



SILVER SPRING CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD

February 26, 2019

Marc Elrich, County Executive
Montgomery County

[delivered via e-mail]

Advice from the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board re:
**NEED TO IMPLEMENT WITHOUT DELAY SHA ALTERNATIVE 5B FOR MD97
(GEORGIA AVE IN MONTGOMERY HILLS)**

Dear County Executive Elrich:

The Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board (SSCAB) has held a series of discussions with key state and local officials, as well as the public on improvements to the transportation and roadway design impacting the Montgomery Hills community. In consideration of these presentations and our understanding of priorities from citizen input, we urge you to consider the following advice:

- Prioritize the MD 97 Montgomery Hills Improvements as the County's **#1 priority** in the Transportation Priorities letter to be prepared in March for submission to the State.
- Request the State Highway Administration (SHA) expedite the design and engineering phase and to provide to the County their proposed timeline for completion. Moving on this project in a more expedited manner will a) maximize the chance for these changes to be complete when/if any beltway changes occur, and b) will help the local businesses survive because of the increased economic activity that will take place when the pedestrian and road improvements are complete.
- Direct County staff to file a Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Grant application with the U.S. Department of Transportation, in coordination with the Maryland State Highway Administration, as a potential source of funding for construction of the SHA-proposed Georgia Ave road improvements.
- Appeal to SHA to request that the utilities provide an estimate for the cost of burying lines during the construction.
- Request more stringent enforcement on the use of the west curb lane by car wash customers to prohibit stacking on Georgia Ave.

When considering SHA's Preferred Alternative 5B's (available in [MD 97 Georgia Ave Montgomery Hills Project Planning Study](#)) outsized benefits to both County and State, as well as the immediate improvement in the congestion faced by 83,000 cars per day, it is hard to imagine

another project with more bang for the buck. Given the cost of the project has been cut in half, if the County finds the BUILD grant idea unfavorable, we advise the County Executive to advocate strongly that SHA procure the funding to proceed on an expedited timetable. The State has ignored the County's wishes for two decades. And even if the only benefit of the project was to make the road safer for vehicles and alleviate congestion, it is hard to imagine a more cost-effective project than improving this critical portion of Georgia Avenue.

If we can provide any additional information, please don't hesitate to contact Michelle Foster at 240-997-8027 or mjdesiderio@gmail.com, who chairs the SSCAB's Transportation, Energy and Environment Committee (TREE). Please see further detail in the attachment.

Thank you for consideration of our recommendations.

Sincerely,

Matt Losak
Chair,

Ed Levy,
Vice Chair

Mark Mendez
Secretary

Lysette House
Parliamentarian

Michelle Foster
Chair, TREE

CC:

Montgomery County Council Members
Reemberto Rodriguez, Silver Spring Regional Area Director
Members of the SSCAB

ATTACHED:

Background Information

BACKGROUND

The Transportation, Energy, and Environment Committee heard presentations from the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) staff on January 28, 2019. The presentation focused on SHA's plans currently under development to improve Georgia Ave from the I-495 interchange to 16th Street. Over 60 residents attended the meeting.

This corridor is the gateway to downtown Silver Spring. Georgia Avenue also acts as connector between the Silver Spring and Wheaton CBD and its amenities include the Forest Glen Metro Station, a planned BRT line, and an existing health and wellness node comprised of numerous medical office complexes. In addition, it is adjacent to the Purple Line Woodside Station under construction. Much of the vehicular traffic and on-road transit coming to and leaving from downtown Silver Spring must travel through this area. When traffic comes to a standstill in either direction, the entire region is affected. The inability for people to walk or bike in the corridor hinders all but travel by vehicles. The vehicle-dominated corridor reduces transit use by people who have a choice in transportation options and makes it unsafe for those that do not have a choice.

As currently configured, Georgia Avenue is dangerous for all users. The Montgomery Hills section of Georgia Avenue is three-quarters of a mile in length, carries an average traffic volume of 83,000 vehicles each day, and has a higher than average crash rate for all types of accidents. Specific crash data is available in the SHA document [MD 97 Georgia Ave Montgomery Hills Project Planning Study](#). Sidewalks are narrow and directly abut the busy road, are in disrepair, not ADA-compliant, and often have utility poles blocking their use. The reversible center-lane and outdated I-495 interchanges creates standstill congestion during rush hour.

Georgia Ave has been studied for almost two decades. In 2000, Montgomery County gave SHA \$3 million to develop planning concepts to improve the corridor. The purpose of the MD-97 [Montgomery Hills Project Planning Study](#) was to establish a balanced approach to transportation within the corridor, by evaluating existing vehicular, pedestrian, and bicyclist mobility and safety, while accommodating proposed transit enhancements and establishing a sense of place within the Montgomery Hills community.

The severity of backups on northbound Georgia Avenue, which often extends into downtown Silver Spring, was exacerbated significantly when SHA modified the Beltway interchange by eliminating the loop ramp in the northwest quad. SHA's objective for this modification was to reduce back-ups on I-495 and get a larger volume of traffic onto Georgia Ave as fast as possible. The interchange configuration was successful in this objective but resulted in substantial traffic congestion on Georgia Ave and in Montgomery Hills. The interchange modification necessitated the installation of traffic signals at southern edge of I-495 which helped make the merge on and off I-495 slightly less precarious, but because it stops north- and south-bound traffic on Georgia Ave during the light cycle it drastically reduced the amount of through-put of cars between Georgia Ave and I-495, and increased the back-ups on Georgia Ave.

In 2014, SHA presented six alternatives. Residents, businesses, and the official stakeholder group were unanimously in favor of the project because no one is satisfied with the existing conditions and were aligned in support of Alternative 5B.

The proposal includes removing the reversible lane on the roadway, installing a two-way bike lane on the west side of the street, installing a traffic signal at Flora Lane, creating much wider sidewalks, reconfiguring the I-495 interchange from northbound Georgia Ave, and installing a landscaped median. Despite this overwhelming and widespread support, project implementation is not funded.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE COUNTY VISION FOR A MORE EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE MONTGOMERY COUNTY

The proposed Georgia Avenue corridor improvements in Alternative 5B will propel the vision that the Elrich administration has outlined for the County. Specifically, the road improvements support the **Easier Commutes** priority. Georgia Ave must be redesigned if it is to safely move people and goods more efficiently. Presently, the road is thwarting economic growth, harming small businesses, and impairing our residents' quality of life. Proposed road improvements will reduce traffic congestion, improve transit accessibility, support Metro, and allow pedestrians to walk safely.

The road improvements support your administration's **Safe Neighborhoods** objectives. The redesign is intended to address pedestrian safety and greatly enhance opportunities for walking, biking, and creating neighborhood gathering places.

The proposed road improvements creates a **Greener County**. There are plans to address storm water, increase transit options, and provide transportation alternatives to driving.

ALIGNMENT WITH CIVIC ASSOCIATIONS, LOCAL RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND LOCAL BUSINESSES

The proposed Georgia Ave corridor improvements in Alternative 5B are strongly supported by the five civic associations that surround the corridor: Woodside, Woodside Park, Woodside Forest, Linden, Forest Estates. The five civic associations have been on the record since at least 2013 urging SHA to implement the road improvements. In addition, there are several private schools and religious institutions in and adjacent to the corridor. These organizations have voiced their support for the improvements and believe them critical to the safety of their families, students, and congregants. Last, many of the local businesses support the road improvements because the current road configuration, lack of sidewalks, and congestion makes it difficult for them to thrive.

SHA's 2015 version of Alternative 5B included a wider right-of-way that would have caused a few properties and businesses to be taken by eminent domain leading those businesses to oppose Alternative 5B. However, SHA's subsequent revision has eliminated the need to take private property for the right-of-way thus eliminating those potential negative impacts.

ALIGNMENT WITH COUNTYWIDE TRANSIT CORRIDORS FUNCTIONAL MASTER PLAN AND BICYCLE MASTER PLAN

SHA's revised Alternative 5B is consistent and complementary to the **Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan** which recommends Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) for the Georgia Ave South Corridor and the **2018 Bicycle Master Plan** which recommends a separated bikeway on Georgia Ave that connects with the pedestrian bridge under I-495.

FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

Given broad support of Alternative 5B, and widespread agreement these road improvements will help Montgomery Hills thrive, it appears that funding remains the sole barrier to implementation of Georgia Ave road improvements. When Alternative 5B was originally conceived, total costs of implementation were estimated to be at \$40-60 million, with the right-of-way (ROW) acquisition alone estimated at \$20+ million. SHA Administrator Greg Slater stated that the project would proceed faster (presumably than the 2030 projected completion date) if there was funding to help the State pay for the road improvements. This presented a conundrum as the County has been worried about setting a precedent for paying for improvements to a State road.

Our federal congressional delegation, also supportive of the road improvements, has suggested that the County submit a Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Grant with the U.S. Department of Transportation. The delegation indicated they will support DOT's approval of such an application and that the amount was in the "sweet spot" for BUILD grants. The SSCAB supports this idea to help fund the project.

SHA has since revised Alternative 5B with input from the County to eliminate the need for ROW acquisition, thus reducing the cost of the project to \$20 million. It has been encouraging to see renewed collaboration between County and State agencies on this important project.