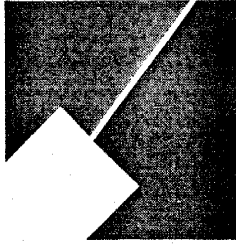


M-NCPPC



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARK AND PLANNING**

THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL  
PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

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April 7, 2006

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Montgomery County Planning Board

**VIA:** John Carter, Chief *JC*  
Community-Based Planning Division

**FROM:** Judy Daniel, Rural Team Leader (301.495.4559) *JD*  
Community-Based Planning Division

Dan Hardy, Transportation Planning *DKH*  
Countywide Planning Division

**SUBJECT:** Damascus Master Plan:  
Land Reservation for a Damascus Bypass

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

The staff recommends that the Planning Board support the existing recommendations of the Planning Board Draft of the Damascus Master Plan. The following items summarize the existing recommendations concerning a Damascus Bypass:

1. Within two years after the completion of Woodfield Road Extended (A-12), the M-NCPPC will begin an evaluation of current traffic conditions and work with the community to determine whether a Master Plan Amendment process is warranted to evaluate the need for a bypass type road.

A study of long-term traffic implications of growth patterns in the adjoining regional counties that contribute to traffic impact to Damascus is needed as a prelude to any future alternate route study. The Master Plan recommends that the County Council authorize and direct the Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT) to conduct such a regional study within two years in conjunction with the M-NCPPC, the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA), Howard County, Frederick County, and Carroll County.

2. Land reservation for a Damascus Bypass is not necessary at the current time.

## **DISCUSSION**

The following paragraph describes the issue before the Planning Board. The first three sections of the memorandum describe recent events associated with the Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Worksessions in spring 2006. The next three sections describe the bypass alternatives and the rationale behind the staff and Planning Board position in the 2005 Draft Plan. The last section describes public outreach efforts since the February 17, 2006 PHED Worksession.

### **Council Staff Recommendation**

At the February 17, 2006 PHED Worksession, the staff of the County Council recommended alternate action from the Planning Board Draft of the Damascus Master Plan on the Damascus "through traffic" issue (see Attachment 1) including:

1. The Maryland SHA should lead the multi-jurisdictional feasibility study of capacity options in the region (defined as the MD 124/MD 27/MD 75 corridors between I-70 and I-270) including two-lane bypass options around Damascus. Council staff believes that SHA, rather than DPWT would be the appropriate lead agency for such a study.
2. The Damascus Master Plan should state that any right-of-way for a two-lane bypass that might be identified in the above study would be considered consistent with the Plan and could be protected if adopted by a subsequent Council resolution after a public hearing.
3. The Damascus Master Plan should state that the bypass could not be built in the protected right-of-way until its need was confirmed in a future amendment to the Master Plan.
4. Reserve land along a potential right-of-way route to be identified in the Master Plan in order to preclude development of impacted properties along that route.

The Council staff believes that waiting until Woodfield Road Extended is completed to identify and protect a bypass route will be "too late". Council staff and DPWT believe that a bypass route should be identified in the Master Plan now, because of the impact it might have on development decisions for impacted properties, and the impact that future parkland, historic resources, and environmental features might have on the viability of any bypass route. Council staff concern is that the bypass may be needed to accommodate future traffic growth beyond the 20-year Plan timeframe.

### **Planning Staff Comments to PHED Committee**

In response to the Council staff recommendations, the M-NCPPC staff made the following observations in a March 8, 2006 memorandum (see Attachment 2), which includes a history of this transportation issue in Damascus, and in further support of the Planning Board Draft Master Plan recommendation draws an analogy between the Damascus and the Purple Line decisions in terms of not recommending reservation of a specific route.

The report also discusses the severe environmental constraints that afflict any potential route. The report notes that reserving a specific alignment without concurrence from state and federal officials is not appropriate. The report reiterates the conclusion of the 1993 Master Plan Amendment, which concluded that "answers to the traffic congestion in this part of the County must be part of a regional approach with State participation", as recommended in the Planning Board Draft Master Plan.

### **PHED Committee Recommendation**

The PHED Committee concurred with the Council staff that these recommendations should be given further consideration and directed the Planning staff to return to the Damascus community and to the Planning Board to obtain their input and thoughts. The PHED Committee also limited the scope of the further evaluation to two possible routes – both previously considered by the Planning Board and County Council during the deliberations for the 1993 Damascus Master Plan Amendment that primarily addressed the potential for a bypass.

The 1993 Master Plan Amendment evaluated a range of alternate routes to the east, west, and through-town alternatives. The final routes included one to the east "F", and three to the west "B", "B Modified", and "C" (see Attachment 3). All were ultimately not chosen and the Master Plan did not recommend a bypass. Among the reasons noted were the environmental constraints and the need to complete the already planned roadway network (which included Valley Park Drive and Woodfield Road Extended). The PHED Committee rejected further consideration of Alternate "F", because of the number of new subdivisions created along its route in recent years; and Alternate "B Modified" as it would bisect Ovid Hazen Wells Park. The zoning along Alternate "F" was primarily RE-2C, while the zoning along Alternates "B" and "C" is primarily RDT and Rural Cluster. The routes chosen for consideration share certain characteristics as noted below.

### **Description of Alternatives**

Attachment 4 summarizes the impacts of the three "short-listed" alternatives (Alternates B, C, and F) defined in the 1991 M-NCPPC study that informed the recommendations of the 1993 Damascus Master Plan Amendment. Alternates B and C are identical northwest of the Damascus Town Center, between Ridge Road in Claggettville and Bethesda Church Road, following a route through the RDT Zone and over several headwater tributaries of Bennett Creek.

In the 1991 study, Alternates B and C were to be built as four lanes, with Ridge Road widened to six lanes between Clarksburg and the southern bypass terminus. The current Council staff proposal defines either bypass route as a two-lane roadway, with Ridge Road widened to four lanes between Clarksburg and the southern bypass terminus.

Alternate C Route - South of Bethesda Church Road Alternate C heads from Bethesda Church Road directly southeast toward Ridge Road (crossing ballfields on the Damascus Recreation Center property), minimizing the amount of new roadway alignment, but requiring widening of Ridge Road to four lanes south of the intersection with the bypass.

Alternate B Route – South of Bethesda Church Road this route continues south, generally following Kings Valley Road, returning to Ridge Road in the vicinity of Cedar Grove Elementary School.

### **Evaluation of Alternative Routes**

Regarding the relative merits of the two alternatives, staff offers the following considerations for the Planning Board:

1. Alternate B is problematic because of its impact on the RDT Zone and the Rural Cluster Zone, headwaters of Bennett Creek, headwaters of Little Bennett Creek and tributaries, additional cost from additional length, and impact on existing residences south of Kingstead Road, but could be considered more favorable for the following reasons:
  - The extent of necessary widening of Ridge Road is about two miles shorter, reducing impacts on the linear residential development pattern in this area.
  - It avoids impact to the Damascus Recreation Center property, and thus may have less public opposition than Alternate C (considering comments at the March 28 public meeting in Damascus).
  
2. Alternate C is problematic because of its impact on the RDT Zone, headwaters of Bennett Creek, headwaters of Little Bennett Creek and tributaries, impact on the linear development pattern along Ridge Road south of Oak Drive, and impact on the Damascus Recreation Center property, but could be considered more favorable for the following reasons:
  - The extent of new roadway construction is about two miles shorter, reducing impacts on the natural environment and costs.
  - Reserving an alternative that impacts the Damascus Recreation Center could be viewed as a County commitment to share the burden of the reservation with other impacted property owners and to delay implementation until the Recreation Center has reached the end of its useful lifespan and could be relocated.

In summary, both alternatives create substantial impacts, as evidenced by the 1993 Master Plan recommendation not to reserve any right-of-way. The staff believes that a choice between the two would be essentially a choice between the greater environmental impacts of Alternate B and the greater community impacts of Alternate C. Given these concerns, and the other concerns expressed in this report, the staff continues to support the Planning Board Draft Master Plan recommendation.

### **Summary of the Rationale Behind the Master Plan Recommendations**

The most pertinent points of the existing recommendations outlined in Attachment 2 are summarized as follows:

1. The land use and transportation in the Planning Board Draft of the Damascus Master Plan are "in balance" without reserving right-of-way for a bypass.

2. The existing recommendations in the Planning Board Draft of the Damascus Master Plan for a future study of a Damascus Bypass emphasize the need to look far beyond the narrow bypass alignment feasibility question raised by the Council staff. The M-NCPPC staff continues to believe that to address the transportation options and the impacts these options would have on land use recommendations within the Damascus Master Plan area, any study must include the affected portions of Carroll, Frederick, and Howard Counties. And any study of new roadway alignments should also document how concerns raised by state and federal permitting agencies have been successfully addressed.

The staff is doubtful that such a study with true multi-jurisdictional and multi-agency participation can be completed in the two-year timeframe proposed, which could impose an undue burden on property owners along the designated reserved right-of-way.

3. Instead of modifying the Planning Board Draft of the Damascus Master Plan to include reservation of land for a bypass and a study to evaluate transportation options in the MD 124/MD 27/MD 75 transportation corridors, the County Council should consider more immediate transportation priorities in Montgomery County, such as land reservation for one or more options for the Metro Purple Line.
4. Data collection for the future study should not begin until the compilation of existing conditions reflects the impact of a completed Woodfield Road (A-12) Extended and Valley Park Drive (important elements of the Damascus roadway network), as these routes have the potential to bring significant relief to central Damascus.

In summary, the staff believes that the recommendations described in Attachment 2 remain valid. In addition, no testimony has been received that would change the recommendations in Attachment 2.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH**

The staff held a public meeting to discuss the bypass reservation issue at the Damascus Library on March 28, 2006, and approximately 100 people attended. Comments offered at the meeting varied, with some expressing support for the Master Plan recommendations, some expressing support for a bypass reservation and immediate study, and some expressing possible support for certain elements but not others. Among those who spoke at the meeting, there was a possible consensus that among the options presented, Alternate C, that would traverse the site of the recently opened Damascus Recreation Center, was the least desirable option. Attachment 4 contains the meeting handout materials, and Attachment 5 contains written testimony received to date.

## CONCLUSION

The following table summarizes the alternative recommendations for including a bypass in the Damascus Master Plan. The staff recommends that the Planning Board support the existing recommendations of the Planning Board Draft.

**Table of Alternatives**

	<b>Planning Board Draft Master Plan Recommendation</b>	<b>Council Staff Recommendation</b>	<b>1993 Master Plan Amendment</b>
<b>Definite Bypass Route</b>	Premature	Premature	Premature
<b>Bypass Route Reservation</b>	No – extensive problems with all alternatives already evaluated, and study will take more than two years	Yes – hold land while completing a bypass study over next two years	No – multiple alternatives evaluated, but none chosen due to severe environmental constraints
<b>Bypass Study</b>	Premature – consider current conditions and evaluate whether to begin study after Woodfield Road Extended is completed	Yes – after adoption of Plan, as a part of a regional study of growth patterns	Completed – No further study until major network roads completed and can be considered on a regional basis
<b>Regional Study of Growth Patterns</b>	Yes after Plan is adopted	Yes after Plan is adopted	Not recommended

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### **Attachments:**

1. Recommendations of the Council Staff
2. Recommendations of the M-NCPPC Staff
3. Map of Bypass Alternatives
4. Meeting Handouts – March 28, 2008
5. Testimony