

## MEMORANDUM

To: National Park Service  
Montgomery County Parks Department  
Montgomery County Department of Transportation  
District of Columbia Department of Transportation

From: Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail

Date: March 31, 2025

Subject: Important Capital Crescent Trail Issues

Last year, the agencies responsible for the maintenance, operation, and safety of the various sections of the Capital Crescent Trail discussed several areas where it makes sense to have consistency and standardization along the several mile route of the Trail. It was recognized that some degree of uniformity on the Trail regarding signage, markings, and design standards would be useful and less confusing for the thousands of people who use the Capital Crescent Trail. With the completion and opening next year of the extension of the Capital Crescent Trail to Silver Spring, it is timely to address a number of key issues where coordination is possible. Resolving these issues will facilitate the necessary planning for a number of actions that must be taken, including design on mileage markers, identification of milepost placements, modifications of trail maps, and other pre-opening actions. The immediate matters that need attention and consensus are the following:

- Location of the Georgetown trailhead for the Capital Crescent Trail.
- Production of a trail survey to get accurate distance measurements of the Trail.
- Design for the mileage markers.
- Creation of a new map for the Capital Crescent Trail.

## **Location of Georgetown Trailhead**

One of the most critical issues needing immediate attention is the location of the trailhead for the Capital Crescent Trail in Georgetown. The trailhead decision is essential because all parties involved agree that the mileage numbering, specifically the zero milepost, will be placed in Georgetown. With the extension of the Capital Crescent Trail to Silver Spring scheduled to open in the spring of next year, determining the trailhead location in Georgetown should be a priority.

### **Trailhead Background**

In the 1980s, the proponents for turning the abandoned CSX right-of-way into the multiuse trail, which became the Capital Crescent Trail, envisioned a Georgetown trailhead. It was to be located just below the General Services Administration heating plant (now abandoned and being converted into luxury residences) on Water Street between 29<sup>th</sup> Street and Rock Creek Park. This is where the CSX Georgetown Spur terminated. If the trailhead was at this location, trail users could easily join onto the Rock Creek Trail going north towards Maryland or south towards West and East Potomac Parks. However, this original proposal was never achieved.

The CSX rail right-of-way running along Water Street was originally a shared thoroughfare for both the rail line and local vehicle traffic. When this section of the right-of-way was abandoned by the CSX, it reverted to the District of Columbia, which removed the tracks and restored it as a roadway for vehicle traffic under the Whitehurst Freeway. There was no space allocated for a multiuse trail or even a protected bike lane. As a result, pedestrians and bikers had to use the street or the sidewalk to continue eastward onto the Rock Creek Trail.

Recently, the DC Department of Transportation has constructed a protected surface bike lane from the remains of the Alexandria Aqueduct Bridge near 36<sup>th</sup> Street on Water Street extending eastward toward Washington Harbour at 30<sup>th</sup> Street. At that east point, to get to the Rock Creek Trail, a pedestrian or biker can turn right onto 30<sup>th</sup> Street and then take the pathway that loops south around the House of Sweden and then crosses the bridge over Rock Creek into the Thompson's Boathouse parking lot, where the Rock Creek Trail can be joined. Alternatively, a pedestrian or biker could take the sidewalk at 30<sup>th</sup> Street and proceed under the Whitehurst Freeway to join the Rock Creek Trail.

### **Georgetown Trailhead Options**

There are at least four Georgetown trailhead options to be considered:

1. **Thompson's Boathouse Parking Lot.** The trailhead would be situated at the edge of the parking lot next to the Rock Creek Trail. Access from Water Street involves taking the pathway that loops around the House of Sweden on 30th Street. The DC Department of Transportation has installed directional signs at the intersection of Water and 30<sup>th</sup> Streets

informing pedestrians and bikers to take this route to reach the Rock Creek Trail.

However, this pathway can become challenging and crowded, particularly at the foot of 30th Street and the bridge across Rock Creek due to the influx of people heading to and from the Washington Harbour restaurants and Georgetown Waterfront Park.

2. **East of Whitehurst Underpass.** The trailhead at this location would be at the end of the pathway that starts at Water and 30<sup>th</sup> Streets and goes under Whitehurst Freeway to meet the Rock Creek Trail. Accessing this location from Water Street involves navigating a narrow, 7-foot-wide path with a 90-degree turn under the freeway, which may obscure oncoming trail traffic and pose safety risks. Some DC Department of Transportation bike maps instruct bikers to take this route under the freeway to access Rock Creek Trail. The Google Maps app also indicates this as the route. In agreement are Strava and other biking apps. If this option is selected, for safety reasons, the pathway under the freeway would need to be widened and metal railing installed along the curb. Alternatively, bikers could be instructed to dismount when going under the Whitehurst Freeway. There are a couple of locations on the Mt. Vernon Trail where this approach is used by the National Park Service when the trail passes under an overpass and narrows substantially.
  
3. **Water and 30<sup>th</sup> Streets.** This trailhead location would be at the eastern end of the Water Street surface bike lane. Interestingly, the Capital Crescent Trail map published by the Rails to Trails Conservancy and other organizations identifies this location as the trailhead for the trail. If this location is chosen as the trailhead, there needs to be clear signage to guide pedestrians and bikers to the Rock Creek Trail.
  
4. **Water Street at the Aqueduct.** Another possible option is the traditional trailhead at the Aqueduct on Water Street. Traditionally acknowledged as the starting point of the car-free Capital Crescent Trail, this location benefits from familiarity among long-time trail users. Yet, recent developments such as the installation of the protected bike lane along Water Street have altered the dynamics of this site.

Consistent with the goal of having an interconnected trail system in the DC metro area, the Coalition in the past has recommended that the Capital Crescent Trail start near Thompson's Boathouse adjacent to the Rock Creek Trail. This would give the Capital Crescent Trail two connections to the Rock Creek Trail, at the southern end and on the northern section of the Capital Crescent Trail where it arcs toward Silver Spring. However, as indicated above, there are some logistical and safety issues with putting the southern trailhead near Thompson's Boathouse. Ultimately, the decision on the trailhead placement should involve collaboration between the National Park Service and the DC Department of Transportation. These entities possess the expertise and jurisdictional authority necessary to navigate the logistical complexities and safety

concerns associated with each option. Their experience with trail design and management should ensure that the best trailhead option is chosen.

### **Where should we site the Georgetown trailhead?**

#### **Survey of the Trail**

The Coalition arranged for the placement of the original mile and half-mile posts along the Capital Crescent Trail by using the CSX mileposts that had been installed on the side of the Georgetown Spur railroad tracks. The existing mileposts won't be useful for placement of new mileposts originating at the Georgetown trailhead. The reason is that the current mile markers indicate the distance from the original northern trailhead in Lyttonsville, rather than Silver Spring. The Georgetown Spur of the CSX railroad branched off in Lyttonsville and, following the railroad convention, the branch-off point was designated as the zero-mile point. In addition, the existing distance measurements assume that the Capital Crescent Trail passes through the tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue. For the foreseeable future, the longer Bethesda surface trail will substitute for the tunnel passageway.

Bottom line, there needs to be a new survey of the Capital Crescent Trail from the Georgetown trailhead to the terminus in Silver Spring so that the mileposts can be placed at the appropriate places. Agencies responsible for the different sections of the Trail have survey records that could be stitched together to create a complete survey of the extended trail. Alternatively, the agencies may have in-house experts who could use online tools such as Google My Maps or mapping software to create a new survey. The Coalition has indicated that it is prepared to hire a survey or mapping expert to prepare a survey of the Trail.

### **How should we address this issue?**

#### **Trail Signage**

Clear and consistent signage is essential for maintaining the traffic flow and user experience on the Capital Crescent Trail. Given the multiple managers of different sections of the trail, having a common signage design will provide a more enjoyable and less confusing experience for the thousands of people who will use the Capital Crescent Trail. The most important and urgent signage decision involves the mile and half-mile markers. The current mile markers are wood and should be replaced with more durable metal or composite markers. Milepost signage could use the same shape or color, but it could indicate trail ownership with logos. If there are restrictions on the color used in signs (e.g., NPS signs typically are brown), efforts should be made to achieve consistency. In addition to the mile and half-mile markers, informational signs should be strategically placed at junctions, forks, and notable landmarks to aid navigation. Again,

the goal should be for a common design for such signs. The National Park Service has had a lot of recent experience with mile markers on local trails and could take the lead in recommending mileage sign designs. The Coalition funded the original mile and half-mile markers and is willing to do the same for their replacements.

**How should we proceed?**

### **Map of the Capital Crescent Trail.**

A new map of the Capital Crescent Trail from the Georgetown trailhead to the terminus in Silver Spring is needed. The existing maps at several information kiosks on the trail are outdated, as are the maps that are available online. A new map needs to reflect the location of the Georgetown trailhead, the Water Street surface trail, the surface trail in Bethesda, and the trail extension to Silver Spring. The four agencies probably have map-making specialists who could handle this responsibility. Alternatively, the Coalition could hire a cartographer to produce an updated trail map.

**What do you recommend?**