

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY CONSERVATION COMMISSION

c/o Department of Environmental Services

2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 705

Arlington, VA 22201

January 29, 2012

Mr. Walter Tejada, Chair  
Arlington County Board  
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Chairman Tejada:

At its meeting of November 26, 2012, the Environment and Energy Conservation Commission (E2C2) received the most recent in a series of briefings on the Environmental Assessment for the proposed Washington Boulevard bike trail. This trail would run for approximately one-half mile from the end of an existing trail near Second Street South to South Rolfe Street and Ninth Street South, one block north of Columbia Pike.

A number of residents of the Penrose neighborhood attended the meeting to oppose the bike trail, because of the effect it would have on the urban forest that separates their neighborhood from Washington Boulevard. Residents are concerned that construction of the trail would eliminate wildlife habitat and reduce much of the noise-reduction benefit the neighborhood receives from the existing forest. Residents also expressed concerns about the safety of access to the north end of the proposed trail which could impact the amount of use the trail would ultimately see, reducing the positive environmental impacts. The community members were also concerned with the trail's projected cost of \$1.5 million. E2C2 judged both of these issues to be outside its area of expertise.

Two alternatives to the proposed trail have been examined as part of the Environmental Assessment process. One would be to locate the trail along South Courthouse Road, using a painted bike lane on the portion of the street that is wide enough to accommodate such a lane and using "sharrows" on the narrower portion of the street. A second alternative would be an off-road bike trail on the east side of Washington Boulevard.

E2C2 considered five types of environmental effects from the proposed trail: 1) tree loss, 2) noise, 3) loss of wildlife habitat, 4) effects on water quality, and 5) increased bicycle and pedestrian travel, accompanied by reduced automobile traffic. We will cover the effects of the three alternatives on each of these aspects in turn.

Tree loss would be worst for the proposed trail. Under current plans, the project would result in the loss of 127 trees, 99 of which are healthy, native species and 12 of which are very sizable trees with diameter at breast height (dbh) of 20 inches or more. While this number has been reduced substantially as a result of County staff's laudable efforts to minimize the effect of the trail on trees, it is still a very large number for a one-half-mile trail. A preliminary analysis of the alternative, "east-side" trail shows a loss of 31 trees with dbh of 10 inches or more, including 14 with dbh of 20 inches or more, though some of these trees are not native species. The South Courthouse Road alternative would not result in the loss of any trees.

The proposed trail would have a greater effect on noise pollution than the other alternatives, because it would remove much of the forest that currently buffers the Penrose neighborhood from the sound of traffic on Washington Blvd. The other alternatives would have little effect on noise pollution, because the trees that would be lost on the east-side alternative are not buffering a residential area.

The loss of wildlife habitat and effects on water quality would likely be greatest for the east-side alternative. A trail in this location would run parallel to Long Branch for much of the trail's length and would require a long bridge over the stream. Because the east-side of Washington Blvd. contains a wider natural area than the west side and because it is adjacent to parts of Fort Myer that are not thickly settled, it likely provides greater wildlife habitat than the west side of the highway. While the west-side trail crosses a small stream that feeds into Long Branch, it has less direct effect on the stream than would the east-side alternative. Locating the trail on South Courthouse Road would have no effect on wildlife habitat or water quality.

While there are no projections for the amount of traffic the proposed trail would carry, it is likely that the trail would do a better job of moving traffic from automobiles to bicycles or walking than the other two alternatives. Some bicyclists prefer off-road trails to on-street bike lanes, and therefore would be more likely to ride if the trail were available as an alternative to riding on South Courthouse Road. The east-side alternative has less connection to any residential areas, so it would be less likely to be used by pedestrians. Access to the trail on the north end would be across the Second Street South bridge over Washington Blvd.; this bridge is very narrow and intrudes into Fort Myer, making access to the alternative problematic.

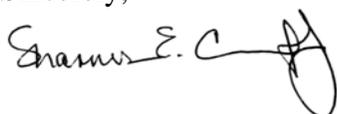
Of the five environmental criteria considered, impact on bike usage was the least well quantified, and was much more difficult for E2C2 to assess. The difference among the three alternatives with regard to the County's ultimate reduction in carbon emissions through the reduction in motor vehicle usage could not be estimated and was not given as much weight in the discussion as other environmental factors.

To sum up, the proposed bike trail would have greater negative environmental effects on four of the five environmental issues E2C2 examined, while being preferable from an environmental standpoint in one area. The consensus of the Commission was that South Courthouse Road was a better alternative than construction of the proposed trail.

E2C2 is aware that County staff is still in the process of completing a revised Environmental Assessment (EA) for the "east-side" alternative, and that the conclusions reached by the Commission may be premature pending the results of that assessment. E2C2 may revisit this evaluation and provide an updated recommendation once the final EA is received.

Despite its decision not to support the proposed trail, E2C2 reiterates its appreciation for the work of staff to reduce the negative environmental effects of the proposed trail. The loss of trees and consequent loss of wildlife habitat and noise buffering have been reduced substantially from earlier proposals for the trail. E2C2 greatly appreciates the work staff has done to accomplish this.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shannon E. Cunniff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "S" and "C".

Shannon Cunniff, Chair