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Superintendent Charles Cuvelier
George Washington Memorial Parkway Unit
c/o Turkey Run Park 700 George Washington Memorial Parkway
McLean, Virginia 22101

Re: Official Comments Regarding George Washington Parkway Traffic Safety Study, Southern Section

Dear Superintendent  Cuvelier:

Thank you for hosting the public meeting on the George Washington Memorial Parkway and Trail traffic safety study. The attendance by residents was the largest that you or I had seen on a Parkway matter. We have also shared the National Park Service (NPS) link with constituents for comment. I am writing to share the initial comments and deep concerns that our residents have expressed to us to date.

I have lived in the Mount Vernon area for 30 years and drive on the Parkway daily, so I share the traffic and safety concerns that many of my constituents have expressed. I am also an avid cyclist and runner, therefore, am very familiar with the safety issues on the trail as well.

I understand the restrictions posed by the National Historic Preservation Act. I support maintaining the historic nature of the Parkway and ensuring that it remains on the National Register. While the Parkway was not designed for the current modern conditions with high speeds and heavy volumes, improvements are crucial NOW for the safety of all users.

Speed Cameras

The two main issues along the Parkway seem to be traffic volume and excessive speed. Years ago, there was not support for speed cameras, but opinions have dramatically changed. Speed cameras are now widely used across the country and have proven to be effective in reducing speed. Placing speed cameras at certain intersections, particularly those prone to accidents and excessive speeds, would reduce speeding.

Traffic Diets

I support the consideration of some “traffic diet” options; however, narrowing the Parkway to one lane in each direction seems problematic and would likely limit the opportunities for left turn entrances on to the Parkway during peak volumes and create their own safety concerns. Studying and testing traffic diet options in specific locations might be useful so that we could see the impact on traffic patterns before making any permanent changes.

Roundabouts

Roundabouts should be studied as a means of intersection control. Many residents are familiar with the use of roundabouts in Washington DC. Roundabouts can effectively relieve traffic congestion, improve the movement of an intersection and improve traffic safety.

Left Turn Bans

Considering left turn bans could be helpful where there is no deceleration or turn lanes and the ban is joined with another solution. For example, banning a left-hand turn at Belleview Boulevard would make the intersection of Belle Haven Road much worse. However, if a traffic light were placed at Belle Haven Road, a left-hand turn prohibition at Belleview Boulevard could potentially provide an improvement. A left-hand turn ban could also be considered during certain peak travel times at certain intersections.

Banning left turns from Morningside Lane, or other roads along the Parkway, will push cars on to other nearby roadways not designed for heavy volumes of traffic. These issues need to be carefully considered prior to implementing a left turn ban anywhere on the Parkway as left turn bans could create more problems than they solve.

Mount Vernon Bike Trail

As a cyclist and a runner, I access the bike trail on a regular basis. It is a beautiful trail with stunning views along the Potomac River. The trail is used both recreationally and as a commuter trail. Due to the narrow trail and the varying speeds in which people travel on the trail, it can be unsafe as well. There are blind curves, steep ascents/descents, uplifted pavement due to tree roots, and uneven surfaces that are particularly risky when the trail is wet.

Upgrades and widening the trail are needed now and would improve overall safety. Consideration, as part of other safety changes to the Parkway, should also be given to permitting cyclists to return to riding on the Parkway, at least on weekends. This would reduce some of the volume of trail riders during it busiest times (weekends) and divert the riders most prone to higher (and most risky) speeds away from what is becoming a lower speed recreational trail.

Pedestrian Safety

The Parkway is treacherous for pedestrians. In the Belleview and Belle Haven areas, pedestrians (adults and children) are often stranded in the middle of the road trying to cross to/from the bus stop or the park to return to their homes. The Parkway is in dire need of crosswalks for pedestrians and I would strongly support a pedestrian refuge infrastructure, as well as signage, embedded pavement lights and/or "Hawk" signal to alert drivers of pedestrians in a crosswalk.

Law Enforcement

Increased enforcement is the single most effective tool for increasing Parkway safety! Drivers know that there is seldom any police presence, not only on the Parkway, but on the roads in general. The traffic volumes and urban driving constraints mean that the Parkway can "feel" like the place where a driver can make up time on his/her commute.

The Fairfax County Police Department does not currently have legal authority on the Parkway, and Fairfax County does not have enough traffic officers to provide non-emergency support for its own roads. Even if Fairfax County had additional resources, as you know, the chief of the U.S. Park Police would need to make a request to the Secretary of the Department of Interior. The Department of Interior would then have to get legal and other approvals. They advised Chief Roessler last year that they would not make such a request coming from another local chief.

Mount Vernon Estate Parking Terminus

The Mount Vernon Estate (MVE) Parking Terminus needs to be improved by working with MVE to reduce pedestrian risks and traffic back-ups. The traffic passing through the Parkway and Route 235 has significantly grown in recent years, as have the number of accidents and pedestrian safety concerns. Options discussed over the years and should be considered again have included reconfiguring the intersection, adding "crossing guards" or other pedestrian guards, pedestrian activated signal, etc. Resurfacing the brick walkway from the west side parking lot at MVE connecting to the walkway near Mount Vernon Inn is critical. This is a busy intersection and the worn, broken surface presents a hazard for pedestrians in this intersection. Solutions for this challenging intersection should be studied.

Additionally, the two traffic lanes closest to MVE are currently separated by a very low concrete divider. This divider can be difficult to see and often causes confusion for drivers. The very narrow inner lane is for through traffic, the outer lane is for loading/unloading passengers. Often drivers choose the wrong lane, creating unsafe conditions. It is also not uncommon to see vehicles cross the divider. Options to make the divided lanes more effective in splitting the two types of traffic should be considered.

Stone Bridge

The Stone Bridge has been a regular source of major accidents that have been increasing in frequency and severity over the past decade as visible police enforcement has waned. Better, more visible signs identifying vehicle restrictions before entering the Parkway at any intersection and on the Parkway are crucial. Traffic cameras could also serve to identify trucks or commercial vehicles that are violating the Parkway restrictions and improve enforcement of this now frequently violated restriction.

Additional Considerations

Impacts on Connecting Roads: Fairfax County Department of Transportation (FCDOT) and VDOT needs to be routinely apprised of proposed changes and closely consulted during this time, as it is likely that other traffic studies will need to be done to determine impacts on roads near the Parkway.

Impacts to wildlife: It would be beneficial and important for the study to include the impacts that wildlife may have on traffic or accidents, and that the traffic is having on wildlife. Important solutions could prevent injury to both humans and wildlife.

Median Barriers: The northern section of the Parkway has steel median barriers to prevent cars from drifting into oncoming traffic. None of the southern section of the Parkway has median barriers. Drivers distracted by cell phones or scenery can easily drift into oncoming traffic, resulting in serious or fatal accidents. Median barriers, particularly due to the narrow inner lanes, would protect drivers from head-on collisions.

Drainage: There are many sections of the Parkway that are uneven and have very poor drainage causing large puddles after rainstorms and ice in the winter. The lack of drainage and uneven surfaces leads to dangerous driving conditions.

Thank you for your work to improve safety on the Parkway. I will provide additional comments in mid-August based upon our resident's feedback. I look forward to seeing the study move forward and to the improvements that will come from it.

Respectfully yours in public service,



Dan Storck

Supervisor, Mount Vernon District
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