommends that the Board approve the proposed project (see Attachment 1: Location Map) with the following comments to DPWT:

1. Ensure that all bus stops within the limits of this project have safe pedestrian access from each side of Falls Road.
2. Ensure that the bus pads proposed to be constructed under this project on the non-trail side of Falls Road will be in a suitable location that will not require reconstruction when a sidewalk is built.
3. For the side of Falls Road not chosen for the trail location, consider adding a sidewalk as a Facility Planning candidate to the FY07-FY12 CIP.
4. Provide pedestrian refuges at Woodford Road, Eldwick Way, Congregation Har Shalom, Winterset Drive, Falls Chapel Way, and Liberty Lane.
5. Provide a striped crosswalk on Democracy Boulevard at Falls Road.
6. Realign the end of Cranford Drive at Falls Road to improve safety for trail users.
7. Enlarge the right-in/right-out island at the Potomac Community Recreation Center driveway and relocate the existing crosswalk at the Potomac Community Neighborhood Park driveway to run between the island and the northwestern corner of Woodington Drive. Provide a connection between the proposed trail and the community center.
8. Move the bus stop on the west side of Falls Road closer to Falls Farm Drive or move it to Victory Lane and construct a pedestrian refuge on the south leg of Falls Road.
9. Widen the proposed trail just south of Atwell Road to eight feet minimum. Provide a two-foot offset from the roadway if possible.
10. Consider moving the bus stops at Atwell Road to north of the Montgomery Square Swim Club driveway and constructing a pedestrian refuge at the crossing between the two stops.
11. Provide at least two feet of lateral clearance between the proposed trail and utility poles or other obstructions.
12. Consider using "No Right Turn on Red" restrictions at trail crossings of signalized intersections and providing advance warning signage of the trail crossing on all applicable side streets within the project limits.
13. Provide landscape plans to staff for review when available.
14. Provide a Tree Save plan for review and approval by staff during the final design stage of the project, and minimize the removal of trees and other vegetation not covered by the Tree Save plan.
15. Study using the existing right-of-way for the Master Plan relocation of Falls Road north of Eldwick Way as the location for a west side trail. The documentation of this study should be made part of the public record for this project.

PREVIOUS BOARD ACTION AND BACKGROUND

The Planning Board has not previously reviewed this project. The design of the subject project is now at the 35% stage, the end of Phase II of facility planning. A Project Prospectus, the document that normally completes Phase I of facility planning, was never prepared for this project and therefore was not reviewed by the Planning Board. As such, this Mandatory Referral constitutes the Board's first opportunity to review the project concept of constructing the trail along the east side of Falls Road.

At a recent public meeting, discussed below, many residents of Falls Road questioned the choice of the east side for the trail. While the proposed design is consistent with the Master Plan and meets the desired functional needs, staff believes that DPWT must do some additional study to support their choice of the east side.

This memo is structured to first analyze the design of the project as it is currently proposed, and then to comment on what staff believes needs to be studied before moving forward with the project. The latter is discussed in the section entitled "Alignment Selection". The Planning Board's review of this project is also timely in that the project is anticipated to be proposed by DPWT for inclusion in the FY07-FY12 Capital Improvements Program. The Board's comments would therefore also be considered in deciding whether or not to fund the project for final design and construction.

The trail project is a follow-up to a Safety and Resurfacing project constructed along Falls Road by the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) that was approved by the Planning Board as a Mandatory Referral in October 1996. That project was the alternative that was chosen after considering a number of reconstruction alternatives, including widening Falls Road to four lanes. When the lesser project was selected, the decision was made to defer construction of the trail until a later time. (A widening of Falls Road to four lanes was not supported by the 1980 Master Plan. The 2002 Potomac Subregion Master Plan update confirmed that Falls Road is to remain two lanes.)

In the last couple of years, DPWT has constructed sidewalks along River Road at Falls Road and SHA has recently widened Falls Road between River Road and Glenolden Drive to improve the operation of the Falls Road/River Road intersection. The implementation of the latter project has affected the design of the subject project and is discussed in greater detail below.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project would construct an eight-foot-wide bikeway along the east side of Falls Road from River Road to Dunster Road, a distance of about four miles (see Attachment 2, Vicinity Map). The offset of the trail from the roadway would vary between three and seventeen feet, but in two small areas would be directly adjacent to the proposed curb. Four bridges with a total length of 220 feet would be built to carry the trail over wetland and stream areas.

STAFF ANALYSIS

DPWT has done an excellent job of designing a trail along the east side of Falls Road, providing an eight-foot-wide trail with a sufficient width landscape panel for most of the project length, while limiting impacts to adjacent properties on this side of the road.

This project would implement a significant recommendation of the Potomac Subregion Master Plan and the Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan by providing a pedestrian and bikeway link along Falls Road between Potomac Village and the City of Rockville, tying directly into Rockville's existing off-road trail. The proposed trail would constitute a very important connection between Rockville's Millennium Trail and the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park, and would link residential areas to Potomac Village, the library, and the community recreation center.

Bicyclist Accommodation

Bicyclist accommodation would be greatly improved by this project. Off-road bicyclists would be accommodated via an eight-foot-wide trail on the east side of Falls Road. Since Falls Road has an average daily traffic (ADT) of about 22,000 vehicles, the proposed trail would provide a much-needed and safer alternative to riding with traffic. Gravel shoulders would be paved in some areas, providing minor benefits for on-road bicyclists.

Staff's main concerns with the design of the project involve short sections at the southern limit and near the northern limit of the project.

At the southern limit, in Potomac Village, the last block of the project is proposed to have only a six-foot-wide sidewalk, rather than an eight-foot-wide trail (see Attachment 3). The reason is that there is insufficient right-of-way to provide the standard width trail, or any landscaped offset from the roadway, after SHA's recent roadway widening. SHA decided to widen the road on the east side after unsuccessful negotiations with the owner of the property now occupied by Cherner Automotive on the west side. The lease for that property is based on the whole lot being available for use. It appeared that if SHA took part of the property they might be required to purchase the whole property. SHA decided to widen Falls Road on the east side, leaving insufficient room for this project. SHA's plans were not referred to staff for review.

The provision of a six-foot-wide sidewalk instead of an eight-foot-wide trail means that off-road bike accommodation essentially stops one block north of River Road. DPWT staff has said that signs will be installed telling bicyclists to dismount as they approach the center of the village. While this is far from desirable, staff believes that this problem can be corrected when the Cherner Automotive parcel is developed since the required right-of-way dedication would allow the roadway to be straightened, shifting the road to the west and providing more space on the east side that could accommodate a standard width trail and an offset from the curb. The Community-Based Planning Division regularly receives inquiries by prospective developers concerning this parcel.

In the meantime, the proposed ramps at the Glenolden Drive intersection need to be improved to correct the poor alignment of the trail across Glenolden. On the southeast corner, the ramp should be shifted to the east. On the northeast corner, two ramps should be used, one to

cross each street. The eight-foot-wide trail should begin at the Glenolden ramp, rather than having a variable transition between the existing sidewalk and the wider trail.

At Atwell Rod near the northern project limit, DPWT has also proposed to provide only six feet of off-road accommodation for pedestrians and bicyclists to limit the impacts on adjacent property (see Attachment 4). The provision of a six-foot-wide sidewalk instead of the typical eight-foot-wide trail would create a discontinuity in the middle of a residential area that is unlike the proposal at the southern limit, where it would be at the entrance to a commercial area. Staff believes that many bicyclists would ignore signs warning them to dismount and that having two cyclists pass each other on a six-foot-wide sidewalk adjacent to the curb would pose a safety concern.

Staff recommends that a minimum eight-foot-wide trail be provided. Recognizing the limited amount of space available and the desire to limit impacts to the adjacent residential property, staff also recommends that the trail be constructed two feet back from the curb, which would leave it one foot from a recently constructed fence.

Pedestrian Accommodation

Pedestrians would be accommodated well by this project via the proposed hiker-biker trail, providing them a much safer alternative to walking along the roadway, which in many areas has no shoulder and poor sight distance. Short segments of sidewalk would also be provided from some intersections to nearby bus stops on the west side of Falls Road. Facility Planning for a continuous sidewalk along the west side of Falls Road is anticipated to be recommended by DPWT staff for inclusion as a candidate project in the FY07-FY12 CIP.

Pedestrian Refuges and Bus Stops

Many of the intersections through the subject segment of Falls Road are tee intersections with left-turn lanes on one leg of Falls Road and an unused paved area on the opposing leg. The majority of these intersections also have bus stops, the safety of which would be improved for patrons by providing pedestrian refuges in these unused areas. While DPWT states that Ride-On staff has approved the location of these bus stops, *staff believes that many of the bus stops are not well coordinated with safe crossing locations*. Staff recommends that refuges be provided at the following locations:

- Woodford Road, south leg of Falls Road
- Eldwick Way - north leg of Falls Road, and move the bus stops closer.
- Congregation Har Shalom – a refuge should be provided between the bus stops in front of the synagogue or the stops should be moved to Marseille Drive and a refuge constructed on the south leg of Falls Road (see Attachment 5)
- Winterset Drive, A pedestrian refuge should be provided on the south leg of Falls Road.
- Falls Chapel Way – the wide receiving lanes in each direction on Falls Road should be reduced to create pedestrian refuges on the north and south legs.
- Liberty Lane - south leg of Falls Road

Falls Road meets **Democracy Boulevard/South Glen Road** at a signalized intersection. DPWT proposes to provide a striped crosswalk on the south leg of Falls Road to accommodate users of the bus stops south of the intersection, but does not propose to stripe a crosswalk for the proposed trail. *Staff recommends that a crosswalk be provided for the trail and that a sidewalk connection be provided between the bus stop on the west side and the southwest corner of South Glen Road* (see Attachment 6).

The pavement at the northeast corner of **Cranford Drive** is proposed to be reduced and new curbs built. Staff recommends that the end of Cranford Drive be realigned to intersect Falls Road at a right angle, providing a shorter crossing for trail users and better safety for all (see Attachment 7).

There is an existing crosswalk on the south side of the Potomac Community Neighborhood Park driveway that has restricted sight distance for northbound traffic (see Attachment 8). Rather than move the bus stops to the existing crosswalk, staff believes that the crosswalk should be moved to the intersection of Woodington Drive and the **Potomac Community Recreation Center** driveway. The existing right-in/right-out island should be expanded to shorten the crossing distance and a pedestrian refuge should be built in the unused area in the center of the roadway. A connection should also be provided between the trail and the community recreation center on the north side of the driveway.

The bus stop on the west side of Falls Road between **Victory Lane and Falls Farm Drive** is located at mid-block and would encourage pedestrians to cross at an undesirable location on Falls Road (see Attachment 9). It would also unnecessarily require transit patrons to negotiate a 5% grade to get to and from the stop. Staff recommends that the stop be moved either closer to Falls Farm Drive or moved to Victory Lane and a pedestrian refuge constructed on the south leg of Falls Road.

Atwell Road tees into Falls Road at an unsignalized intersection that is only 300 feet north of Montrose Road and the southbound left-turn lane actually extends beyond Atwell Road. Staff is concerned about the safety of the pedestrian crossing between the two bus stops that are on either side of Falls Road at Atwell Road (see Attachment 4). We recommend moving them about 150 feet north in front of the Montgomery Square Swim Club, where a pedestrian refuge should be provided in the ten-foot-wide unused area in the center of the roadway just prior to the start of the left turn lane.

Landscaping

Conceptual landscaping plans were shown at the recent public meeting. The project would include a naturalistic planting scheme for the length of the project using trees, shrubs, perennials and other native plant materials. The intent is to provide clear sight lines for trail users while providing sufficient privacy for adjacent homeowners. *Staff recommends that landscape plans be provided for review when available.*

Environmental

Falls Road between the Potomac Village and the City of Rockville is a rolling road located upon high ground near ridgelines of watersheds. The property on either side of the road is highly developed and many landscape trees have been planted in the wide right-of-way. The road also skirts the edge of eight small urban forests.

The proposed project would clear approximately one-half acre of forest along the length of the trail with eight specimen or significant trees impacted or removed. In addition, it is likely that many small individual landscape trees will be impacted or removed.

Because this is a linear project with minimal forest disturbance, a forest conservation exemption has been granted. However, a Tree Save plan is required to be submitted for M-NCPPC staff review and approval during the final design stage of the project and must address protection measures for the affected specimen trees. Staff also recommends that other existing trees and vegetation be preserved and protected to the greatest extent possible. When this is not possible, trees should either be moved or replaced. Affected trees that should be covered by the Tree Save plan include:

- 26" Red Maple at Station 114+50
- 39" Red Oak at Station 205+50
- 25" Red Oak at Station 308+52
- 36" White Oak at Station 236+20
- 23.4" Elm at Station 201+50

Parks Impact

The Potomac Community Neighborhood Park is the only Parks facility that would be impacted by this project. The park is immediately south of the Potomac Community Recreation Center. The current plans show that 7,223 s.f. of right-of-way and 4,398 s.f. of construction easement area would be required by this project. Parks staff has no objections to this work.

Historic

No County-designated historic properties would be impacted by the proposed improvements.

Property Impacts

There are 123 property owners along the path whose property would be affected by this project. Of these, the project would require:

- Fee Simple R.O.W. from 54 property owners.
- Revertible easement from 81 property owners.
- Permanent easements from 8 property owners.

The total number of properties which have one or more types of property acquisition is 81.

ALIGNMENT SELECTION

DPWT's decision to construct the trail on the east side of Falls Road was based on several factors:

- Connectivity with existing trail segments
- Main area destinations are on the east side
- Minimizing encroachments to homes that are close to the road (three homes and/or businesses on the east side are 40 feet or closer to the edge of pavement but twelve buildings on the west side are this close)
- The east side has the greater number of residents
- A trail on the west side would require more utility pole relocations

Connectivity: The strongest of the factors used by DPWT is the desire to provide continuity between the existing segments of trail south of River Road and north of Dunster Road. The existing trail segments are both on the east side of Falls Road. The segment south of Falls Road has had a jog in the trail that forced users to cross from the east side of the road to the west at Stanmore Drive for a distance of about 2,200 feet and back to the east side again at Alloway Drive. Both of these crossings were unsignalized and there have been some serious pedestrian crashes at these locations, including one fatality in 1992. After several years of negotiations with adjacent property owners to gain the needed property to provide a continuous trail on the east side that would not require such crossings, DPWT has just completed this construction.

Destinations: In regard to the second bullet, while most of the destinations in the southern half of the project are on the east side (the Potomac Library, the Bullis School, and the Potomac Community Recreation Center), most of the major destinations in the northern half of the project are institutional uses on the west side (Congregation Har Shalom, the Washington Hebrew Congregation, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). The community center is at approximately the midpoint of the project length along Falls Road. The only major destination in the northern half of the project is Saint Raphael's Church, is at the northern project limit, the southeast corner of Dunster Road and Falls Road.

Encroachments: Most of the potential encroachments on the west side are south of Glen Road.

Greater Number of Residents: The east side of Falls Road does have a greater number of residents than the west side. This is a benefit for accessibility to the trail, but it is a drawback for bicycle through-traffic on the trail. In the segment north of Glen Road, there would be almost three times as many driveway crossings on the east side of Falls Road as on the west side because more of the homes on west side back up to Falls Road rather than front on it.

Utility Pole Relocations: Most of the potential utility pole relocations on the west side are south of Glen Road.

Right-of-Way for the Master Plan Realignment of Falls Road

The segment of Falls Road north of Eldwick Way meanders in the right-of-way (see Attachment 10) but a straighter alignment has been recommended in the Master Plan for some time. Most of the right-of-way to accomplish this realignment is now in public hands, either as dedication to public use, SHA property, or in M-NCPPC's hands purchased with Advance Land Acquisition Revolving Funds. While the road meanders, the greater width of the unused right-of-way is located on the west side of the right-of-way and where a complete realignment is called for in the Master Plan, the separate right-of-way is also to the west of the existing road.

During Phase I Facility Planning, DPWT staff evaluated alignments along the east and west sides of Falls Road but did not evaluate a trail alignment that used the separate right-of-way. Staff believes that this should be studied before proceeding to final design and construction. The documentation of the reasons for selecting one alternative and rejecting others should be open to review by the public.

As noted above, staff agrees that keeping the trail on one side of Falls Road is a desirable goal. Using the separate ROW for the northern half of the project however would create other potential benefits. In addition to the fewer driveway crossings, there would also be fewer roadway crossings since there are fewer tee intersections on the east side of Falls Road within the project limits north of Eldwick Road than on the west side. Minimizing the number of road crossings would increase the safety of the proposed trail. The character of such a trail would be closer to that of the Sligo Creek Trail rather than that of most trails beside roads, creating a better recreational facility in addition to serving its transportation function.

Among the drawbacks of such a trail would be that it would require crossings of Falls Road at the northern and southern ends to connect with the rest of the trail, although there are traffic signals at Dunster Road to the north and Glen Road to the south, and the possibility of installing a traffic signal at Eldwick Way could be explored. A west side trail between Falls Farm Drive and Cold Spring Road would not improve access to transit where the right-of-way is completely separate from the existing road, and would require an independent lighting system. The tree removal required would also likely be greater.

Staff has not done a detailed review of what such an alignment would require and is therefore not prepared to endorse a western alignment over the proposed eastern alignment. We believe, however, that a western alignment that would use the available right-of-way should be studied to ensure that the best facility is provided.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

A public meeting was held for this project at the Potomac Community Recreation Center on Falls Road on June 20, 2005, and was attended by about 75 people.

A significant proportion of the comments received by DPWT related to the choice of the east side of Falls Road as the location for the proposed trail. Residents agreed with DPWT that the major destinations south of Glen Road are on the east side of Falls Road, but said that the destinations north of Glen are on the west side where there is more right-of-way available.

One resident expressed concern that pedestrian crashes would increase because no sidewalk is proposed to be constructed along the west side of Falls Road, so many of the residents of the west side attempting to use the trail on the east side would have to cross at locations without marked crosswalks, since there are only seven signalized intersections and three other unsignalized locations with striped crosswalks within the four-mile project length. The resident also stated that right-turns on red should be prohibited at trail crossings to improve safety for trail users. DPWT staff intends to include a sidewalk along the west side of Falls Road in its candidates for the FY07-FY12 CIP. M-NCPPC staff believes that the concern about right turns on red is reasonable and has addressed this in our recommended Board comments.

LC:kcw
Attachments

mno to mcpb re MR Falls Road Bikepath.doc