



Public Comment Period for Controversial M83 in UpCounty Closes on Aug. 1st

By Elizabeth Zinar



M83 would jeopardize the water quality and biodiversity of watersheds like the Dayspring Creek valley.

Montgomery County is nearing the close of a more than 50-year process of determining whether to pursue a controversial transportation plan that would drastically alter the landscape and communities Upcounty. The Midcounty Highway has been a part of the county's master plan from the time it was built in the 1960s. Ever since, county transportation planners have debated whether to extend the highway into the north, from Gaithersburg up to Clarksburg. As originally proposed, the four to six-lane highway extension, or M83, would begin at Montgomery Village Avenue, cut through Germantown, and conclude at Ridge Road.

The county's stated rationale for building the extension relates primarily to two major issues. One is to ease the notorious traffic congestion in regions further Downcounty, particularly on heavily used and accident-prone roads like 355 and 270. The other is the goal of providing newly developed areas in Clarksburg with improved access to the rest of the county. However, this rationale has been challenged in recent years by critics who say building M83 in the present day would be a shortsighted response to the broader question of effective community planning. Since the time that it was first developed in the 1950s, critics say, the master plan for M83 has become both logistically infeasible as well as destructive for established communities through which it would traverse.

Sharon Dooley of Olney is among the most vocal opponents of M83. A well-known community activist in the county, Dooley started the civic group Upcounty Action. She works with other county residents to seek sustainable growth and community design in the upper portion of the county, including Clarksburg. Dooley says M83 is no longer a reasonable solution to connect residents in Clarksburg to the more built out metropolitan areas.

"The [transportation master] plan was developed almost 60 years ago, and technology and transportation has become much more developed since then," says Dooley. "Working with what we have today is much more important than taking away green space and watershed."

In response to dissent from residents like Dooley, the county embarked on formal study of the Midcounty Corridor Extension and its potential impacts on surrounding communities. Currently, there are six options under consideration in the study. These range from not building anything at all, to widening and repairing existing roads, to going through with the original master plan. The Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) has been holding periodic workshops on the study to solicit input from the public, with the most recent workshop held earlier this month. The public comment period for recommendations presented in the workshop will remain open until August 1st.



Sharon Dooley

Margaret Schoap and Jim Hall of the Dayspring Silent Retreat Center in Germantown echo Dooley's sentiments. The Dayspring Center is a major landmark and conservation area in Germantown which has become established as a haven for people, as well as wildlife. It is also located squarely in the path of M83. In addition to disturbing the solitude that attracts people from around the world, the proposed road would also

irreversibly destroy the natural habitat within and around the 210-acre property area. These areas, which include the Dayspring Creek stream valley and the nearby Seneca Creek valley, are high-biodiversity areas, Schoap and Hall said in an interview. Hall also explained that the M83 master plan would slice through this area and destroy not only the habitat but also the setting of the Center, which was opened in 1953.

"We are not simply saying that we don't want this highway in our backyard. We don't believe this should be in *anyone's* backyard," Schoap said. In addition to her association with Dayspring, Schoap also leads the Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended Coalition (TAME), a group of existing civic and environmental organizations who have coalesced to advocate for more diverse local transit options than a highway-based system.

Comparatively speaking, Dooley, Schoap and Hall say, highway travel is no longer the most reliable or accessible mode of transportation that it was in the 1950s and 1960s, when the Montgomery County Master Transportation plan was first designed. They say the huge portion of the county's budget would have to be set aside to plan for and potentially build M83 is therefore irrational and that the funds could be put toward more progressive and effective alternatives.

"We need to switch from a highway system to a more robust transportation system," Hall asserted. "The focus of federal and state funding should be on transit. We don't need this destructive road."

To be sure, funding is a major concern among Montgomery County Council Members. At Large Councilmembers Marc Elrich and George Leventhal maintain that the M83 master plan is not only damaging to the environment but expensive and infeasible in light of its dated design. A spokesman from Councilmember Marc Elrich's office noted that one-third of the proposed countywide Rapid Transit system could be built with the projected cost of the road.

"In the past, I have had an open mind on the desirability of M-83, but now it is clear that we cannot afford it," Councilmember Leventhal wrote in a statement. "We must build the Corridor Cities Transitway. We must build a Watkins Mill Interchange on I-270. We should widen I-270 with reversible lanes. We should provide bus rapid transit capability on 355. All of the projects are higher priorities than M-83 and doing all of them will take decades."

The MCDOT began environmental and engineering studies surrounding the plan in 2003. It subsequently broadened the process into the Midcounty Corridor Study, through which it has been planning and assessing potential alternatives to the M83 master plan. The county has scheduled a public hearing on the alternatives for Spring 2013 and hopes to conclude the 60-year-long process with a selection next summer.

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