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WASHINGTON AREA
BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION

April 28, 2020

To: The Honorable Sidney Katz
President, Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Ave
Rockville, MD 20850

From: Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail
Coalition for Smarter Growth
East Bethesda Citizens Association
League of Women Voters Montgomery County
Montgomery County Road Runners Club (MCRRC)
NIH Bicycle Commuter Club
Purple Line Now
Town of Chevy Chase
Washington Area Bicyclist Association

Re: Capital Crescent Trail Tunnel in the FY21-26 Capital Improvements Program

President Katz and Members of the Council,

We the undersigned urge the County Council to fully fund construction of the Capital Crescent Trail tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue in the upcoming FY 21-26 Capital Improvement Program. Though the County is facing an unprecedented crisis with the Coronavirus pandemic with severe budgetary and economic ramifications, we believe that the County must deliver on its decades old promise to complete a safe and fully grade separated Capital Crescent Trail between Bethesda and Silver Spring. In light of the pandemic and unexpected high cost, we concede that it may not be feasible to fund and complete the tunnel to open alongside the new trail and Purple Line service in 2023. However, it is imperative that the Council fund the tunnel project for completion before the end of this Capital Budget.

Since the first segment opened in 1994, the Capital Crescent Trail has grown into one of the most used trails in the DC region and a vital transportation, recreation, and public health resource for hundreds of thousands of people. Before the existing tunnel and interim Georgetown Branch Trail closed in 2017, the Capital Crescent Trail in Bethesda saw an average of over 15,000 weekly trips and up to 90,000 monthly trips in the summer. It was an active and low-stress route to schools for hundreds of elementary and high school students, a low carbon daily commute for thousands of workers, a popular off-street refuge for solo and group recreation, and a pleasant connection to two bustling retail and entertainment centers.

When the Purple Line project is complete, a new and improved Capital Crescent trail will run alongside it, finally linking Georgetown, Bethesda, and downtown Silver Spring. New bridges over major roads, new neighborhood connections, and direct links into the growing 842 mile Capital Trail Network will draw new trail users from around the region, easily adding thousands of new daily users. But as funded, these improvements come with an unacceptable compromise that violates more than 25 years of County planning.

The Air Rights Tunnel, which opened for trail use in 1998, is being repurposed to carry trains. Without a tunnel available for bicyclist and pedestrian use, every trail user will be rerouted to cross Wisconsin Avenue at grade at Bethesda Avenue. Despite improvements to the intersection (beginning this year), they will face the unavoidable risk of crossing Wisconsin Avenue's 6 lanes and 40,000 daily cars and trucks. On the best of days, crossing here will require careful adult supervision of kids, wading through crowds, and waiting for a traffic signal that prioritizes moving cars instead of people. On the worst of days, exposing this many people to the multiple lanes, traffic volume, speed, and highway context of state-controlled Wisconsin Avenue will inevitably result in crashes and injuries.

As far back as the 1994 Bethesda CBD Sector Plan, Montgomery County has planned for both a tunnel route and a surface route for the Capital Crescent Trail in Bethesda. After the Hogan administration made significant changes to the Purple Line which removed the trail from the Air Rights tunnel, the Council and Planning Board reaffirmed the vision for dual tunnel and surface alignments by adding a new tunnel project to the adopted 2017 Bethesda Downtown Master Plan and 2018 Bicycle Master Plan. Based on this vision, the Planning Board secured an agreement with Carr Properties to build a part of that tunnel under 7272 Wisconsin Avenue and the Council approved \$3.8 million for the remaining tunnel design under Wisconsin Avenue and Elm Street. Construction funding was expected in this budget.

However, County Executive Marc Elrich decided to leave funding for tunnel construction out of his proposed FY21-26 Capital Budget. It is the County's duty to correct this omission.

High quality, accessible, and continuous trails are critical to our region's transportation and sustainability goals, Vision Zero commitments, economic competitiveness, and public well being. Trails provide low stress access to open space and reliable transportation for people of all ages and abilities. Funding the tunnel under Wisconsin Avenue will deliver on a generation of planning and promises with a truly accessible trail between Silver Spring and downtown Bethesda. We urge the County Council to fully fund this project in the FY21-26 CIP.

Sincerely,

Tony Marra, Board Chairperson
Coalition for the Capital Crescent Trail

Vernon Anderson, Chair
NIH Bicycle Commuter Club

Jane Lyons, Maryland Advocacy Manager
Coalition for Smarter Growth

Ralph Bennet, Chair, Executive Committee
Purple Line Now

Andy O'Hare, President
East Bethesda Citizens Association

Barney Rush, Mayor
Joel Rubin, Intergovernmental and
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Diane Hibino & Kathy McGuire Co-Presidents
League of Women Voters Montgomery County

Town of Chevy Chase

Ken Earley, President
Montgomery County Road Runners
Club (MCRRC)

Peter Gray, Vice President, Board of Directors
Washington Area Bicyclist Association

cc: Montgomery County Council
Marc Elrich, County Executive
Chris Conklin, Director, Montgomery County Department of Transportation
Glenn Orlin, Senior Analyst, County Council