

July 21, 2023

Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Re: Pedestrian Master Plan -- Public Hearing, March 23, 2023

Dear Council President Glass and Members of the County Council:

The Montgomery Planning Board (MPB) has sent the Pedestrian Mater Plan (Plan) to this Council for approval. My testimony and objections are directed at one small section Plan – Section B4-g. Section B4-g provides for the closure of Beach Drive on weekends and holidays. For reasons including those set forth below, either Section B4-g should be stricken from the Plan or Beach Drive should be removed from Section B4-g (this section also provides for the Friday thru Sunday and holiday closure of Sligo Creek Parkway and based on road configuration, the neighborhoods near Sligo Creek may not oppose the Sligo Creek Parkway closure). If Section B4-g as revised by the MPB remains in the Plan approved by this Council, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), and not Montgomery Parks (MCParks) should be the lead county agency regarding Section B4-g. Closing roads and re-directing traffic is a subject that demands MCDOT experience and expertise.

No Matter the Goal, Closing Beach Drive is Not the Answer

Making the county safer for pedestrians and bicyclists is a worthwhile goal and the comprehensive Plan as a whole should facilitate a move to greater non-motorized vehicle safety. Closing major conduit streets like Beach Drive on the other hand, forces vehicular traffic onto streets not designed to handle the increased traffic volume – including neighborhood streets with pedestrians and bicyclists.

I live on Culver Street which runs parallel to Beach Drive between Cedar Lane and Connecticut Avenue. Beach Drive, at least between Cedar Lane and Connecticut Avenue, is a major county conduit for cars and trucks to travel East/West between these two significant North/South streets. The traffic from Cedar Lane to Connecticut Avenue to access the Beltway is particularly heavy 24/7 -- during the week, and on weekends and holidays. Based on 4 tube count studies on Culver Street conducted by MCDOT between 2020 and 2023, on weekdays an average of 350 cars and trucks travel on Culver Street. On Saturdays, because Beach Drive is closed, the number of vehicles doubles (an average of 692 vehicles traverse Culver Street). Considering both Saturday and Sunday volume (average of 591 vehicles over 4 studies and 630 vehicles on January 2023 study) the increased traffic volume is still way too much.

MCParks has never articulated what the goal is for closing Beach Drive on weekends and holidays. There is already a nice winding path running through the trees next to Beach Drive for pedestrians and recreational bicyclists – so the purpose cannot be for pedestrians or recreational

cyclists. Advanced cyclists ride on Beach Drive and have done so for the 20 plus years I have lived here and they have done so without closing Beach Drive. Also, advanced cyclists ride Beach drive well beyond the section of Beach Drive between Connecticut Avenue and Knowles Avenue that MCParks has closed on weekends and holidays since it started the closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing safer transportation for advanced cyclists and/or those commuting by bicycle is a worthy goal – and one that can be accomplished without closing Beach Drive. There are better alternatives to facilitate safe advanced and commuter bicycle transportation without closing Beach Drive.

Council Should Consider Construction of a Bike Lane as an Alternative to Closing Beach Drive

Constructing a protected and dedicated bike lane parallel to Beach Drive is a forward-thinking alternative that the Council should require MCParks to explore and report on to the Council. Despite the alternative being suggested by the neighborhood in which I live, constructing a bike lane has not even been explored by MC Parks. The state of Virginia built an 18 mile “shared use” trail parallel to I- 66 as part of its Transform 66 Project -- https://outside.transform66.org/about_the_project/project_sections/trails.asp . Something similar should at least be explored for Beach Drive. And a Beach Drive bike lane would be much shorter in length - closer to 5 miles in length. This is an opportunity for Maryland (at least Montgomery County) to keep up with Virginia in finding forward thinking “shared use” solutions for transportation challenges. Closing streets or lanes on streets is not the answer.

A dedicated bike lane could run parallel to Beach Drive from Garret Park Road to the North all the way to where Jones Mill Road intersects with the Georgetown Branch Trail to the South. The Beach Drive dedicated bike lane could connect to the Metro at the new Strathmore Square at Grosvenor and the Purple Line at Chevy Chase Lake developments. This Beach Drive bike lane would also provide safe bicycle access for some of the county’s historically underserved communities such as Ken-Gar Palisades Park, Viers Mill Local Park, and Dewey Local Park.

I am not a transportation planner and this suggestion may not ultimately be viable, but why not at least explore it. This Council should require MCParks and MCDOT to get more creative and think outside the box while pursuing enhanced, safe bicycle transportation options. The proposed closure of Beach Drive on weekends and holidays in Section B4-g of the Plan is a relic of COVID-19 and of the Casey Anderson era at MPB. We all need to move forward from both in a new and better direction. This Council should direct the MPB to first explore alternatives to closing roads and negatively impacting neighborhoods and the safety of neighborhood residents.

Either Section B4-g should be removed or there should be no reference to Beach Drive in Section B4-g. Important arterial county streets should not be closed without exploring better alternatives. Like the MCParks proposals for Little Falls Parkway, plans for enhanced bicycle options associated with Beach Drive should be considered separately and thoroughly by the Council and not as a small section of a large pedestrian plan.

Mark Redmiles

