



P.O. Box 3703
Bethesda, MD 20824

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Testimony to the Montgomery County Planning Board
on the Woodside East II Preliminary Plan

The Woodmont East II site straddles the alignment of the most popular trail in Montgomery County, the Capital Crescent Trail. A recent trail use survey showed there are over 10,000 weekly uses of the CCT at the Bethesda Tunnel. Development at the Woodmont East site will impact the heart of the CCT very strongly.

CCCT Board Members have been meeting with the Woodmont East II development team, and we have seen some significant improvements in the proposed plan. Chief among these has been the recent decision to keep the Bethesda Tunnel open during the construction period. That is a big step in the right direction for this project. But there are a number of important issues that remain to be decided that will determine the future of the trail in this location during project construction and after.

The preliminary design submission suggests three detour routes the trail could follow during construction. We prefer the detour route south through the Artery Property (Route 2) as the most direct. If one of the two suggested detour routes north to Elm Street and along Woodmont Avenue is ultimately used (route 1 or route 3), then we call for a temporary full width shared use path to be created along the west side of Woodmont Avenue. The existing sidewalks on Woodmont Avenue are much too narrow and congested to carry the trail traffic, and the bike lanes are only suitable for experienced adult cyclists. Parking along one side of Woodmont Avenue would need to be removed temporarily to make room for the trail, but the value of having a safe, inviting trail on Woodmont Avenue adjacent to the restaurants and café seating far exceeds the value of the 13 parking spaces there now. Sidewalks, paths and ramps elsewhere along the selected detour route should be minimum 10' wide and ADA compliant.

For the permanent CCT after project construction, the trail needs to be strongly differentiated from areas in the public use corridor for non-trail pedestrian uses (café seating, access to retail and movie theatre, general circulation) to minimize pedestrian/cyclist conflicts. Landscaping and paving details will be important to reinforce this sense of separation. It is very important that the future Woodmont Ave. crosswalk line up properly with the trail and public use corridor through the site. But DPWT has repeated its commitment to rebuild this crosswalk south of its current position, to be parallel to Bethesda Avenue, far from where the future crosswalk is shown

in the project preliminary plan. CCCT strongly supports the crosswalk location shown in the preliminary plan, and also supports the M-NCPPC staff recommendation that the project design support a single cycle crossing across this intersection for trail users. In our view DPWT would take us backwards to an unimaginative “cookbook” crosswalk design that would be so indirect as to invite dangerous “J” walking behavior. It is not appropriate to take a business as usual approach to crosswalk design for this intersection, where more people are crossing through the intersection on foot than by motor vehicle during some periods. The conflict between DPWT and the preliminary plan for the future crosswalk location needs to be resolved.

CCCT continues to not support or oppose the Purple Line, but any contingency plans for the Purple line must provide for a safe, full width trail through this site and through the tunnel. We cannot determine whether the contingency plan for the Purple Line transit/trail is adequate from the drawings we have seen. The space being reserved for the ramp to elevate the trail over the south transit track at the west tunnel portal appears from the architectural drawing to be only 20’ wide. This space needs to be a minimum of 28’ wide to permit a switchback ramp to meet minimum standards (10’ width plus 2’ clearance on each side). We have not seen any preliminary plans or architectural drawings that show clearly and on scale how the trail, the Purple Line tail track, trees and plantings, café seating, general circulation, bicycle parking, and the sidewalks needed to serve the retail spaces will all fit together in the proposed 75’ wide public use corridor. Concept sketches we have seen to date leave too much to the imagination. The feasibility of all of these uses functioning well in this corridor needs to be laid out clearly.

The M-NCPPC staff report recommends that a number of these important “loose ends” be addressed by having the offerer present written plans to the M-NCPPC staff and other “relevant” agencies for review before the site plan is formally submitted to the Planning Board. CCCT requests that it be given an opportunity to participate in this planning process. CCCT had numerous meetings over the last year with the offerer, and we provided constructive input that improved the preliminary design. We can help resolve these important “loose ends”. It will be much harder for trail users to understand and accept important design decisions if we don’t see them until the eve of the Planning Board site plan review.

Finally, we must question whether the developer is offering an adequate public amenity. Consider that the trail users are being asked to put up with significant inconvenience during a several year construction period. The public is being asked to give to the developer a significant open circulation space already available, in Reed Street. The public already owns a 32’ wide easement in the center of the proposed 75’ wide public corridor. The developer is proposing retail and a movie theater fronting on both sides of this “public corridor” and these will require sidewalks to function for the benefit of the developer’s own proposed retail spaces. Much of this public corridor will be covered overhead by the building bar. If you exclude the existing public easements, the space needed by the developer to provide minimal access to the proposed project retail, and the covered space, then it appears that the developer is giving very little open space back to the public.

The developer disputes whether the public does in fact own the 32' wide easement in the center of the proposed public corridor. CCCT supports the County position that the public does hold this easement. The serious legal question arises whether the Planning Board is crediting any of this 32' easement as part of the offerer's amenity package. The public cannot accept as an amenity what it already owns.

The developer is offering improvements to Elm Street Park as part of the amenity package. Improvements there are needed and welcome, but we have a much greater need for more public space in the center of Bethesda, at the Woodmont Avenue/Bethesda Avenue intersection. This project would be a much better deal for trail users and for the general public if the developer will provide a larger public plaza there.

These issues impact the basic safety and function on the trail and also whether the trail can give a pleasant experience. If this project proceeds beyond the preliminary plan, then these issues must be resolved before the site plan is approved. Trail users need to continue to participate fully in this process.

Respectfully submitted,
Wayne Phyllaier and Pat Baptiste, for the CCCT