

Megan Brown

Dear County Council Members:

I am writing as a nearly life-long resident of Montgomery County to identify problems with Section B-4g of the proposed Montgomery County Master Plan. I am a resident of Byeforde Rock Highlands (BRCH) and have lived in Kensington for 38 of my 45 years. My parents, children and in-laws all live in this neighborhood. Like you, our neighborhood supports a safe pedestrian experience in Montgomery County as well as rational road and traffic planning in support of that goal. I am also a regular jogger in the closed portion of the road and park, and the recreational uses that I observe at various times of day each weekday do not justify the closure's downsides. Rational cost-benefit calculus would not support this proposed closure, which is further arbitrary given the lack of closures of other nearby portions of Beach Drive. Put frankly, what may have been a nice idea to provide additional distanced recreation for coping with COVID closures of work and schools in 2020 as outlived its utility and rationale. I urge you to abandon this misguided and poorly supported approach and reject the closure of Beach Drive between Connecticut Avenue and Beach Drive.

Section B-4g, as drafted, would make permanent the current weekend closures of Beach Drive. As planners and Councilmembers have heard, this is a dangerous and poorly considered plan that demonstrably increases the risks to pedestrians in BRCH and changes the use of this residential road. I have seen first hand the risks that the closures create both in the neighborhood to which traffic diverts, and on Connecticut Avenue and Beach Drives for drivers (including myself) seeking to enter the closed road and our neighborhood side streets.

The closure of Beach Drive between Connecticut Ave. and Cedar Lane is misguided and unsupported by evidence about its safety or consistency with sound planning. It has created a major pedestrian safety issue for our neighborhood. The section of Beach Drive that Section B-4g would permanently close serves as a primary means for commuters to travel to and from the Beltway with direct access to the Rockville and Bethesda, including NIH and Walter Reed – the latter of which each have shifts that operate 7 days a week. When Beach Drive is closed, non-local/cut through drivers are redirected onto residential streets that were not designed, nor equipped to accommodate such excessive volumes of traffic. What is of primary concern is that the closures result in cars forced into a neighborhood that has no sidewalks, narrow streets with cars parked on both sides, several blind spots and no traffic calming measures of which to speak. It is simply too dangerous to walk or run on the street, walk pets, or for children to play or ride their bikes.

I personally have observed several dangerous instances of the effect of this closure. There are three main categories of dangerous behavior I see created:

- First, within the neighborhood, I have seen cars zipping through our neighborhood on Culver from Cedar race down the hill to Connecticut Avenue, and I have seen congestion and near-misses as cars zip around the corner of Bramber and Culver accessing Cedar Lane on the other end of the cut through. Culver does not have sidewalks and frequently has kids and pedestrians, including the elderly.
- Second, the additional cars cutting through on Culver from Connecticut often turn left from Bramber onto Cedar Lane to get back to Beach Drive; these lefthand turns compound dangers as cars come over the hill from Beach in the direction of Knowles toward Kensington and Wheaton.

- Third, I also have seen numerous drivers headed north on Connecticut Avenue attempt to turn left onto Beach Drive, hesitate in southbound traffic and then swerve to get back in the northbound traffic lanes to then speed up to Culver for the detour.

I worry too about public safety needs – police and ambulances benefit from the access to Beach Drive and closing it seems likely to add to delays and challenges in crossing that area of Montgomery county.

Traffic counts conducted by Montgomery DOT show that traffic increases in our neighborhood by over 100% each Saturday – a weekend which is supposed to have the lowest traffic volume. Weekend traffic averages show an 82% compared to weekday volumes. By simple math, doubling the volume of cars down a narrow residential street without sidewalks is at odds with the goals of the Pedestrian Master Plan – to create a safe, comfortable and appealing network for pedestrians.

This additional burden and danger is not necessary because Beach Drive already has a sufficient pedestrian pathway that has been in place since the 1970s. I and my children have used this pathway my entire life for foot and bike traffic. When I do, I do not observe substantial users of the closed road that could not be accommodated on the pathway.

Montgomery Parks has not provided any data demonstrating the need to close Beach Drive. Montgomery Parks also has not conducted any traffic studies to support the closures – neither before its implementation nor as part of the plan to make it permanent. Montgomery Parks does not even have any data showing the volume of pedestrian and bicyclist usage of Beach Drive (for the section between Cedar Lane and Connecticut Ave.) when it is closed.

To date, Montgomery Parks has ignored our concerns, has not considered reasonable alternatives and has even referred to us “those but the cut through traffic people” in internal communications. These communications also show that Parks personnel enjoy the closures on a personal level and cannot even pretend to be objective or to make safety their priority. My neighbors have proposed reasonable alternatives that have been ignored. For example: (i) starting the closure on Beach at Cedar Lane and extending it to Summit Ave.; and/or placing protected bike lanes on Beach Drive between Cedar Lane and Connecticut Ave. As a lawyer who often deals with regulator agency decisionmaking, it appears to me that the process here is inadequate, evidence absent, and proposal not supportable.

For these reasons, I strongly urge the County to consider revision of this section of the Pedestrian Master Plan to ensure the safety of Montgomery County residents and to meet the goals of other programs, such as Vision Zero. Decisions made without data or the input of those impacted have consequences.

Sincerely

/s/ Megan L. Brown
9608 Carriage Road
Kensington MD 2089