



Vision 2030

Montgomery County Parks and Recreation Vision 2030 and Strategic Plan

Trails Focus Group Notes

April 27, 2010

Parkside Headquarters

9500 Brunett Avenue, Silver Spring

7-9:00 pm

Participants:

Friends of Little Bennett (also Up County Rec. Adv. Board)

Mid-Atlantic Off Road Enthusiasts (MORE)

Trail Riders of Today (TROT)

Montgomery County Road Runners Club

Save Our Trail

Trail Conservancy, Inc.

Hiking Along

Montgomery County Bicycle Advocates

Montgomery County Bicycle Advocates

EPIC (Equestrian Partners in Conservation)

Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA)

M-NCPPC Staff:

Chuck Kines, M-NCPPC

Bob Turnbull, M-NCPPC

Brooke Farquhar, M-NCPPC

Facilitator: Jim Klein, Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects (Greenplay Team)

Summary:

The purpose of the focus group was to delve more deeply into trails related issues associated with park and recreation in Montgomery County. Participants were asked to discuss trail related assets, issues and challenges, priorities, and potential partnerships that can be encouraged to help achieve those priorities. Participants were also asked how the strategic plan could help to address the challenges.

Participants identified a number of key assets associated with trails throughout the discussion especially the relationship of trails to healthy lifestyle by providing better access to nearby nature and to the quality of the overall system (especially its length and relationship to greenways)

Discussion of trail related issues focused on a number of key points related to: connectivity; increasing the length and opportunities for all trail users; sustainability of all types of trail design; the need to meet AASHTO trail design standards for multi-use trails; the need to communicate better about all the environmental benefits of trails; the myths of trail – neighbor relationships (such as crime); the role of private developer agreements in trail building (and needed public investments to complete trail sections started by developers); the need for facilities such as access to bathrooms; the need for better coordination among other agencies; and the need for a simpler process to facilitate partnerships with volunteer groups and organizations.

The overuse and preponderance of user conflicts on certain trails (e.g. Capital Crescent Trail) are clearly the result of lack of connectivity, lack of sufficient facilities, lack of adequate trail width, and the need for more user education.

The strategic plan could help overcome some of these issues and challenges by developing more transparent policies regarding trail planning and design (especially public involvement), environmental assessment, and public/private/agency/organization partnerships. Of particular importance is the need to establish consistent policies for trails between area plans (according to participants, sometimes trail standards are different when crossing into one planning area into another) and for clear standards that establish what is an environmental impact of a trail. The strategic plan could also point to the need for clear trail design standards by type of trail (*or a new look at those standards currently in use*)

Ideas for strategic interventions include the need to focus on the interconnectivity between trail systems. A large proportion of the current trail system is along stream valleys. Connecting between stream valleys would be an excellent way to extend trail length and widen the range of trail opportunities.

Partnerships between the M-NCPPC and MCPS, non-profit organizations, and user groups are sometimes difficult if not impossible to establish. Discussion focused on ways to make it easier to establish partnerships and working with these organizations to better position trails for outside funding. Developer contributions to trails were also discussed along with the need for better communication about trail projects that could be funded through developer contributions. User education was identified as a major need, something that other jurisdictions gain funding for through their DOT's.

Following is a summary of the discussion by focus group participants in response to a series of questions (note that in this focus group the conversation flowed from one topic to another with some overlap – the comments have been slightly reorganized to address each topic).

1. *What are the two or three most important assets associated with trails and trail related uses in Montgomery County?*

- Trails help to link neighborhoods with parks and nearby nature providing benefits for property value, lifestyle, and health (inviting & safe & free)
- Trails provide more opportunities for children to get outside and experience nature nearby
- Trails provide opportunities for people of all ages to experience parks and understand park issues
- The variety of trail types (both hard and soft trails, for example) in the County is an asset
- The extent of the trail mileage in the County including County, State and Federal is an asset
- Nearby trails provide a casual meeting spot in neighborhoods and a shared experience among neighbors
- A breath of fresh air -- the lungs
- Transportation benefits
- Trails contribute to the ecosystem as part of greenways
- Trails and greenways are also wildlife corridor – providing a chance to experience wildlife (bird watching for example) nearby

2. *What are the most significant issues related to trails and trail uses? Are there any specific examples of significant issues that have been resolved successfully? Unsuccessfully?*

- The trail system needs to be better integrated within the community
- Lack of well-placed bathrooms and water including winter hours is an issue (that may get worse with current budget conditions)
- Maintenance and repaving of existing trails is needed (not just new construction); with volunteer help
- Preservation of land needed for trails (land purchases need to be made with trails in mind)
- Sustainability of trails over time
- Trail types need to be well distributed throughout the entire County
- ADA accessibility
- Multi-use trails need adequate width
- Safety of road crossings, trails in general
- Paved trails designed to AASHTO standards
- More benches, picnic spots, and resting places are needed along trails
- Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) issues need to be addressed (e.g. the myth that trails bring crime)
- Private developers have built trail sections but public sector has not finished them (e.g. Damascus Reg. Park to Hazel Mills)
- Inconsistencies among area plans
- Coordinating trails w/ SHA and County DPW (e.g. Georgia Avenue guardrails, MD 108)

3. *As a representative of specific trail user group, please identify any challenges facing trail users (e.g. trail capacity, proximity to trail resources, lack of continuity, etc)? How can the strategic plan assist trail users in overcoming these challenges?*

- Accessibility for horses to sustainable trails with adequate trailer parking for horse trails
- Better connectivity (with good surfacing) is needed with enough trails for all – better connectivity increases trail capacity – complete the system
- Promote cycling for environmental benefit -- talk about its overall green advantages at a macro scale in a manner that allows for comparison with site –scale environmental impacts
- Community relationship w/ trails – public realm v. private
- Police emergency calls – suggest better location services for safety – mile markers, nearby streets noted along trail so user can better describe location (some cell phones have location identifiers to nearest tower, but more information is helpful)
- Developer dedication of land is typically non-buildable or environmentally sensitive – this makes it difficult to put trails on these lands. Need to coordinate more through the development review process
- Environmental impact of trails – needs to be done with more honesty and integrity (example given of Rachel Carson Greenway where a few individuals were able to influence the final decision resulting in a narrow and some perceive to be unsafe trail solution).
- Clear standards are needed for environmental impact and trail design; there should be a way to site trails; shared use could be the norm
- Staff support is needed to speak for the needs of future trail users (who are not typically represented well in overall process) – process of exclusion of some groups is the biggest problem

- County policy has one paragraph where participant says bicycles are noted as being inconsistent (*assume meant as inconsistent with open space use or park use*)
- Inconsistent trash policies lead to confusion - if carry in carry out, then signs are needed at trailhead to make it clear
- For horses and mountain bikers, sustainability is a common issue and they could work together more closely to achieve common goals
- Community survey user trail sample didn't mention horses! Surveys should be more inclusive using a wide range of tools (mail, telephone, web)

4. *What do you consider to be the top two or three priorities for trails in Montgomery County? How about top priorities for trails that are associated with Montgomery County Parks, if different from above?*

Note this question was skipped over due to time constraints but the following were mentioned

- Repaving - Rock Creek to Lake Needwood in bad shape
- NW Branch Trail flooding problems
- Clarksburg Greenway

5. *What are potential partnerships to help achieve trail and trail use priorities in Montgomery County? How can Montgomery County's Parks and Montgomery County Recreation help achieve these priorities?*

- Provision of needed trail facilities (bathrooms and water, picnic/benches etc.) should be coordinated with park design (e.g. multi-use athletic fields typically need bathrooms and water – plan trail system to link up with those parks – the type of facility could be similar to Fletchers Boat House)
- Budget priorities should focus on trail system – including and especially getting to the system.
- The role of trails in the overall park system should be clearly spelled out
- Land acquisition needs to be accomplished with trail system in mind – land purchase in current economic recession should be a priority
- A formal mechanism should be established for developers to contribute to the trail system (for example, development in Downtown Silver Spring could make a contribution to system in lieu of providing on-site facility)
- Trails need to be more competitive with more well-funded users/activities when looking at pools of funding from development fees
- The current effort to establish a “CR” Zone is an example where the density benefit is provided when funding a master plan facility (trails need to be on the list of eligible master plan facilities)
- Trail corridor planning within existing parkland needs to consider additional land dedication on non-environmentally sensitive adjacent lands (the problem with stream valley parks is it usually only includes the most environmentally sensitive lands that are not developable and making it difficult to meet AASHTO standards without some environmental impact)
- Partnerships with MCPS – MOU's have been difficult to establish with schools (and other non-profit groups) – suggest expanding partnerships (making it easier to establish) to draw in other sources of funding (making a stronger case for Safe Routes to Schools, for example) - suggestion to go through parks volunteer program office, rather than establishing formal MOU)

- Other potential partnerships include scouting, other agencies, environmental education (building on the “no child left inside” momentum), water quality, etc. - Partnership process needs to be more inviting, less daunting – assistance needed!
- Transportation funding is a source that MCDPW does not appear to be interested in (*according to focus group participant*) – USDOT Recreational Trails programs, Transportation Enhancement program, Safe Routes to Schools, etc.
- Northwood is current high school program but concern when school cuts occur – environmental education is first to get cut – leaving program without a committed teacher to partner with
- M-NCPPC has worked extensively with Eagle Scout activities and open to more – suggested link to website to make that more obvious
- Utility ROW’s were identified as possible opportunity (e.g. Fairfax County has extensive program to work with Virginia Dominion Power) why not in Montgomery? Challenge is in utility owned corridors versus those with right-of-way leases. Strategic plan can point out the need for further discussion - How do you develop incentives for PEPCO and others to participate in multi-use of maintenance roads for example. More research needed on legal issues of using right-of-ways
- Some of the gaps in trail corridors are from lack of public ownership. Ownership of lands where trail gaps occur are unclear, and when efforts to use private or HOA land are used to fill gaps, maintenance responsibilities become blurry – staff prefers public ownership of trail corridors. Gaps need to be mapped and prioritized
- The strategic plan should be used to educate the public about trail benefits and to gain support for funding trails – how about something like “penny for trails” to gain dedicated funding source
- Grant writer support is needed for trails – health connection is an obvious opportunity for outside funding
- Advocacy groups support trails with money (such as Road Runners Club) – *these funds could be utilized as matching funds for other programs if timing is coordinated*
- There is a need to get information about future master plans and updates more obvious and on a master schedule so that all can participate in a fair manner
- Consistent user education (for all types of users) is an important strategy to increase capacity of trails. Bicycle behavior relative to shared use of trails is not well understood by all users. Education should include timing of use (especially related to weather), signage reminders, trail marking. CCT’s million users within an 8-12’ corridor create lots of conflicts.
- Recreation department could provide some of these educational programs specific to trail use including safe riding, rider etiquette, adventure sports (such as mountain bicycling or orienteering). WABA gets money from VDOT and DDOT to do training in those jurisdictions – perhaps MDOT/SHA would be a good source of funding for this (*Rec. Trails Program allows for education as an eligible funding category*)
- All user groups need to work together as most have common goals – the more trails there are with better connectivity, the fewer conflicts that arise
- Flexibility in design works better for natural surface trails where sustainable trails can become part of the ecosystem
- For paved multi-use trails – the use of AASHTO Guidelines help to reduce conflicts based on lots of input from user groups over many years. The County trail system is older and the standards have evolved over time, where an 8’ trail once seemed adequate, now it is inadequate
- Suggest a planning board member briefing on trails – with the top five points that any planning board member should understand about trails