

My name is Evin Fernando, and I'm a rising junior living in Damascus and a part of the IB program at Watkins Mill High School, as well as the president of our Eco MoCo chapter. I'm here today to ask you to remove the proposed M83 highway northern section from the Master Plan of Highways and Transitways.

At school, we talk a lot about climate change, how it impacts our planet, our health, and our future. We learn about the greenhouse effect, sustainability, and the importance of protecting our environment. But beyond the science, I've also learned that the effects of climate change and environmental decisions don't impact everyone equally.

Communities like mine often bear the greatest burden. The Montgomery Village area has lower income, and overall, it is a community you may call a "disadvantaged community". Marginalized communities are often located in areas more vulnerable to climate impacts. Lower-income communities frequently have inadequate infrastructure to withstand climate-related events, leading to greater damage and displacement. We do not have as many resources when compared to other parts of the county, which is exactly why M-83 needs to be removed.

Watkins Mill is a Title 1 school, which is located right across the Great Seneca Stream Valley from the path of the proposed M83 highway. But it's not just our school. This plan would also affect homes, families, and neighborhoods, the places people live and raise their children.

And then there's the cost, nearly \$1 billion. Imagine what that kind of investment could do for our schools, for public transit, or for climate solutions that actually move us forward rather than take us back. Some people may say that people living up-county don't use the Ride-On buses, but I would like to speak to the contrary. Living in Damascus, I have taken the bus to Watkins Mill numerous times. However, I always have to take 2 buses to get there, which takes up more than an hour. If we had more funds spent towards our transit programs, we would be able to accommodate more people like me who may not have cars, live with disabilities, are too young to drive, or whatever the case may be, to make the typical hour bus ride shorter, saving time for everyone.

Additionally, I have friends at Watkins Mill who walk 30-40 minutes every day to school, as they are within a certain radius where school buses aren't provided. Transit has helped most of these friends of mine and has allowed them to speed up their journey to school, even if it is by 10-15 minutes. It would also be invaluable to have a bus running in Damascus on the weekends, as they do on weekdays.

Yes, the project may only span five miles. But that's five miles of homes, trees, trails, and ecosystems, five miles of natural spaces and community spaces that would be permanently altered or destroyed. Habitats for animals would disappear. And with them, a piece of what makes our community special.

Please don't pave over our future. Invest in something better, something that helps all of us thrive.

Thank you.