



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

VALERIE ERVIN
COUNCILMEMBER
DISTRICT 5

Memorandum

Date: February 24, 2010

To: Nancy Floreen, Council President and Chair, Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy, and Environment Committee
Arthur Holmes, Jr., Director, Department of Transportation

From: Valerie Ervin, ^{V&E} Council Vice President

Re: Status Update on the Metropolitan Branch Trail

With the release of the County Executive's Recommended FY11-16 Capital Improvements Program (CIP), I am requesting an update on the status of the Metropolitan Branch Trail project.

I respectfully ask the Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy, and Environment Committee (T&E) Committee to review this project in light of the Planning Board's recommendation to accelerate project designs and funding; recent Silver Spring Advisory Board letter; construction of the Paul S. Sarbanes Transit Center; and ongoing adjacent projects in the Ripley District.

IMPORTANCE OF THE TRAIL

The Metropolitan Branch Trail project is an important off-road facility that would be part of a larger system of non-motorized trails throughout the region. As stated in the Recommended FY11-16 CIP, the goal is to "create a bicycle beltway that links Union Station and the Mall in Washington, DC to Takoma Park, Silver Spring, and Bethesda in Maryland."¹

The Trail would be a critical link for pedestrians and bicyclists traveling to, from, and through downtown Silver Spring. Planning Board staff estimate the trail usage would range between 50-150 persons on weekdays to 300-500 persons on weekends.² It would create a more bicycle-friendly Silver Spring, facilitate multimodal access to the new Transit Center, and contribute to the revitalization of the area. Through my office's daily contact with the residents of Silver Spring and bicyclists throughout the County, it is considered a top transportation priority.

¹ County Executive's Recommended FY11 Capital Budget and FY11-16 Capital Improvements Program: Transportation. "Metropolitan Branch Trail – No. 501110." January 15, 2010.
<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/omb/FY11/ciprec/pdf/501110.pdf>

² Clarke, Justin, Dan Hardy and Larry Cole. "Recommended Transportation Additions to the FY11-FY16 Montgomery County Capital Improvements Program (CIP)." Montgomery County Planning Board. January 28, 2010.

BACKGROUND

The County's Department of Transportation (DOT) began concept design for the Metropolitan Branch Trail in fiscal year 2004. In 2006, the County Planning Board's Phase I Facility Planning Study recommended a seven-tenths of a mile segment that would roughly parallel the CSX Metropolitan Branch between the Silver Spring Metrorail Station and Montgomery College's Takoma Park campus, crossing Georgia Avenue on a new bridge. According to plans, the Trail would be eight to ten feet in width.

Some portions of the Metropolitan Branch Trail have been completed, including a segment next to Montgomery College's Takoma Park campus. Design and construction of the Trail is underway on the District of Columbia's extension to Union Station. In contrast, there has been little progress in the County's Metropolitan Branch Trail design since 2006.

As I requested, the Council's T&E Committee received an update from DOT on the status of its facility planning for the Trail in July 2009. At the worksession, DOT stated that progress had stalled and that no substantive agreements had been made between the County and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) or CSX. Both WMATA and CSX representatives reported that they were willing to enter into discussions when DOT had more detailed designs. Staff from DOT stated that funding would be requested in the FY11-16 CIP to complete planning and design work.

RECOMMENDED FY11-16 CIP

As you may know, the project is included in the Executive's Recommended FY11-16 CIP, but it does not include design funds until FY13, and proposes using the existing bridge over Georgia Avenue. The Recommended CIP project description also does not include construction funds in any of the six years.

In February 2010, the County's Planning Board recommended that the Council accelerate the design and construction schedule to the extent possible so that the project opens concurrently with the Transit Center and the portions of the Trail being constructed in the District of Columbia. The Planning Board also recommended that funding be included for a new bridge over Georgia Avenue, as it previously had advised to the Council.³

Recently, the Silver Spring Advisory Board sent a letter to the Council urging the County to move forward on this project. The Advisory Board recognizes the difficult budget year ahead, but states that delaying the design and construction of the Metropolitan Branch Trail is "unproductive and unacceptable," since it has already been put off for far too long.⁴ Further, I fear that this project's lack of progress may signal to residents that the County is uncommitted to non-automotive modes of transportation. We need to get this project moving.

³ Hanson, Royce. "Comments on the FY 11-16 Montgomery County Capital Improvements Program (CIP)." Office of the Chairman. Maryland-National Park and Planning Commission. February 9, 2010. http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council/pdf/agenda/cm/2010/100218/20100218_TE1-3.pdf

⁴ Unger, Darian. "Letter from Silver Spring Advisory Board about Met. Branch Trail." Silver Spring Advisory Board. February 22, 2010.

REQUEST FOR STATUS UPDATE

Within the next few weeks, the Council will be making budgetary decisions on the CIP that will impact the future of the Metropolitan Branch Trail. To make these decisions, I request that DOT provide the T&E Committee a full update on the project during the Council's discussion of the FY11-16 Capital Improvements Program. I would like a clear account of the issues impeding this project, and what is needed to address them, including:

- What information is needed from WMATA and CSX?
- What is the rationale for the proposed timing of design and construction of the project?
- What is the rationale for the proposed route of the project?
- What is the Executive Branch response to the Planning Board's comments on the project?
- Does DOT expect right-of-way acquisition to delay project implementation?

Please feel free to contact my office with any questions regarding this request at 240-777-7960. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

c: Councilmembers
Edgar Gonzalez, Deputy Director for Transportation Policy, Department of Transportation
Bruce Johnston, Division Chief Capital Projects and Construction, Department of Transportation
Glenn Orlin, Deputy Director, Montgomery County Council
Reemberto Rodriguez, Director, Silver Spring Regional Service Center
Rollin Stanley, Director, Montgomery County Planning Department
Darian Unger, Chair, Silver Spring Advisory Board
Eric Gilliland, Executive Director, Washington Area Bicyclist Association