



Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail

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November 26, 2023

Chair and Members of the Planning, Housing, and Parks Committee
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Safety at Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway Intersection

Dear Councilmember Andrew Friedson and Members of the Planning, Housing, and Parks Committee,

As you consider design options for the configuration of Little Falls Parkway, the Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail requests you **consider the safety issues at the parkway's intersection with the Capital Crescent Trail**. In 2016, Dr. Ned Gaylin was killed by a car while cycling across the intersection and, since then, there have been many more accidents, injuries, and near misses.

Following the tragic death of Dr. Gaylin, the Parks Department addressed the immediate safety problem at the intersection by installing a temporary road diet. The Committee and the County Council will be considering permanent design options for the parkway section between Dorset Avenue and Arlington Road, which includes the parkway intersection with trail. As a local community-based group whose primary purpose is to promote the preservation, protection, and improvement of the Capital Crescent Trail, the Coalition's main concern is the safety of the intersection, and we have taken no position on other aspects of the design options to be considered. There is a consensus in the community about maintaining the road diet on the parkway, where it intersects with the trail, and the Coalition supports this consensus. The Coalition recommends that the permanent plan for the intersection address the following matters:

- **There must be a wide median between the two traffic lanes.**
- **There must be better signage.**
- **There must be a realignment of the Capital Crescent Trail at the Little Falls Parkway intersection.**

A Wide Median is Needed

Until recently, there was a 17-foot wide median between the traffic heading north toward Bethesda on Little Falls Parkway and the traffic heading south away from Bethesda. This meant that, when pedestrians and bicyclists on the Capital Crescent Trail came to the Little Falls Parkway intersection, they only had to focus on traffic coming in one direction to judge when it was safe to cross the parkway. Once in the median, they could then focus on traffic coming in the opposite direction. After Ned Gaylin's death, Montgomery Parks installed an interim road diet at the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway intersection. The road diet resulted in narrowing Little Falls Parkway from two lanes in each direction to one lane in each direction separated by the 17-foot median to one lane in each direction between Hillandale and Arlington Roads.

In June 2022, Montgomery Parks initiated a study to determine whether two lanes, rather than four lanes, between Dorset Avenue and Arlington Road could adequately accommodate vehicle traffic. This effectively expanded the Capital Crescent Trail crossing road diet to an approximate half mile stretch of the parkway. The new configuration resulted in the closing of the two southbound lanes of the parkway. These two lanes, along with the addition of the 17-foot median, were made available for recreational use by pedestrians and cyclists. The two previously northbound lanes were changed to one northbound lane and one southbound. Consequently, all the traffic was shifted to the two north-bound lanes. With the shift to the north-bound lanes, the 17-foot median between the opposing lanes of traffic at the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway intersection was no longer available for its intended use. As a result, a pedestrian or cyclist approaching the Little Falls Parkway intersection now needed to contend with traffic traveling in two different directions.

According to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), for the most recent five-year reporting period, an estimated 57 percent of bicyclist and 39 percent of pedestrian fatalities and incapacitating injuries in the U.S. occurred at intersections or were intersection related. The FHWA, which oversees millions of miles of the nation's highways, roads, and bridges and sets national standards for all traffic control measures, including road designs, highway signs, and traffic signals, recognizes the safety issues related to intersections. Because of this, the FHWA repeatedly emphasizes the importance of using medians, or what it sometimes calls pedestrian refuge islands, as safe locations for pedestrians and bikers crossing between opposing lanes of traffic. In its guide, "Improving Intersections for Pedestrians and Bicyclists" (Report Number: FHWA-SA-22-017) published last year, the FHWA stated:

Refuge islands are medians that provide space for pedestrians and bicyclists to wait in between stages of a crossing movement. Refuge islands decrease the complexity of crossing movements for pedestrians and bicyclists by allowing them to focus fewer lanes or fewer movements at a time while waiting for an acceptable gap to cross the roadway. Pedestrian refuge islands should match the width of the crosswalk or be wide enough to provide a safe, comfortable, and convenient crossing experience for wheelchair users, bicyclists, or groups of pedestrians.

A median or pedestrian refuge island contributes to pedestrian and cyclist safety because it allows people to cross one direction of traffic at a time and gives them a place to wait for an adequate gap in oncoming traffic before finishing the second phase of the crossing. For this reason, the Coalition supports the restoration of a median between the two lanes of traffic between Hillandale and Arlington Roads. The Parks Department's description of the Planning Board's recommended option of a permanent two-lane configuration of Little Falls Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue does include a raised grass median of indeterminate width at the intersection. The County Council requested option restores the original 17-foot median at the intersection.

The FHWA recommends that medians should be at least 6-feet wide, but preferably 8 to 10 feet wide. It also advises that a median should be at least as wide as the width of the crosswalk. At the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway intersection, the crosswalk is approximately 10 feet wide. In addition to the Little Falls Parkway crossing, there is only one other at-grade crossing on the Capital Crescent Trail between Georgetown and Bethesda, which is at Dorset Avenue, and it has a generous 25-foot median between opposing traffic lanes. The Coalition supports a median that is at least 10 feet wide but would prefer that it be as wide as feasible. One possibility is to simply return to the already existing 17-foot median at the intersection.

Better Signage

Signage at the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway crossing needs to be improved. Many people going through the intersection – whether pedestrians, bicyclists, or automobile drivers – are confused about who gets to go first through the intersection. The current signage contributes to the confusion. The crosswalk itself at the intersection consists of eight 10-foot-wide longitudinal stripes designated where pedestrians and bikers can travel across Little Falls Parkway. These markings are supposed to provide a visual cue to drivers to expect pedestrians and cyclists on the crosswalk, but the signage and trail alignment creates uncertainty. Here is the situation on the four approaches to the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway intersection:

- On the northbound side of the Capital Crescent Trail, heading to Bethesda, there is a sign approximately 500 feet from the intersection stating: Dangerous Intersection 500 Feet. At the intersection, there are no cautionary or instructional signs reminding those in the northbound trail lane that the intersection is dangerous. There should be another intersection warning sign closer to the parkway crossing.
- On the southbound lane, there is the similar cautionary Dangerous Intersection 500 Feet sign and, just before the crosswalk, there is a stop sign next to a light pole.
- On the Bethesda bound traffic lane of the Little Falls Parkway, there are a series of signs that appear to confuse many drivers. Opposite the Bethesda Pool parking lot, about 60 yards north of the Hillandale Road intersection, there is a diamond shaped yellow sign warning drivers about the pedestrian/cyclist crossing ahead. A further 10 yards ahead, there is a wide white stop line painted across the parkway, at the entrance to the Bethesda Pool parking lot, with an accompanying Stop Here for Pedestrians sign. At this location, there is occasional automobile traffic in and out of the pool parking lot, but rarely any

pedestrian traffic. The stop line does have the effect of slowing down some of the traffic. A further 14 yards ahead is the Capital Crescent Trail crosswalk. At the crosswalk, there is no Stop sign, only a sign informing drivers that there are pedestrians and cyclists using the crosswalk and that the speed limit has been reduced to 15 mph. Placed on the far side of the crosswalk, there is a moveable Stop Here for Pedestrians sign. This type of sign is supposed be placed prior to the crosswalk.

Under Maryland law, pedestrians and bikers have the right of way in a crosswalk. When the crosswalk is free of pedestrians and bikers, cars can proceed at the posted speed. Some car drivers stop at the Capital Crescent Trail/Little Falls Parkway crosswalk and look left and right; others just cruise over the crosswalk if they think it is clear. The problem is that drivers no longer have a clear view of trail traffic heading away from Bethesda and approaching to their right. Because of the S-shape alignment of the trail where it joins the intersection with the parkway, car drivers don't have an unobstructed view of bikers heading south on the trail. As a result, bikers often appear suddenly on the crosswalk or on its edge when just when cars are approaching the crosswalk. It then often becomes a contest between cars and bikes to see who will get over the crosswalk first. Pedestrians also have problems. Because there is no stop sign, cars often don't stop completely, but come to a rolling stop. Pedestrians who have started in the crosswalk are hesitant to proceed even though they have the right of way. There is often a standoff between the pedestrian and the car before one of them decides to proceed.

- On the traffic lane heading away from Bethesda, there are similar problems, but not as confusing as in the opposite lane. The Stop Here for Pedestrians sign is placed about 6 yards prior to the crosswalk, and it is clear that a stop is required at the crosswalk when pedestrians are present. Additionally, cars in this lane have a better view of pedestrians and bicyclists coming from either direction along the trail.

The most prudent and safest signage improvement for the intersection would be a requirement that cars on the Little Falls Parkway come to a full stop at the crosswalk. While the Stop Here for Pedestrians sign might be sufficient at an intersection with only pedestrians walking at 2 to 4 mph, it is not safe where bicycles are permitted to maintain a speed of up to 15 mph on the trail and expect to have the right of way on the crosswalk. In circumstances where two vehicles, one a car traveling at 25 mph and the other a bicycle going 15 mph, are heading toward each other at the crosswalk, there needs to be a formal way to establish intersection control. The best way to do this is to require that the more powerful, dangerous, and on average 4,000-pound vehicle should come to a complete stop. The traditional red Stop sign should be installed at either side of Little Falls Parkway prior to the crosswalk, along with an accompanying sign stating Cross Traffic Does Not Stop. Preferably, in order to increase driver awareness, the Stop sign should be one of the highly visible and bright solar powered flashing LED Stop signs that are now used in the county.

Trail Realignment at Intersection

We recommend a rerouting of the Capital Crescent Trail as it approaches Little Falls Parkway from Bethesda. The current interim S-shape routing, with two sharp 90-degree turns, should be

replaced with a gradual curve and the trail should widen as it approaches the intersection so that there is adequate room for trail users to wait for the passage of any cars in the crosswalk. One of the purposes of the S-shape design may have been to slow down biker speed and it does have this effect. However, as mentioned above, this design doesn't give cars on the parkway a clear view of approaching bicycle traffic. We recommend that consideration should be given to other traffic calming measures for bicycle traffic. This could include better signage, speed bumps, or rumble stripes. Speed bumps are used at the Capital Crescent Trail/Dorset Avenue intersection to reduce bicycle speeds.

We are happy to discuss our recommendations with you and with the Parks Department.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tony Marra". The signature is written in dark ink and has a fluid, connected style.

Tony Marra, Chair
Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail

cc: Mike Riley
Kyle Lukacs
Andrew Tsai
Matthew Higgins