



MCPB Item # __7__

Date: 10/6/2011

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 30, 2011

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Mary Bradford, Director of Parks *MBradford*
Michael F. Riley, Deputy Director, Administrator *MR*
Dr. John E. Hench, Ph.D., Chief, Park Planning and Stewardship Division (PPSD) *JHench*

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

SUBJECT: **Countywide Park Trails Plan Amendment:
Plan Objectives, Outreach Strategy and Schedule - Public testimony will be taken**

Recommended Planning Board Action:

1. Approve objectives of the plan amendment
2. Approve outreach strategy
3. Approve plan schedule

Background

In 1998, the Planning Board approved the *Countywide Park Trails Plan (CWPTP)*. This was the first county level trails plan focusing solely on both hard surface and natural surface trails on parkland. It established a vision for park trails of county-wide, regional significance. The plan also identified several bikeways – “non-park bikeway connectors” – that provide important connections between regional parks and between stream valley parks and regional park trails.

The *CWPTP* did not make recommendations for trails on parkland that were of a more local scale, such as loop trails in regional parks, loop and connector pathways in neighborhood and local parks, and nature trails in conservation parks. Its focus on trails of “countywide significance” establishes the framework for the countywide system, not unlike the classification for the county bikeway system in which there is a countywide master plan of bikeways while recommendations for local bikeways are addressed in area master plans and sector plans. The *CWPTP* is the county’s plan for regional recreational trails on parkland, both hard surface and natural surface.

While the *CWPTP* has been amended numerous times by trail corridor plans and park master plans since 1998, it has never been comprehensively reexamined (see list of plans and amendments in Appendix A, Previous Board Actions Regarding *CWPTP*). This amendment will establish more realistic expectations for implementation, based on environmental and cultural resource analysis as well as on a strategy for

service delivery informed by population density and other factors. (Note: cultural resources include historic structures and their environmental setting as well as archaeological sites.)

In the past few years, several planning tools (e.g., GIS-based Resource Atlas) have been created to help the Department more efficiently analyze site impacts of proposed/planned park facilities and to also accurately identify potential environmental and cultural resource impacts. *The Vision 2030 Strategic Plan for Parks and Recreation in Montgomery County, Maryland (M-NCPPC, 2011) (Vision 2030)* also provides useful data for level of service analysis. This plan will use these tools to conduct more detailed analysis at the countywide master planning level. The Plan also could be accurately coordinated with the *Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan (M-NCPPC, 2005)*.

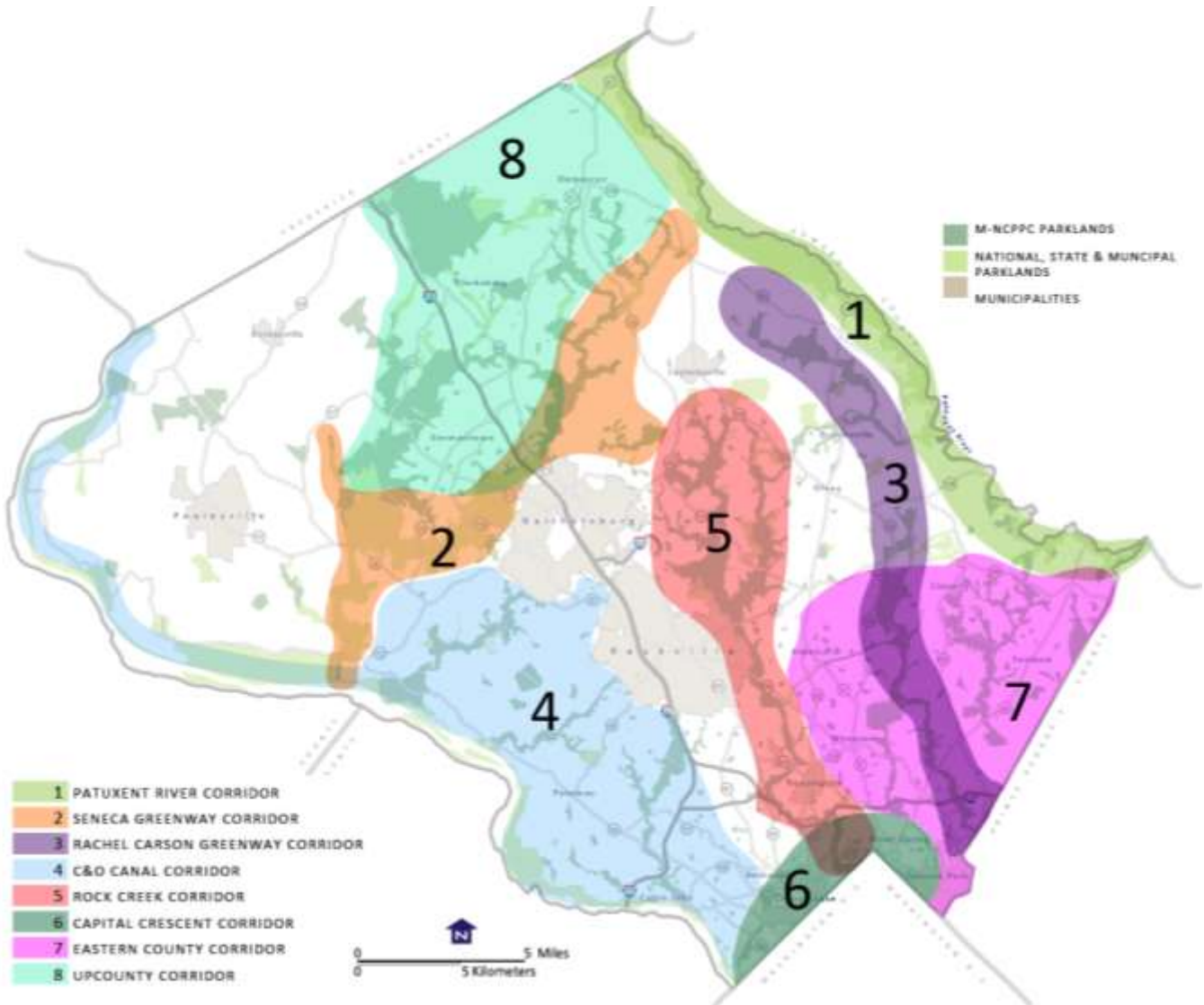


Figure 1 - Illustrative map showing approximate coverage areas for each trail planning corridor. See Figure 04 on page 10 of the *Countywide Park Trails Plan (M-NCPPC, 2008)* for original map showing corridors.

Need for Plan Amendment

The [Countywide Park Trails Plan](#) (CWPTP) (M-NCPPC, 2008)) established the vision for a robust network of natural and hard surface park trails and non-park bikeway connectors that link trails. It offers recommendations for new trails and trail improvements for eight trail planning corridors (see Figure 1):

Although the CWPTP has guided park trail planning and alignment decisions for the past 13 years, resulting in several miles of new hard surface and natural surface trails, the Department of Parks believes the plan needs to be revisited to address the following needs and concerns:

- **Incorporating the latest thinking on long range park planning.**
Analysis and input from Vision 2030 suggests rethinking assumptions about user types and service delivery with an emphasis on locating more multi-use trails near highest density of users.
- **Addressing Implementation Difficulties.**
The Department has encountered numerous problems implementing some of the Plan's recommendations. The current plan defers analysis of resource impacts to the more detailed trail corridor planning process or facility plans, at which time some trail segments have been found infeasible because of their location in constrained areas. The resulting countywide trail network is not well-linked and has significant gaps. Additional difficulties include trails proposed as easements across lands owned by others (e.g. Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, the State of Maryland), and inconsistencies with trail policies of adjoining land management agencies. The amended Plan should be based on more detailed analysis upfront to ensure more implementable recommendations.
- **Highlighting Master Plan Inconsistencies.**
There are some inconsistencies between the CWPTP, the *Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan* (M-NCPPC, 2005) and certain area master plans. This causes divergent interpretation of policy when detailed plans are reviewed by various agencies. The amended Plan should attempt to remedy the inconsistencies.
- **Organizing the plan more logically and strategically.**
The plan should be reformatted to be clearer and more "user-friendly." Redundancies will be eliminated and trail corridors that currently overlap will be regrouped geographically in a more logical manner. Recommendations will be strengthened and will more be clearly distinguished from "Issues Needing Further Study".
- **Questioning of Allowable Uses.**
Since the CWPTP was approved, some of its recommendations on user types have been challenged by trail users. The assumptions about which users should be allowed on which trails should be reexamined and clarified. In addition, the Department will need to clarify whether any motorized devices are allowed under current federal regulations for accessibility.
- **Addressing the role of park trails as recreational versus transportation facilities.**
There is considerable interest in the cycling community to identify hard surface park trails as transportation bikeways; however, the mission of the Department of the Parks does not include transportation, and only two park trails are considered primarily transportation routes. Transportation facilities have different design, maintenance and policing standards than recreational trails. There are increased capital and operational costs for designating trails for transportation, as well as increased resource impacts, especially in environmentally constrained Stream Valley Parks. The Plan should clarify the policies for classification of trails accordingly.

Objectives of Plan Amendment

This plan amendment will be the first to comprehensively reexamine the *CWPTP*, including the assumptions that informed its recommendations and the specific trail planning corridors. Multiple objectives for this amendment are proposed, as follows:

1. Vision 2030 Strategic Plan: Incorporate recommendations from the Department of Parks' long range planning document, approved by the Planning Board in June 2011.

Goal #6 of *Vision 2030* states "Expand and enhance opportunities for recreational trail experiences to promote health and wellness", under which there are four objectives for achieving the goal.

During this plan amendment, several of these objectives will be studied in detail, including:

- Expand the distribution of multi-use trails by identifying new multi-use natural and hard surface trails, particularly in currently or projected underserved and high-density areas with limited trail access
- Increase trail connectivity by filling gaps in the regional trail system and creating linked series of loops.
- Address the needs of specialty trail users, including hikers, bikers, and equestrians by establishing certain trails as limited-user trails, based on the terrain and environment.

2. Implementation trouble spots: Identify and recommend solutions to issues and areas that have caused problems during implementation.

The plan amendment will examine trail corridors in more detail, overlaying approximate trail alignments with the Resource Atlas GIS tool to study trail gaps more closely. Also, during the plan amendment process, staff will more closely consult with other land management agencies to discuss proposed trail corridors that cross their land.

When trail alignments are determined to be infeasible for whatever reason, this plan amendment will evaluate alternatives to fill the gaps including identifying potential land acquisition needs and/or routing trails along master planned bikeways and sidewalks within public rights of way where feasible and appropriate.

3. Trail easements on private land: Adjust or eliminate proposed trail corridors/alignments to rely less on trail easements.

Historically, many parks and park trails have been connected via easements on private land. Many longtime landowners have allowed certain groups – primarily equestrians – to align, build and maintain natural surface trails across their land to make these connections.

The Planning Board has approved numerous trail easements as part of subdivision activity over the past 30 years. These easements are intended to be operated and maintained jointly by M-NCPPC and trail groups or solely by M-NCPPC. Park staff has encountered many problems with park trail easements:

- We do not have a comprehensive map of all trail easements
- Trail easement agreements are inconsistent regarding uses allowed
- Responsibility for signage, maintenance, management and policing is unclear
- A comprehensive, strategic plan for trail easements does not exist
- M-NCPPC may not have authority to monitor and enforce trail easements on private land
- Responsibility for liability is unclear

As part of this plan amendment, staff will revisit the role of trail easements in park trail planning policy and implementation in consultation with the Commission's legal staff. We also will adjust trail alignments to minimize the need for additional future easements to make connections. This plan amendment will recommend alternatives for the Planning Board to consider regarding the Commission's role in operating and maintaining existing easements.

4. Master plan consistency: Align CWPTP recommendations with area/sector master plans, as well as functional master plans, and identify inconsistencies and possible remedies.

During the County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee briefing on the *Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan (M-NCPPC, 2007)* in fall of 2008, several inconsistencies in bikeway and trail recommendations between the park master plan and the *Clarksburg Master Plan and Hyattstown Special Study Area (M-NCPPC, 1994)* were highlighted and discussed. PHED asked M-NCPPC to study other area master plans, functional plans and park plans to determine whether the Clarksburg bikeway controversy was an isolated problem or indicative of a larger one, since Board-approved park master plans cannot amend Council-approved area master plans.

In March 2009, the Planning Board was briefed on [study findings](#) by Park and Planning staff based on an interagency (County Department of Transportation) review of a sampling of plans. Staff reported that other inconsistencies were found and that all master plans and sector plans, as well as functional master plans such as the *Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan (M-NCPPC, 2005)* should be reviewed to uncover other potential problems. During this plan amendment process, staff will pick up where it left off in early 2009 to study the remaining plans. Inconsistencies will be highlighted and potential remedies will be identified, including amendments to area master plans and functional master plans.

5. Other land management agencies: Ensure plan recommendations are consistent with policies of other land management agencies (WSSC, PEPCO, DNR), as well as adjoining counties and municipalities.

As part of this amendment, parks staff will meet with other agencies that manage lands through which proposed park trail corridors pass or connect to attempt to gain support for the plan's objectives and proposed trail alignments. Where plan recommendations are inconsistent with land management objectives of other agencies, proposed trail corridors may be adjusted or re-evaluated. Additionally, the plan will be aligned with State of Maryland maps and long range plans for bikeways and trails.

6. Reorganize/clarify the plan. The plan will be reorganized to:

- Align recommendations by stream valley corridors and/or more logical geographic boundaries
- Clarify and strengthen recommendations and clearly distinguish between plan recommendations and “Issues Needing Further Study”
- Reduce and/or resolve “Issues Needing Further Study” so that these issues are addressed earlier in the planning process, whenever feasible
- Elevate the status of the plan’s appendices by incorporating them into the body of document.

7. Address issue of allowable uses on hard and natural surface trails: Clarify the decision making processes for which user groups are identified as suitable for certain trail types.

For natural surface trails, this plan amendment will develop clear criteria for determining user groups. It will attempt to recommend which trail alignments can accommodate all user groups (hikers, mountain bikers and horses). These would include those trails that are and will remain sustainable, based on environmental conditions. Conversely, the plan amendment will attempt to recommend which trail alignments cannot accommodate all user groups. Generally, all natural surface trails will be identified as either shared use by all or hiking only. Additionally, for hard surface trails and natural surface trails, this plan amendment will address the effect of new regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Justice regarding changes to the Americans with Disabilities Act. Specifically, the plan amendment will incorporate forthcoming trail and park policy changes by the Department of Parks in response to the new US Department Of Justice regulations concerning use of electronic personal assistive mobility devices (EPAMD) by persons with disabilities.

8. Clarify role of park trails as recreational facilities versus transportation facilities.

There is considerable interest in the cycling community to identify hard surface park trails as transportation bikeways. The Department of Parks believes hard surface trails can play an important role in promoting more sustainable forms of transportation and affirms that properly designed and located trails can be important components of a balanced transportation system. Montgomery County features an extensive network of off-road trail facilities. However, it is important to note that many of these trails exist in the county park system and were designed and constructed primarily to serve recreational rather than transportation needs. It is also important to note that the mission of the Department of the Parks does not include transportation.

Transportation facilities have a different design, maintenance and policing standard than facilities that are used for recreation. For example, the Capital Crescent Trail in Bethesda was the first park trail in Montgomery County designed to bikeway design standards, and since that time only the Matthew Henson Trail has been designed to bikeway standards. There are also increased capital and operational costs for designating trails for transportation, such as clearing debris after storms, as well as increased environmental impacts, such as movement of de-icing salts from trail surfaces to adjacent waterways and wetlands.

Therefore, this plan amendment proposes to distinguish three types of off-road trails: 1) Shared Use Paths – Bikeways (Primary Use – Transportation); 2) Hard surface park trails in transportation rights-of-way or constructed with transportation funding (Joint Roles: Transportation and Recreation); and 3) Hard surface park trails on parkland (Primary Role: Recreation). See Appendix B, Letter from Department of Parks Director Mary Bradford to Maryland Department of Transportation from March 2010, for the origin and a more detailed description of this proposed typology.

Proposed Public Outreach Strategy

The plan schedule and public outreach strategy will be closely aligned with the 2012 update to the *Parks Recreation and Open Space (PROS)/Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan (LPPRP)*. Public meetings are scheduled for January 2012 during which the public will be invited to comment on the draft concepts and preliminary recommendations. Parks staff will also coordinate closely the representatives from the County Department of Transportation and seek input from the Montgomery County Bicycle Action Group (MCBAG), environmental groups such as Conservation Montgomery, and the Countywide Recreation Advisory Board (CWRAB).

Park Planning staff also has established an informal “Trails Working Group” consisting of representatives from park trail stakeholder groups. This group is helping to guide the plan and offer advice. Members of this group include Ginny Barnes from Conservation Montgomery (park stewardship), Jack Cochrane from Montgomery Bike Advocates (transportation bicycling), Joe Fritsch from the Mid-Atlantic Off Road Enthusiasts (MORE) (mountain biking), Jennifer Chambers from Hiking Along, Inc (hiking), Ed Schultze, a park trail volunteer (hiking, trail volunteer program), Austin Steo from Trails Conservancy (sustainable natural surface trail design) and Ron MacNab from Trail Riders of Today (TROT) (equestrian).

We began meeting with this group in April 2010 during the Vision 2030 Strategic Plan process. This group has helped identify and shape the plan’s objectives and will continue to advise the plan throughout the planning process.

Schedule

- Planning Board approves Objectives, Outreach Strategy and Schedule – October 6, 2011
- Public meetings with PROS/LPPRP – January 2012
- Monthly “Trails Working Group” meetings –October/November/December 2011
- Meetings with Montgomery County Bicycle Action Group (MCBAG) and Countywide Recreation Advisory Board –November or December 2011
- Staff Draft Plan to the Planning Board - April 2012
- Public Hearing Draft – June 2012
- Planning Board Worksessions – Summer/fall 2012

Planning Board Approval and Adoption – Late 2012

CC:

M-NCPPC, Department of Parks
Gene Giddens, Deputy Director - Operations
Brian Woodward, Chief, Southern Parks Division

Mike Horrigan, Chief, Northern Parks Division
Darien Manley, Chief, Park Police, Montgomery County Division
Mitra Pedoeem, Chief, Park Development Division
David Vismara, Chief, Horticulture, Forestry and Environmental Education Division
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Montgomery County Department of Transportation

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Appendix A - Previous Board Actions Regarding CWPTP

- [Woodstock Equestrian Park Master Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2002\)](#)
 - Added new “Equestrian Trail Corridors” (See Figure 4 on page 12 of plan) to connect Woodstock Equestrian Park with nearby parks and destinations
 - Trail connections rely heavily on trail easements on private land
- [Muddy Branch Stream Valley Trail Corridor Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2002\)](#)
 - Removed the hard surface trail on parkland south of Quince Orchard Road
 - Affirmed hard surface trail on parkland north of Quince Orchard Road
 - Affirmed natural surface trail along entire corridor
 - Identified a non-park connector/master planned bikeway along Travilah Road (SP-X in Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan) to link hard surface park trail north of Quince Orchard Road to the C&O Canal Towpath
- [Amendment to add a “Trail Planning Process” \(2003\)](#)
 - Added a new chapter: Trail Corridor Plans
 - Added the “Trails Work Program” to the Implementation chapter
 - Affirmed the guiding principle “to seek balance among recreation, transportation, and environmental concerns” on a county-wide basis
 - Added an objective to create sustainable natural surface trails
- [Blockhouse Point Conservation Park Master Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2004\)](#)
 - Identified natural surface trail connector between Muddy Branch natural surface trail and C&O Canal Towpath
- [Rachel Carson Greenway Trail Corridor Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2005\)](#)
 - Recommended a continuous natural surface greenway trail between I-495 and the Patuxent River, which is primarily within the Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park units
 - Divided the trail corridor into six segments, and identified thematic interpretive elements for each
 - Recommended only hiking and equestrian use of trail, eliminating mountain biking use
- [Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2007\)](#)
 - Realigned Clarksburg Greenway Trail from through the park’s interior to along Snowden Farm Parkway and MD 355 for two reasons:
 - Avoid impacting sensitive environmental resources in the park and disturbing interior forest consistent with the park master plan’s theme to keep the park’s interior as natural and undisturbed as possible.
 - Take advantage of master planned bikeway along MD 355 that would connect to planned day-use area for the regional park
 - *NOTE: The 1994 Clarksburg Master Plan recommends a shared use path bikeway (B-1) through the park’s interior. The 2005 CBFMP implicitly removed B-1 from passing through the park and realigned B-1 (which M-NCPPC interprets as the Clarksburg Greenway Trail) to along MD 355. Hence, the LBRPMP does not include B-1 as a continued trail/bikeway recommendation.*

- [Upper Rock Creek Trail Corridor Plan \(M-NCPPC, 2008\)](#)
 - Affirmed a hard surface trail between Lake Frank and Olney within the North Branch Stream Valley Park
 - Trail alignment relies on master planned shared use paths along Muncaster Mill Road and Emory Road as well as the ICC Bike Path to bypass an environmentally sensitive biodiversity area and best natural area in North Branch Stream Valley Park north of Muncaster Mill Road.
 - Identified a X-mile natural surface loop trail that travels along both the North Branch and the Rock Creek mainstem
- [Intercounty Connector Limited Functional Master Plan Amendment \(M-NCPPC, 2009\)](#)
 - Affirmed the importance of the North Branch Trail as a connector between the ICC Bike Path and the Rock Creek Trail system
 - Extended the Matthew Henson Trail across Northwest Branch to connect to the ICC Bike Path terminus at Notley Road
 - Recommended that the ICC Bike Path parallel the ICC on parkland between Layhill Road and Bonifant Road and that this segment of SP-40 be studied in detail as part of the future master plan for Northwest Branch Recreational Park
 - Through Paint Branch Stream Valley Park, identified three options (in order of priority) for ICC Bike Path between New Hampshire Avenue and US 29 recognizing that the final alignment may be a blend of all three:
 - Within the highway limit of disturbance
 - Within the highway right-of-way
 - On parkland parallel to the highway
 - Pursues the *CWPTP* recommendation to identify a park trail connection through the park parallel to the highway (in addition to ICC Bike Path). Feasibility, detailed alignment and surface type to-be-determined later

Appendix B – Letter from Department of Parks Director Mary Bradford to Maryland DOT, March 2010



MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS
THE MARYLAND - NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

March 19, 2010

Donald Halligan
Director, Office of Planning and Capital Programming
Maryland Department of Transportation
7201 Corporate Center Drive
Hanover, MD 21076

Dear Mr. Halligan,

This letter is in response to your request for our agency's comments on *Maryland Trails: A Greener Way to Go*. Both the Department of Parks and the Department of Planning have reviewed the document and the online interactive map. Since the majority of off-road trails in Montgomery County are located on parkland, the Department of Parks is leading our agency's response. You can expect separate comments from the County's Department of Transportation.

The primary goal of *Maryland Trails: A Greener Way to Go* is to emphasize the transportation value of off-road trails. We applaud this goal and share your vision that trails can play an important role in promoting more sustainable forms of transportation. The M-NCPPC affirms that properly designed and located trails can be important components of a balanced transportation system. Such a system will facilitate non-motorized travel to and from work as well as short trips to neighborhood destinations. We believe the County needs to continue to invest in these facilities to promote healthier lifestyles and provide additional travel options for our residents and workers.

Montgomery County features an extensive network of off-road trail facilities that can and should be included in this plan. However, it is important to note that many of these trails exist in the county park system and were designed and constructed primarily to serve recreational rather than transportation needs. Accordingly, we ask that this Statewide trail plan distinguish among off-road trail facilities based on their primary roles:

- **Shared Use Paths (Bikeways)/Primary Role: Transportation**

The *Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan* (M-NCPPC, 2005) identifies a number of shared use paths located in transportation rights of way. These facilities primarily provide a transportation function for bicycle and pedestrian trips, but may also be used for some forms of recreation (e.g., high-speed biking). Examples include Falls Road, Great Seneca Highway and the future ICC bike path.

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- **Hard surface park trails in transportation rights-of-way or constructed with transportation funding/Joint Roles: Transportation and Recreation**

The Capital Crescent Trail is located in a rail-banked corridor which is owned by the County Department of Transportation but is operated and maintained as a park trail. It was partially funded with federal and state transportation grants, the most recent example being the bridge over River Road. The Matthew Henson Trail, located in the former right-of-way for the Rockville Facility, was funded under *Go Montgomery!*. These trails or trail segments are heavily used for commuting and short trips on weekdays and are primarily used for recreation on weekends.

- **Hard surface park trails on parkland/Primary Role: Recreation**

The majority of the county's hard surface park trails are located in stream valley parks, such as Rock Creek, Sligo Creek, and Magruder Branch. These trails were built decades ago and were intended to serve a variety of trail-based recreational needs – including walking, jogging, biking, and nature appreciation. Given their age, they often do not meet AASHTO design standards. They were also frequently built in areas that are considered environmentally sensitive today. These areas include stream buffers, 100-year floodplains, and non-tidal wetlands. Although these facilities may offer some limited transportation benefit, their primary purpose is recreation.

Given their different primary roles, each of these facility types is designed, managed, operated and maintained differently. For example, hard surface park trails located in stream valleys do not receive the same level of maintenance as shared-use paths or hard surface trails located in transportation rights-of-way. This reflects both budget limitations (*e.g.*, snow removal on remote stream valley trails) and a variety of environmental concerns (*e.g.*, de-icing trails located adjacent to streams).

We believe that graphically distinguishing primary or joint use trails on the Maryland Trails website has value not only for Montgomery (and Prince George's) County, but also throughout the State. It would be enable trail users and policy makers to distinguish between trails intended primarily for transportation (but used for recreation) and trails intended primarily for recreation (but used for transportation), as well as their role in the entire statewide bikeway and trail network.

Please contact Mr. Joe B. Davis, Senior Natural Resource Specialist, M-NCPPC, Department of Parks, Montgomery County, for a copy of the Department of Park's hard surface trails GIS layer. Mr. Davis can be reached at 301-650-4393 or Davis.JoeB@montgomeryparks.org.

The Department of Parks looks forward to participating in this important planning initiative. If you have any questions about this letter and our participation in this plan, please contact our trails planner Chuck Kines, 301-495-2184; Charles.Kines@montgomeryparks.org.

Sincerely,



Mary Bradford
Director, Montgomery County Department of Parks

Pc: Dan Hardy
John E. Hench
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