

June 13, 2006

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Gwen Wright, Acting Chief, Countywide Planning Division
John Hench, Supervisor, PPRA Unit

FROM: Lyn Coleman, Trail Planning Supervisor 301-650-4391 Park Planning and
Resource Analysis Unit, Countywide Planning Division

SUBJECT: **UPPER ROCK CREEK TRAIL CORRIDOR PLAN:** Plan Objectives,
Outreach Strategy Recommendations and Plan Schedule- *Approval*

Background

The Countywide Park Trails Plan (adopted in 1998 and amended in March 2004) identifies eight trail corridors for more detailed study. The Rock Creek Trail Corridor is one of the eight (*see figure 1*). The Plan objective for the Corridor is to “expand the trail system in Rock Creek Regional Park northward to Olney and the Patuxent River.”

The Planning Board included the Rock Creek Trail Corridor Plan in the Trails Work Program for FY 04-06.

This memo identifies Plan objectives, outlines a work program to complete the trail corridor plan and proposes a community outreach program.

Overview of the Trail Corridor Study Area

Figure 1 depicts the Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor Study Area. The study area is referred to as “Upper Rock Creek” as there are no planning issues related to the southern portion of the Rock Creek where a hard surface hiker biker trail already exists.

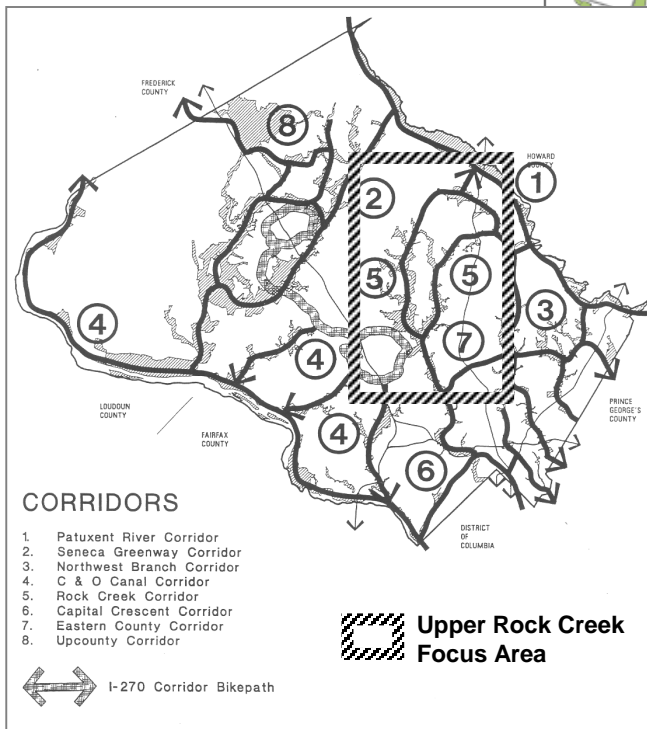
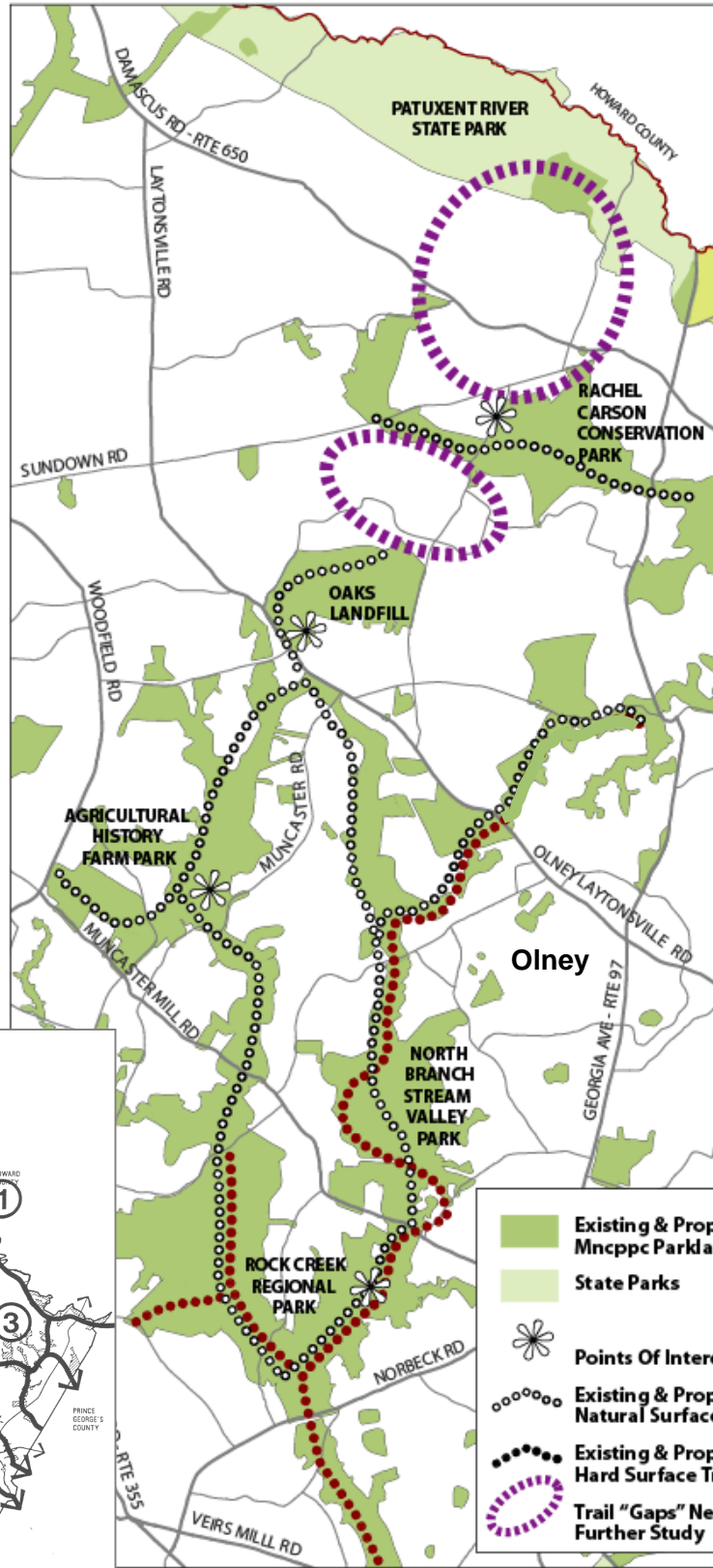
As shown in *Figure 2*, there are six park and/or trail master plans that are shaping the trail pattern in the corridor: the Countywide Park Trails Plan, the Rachel Carson Greenway Trail Corridor Plan, the Park and Trail Analysis for the Upper Rock Creek Vicinity, the Rock Creek Park Master Plan, the Agricultural History Farm Park Plan and the Rachel Carson Conservation Park Master Plan. The key trail recommendations of each are summarized in *Table 2*.

Both hard surface and natural surface trails exist in the Corridor. The challenge facing this plan process is to link these various trails into a coordinated network.

Figure 1

Right: Close-up of the Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor study area with the recommended trails from adopted plans and trail gaps highlighted.

Below: The Countywide Park Trails Plan proposes eight trail corridors for future study, of which the Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor planning area is one.



Proposed Plan Objectives

1. To coordinate and integrate existing trail plans and policies for individual parks into a comprehensive trail system.

The long-term vision for the trail network in the Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor has largely been defined by the many trail related plans affecting the area. As can be seen in **Figure 1**, trail recommendations include extension of the Rock Creek Hiker Biker Trail north to Olney and creation of a natural surface trail “loop” that links Rock Creek Regional Park, the Agricultural History Farm Park and North Branch Stream Valley Park. The key area needing further study is how to extend the trail system northward to the Patuxent River.

2. To ensure a continuous, natural surface trail can be provided within the trail corridor. Over 80% of the trail corridor is already in park ownership. However, there are two significant “gaps” in the park pattern (**Figure 2**). Ways to provide public access through these areas will be examined during the plan process.

3. To designate trail locations that achieve environmental stewardship objectives. As stated in the Countywide Park Trails Plan, completing an environmental inventory is the first step in the Trail Corridor Plan process. A preliminary inventory has been completed and the key environmental features are shown in **Figure 3**. These features include:

- Two (2) Best Natural Areas. Best Natural Areas contain the best examples of exemplary natural resources such as high quality forest, forested wetlands and unique habitats that are scarce and/or fragile in Montgomery County. The 2 areas are Rachel Carson and the North Branch Stream Valley Unit #2 Best Natural Areas.
- Nine (9) Biodiversity Areas. These are significant natural areas which enhance the biodiversity of the county. They contain some plant and animal species designated as important to the county or locality by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The 9 areas within the corridor include: Rachel Carson, Hawlings River, Pope Farm, Western, North Branch Valley, Needwood North, North Branch, Crabbs Branch and Lake Frank Biodiversity Areas
- Three (3) Watersheds: Patuxent River, Hawlings River and the Upper Rock Creek watersheds. Streams in these watersheds are designated by the State of Maryland as either Use III or Use IV streams. Streams classified as water Use III are waters suitable for growth and propagation of trout and are capable of supporting self-sustaining trout populations and their associated food organisms. State water Use IV include streams which have the potential for or are capable of holding and supporting adult trout for put and take fishing.
- Upper Rock Creek Special Protection Area. Designated by the Planning Board in order to better protect our sensitive county resources.
- Large tracts of significant forests, wetlands and floodplains.

4. To provide a natural surface trail network that accommodates hikers, equestrians and cyclists. The Countywide Park Trails Plan recognizes that hiking, horse back riding and cycling are all legitimate forms of recreation on natural surface trails “when and where it is practiced in an environmentally sound and socially responsible

manner.” The Countywide Park Trails Plan also endorses “geographic parity in natural surface trail use opportunities for hikers, equestrians and bicyclists across the park system.”

At the present time, there are very few natural surface trails open to cyclists in the Rock Creek Trail Corridor. This lack of parity needs to be addressed, especially since the Rachel Carson Greenway Trail Corridor to the east of Rock Creek excludes cycling because it is an interpretive trail corridor.

A key assumption of this Plan is that more opportunities for cyclists/mountain bikers should be provided in this trail corridor.

5. To provide a hard surface trail network that extends Rock Creek Regional Park hiker biker trail to Olney. This goal of the Countywide Park Trails Plan has already been studied in more detail in conjunction with the Rock Creek and Olney Master Plans and as part of the ICC planning process. Construction of a significant portion of the hard surface trail will be completed by developers. Bike paths along the ICC, Emory Lane and Muncaster Road will help provide connectivity. The remaining portions of the trail will require more detailed study in the context of a park trail facility plan. The Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor Plan will give guidance as to the issues needing to be addressed when a facility plan is undertaken by the Parks Department.

6. To identify ways to allow trail users to safely cross roads. This plan will identify key roadway crossings that should be improved to allow safe crossing.

7. To identify interpretive opportunities related to two themes:

- a. Natural environment
- b. Agricultural Traditions

8. To provide better access to the trail corridor by identifying opportunities for trail access along the corridor. The Rock Creek Trail Corridor is 14 miles in length. Trail access points that include parking are needed at different locations along the greenway so people can hike or bike shorter sections of the trail. Locations for horse trailer parking also need to be identified. Providing opportunities for residents of communities near the greenway to access the trails would allow people to get to trails without using their cars. The Carson Farm Special Park, located just south of Fieldcrest Road, is one area that will be studied as a trail access point.

9. To identify opportunities for making portions of the trail accessible to people with limited mobility. Providing some short trail loops and interpretative areas that meet accessibility design standards will help assure universal enjoyment of the trail experience. Finding areas in the corridor that can accommodate people with limited mobility is an important plan objective. Making the entire corridor accessible will not be possible given some challenging topography.

Proposed Community Outreach Strategy

The first public outreach meeting, an Issues Forum was held in May 2006 at the Agricultural History Farm Park activity center. Those attending were asked to identify trail issues, planning concerns and planning opportunities in the trail corridor. The results of that meeting, which are posted at www.montgomerytrails.org, are included as **Attachment A**. In general, those attending were very supportive of linking trails into a comprehensive trail network.

The next community meeting will be scheduled in the fall (**Table 1**). Trail options and opportunities within the corridor will be presented. Based on the outcome of this meeting, a Staff Draft Trail Corridor plan will be prepared for Planning Board review.

In general, the community outreach strategy will rely on the following techniques to encourage citizen input and involvement:

Public Meetings

Sponsor community meeting(s) at the Agricultural History Park activity center. This location is most convenient to residents of the study area. Staff is maintaining a mailing list of interested citizens who will receive e-mail notices of all meetings. All meetings will be publicized by press releases.

Sponsor community meeting(s) at the Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity. This location is accessible by public transportation and would involve people in the southern part of the corridor who might not wish to travel as far north as the Agricultural History Park and who rely on public transportation.

Small Group Meetings

Be available to attend meetings of local community groups, business groups and groups with particular trail interests whenever possible. Staff will work with community based planning to contact civic groups (like the Greater Olney Civic Association and Upper Rock Creek Coalition) and offer to make presentations on the plan at their regularly scheduled meetings. Staff will contact the Mid-County Recreation Advisory Board as well.

Reach out to groups with diverse memberships. Working with Community Relations, staff will identify meetings we might attend to reach a diverse audience, such as church groups with ethnic congregations, the advanced ESOL (English as a Secondary Language) class at Montgomery College and the Holiday Park Senior Center.

E-Communications

Establish a web site to provide information on the project schedule, upcoming meetings, planning process updates and plan documents. The web site for the plan process has been established and may be reached at www.montgomerytrails.org. Staff will rely on the trails web site to keep citizens updated on the plan process, plan recommendations and plan meetings.

Interested citizens and civic groups will be encouraged to become part of our e-mail list. E-mail notices of public meetings and forums will be sent to those on the e-mail list.

For those interested in the plan who do not have e-mail, press releases will be used to publicize plan meetings and all press releases will have the phone number of staff for those wishing to call and receive notices by regular mail.

Table 1. Proposed Plan Schedule

TRAIL PLAN PROCESS AND SCHEDULE
COMMUNITY "KICK-OFF" MEETING May 2006
ISSUES AND OUTREACH REPORT TO PLANNING BOARD July 2006
STAFF DRAFT/COMMUNITY MEETING(S): September 2006 to January 2007
PLANNING BOARD APPROVAL OF PUBLIC HEARING March 2007
PLANNING BOARD PUBLIC HEARING May 2007
WORKSESSION / ADOPTION July 2007

Figure 2. Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor Plan: Trail Recommendations

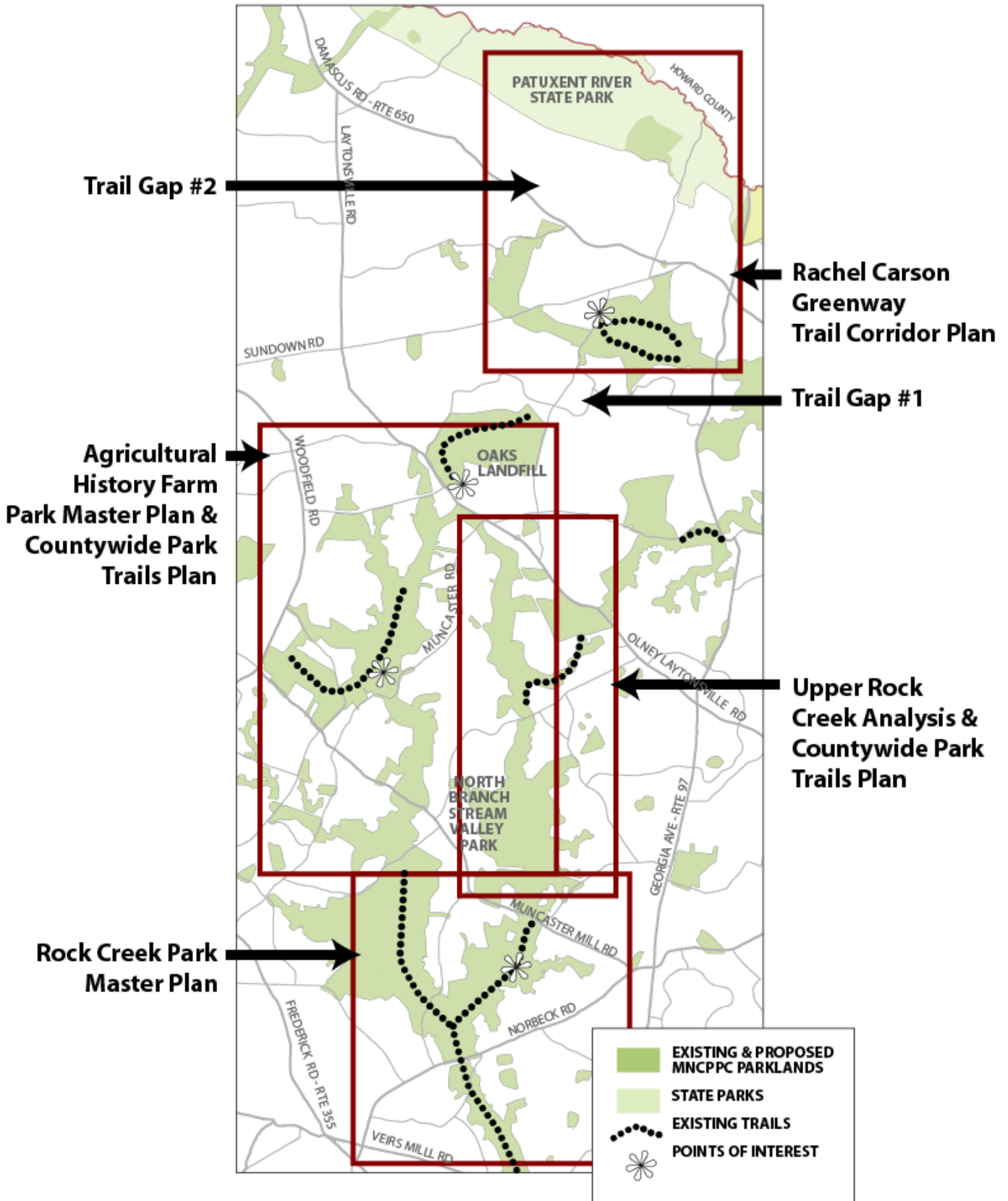
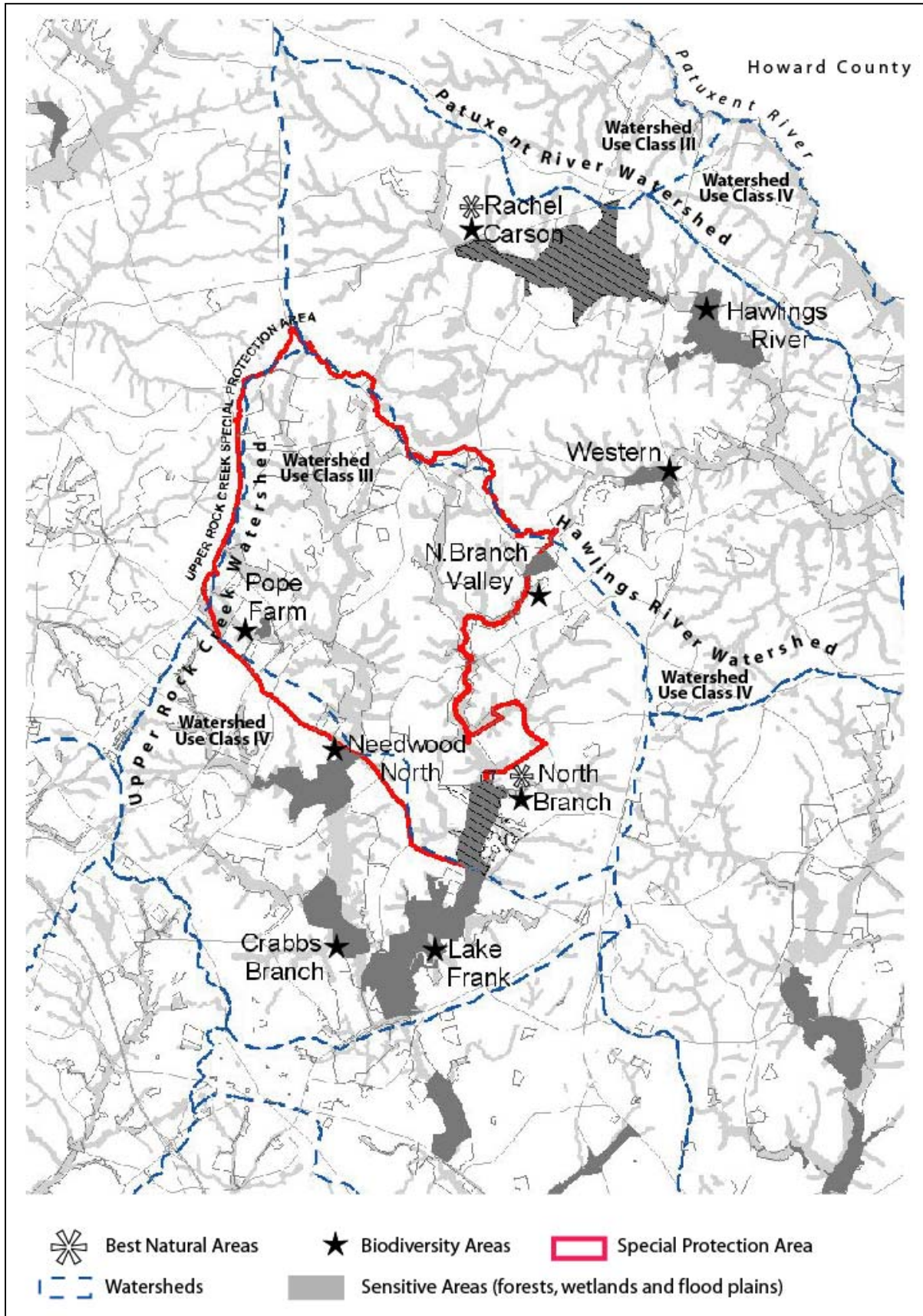


Table 2. Summary of Plans with Trail Policies and Recommendations

<p>Countywide Park Trails Plan</p>	<p>Extend natural surface trails from Rock Creek Regional Park to the Hawlings and the Patuxent Rivers.</p> <p>Explore ways to connect the Rock Creek natural surface trail system to the Seneca Greenway.</p> <p>Provide a hard surface trail connection between Rock Creek Regional Park and Olney.</p> <p>Provide a hard surface trail from the Lake Needwood recreation area to the ICC right-of-way.</p> <p>Implement the bikeway recommendation in the Olney and rock Creek master Plans for bike paths along Emory lane and Muncaster Mill Road.</p>
<p>Rachel Carson Greenway Trail Corridor Plan (2005)</p>	<p>The Rachel Carson Greenway Trail Corridor proposes a trail connection from the Rachel Carson Conservation Park to the Patuxent River State Park and suggests a trail link to the Agricultural History Farm Park. The Plan states: “The Rock Creek Trail Corridor Plan...will address this connection.”</p>
<p>Park and Trail Analysis for the Upper Rock Creek Vicinity (2002)</p>	<p>To reflect the environmental, bikeway and land use recommendations of the Upper Rock Creek Master Plan, several changes were made to the Countywide Park Trails Plan. The most significant was removing a portion of hard surface trail proposed in a sensitive environmental area in the North Branch of Rock Creek and relying on instead on a bikeway along Muncaster Mill Road for trail connectivity in the area.</p>
<p>Rock Creek Regional Park Master Plan (2000)</p>	<p>The Rock Creek Regional Park Master Plan includes a comprehensive trail network. The Plan proposes “... a general expansion of the hard surface and natural surface recreational trail system to create a multiple-use loop trail system between Lake Needwood and Lake Frank.” And recommends, “...extension of hard surface trails up the North Branch Stream Valley toward Olney and natural surface trails up the Rock Creek Stream Valley Park to the Agricultural History Farm Park.”</p>
<p>Agricultural History Farm Park Program and Facility Development Plan (1990)</p>	<p>This Plan provides guidance for two distinct areas in the park: the historic farm area and the modern agricultural area. Natural surface trails are shown on the plan and have been implemented. Staff is currently exploring strategies to make the park a fully functioning farm operation with farm interpreters.</p>
<p>Rachel Carson Conservation Park Master Plan (2000)</p>	<p>The Plan proposes a natural surface trail system that offers opportunities to observe outstanding natural areas while protecting the park’s resources. One of the goals of the Plan is to provide connections to regional trail systems identified in the Countywide Park Trails Plan.</p>

Figure 3 Key Natural Features of the Study Area



Attachment A- Community Meeting Findings

(available online at: <http://www.montgomerytrails.org>)

UPPER ROCK CREEK TRAIL CORRIDOR PLAN

Community Kick-Off Meeting Notes

Wednesday, May 3, 2006, the Agricultural History Farm Park Activity Center

An enthusiastic group of 20 people attended the kick-off meeting to discuss their thoughts on plan issues, concepts and opportunities. Here is a summary of what we heard:

- Support for a continuous trail to the Patuxent and a "loop trail" south of MD 108 that links Lake Needwood, Lake Frank, the Agricultural History Farm Park, future proposed Upper Rock Creek Local Park and the existing trails near Bowie Mill road in Olney.
- Support for more bicycle access on natural surface trails.
- Need to provide safe trail crossings at dangerous trail/road intersections (like Rachel Carson trail at Georgia Avenue). Need to cut guardrails so that trail users can get through.
- Extend trails into neighborhoods so people do not always have to drive to a park to access the trails.
- Anticipate maintenance concerns as trails are expanded and users increase; everyone agreed good trail etiquette needs to be followed in terms of not using trails after heavy rains.
- Remember when trails go under roads that equestrians have higher clearance needs.
- Consider water areas that horses can cross so they can be trained to go through water.
- Dogs off leash a problem; consider providing large field area for dogs to run around in.
- Consider identifying Native American historic sites; identify views of historic sites that might not be in the park but are visible from the trail.
- Consider accommodating shared use natural service trail in park north of Muncaster Mill Road rather than routing cyclists to the ICC bike path.
- Provide well marked and well located trail access points to avoid people parking in neighborhoods; ensure signs keep people on park trails rather than wandering through adjoining non-park property.
- During the open comment period, those attending were very complimentary of Rock Creek Regional Park and its management. People generally seem very pleased with trail concepts for the area as shown in the Countywide park Trails Plan and look forward to helping refine them during the planning process.

More information about the plan process may be found at www.montgomerytrails.org or by calling Lyn Coleman, Trail Planning supervisor at 301-650-4391.

If you are interested in adding your name to an e-mail distribution list, please forward your e-mail address to lyn.coleman@mncppc-mc.org. We look forward to seeing you!

To contact Park Planning & Resource Analysis
email: MCP-ParkLand@mncppc-mc.org
or call (301) 650-4370.

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