



ARLINGTON COUNTY URBAN FORESTRY COMMISSION
2700 S. Taylor St., Arlington, VA 22206

June 14, 2012

The Honorable Mary Hynes
Chair, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Tree Removal for Washington Boulevard Bike Trail

Dear Ms. Hynes,

At its May meeting, the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) heard presentations on plans for constructing a bicycle and pedestrian trail along the west side of Washington Boulevard. This represents the second phase of a project to provide a trail between Arlington Boulevard and Columbia Pike and adds 2650 feet of trail, starting at the end of the existing trail and extending to South Rolfe Street, one block north of Columbia Pike.

We are concerned about the loss of 186 trees for this project, as it goes through a wooded area. The UFC heard public comments from residents of the adjoining Penrose neighborhood concerned about losing a significant screen between high-speed Washington Boulevard and residential areas due to the reduction in tree canopy; Penrose already has only 31% canopy coverage – compared to overall county average of 41% -- so the neighbors feel that every tree is needed.

We urge that an alternate route be identified that is more environmentally friendly. That might mean routing the trail along South Courthouse Road, for example, with a painted bike lane where possible and use of “sharrows” when the street is too narrow for a bike lane. There are already sidewalks for other users.

The specifics of the tree loss were identified by an arborist consultant, and 297 trees with a trunk diameter of 3 inches or more will be disturbed by the project. This is quite a significant impact on existing woodland. Of these 297, 186 trees will be removed, while 111 are identified for protection and preservation. Seventeen of the trees to be removed have trunk diameters of 20 inches or more; two pin oaks, two red maples, a white oak and a black walnut are very large trees with trunk diameters over 30 inches. There are fourteen of the invasive *Ailanthus* (“tree of heaven”) and six dead trees, but the dominant species that would be removed are northern red oak, red maple, and black cherry.

Under the County’s Tree Restoration Guidelines, 250 trees would be planted to replace the 186 removals, given the size and species of the trees being removed. The current proposal is to plant those trees on the project site to the extent possible, but the UFC is concerned that trees planted along the trail will not be watered adequately and that many of them may die in a year or two. Replacing trees will be difficult given that the slope of the ground requires that a retaining wall as high as 4 feet which will keep watering trucks from the trees. In addition, it seems likely that some of the 111 trees identified for preservation may be lost due to root damage during construction, and no replacement trees are planned to compensate for those losses.

This trail involves the greatest loss of trees of any project the UFC has reviewed, yet the trail is only one-half mile long. We do not believe the loss of this many trees is necessary given that a safe alternative for bicycle and multiuse is available along South Courthouse Road.

However if, despite our joint recommendation, a decision is made to construct the trail along Washington Boulevard, we have several recommendations concerning the project that would help to mitigate the impacts upon the trees and to make the trail more context-friendly:

- Make small adjustments in the trail's alignment, worked out in consultation with County urban foresters, to avoid damage to significant trees.
- Reduce the width of the buffer at selected locations when those changes can save larger trees. Also consider reducing the width of the trail in certain areas where existing trees may be preserved.
- Use segments of raised, wooden, boardwalk trail in those areas where very large, high value trees such as white oak and black walnut can be saved. Given the potential for reduced costs of tree removal, replacement and watering, raised portions might not add greatly to the cost of the project.
- Reconsider placing the trail on the east side of Washington Boulevard, even though that area is controlled by the federal and state governments. Such a placement should be explored, because it would greatly reduce tree loss.
- The 250 replacement trees should be planted where the need is greatest, not necessarily along the new trail, with planting sites to be identified by the County's urban foresters. The Penrose neighborhood's need for screening should be a consideration, but it may not be possible to fit 250 trees within the one-half mile project area.
- An invasive plants management strategy should be developed and made an integral part of the project. We note that DES has adopted this practice for new stream restoration projects. A similar need exists for trail construction because exposing a shaded area to sunlight promotes rapid spread of invasive plants and the invasive *Ailanthus* will take over. DPR should not be expected to cope with that challenge as a routine maintenance activity.

Thank you for considering our recommendations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jean F. Amel". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Dean Amel, Chair