

N. Bethesda Connector Project Underway

County-Funded Plan May Face Lawsuit

By TIM CRAIG
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Montgomery County officials broke ground yesterday on a controversial connector road in North Bethesda, even though neighbors have threatened to sue and the state has pushed back plans for financing the full project.

Montrose Parkway West, a cornerstone of Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan's campaign pledge to invest \$1 billion in transportation projects, would run for 1.8 miles, linking Interstate 270 with a narrow street known as "old" Old Georgetown Road. Eventually, a widened Montrose Parkway could stretch east as far as Veirs Mill Road.

The county will pay the entire \$68 million for the highway's first phase, making it the most expensive road project Montgomery has undertaken.

Yesterday, Duncan (D) said the groundbreaking validates his effort in 2002 to elect a majority of County Council members who would support building the parkway and an intercounty connector.

"Thanks to the work of many, many people, we have broken the gridlock and we are moving the county forward," Duncan said, an apparent reference to his "End Gridlock" council slate in 2002. Duncan is running for governor in next year's elections.

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Supporters of the project, including Richard Parsons, executive director of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, said Montrose Parkway West is desperately needed to improve east-west traffic flow across the county.

"This is the dawn of a new era in Montgomery County. We are finally starting to see some real roadway improvements," said Parsons, a Duncan ally.

But some environmentalists and North Bethesda residents have put up fierce opposition to the highway, which they say will destroy wetlands, lead to more development and do little to lessen traffic congestion.

The opponents claim Duncan and state and federal authorities have rushed to start construction without undertaking proper environmental and traffic assessment studies.

The highway will cross Old Farm Creek and its associated wetlands.

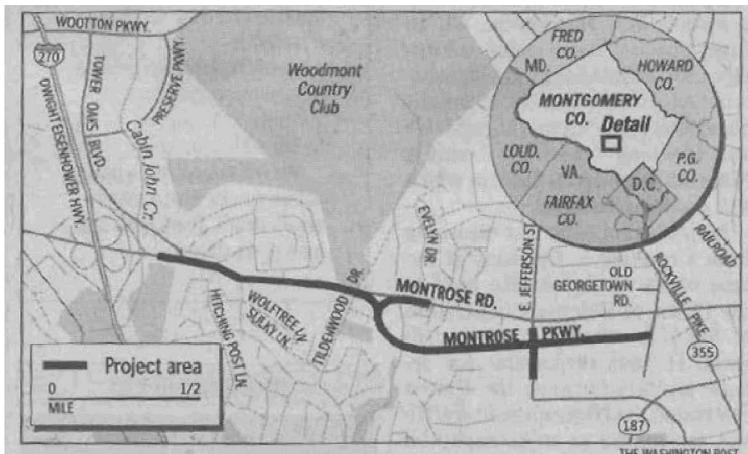
The opponents plan to file a lawsuit this week in federal court against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to try to halt the project. They contend the corps of engineers issued a wetlands disturbance permit without a proper study of environmental concerns.

"This is the last great wetlands in this part of Montgomery County, and they are trampling all over it," said Ed Rich of North Bethesda.

Yesterday, Rich and about two

First Phase of Project

The \$68 million Montrose Parkway West project is designed to relieve traffic in North Bethesda between I-270 and Rockville Pike.



dozen others protested Duncan's announcement, booing and jeering as he spoke.

"This is just a political statement by Doug Duncan that does nothing to alleviate traffic," said Janice Snyder, who was carrying a sign that read: "Duncan's folly."

Although the project has been studied by the county and state for years, opponents say the administration has been cutting corners to get it underway.

In August, a contractor hired by the county began clearing trees along the highway's proposed path before the corps of engineers or Maryland Department of the Environment had issued permits.

After residents protested, construction halted, but not before several trees were felled. The permits were issued a few weeks later.

The plan calls for widening Montrose Road from four to six lanes between the I-270 interchange and Tildenwood Drive, then creating a

four-lane Montrose Parkway that would extend to Old Georgetown Road. The first phase of the project is scheduled to be completed by fall 2008.

Montrose Parkway West is just one portion of a three-part project to build a parkway between I-270 and Veirs Mill Road. The second part, a state-funded interchange on Rockville Pike, is scheduled to be finished by fiscal 2012.

Besides environmental concerns, the opponents argued that it doesn't make sense to build the first phase until the state has fully committed to the second phase.

"It's currently a road to nowhere," said Steve Sorett, president of the Montrose Parkway Alternatives Coalition.

Duncan called on Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. to expedite the construction of phase two and accused him of slashing transportation funding in the state. Ehrlich's office declined to comment.