



Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail
P.O. Box 30703
Bethesda, MD 20824
www.cctrail.org

The Honorable Peter Buttigieg Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE Washington, DC 20590

February 15, 2023

Letter of Support for Montgomery County, Maryland's 2023 RAISE Program Grant Application
to Construct the Capital Crescent Trail Tunnel

Dear Secretary Buttigieg,

The Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail is a local, non-profit community based group, managed by volunteers, and supported by several thousand members. We respectfully request that the U.S. Department of Transportation approve Maryland's Montgomery County Department of Transportation application for a \$45 million grant under the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program. This grant is essential for the continued construction and completion of a safe passageway under Wisconsin Avenue (MD-355) in Bethesda, Maryland for the pedestrians, runners, and cyclists who use the Capital Crescent Trail. The Trail is one of the most popular and well-used trails in the country and it has the highest volume of pedestrian and bicycle traffic of any paved trail in the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Upwards of a million people use the Trail annually for recreation and commuting between Georgetown, DC and locations in Montgomery County, with easy access to Arlington, Virginia.

For historical reference, the Trail previously had access to an old rail tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue in downtown Bethesda that provided a safe passageway for the public. This allowed pedestrians, runners, and cyclists to avoid busily congested Wisconsin Avenue and other heavily trafficked downtown Bethesda streets. It also provided a safe passageway for many students at the nearby Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School who used the tunnel to commute to school on foot or by bike. This situation changed in 2017 when the tunnel was closed to Trail usage and was transferred to the Purple Line light rail project, with the tunnel reserved exclusively for light rail. Needless to say, Capital Crescent Trail users were alarmed when their access to the tunnel was taken away and they have petitioned Montgomery County to provide a safe passageway under Wisconsin Avenue. In response, Montgomery County has committed to building a tunnel

under Wisconsin Avenue for the Capital Crescent Trail and has approved partial funding for the \$69 million construction cost. However, Montgomery County needs an additional \$45 million to launch the project.

We strongly support the construction of a tunnel for the Capital Crescent Trail under Wisconsin Avenue and we support the request for a RAISE grant. Below are some of the key reasons we need the tunnel passageway, including our rationale for the tunnel that we explained in an op-ed essay published in the Washington Post in June 2022:

- Trail usage peaks during the morning and evening rush hours, evidencing its use as a commuter route between Montgomery County and DC. With many residents changing their commuting habits throughout the pandemic, there has been a substantial increase in commuter traffic on the Trail. Commuting on the Trail has become an even more popular option for traveling to and from work, in part because of the attractiveness of the many new dedicated bike lanes throughout the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Furthermore, we anticipate commuter trail usage will substantially increase when the paved extension of the Capital Crescent Trail to Silver Spring opens after completion of the Purple Line.
- The tunnel is needed to achieve Montgomery County's Vision Zero goal to completely eliminate pedestrian traffic fatalities. Without a tunnel, pedestrians, runners, and cyclists must navigate through heavily congested downtown Bethesda streets, placing them at risk for vehicular accidents. With a tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue, Trail commuters to and from downtown Bethesda will have a safe, fast, and reliable route away from congested streets.
- The passageway will help achieve Montgomery County's climate action goals by giving residents car-free transportation options that are safe and convenient and will directly reduce carbon emissions. The Trail tunnel (and related paved extension to Silver Spring as part of the Purple Line project) will better connect existing active transportation networks in our area, such as the Rock Creek Trail, the Green Trail, the Sligo Creek Trail, and the Metropolitan Branch Trail. This helps to achieve the County's climate action goal of integrating park trails in order to make it easier for people to choose alternatives to automobile transportation.
- The tunnel moves supports transit equity and accessibility. It will allow eastern Montgomery County residents to walk, run, or cycle to Bethesda, Georgetown, and beyond. This racially and socio-economically diverse area of the County is one that, after being historically overlooked in the past, deserves enhanced trail connections to address large blocks, difficult topography, and other barriers limiting pedestrian and cyclist access. The 2017 Greater Lyttonsville Sector Plan recognizes that the community would benefit from tunnel and trail completion and calls for "trails and open spaces that could

be expanded with new greenways and civic greens to benefit more residents", which promotes and encourages physical activity.

A safe tunnel passageway tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue will not only align with Montgomery County's policy goals, but will be completely consistent with objectives of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and aligns with the RAISE grant priorities of enhancing pedestrian access, strengthening transit equity, and reducing traffic collisions.

On behalf of the thousands of residents in the metropolitan Washington, DC area who daily use the Capital Crescent Trail, we urge you to approve a RAISE grant of \$45 million for Montgomery County Department of Transportation so that construction of a safe passageway under Wisconsin Avenue can move forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Marra". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Tony Marra

Chair of the Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail