



Trees vs. Sidewalks, a Sad Conundrum

Proposal for a sidewalk in Bethesda could sacrifice 53 trees

By Agnes Blum

The "Green Mile" is in danger of losing some of that green if a state plan to cut down dozens of trees to make room for a sidewalk succeeds.

Known for its lush canopy of trees, the stretch of Maryland state highway 355, or Wisconsin Avenue, runs north from Friendship Heights through Chevy Chase to downtown Bethesda. But now more than 50 trees along the east side of Wisconsin Avenue, between Grafton Street and Bradley Boulevard, are slated to be cut down by the state to make room for a sidewalk or a hike-and-bike trail. The new path would run alongside the Chevy Chase Country Club. There is already a sidewalk on the other side of Wisconsin Avenue.

"It would be horrendous and totally unnecessary to lose 53 trees. What is the county thinking!" said, Mary Rowse, the moderator of the Chevy Chase Community listerv. The Chevy Chase, DC resident calls herself a firm believer in sidewalks. "It's not a mutually exclusive thing. I'd like to see the Chevy Chase Country Club save as many trees as possible. I want the Chevy Chase Club to step forward."

It's a sentiment echoed by others. The Chevy Chase Country Club did not respond to calls for a comment.

The project has been in the works for a few years, and appears on the Montgomery County master plan, said David Buck, a spokesman for the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA). Construction is slated to start in the spring of 2013, Buck said.

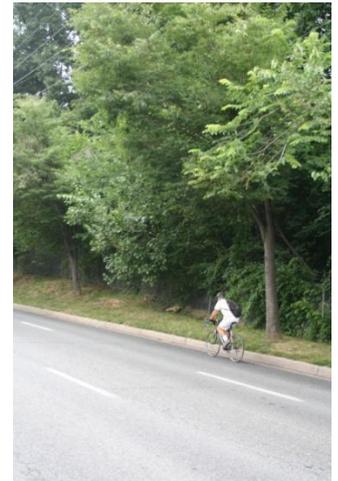
Residents from nearby neighborhoods have requested the sidewalk for years, according to Kate Mazzara, assistant district engineer for the the SHA, who is working on the project and has held several public meetings. The project is fueled by concerns for the safety of pedestrians who have to walk on a bumpy stretch of ground alongside a busy street in order to reach one of the four bus stops that are there.

So while a pathway is all but assured, according to Mazzara, it is still in the design stage, which means it is unclear what shape it will take and how many, if any, of the 53 trees in question can be saved.

Some trees that have been deemed too sick and weak to withstand any nearby construction will certainly be taken down no matter what, Mazzara said. Whether it is a hike-and-bike trail or a sidewalk, the area will have to be graded and construction done near tree roots, which can weaken trees, making them more likely to fall. So some tree removal will not be due to space concerns, but safety, according to Mazzara.

"The last thing we want is one of those trees to fall into the roadway." Mazzara said. Mazzara said the state is looking for "opportunities to save trees." The state will replant trees to compensate for the ones removed, but they won't be planted alongside Wisconsin Avenue, or even necessarily in Montgomery County.

The fate of the trees partly depends on whether the path will be a narrow one designed as a sidewalk, or a wider one built for bicycles as well as pedestrians. A sidewalk needs to be only 5 feet wide to comply with the Americans with Disability Act, which this new construction must do. Since the state requires a 6-foot curb for trees, a sidewalk-style path might not preclude some trees. But a hike-



Pedaling down the 'Green Mile' along Wisconsin Avenue

and-bike trail is a different story. At 8 feet wide, there would be no room for trees, old ones or new ones, since the area in question is only about 12 feet wide.

Both versions of the path have their staunch supporters, as well as those who want the trees to remain untouched, although that would mean no path at all.

The bicycling community has been very vocal, Mazzara said. In a letter to supporters of a hike-and-bike trail, Michael Replogle, the Transportation Committee Co-Chair of the Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Association and a nationally recognized expert on sustainable transportation, wrote about the dangerous biking conditions on Wisconsin Avenue. As for the sidewalk on the other side of the street, Replogle wrote that it is "quite substandard, has an uneven surface, and gets very crowded with pedestrian and bicycle traffic many days."

Replogle urged those in favor of a trail to "let officials know this facility needs to be wide and well designed, with a reasonable buffer from Wisconsin Avenue."

But unfortunately what is good for bicyclists in this case is not good for the trees.

Those opposed to cutting down the trees -- elms, black locusts, cherries and maples among others -- say it would be an environmental and aesthetic disaster.



Michael Replogle of the Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Association



Sarah Morse of the Little Falls Watershed Alliance

A new hike-and-bike trail would be a path to nowhere, said Sarah Morse, who serves on the board of the Little Falls Watershed Alliance, a non-profit conservation group that opposes the construction. "There's no shared-use path coming in to it, or out of it," she said. Morse said she was upset that so little concern had been paid to the environmental price that would be paid.

"What's really appalling at a time when the state is trying to put in more trees, the county is putting in more trees," Morse said. "That they are very cavalier about taking out 53 trees."

Those trees are more than just pretty, she pointed out, they play an important part in storm water management, preventing hundreds of gallons of polluted run-off from entering the creek every time it rains. Trees also reduce the urban heat island effect, the shade cools the road surfaces and saves energy use in our homes. Trees also provide oxygen and clean pollutants out of the air, and help filter polluted water with their root systems so that the ground water is clean.

Once the design is complete, the state will have to do an environmental impact study and a storm water runoff study, Mazzara said. But for some locals, no study is needed to tell them it's not a good idea to cut down dozens of trees. In an area known for rapid development and congested byways, some feel the Green Mile cannot sacrifice its canopy of trees. Local listservs are filled with comments like the ones below:

"The 'green mile' is a lovely break in our increasingly developed landscape and should be preserved," Bridget Cowie wrote.

"I personally think that lovely mile is essential to the character and beauty of our neighborhood," Liza Greenberg wrote.

Celesta Jurkovich, president of the Chevy Chase Neighborhood Association, said residents have been advocating for a sidewalk for a long time.

"The only access in and out of our community is Wisconsin Avenue," Jurkovich said. "There are four bus stops there and we've been working a long time to improve the safety because so many residents use that bus stop."

But she hopes the sidewalk does not pit one neighbor against another, and that some compromise can be found.

Claudia Phelps hopes that the state will find that compromise as well.

"Life doesn't have to be a choice between trees vs. safety," she wrote on a Chevy Chase listserv. "In fact, that is a false choice; both are possible with some flexibility."
