

July 8, 2025

Montgomery County Council Public Hearing - Master Plan of Highways and Transitways – 2025 Technical Update. Testimony by John Parrish

Dear Councilmember,

I am a lifelong resident of Montgomery County. I care deeply about preserving our remaining natural heritage. Please remove M-83 from our master plans.

Professional Background

I am a botanist and ecologist having worked in the National Capital Region for the National Park Service's Center For Urban Ecology and for the Maryland Natural Heritage Program at Maryland DNR. I've also worked for Arlington County and the City of Alexandria to develop natural resource management plans to safeguard their remaining natural areas. I serve on the advisory group for the County's Legacy Open Space Master Plan - 2007 to present.

In the mid-1990's, I worked for MD-DNR to conduct inventories for rare plants and to identify significant habitats on twenty M-NCPPC parklands in Montgomery County. The findings are published as: *Inventory for Rare Plants and Significant Habitats on M-NCPPC Park Lands in Montgomery County, Maryland* by Wiegand, Becker, Fleming and Parrish – February 1997. This report helped form the basis for designating the best natural areas and exceptional biodiversity areas within the park system.

The Ecological Consequences of M-83 to M-NCPPC Parklands

In 2003 I was hired by the Church of the Saviour to assess potential impacts to the natural environment by M-83 in the vicinity of the Dayspring Silent Retreat Center including the North Germantown Greenway and Great Seneca Parks. The findings are compiled in a 2004 report titled *Select Environmental Inventory and Impact Analysis for Amphibians, Forest Birds, Rare Flora and Significant Habitats in North Germantown Greenway & Great Seneca Park in the vicinity of the proposed M-83 Highway Alignment, Middlebrook Road to Brink Road, Montgomery County, Maryland* – (Parrish and Steinman 2004). I'd like to share a few of my findings so you may appreciate the ecological values of the parklands in this area and better understand what will be lost if M-83 is built.

Few people know about a study commissioned by the National Park Service published in 1971 that set out to evaluate superior deciduous forest tracts in the Eastern United States as part of an effort to designate National Natural Landmarks.¹

¹ Keever, K. C., *A study of the Mixed Mesophytic, Western Mesophytic and Oak-Chestnut Regions of the Eastern Deciduous Forest, Including a review of the Vegetation and Sites Recommended as*

Five sites in the Oak-Chestnut Forest Region in the Piedmont of Montgomery County, Maryland were evaluated in this effort. While none of these sites merited National Landmark status, four of the five sites were recognized as important to preserve at the State and County levels. These areas became part of the exceptional parklands we now know as the Rachel Carson and Hoyles Mill Conservation Parks, McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area and the Great Seneca and North Germantown Greenway Parks. The forest tract named Blunt Road Woods in the 1971 report comprises a large part of what we now call the North Germantown Greenway and Great Seneca Park along Dayspring Creek next to the Dayspring Silent Retreat Center. This is an area I inventoried in 2003 for the Church of the Saviour. M-83 would fragment and destroy this special place. The Blunt Road Woods site is described in the 1971 report as follows:

“It is an excellent example of an oak-hickory forest with an understory of Nyssa sylvatica and Acer rubrum. It is particularly unusual because the dead chestnuts were not cut but were allowed to stand until they fell over. It did not appear to be in immediate danger of destruction. Priority 2.”

I am happy to report this forest still harbors living American chestnut trees, some of which bear delicious nuts.

The two parklands, North Germantown Greenway and Great Seneca Park along the Dayspring Creek and Brandermill Tributary that M-83 would traverse harbor significant forest-interior habitats containing bedrock outcrops, wetlands and glades. These two areas are recognized as “biodiversity areas” by M-NCPPC due to scenic values, unusual habitats and the presence of uncommon and rare species.² I documented ten species of amphibians here including 7 frogs and 3 salamanders. Nine of the amphibians depend on wetlands for breeding, including wetlands that would be destroyed by M-83. I documented 21 species of forest-dwelling birds including 11 that are forest-interior dependent species. Nine of these are neo-tropical migratory songbirds that depend on large unbroken forests to maintain viable populations. Nine of the forest bird species are listed by M-NCPPC as “bird species of greatest conservation need.”³ These are the Red-shouldered Hawk, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Acadian Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Wood

Potential Natural Landmarks, the National Park Service, Washington D.C., 1971. (See p. 147 for description of the Blunt Road Woods.)

<https://npshistory.com/publications/vegetation/eastern-deciduous-forests.pdf>

² Natural Resource Management Plan for Natural Areas in M-NCPPC Parkland in Montgomery County, Maryland, Park Planning & Stewardship Division, M-NCPPC, February 2013. See p.6 (description of a biodiversity area, p.29 (map), p.32 (table describing the N. Germantown Greenway & Great Seneca Park SVU2 biodiversity area)

https://www.montgomeryplanningboard.org/agenda/2013/documents/20130221_Natural_Resources_Management_Plan.pdf

³ Ibid, p.44-47 Bird species of greatest conservation need in Montgomery County.

Thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Summer Tanager and Scarlet Tanager. In 2003 I found four state-rare plant species including Black Ash, Butternut, American Chestnut and Bashful Sedge. This spring I verified three of the four species are still present. These plants and animals and the habitats that support them are in great jeopardy if M-83 is built.

The two parklands (North Germantown Greenway and Great Seneca Park) along Dayspring Creek and Brandermill Tributary that M-83 would traverse support over 240 species of native plants, including 15 ferns, 5 orchids and 70 species of trees and shrubs. Potential negative impacts to these species and the habitats that support them are fully described in my report.

In conclusion, M-83 would invade our Agricultural Reserve in the Wildcat Branch watershed. This is one of the few high quality streams left in our County and is designated by the State of Maryland as Class III Natural Trout Waters.

All of these significant habitats, native biodiversity, water resources and the Agricultural Reserve are entrusted to the County to take care of for future generations. Once they are destroyed they are gone forever.

Please delete M-83 from our master plans to safeguard our natural heritage.

Sincerely,

John Parrish, Silver Spring, MD 20910