

M83 Extension Still in Study Phase

Council votes on transportation policy that will have an impact on highway

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A recent County Council vote may shape transportation patterns in the county from this time forward, including the contentious plans to extend the Midcounty Highway (M83). The Transportation Policy Area R review (TPAR) is a new ordinance that has been added as a revision to the [county's 2012 Subdivision Staging Policy](#), originally called the Policy Element of the Annual Growth Policy. On November 13, the Council approved the policy with an 8-1 vote.

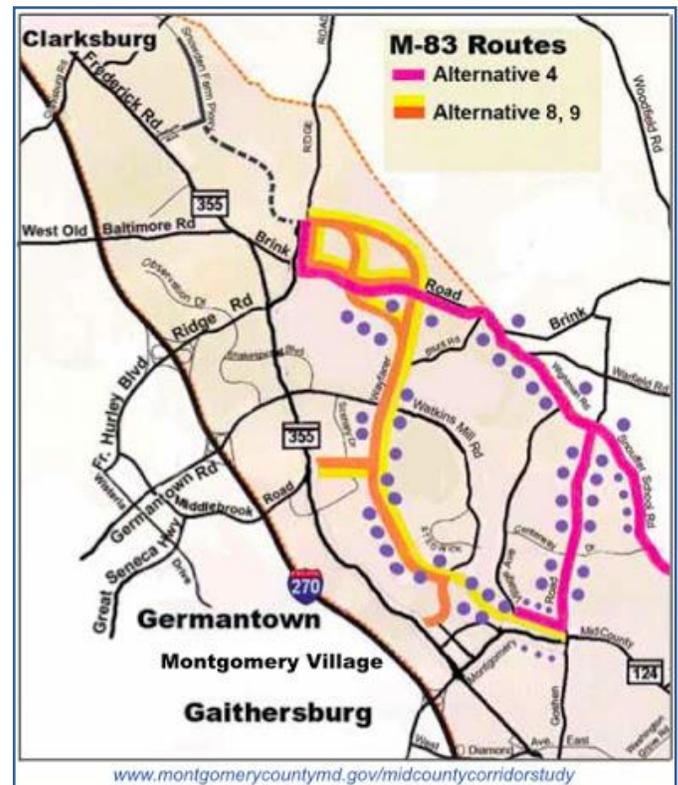
Reviewed by the Montgomery County Planning Board every four years, the Subdivision Staging Policy sets parameters for growth in the county's transportation and school systems with the aim to ensure that county infrastructure will be able to support new development projects.

In order to determine whether projected development of a transportation system is adequate and meets capacity limits for land use, planners need to run tests on their transportation models. TPAR sets the standards and methodologies for these transportation tests, determining adequacy of road and transit options separately. If a projected model is assessed to be inadequate, the Planning Board may still allow the project to proceed if the developer pays a fee that will be used to implement improvements to help a proposed transportation system meet standards of adequacy.

The Planning Board developed TPAR to replace the Policy Area Mobility Review (PAMR) in the Subdivision Staging Policy, which has been used since 2007. Their stated goal was to make the methodology of transportation tests more "transparent" and accurate, and to ensure that transportation system deficiencies will be efficiently addressed through the improvements funded by developers' fees.

In addition, the Planning Board's [synopsis of TPAR](#) states, that unlike analyses done using PAMR, "...the starting point of the analysis [using TPAR] is shifted from the capacity of established transportation projects to determining what projects are needed to accommodate master planned growth. This shift focuses on implementing master plan goals and allows timely responses to market opportunities, rather than limiting growth to what can be accommodated by transportation capacity."

However, a number of [community advocates have had a different take on TPAR](#). They believe the new parameters will not effectively ensure the adequacy and sustainability of a transportation system because of what they see as a loose standard for what constitutes "adequate transit." Furthermore, opponents of the M83 extension say TPAR would allow the revenue from fees to be used to build transportation projects that would ultimately lead to more congestion as well as limit transit options in a given area.



At issue is the potential extension of M83 through northern Montgomery County, which has been under consideration by the county for the last 50 years and formally studied for the last 9 years. [The M83 study](#) has examined the potential impact of the original plans for a 4-6 lane highway running from Montgomery Village Avenue in Gaithersburg to Ridge Road in Clarksburg, in addition to five other alternatives.

M83 remains a question mark on the county master plan with an undetermined date set for final review by the county because of complications surrounding its objective and design. The complications include practical questions stemming from following through with an outdated master plan that reflects the infrastructure needs of the county from more than 50 years ago rather than today. Also under discussion are concerns about the environmental impact the highway would have on the Great Seneca Creek watershed area. Moreover, there is the sheer cost of building the highway extension over a small segment of the county. The County has stated this cost would be one-third the cost of a county-wide public transit system.

For these reasons, the original master plan design for M83 has been deemed infeasible by a number of county legislators, particularly Councilmember George Leventhal, as well as advocates of smart growth. Among them are Margaret Schoap, a steward of the Dayspring Church Farm in Germantown, a 210-acre retreat center and conservation area that would be spliced by the M83 master plan alignment. Schoap has been leading the county's most organized community campaign to stop M83 from being built, Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended (TAME).



Dayspring Creek could be affected by M83

“We need to think of alternatives to a six-lane highway,” Schoap says. “Our intent is to replace it with the multiple transit systems being worked on by the many good people in our county,” [such as the county's proposed Purple Line light rail system and bus rapid transit].

Nevertheless, the [TPAR final report](#) discusses parts of Midcounty Highway Extended as potential projects for future consideration. In light of TPAR's provisions for transit adequacy, this has alarmed community members who stress that the revised Subdivision Staging Policy “shifts control of transportation spending priorities away from the voters and you, their elected representatives,” as expressed by Tina Slater, President of the civic group Action Committee for Transit [in an October 21 letter to the County Council](#).

“Even with the flexibility added by the committee,” Slater wrote, “..tax revenues would have to be spent on reducing road congestion in and around the policy area where development occurs. This still favors investment in sprawl-inducing roads like M83 -- the computer models will insist on it, whatever the real- world effects.”

Meanwhile, Schoap contends that, “No TPAR funds can be assigned to M83 at this time because it is not a project to be built, it is a project to be studied.”

In an interview after the recent Council vote, Glenn Orlin, Deputy Staff Director of the County Council, confirmed that Schoap is correct because no more money has been selected for M83 at present.

“The Council approved TPAR, but not in the same way the Planning Board recommended,” Orlin explained, noting that analyses of transportation tests will not be forecasted over the long-term, but instead will be modeled over a 6-10 year time frame. “The Council doesn't have to put money to a specific project. It has the flexibility to see what the options are,” he said.

Orlin emphasized that M83 is one such project that is still in the study and planning phase. He declined to speculate as to whether that the project would ultimately be approved, but he stated that no more money would be dedicated to the highway at this time.

Councilmember Leventhal cast the lone dissenting vote against TPAR. Before the vote, he explained his opposition.

“[TPAR] imposes three different levels of taxation, none of which raise enough revenue to build any real infrastructure,” said Leventhal. “I understand we need to have something in place, we need to provide some stability and certainty to the development community, so I understand the context in which I anticipate a majority of my colleagues will be voting for this. I hope in the very near term we will engage in a real conversation about paying for transportation infrastructure . . . I think we're dealing with the constraints of a prior system and it's time to think anew.”

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