MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS
THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

November 1, 2023

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Montgomery County Council

**VIA:** Michael F. Riley, P.E., Director of Parks
Miti Figueredo, Deputy Director of Parks
Andy Frank, P.E., Division Chief, Park Development Division
Darren Flusche, Division Chief, Park Planning and Stewardship

**FROM:** Joshua Arnett, P.E., Engineering Section Supervisor, Park Development Division
Kyle Lukacs, AICP, Trails Planner, Park Planning and Stewardship Division
Andrew Tsai, P.E., Engineer, Park Development Division

**SUBJECT:** Montgomery County Planning Board-Approved Permanent Two-Lane Configuration of Little Falls Parkway Between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue

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In April 2023, the Montgomery County Planning Board voted 4-0-1 (1 abstention) to approve a Montgomery Parks (Parks) recommendation for a permanent two-lane configuration of Little Falls Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue. Parks subsequently proceeded with detailed design development and began coordination with the National Capital Park Commission (NCPC) in accordance with the Capper-Cramton Act.

On May 8, 2023, the Montgomery County Council voted 10-1 to adopt a motion that stated:

> *Any realignment of the remaining two lanes between Dorset and Arlington on Little Falls Parkway must be reviewed by the Council before funds may be utilized for this purpose. No funds may be utilized for the implementation of a linear park in this section of Little Falls Parkway.*

As a result, ongoing coordination with NCPC has been temporarily put on hold. The Council also requested Parks develop an alternate option for Little Falls Parkway for Council review alongside the Planning Board-approved configuration. Information on both the Planning Board-approved Configuration and Council-Requested Alternate Option are presented in this report.

Per the letter from the Council to Parks, dated October 25, 2023, the Council's Planning, Housing, and Parks committee (PHP) will review both options and deliver its recommendation to the full Council.

**Parks recommends County Council approval of the two-lane configuration previously approved by the Montgomery County Planning Board. Parks is no longer considering the**

**creation of a linear park along the unused southbound travel lanes of Little Falls Parkway. Parks is proposing the removal of unused pavement to reclaim natural areas of Little Falls Stream Valley Park and creation of a separated shared-use path connection alongside the Parkway.**

This memorandum is a supplement to the published March 30, 2023, Planning Board report: *Recommendation for Permanent Two-Lane Configuration of Little Falls Parkway Between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue,* and the published April 27, 2023, Planning Board *Supplemental Report: Recommendation for Permanent Two-Lane Configuration of Little Falls Parkway Between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue.* Both Planning Board staff reports and appendices are attached to this memorandum. In addition, videos of the Planning Board meetings and presentations (March 30, 2023, and April 27, 2023) are publicly accessible on the Planning Board website.

## Project Timeline 2016-2020

Between Arlington Road and Hillandale Road, the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT) crosses the Parkway. The Capital Crescent Trail was built in the 1990's and is an 11-mile hard surface shared use trail, using the abandoned B&O Railroad corridor, extending from Silver Spring to Georgetown in the District of Columbia.

The Capital Crescent Trail crossing at Little Falls Parkway has historically been the site of frequent conflicts between trail users and motorists. Prior to 2017, the four-lane cross-section on Little Falls Parkway allowed for the multiple-lane threat scenario – a recognized traffic safety problem occurring along road sections that are more than two lanes wide and have an uncontrolled crossing (no traffic signal or stop sign).

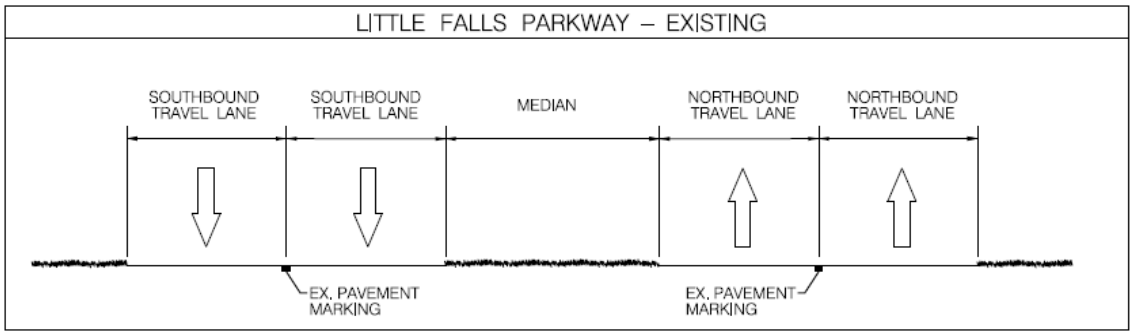


*Figure 1: LFP Configuration Pre-2017 (Arlington to Hillandale) and Pre-2022 (Hillandale to Dorset)*

A multiple-lane threat crash involves a driver stopping in one lane on a multilane road to permit pedestrians/cyclists to cross, and an adjacent oncoming vehicle (in the same direction) striking the pedestrian/cyclist who is crossing in front of the stopped vehicle. This crash occurs because the first stopped vehicle obscures the view of the second advancing driver who subsequently fails to yield.

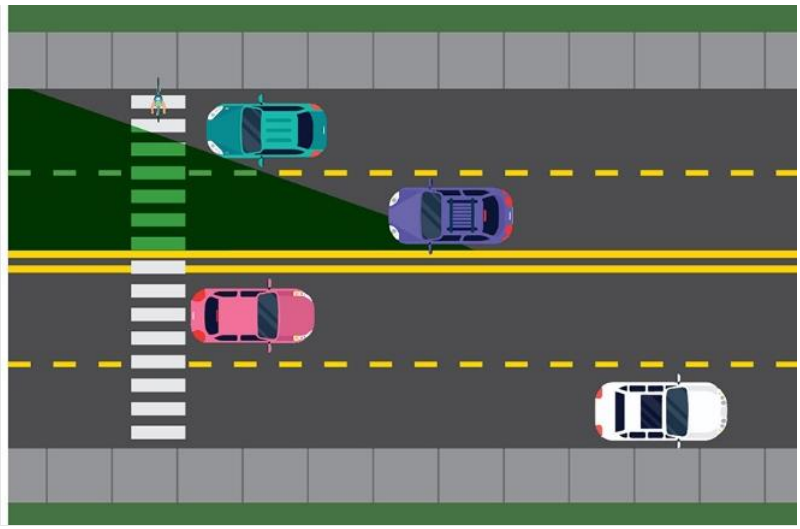

*Figure 2: Multiple Lane Threat Scenario*

Following a bicyclist fatality[1] at the crossing in October 2016, Montgomery Parks in coordination with Park Police and the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, implemented Vision Zero-based safety improvements along Little Falls Parkway between Arlington and Hillandale Roads. Montgomery County is the first suburban county in the United States to commit to Vision Zero, a national initiative to eliminate pedestrian and bicyclist traffic fatalities and conflicts, while increasing safe, healthy, and equitable mobility for all pedestrians. **A key principle of Vision Zero is that "human life takes priority over mobility and other objectives of the road system."**

The safety improvements included an interim road diet that reduced the cross-section of Little Falls Parkway from four lanes to two lanes at the trail crossing, by closing the outside travel lane in each direction. The travel lanes were closed off with chains and flexible posts, and the speed limit was reduced from 35 mph to 25 mph. The grass median dividing the northbound and southbound travel lanes remained. Subsequent traffic study from 2017 through 2019 showed a decrease in reported crashes of over 50% at the crossing and along this Parkway segment.

With the success of the road diet at the CCT crossing in improving trail user safety, Parks presented a Facility Plan recommendation to the Montgomery County Planning Board in June 2019 to build upon the interim road diet with a permanent two-lane Parkway cross-section from Arlington Road to Hillandale Road. The attached May 2019 County Planning Board memorandum, *Facility Plan Recommendation for Capital Crescent Trail Crossing at Little Falls Parkway Safety Improvements Project,* contains additional information and concept plans.

The Planning Board asked Parks to study re-alignment of the CCT trail crossing to the intersection with Arlington Road, with an improved pedestrian signal. The requested re-alignment had been studied during development of the facility plan but was ultimately not recommended by Parks staff due to **increased** travel delays[2] for vehicles as well as trail users.

Soon after, in July 2019, the County Council's Transportation and Environment (T&E) Committee submitted a letter to the Planning Board expressing concern that removing the road

[1] Hensley, S (2016, Oct 17). 81-year-Old Bicyclist Struck by vehicle in Bethesda Dies. *WTOP*. https://wtop.com/montgomery-county/2016/10/81-year-old-bicyclist-struck-by-vehicle-in-bethesda-dies/

[2] Per the 2019 Facility Plan, re-aligning the trail to the Arlington Road signal requires a dedicated pedestrian crossing only phase that increases delays and travel times for all users

diet would be a setback for Vision Zero and put pedestrians and bicyclists at risk. The letter is included in the appendix.

In September 2019, the Planning Board voted to delay the project to realign the CCT crossing beyond the 6-year Parks Capital Improvements Program (CIP) and maintain the existing interim road diet. The Board also asked Parks to further improve safety at the CCT crossing by installing a raised crosswalk, similar to the ones installed along Sligo Creek Parkway. The raised crosswalk was subsequently installed in summer 2020.

In May of 2020, the County Council voted to remove the project to realign the CCT crossing to Arlington Road from the Parks FY21-26 CIP. The following language was added to the PDF, attached to this memo in the appendix: THIS PROJECT WAS NOT APPROVED FOR THE FY21-26 CIP.

Observation of the CCT crossing and implemented safety improvements since has shown further significant decrease in reported crashes, achieving the Vision Zero goal.

**Project Timeline 2020**

In 2020, Montgomery Parks initiated the Open Parkways Program, which closed portions of Sligo Creek Parkway, Beach Drive, and Little Falls Parkway to vehicles during the weekends, to provide additional outdoor recreational space during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program expanded on the intended recreational use of the parkways and proved very popular. When closed to vehicles, the parkways are a welcoming and safe venue for walkers, joggers, cyclists, rollerbladers, and people participating in various other forms of recreation.



*Figure 3: Open Parkways*

In June 2021, the Montgomery County Council passed a resolution in support of enhancing Open Streets and the Open Parkways programs.

The Little Falls Open Parkway program was originally implemented from Massachusetts Avenue to Fairfax Road and operated from Friday morning through Sunday evening each weekend. This

portion of the Open Parkways program was suspended during the winter of 2020 due to operational challenges but was reinstated in March 2021 with the installation of traffic control gates, which made it easier to close the parkway to vehicles on the weekends. When the Open Parkway was reinstated, its limits were reduced to River Road to Fairfax Road and the operational hours were reduced to Saturdays and Sundays. The program proved to be popular, averaging over 3,000 users on a given weekend, but the closure of Little Falls Parkway led to cut-through traffic in adjacent neighborhoods as drivers found new routes to reach their destination during the closures. This increase in neighborhood traffic was confirmed through traffic counts conducted by the Montgomery County Department of Transportation and Montgomery Parks.

**Project Timeline: Pilot Project Phase I (2022)**

To maintain a segment of the Parkway open to safe recreational use while mitigating cut-through traffic on adjacent residential roadways, Parks coordinated with the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) to implement a “pilot project” to revise the alignment of the Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue. The pilot program was conducted in phases to ensure 24/7 vehicular usage along the Parkway and allow traffic counts to be taken to confirm results.

The Phase I alignment was implemented in May 2022 and consisted of extending the existing road diet at the CCT crossing between Arlington Road and Hillandale Road by adding flexible posts that close off one drive lane in each direction, while still always allowing for full vehicle access in the remaining drive lane. This effectively extended the interim road diet that had been in place at the CCT crossing since 2017.

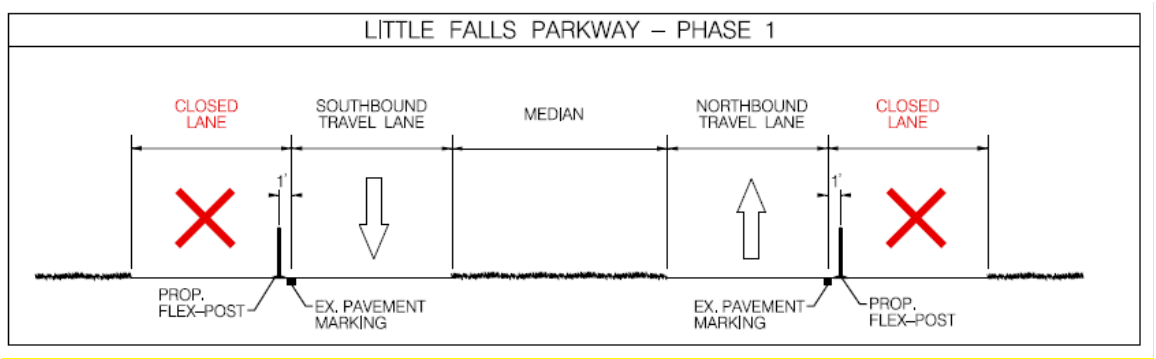


*Figure 4: Pilot Project Phase 1*

With two lanes now open to vehicles 24/7, traffic studies conducted in July 2022 and September 2022 showed a substantial decrease in weekend traffic volumes on Kennedy Drive and Brookside Drive (in the Kenwood community) with no significant difference in traffic volumes on the Parkway or other adjacent roadways. The data showed that the parkway was processing similar vehicle volumes in a two-lane section as the previous four-lane section, confirming that a two-lane section has sufficient capacity to accommodate all traffic demand. The closed lanes were not marketed for recreational use during the Phase 1 pilot due to their proximity to the travel lanes.

**Project Timeline: Pilot Project Phase II (Current Conditions)**

In November 2022, Parks built upon the demonstrated functionality of the Phase I two-lane cross section by implementing Phase II, which is the current condition encountered on the Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue.

The Phase II re-alignment maintained two travel lanes but shifted all vehicles to the previous two northbound travel lanes, providing a single lane of travel in each direction with no median separation. Associated modifications to intersection traffic signals and signage were also performed by MCDOT to support this effort. This roadway section matches Little Falls Parkway between River Road (MD 190) and Massachusetts Avenue (MD 396) and is the same as other park roads including Beach Drive and Sligo Creek Parkway, as well as numerous two-lane roads and highways in Montgomery County. Speed limits for the entire segment of the Parkway between Arlington Rd and MD 190 were lowered to 25 mph, matching the maximum speed limit of other park roads.

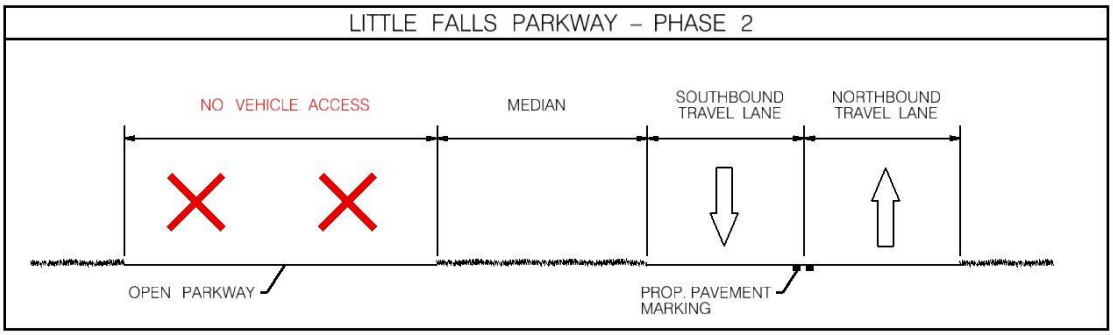


*Figure 5: Pilot Project Phase 2 (Current Condition)*

The remaining two southbound lanes of the Parkway no longer convey vehicle traffic and effectively provide the Open Parkway recreational experience 7 days a week, without negatively affecting the functionality of the Parkway.

Parks conducted additional traffic studies throughout 2022, which show the Parkway continued to serve as much traffic with two traffic lanes as it did with four lanes, but with reduced vehicle speeds and significantly improved Vision Zero safety achieved with the 2-lane configuration versus the former 4-lane parkway.

**Project Timeline 2023**

On February 15, 2023, the Parks Department held a public meeting to share the results of the pilot project traffic engineering analysis and present the recommendation for a permanent two-lane configuration. Studies showed a two-lane configuration met traffic and emergency response needs, while reducing vehicle speeds and allowing for daily recreational use of the closed drive lanes. The meeting was attended by approximately 200 people, and a recording is publicly available. Dozens of residents testified or asked questions. Attendees asked for additional information on future traffic growth, emergency response, and details about any future linear park. In response to the large number of questions asked during the meeting and through the website and emails, Parks subsequently published an online FAQ document.

The Planning Board held a public hearing for the project on March 30, 2023, during which over 50 people testified online and in-person. In addition, hundreds of emails, letters, phone calls and other correspondence were received during the public comment period. The majority of comments received were in support of the pilot project, but concerns were raised with the idea of developing a linear park along Little Falls Parkway and with the impact of the lane reduction on vehicular traffic. Copies of correspondence received were included in the previously published Planning Board staff reports and attached in the appendices.

On April 27, 2023, the Montgomery County Planning Board voted 4-0-1 to make the two-lane configuration of the Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue permanent. The Planning Board also recommended incorporating a refuge at the Capital Crescent Trail crossing, additional turn lanes, and medians where feasible. The Parks Department proposed initiating a separate process to develop plans for any potential linear park along this portion of Little Falls Parkway, to be reviewed and approved by the Planning Board at a future date.

Parks subsequently proceeded with detailed design development for the permanent Planning Board-approved two-lane configuration and began coordination with the National Capital Park Commission (NCPC) in accordance with the Capper Cramton Act.

On May 8, 2023, during Capital Budget deliberations, the Montgomery County Council adopted a motion to add language to the Parks Department's Capital Improvements Program stating that: "any realignment of the remaining two lanes between Dorset and Arlington on Little Falls Parkway must be reviewed by the Council before funds may be utilized for this purpose. No funds may be utilized for the implementation of a linear park in this section of Little Falls Parkway." The Council requested Parks further develop the Vision Zero roadway plans and cost estimate for their consideration.

Following the Council motion, coordination with NCPC was temporarily put on hold while the Council-Requested Alternate Option was developed and a review process was determined. On October 25, 2023, the Council sent the attached letter to Montgomery Parks, requesting Parks develop a non-Planning Board-recommended option (Council-Requested Alternate Option) that "includes a road diet on either side of the median." The Planning Board-Approved Configuration and the Council-Requested Alternate Option will both be reviewed by the County Council's Planning, Housing, and Parks (PHP) committee, and the PHP committee's recommendation will be transmitted to the full Council.

While the Parks Department had initially considered repurposing a portion of the unused southbound travel lanes for development of a linear park, the Planning Board did not request that Parks pursue this study, and it is no longer being considered. Parks is proposing the removal of unused pavement to reclaim natural areas of Little Falls Stream Valley Park and creation of a separated shared use path connection alongside the Parkway.

## MONTGOMERY COUNTY MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

The Planning Board-approved configuration is supported by recommendations in numerous adopted County planning documents, including the *Vision Zero 2030 Action Plan* (November 2017), the *Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan* (October 2022), the *Westbard Sector Plan* (July 2016), the *Montgomery County Bicycle Master Plan*, and the draft *Pedestrian Master Plan*. Additional information on master plan recommendations is available in the previously published Planning Board staff reports.

## EXISTING CONDITIONS

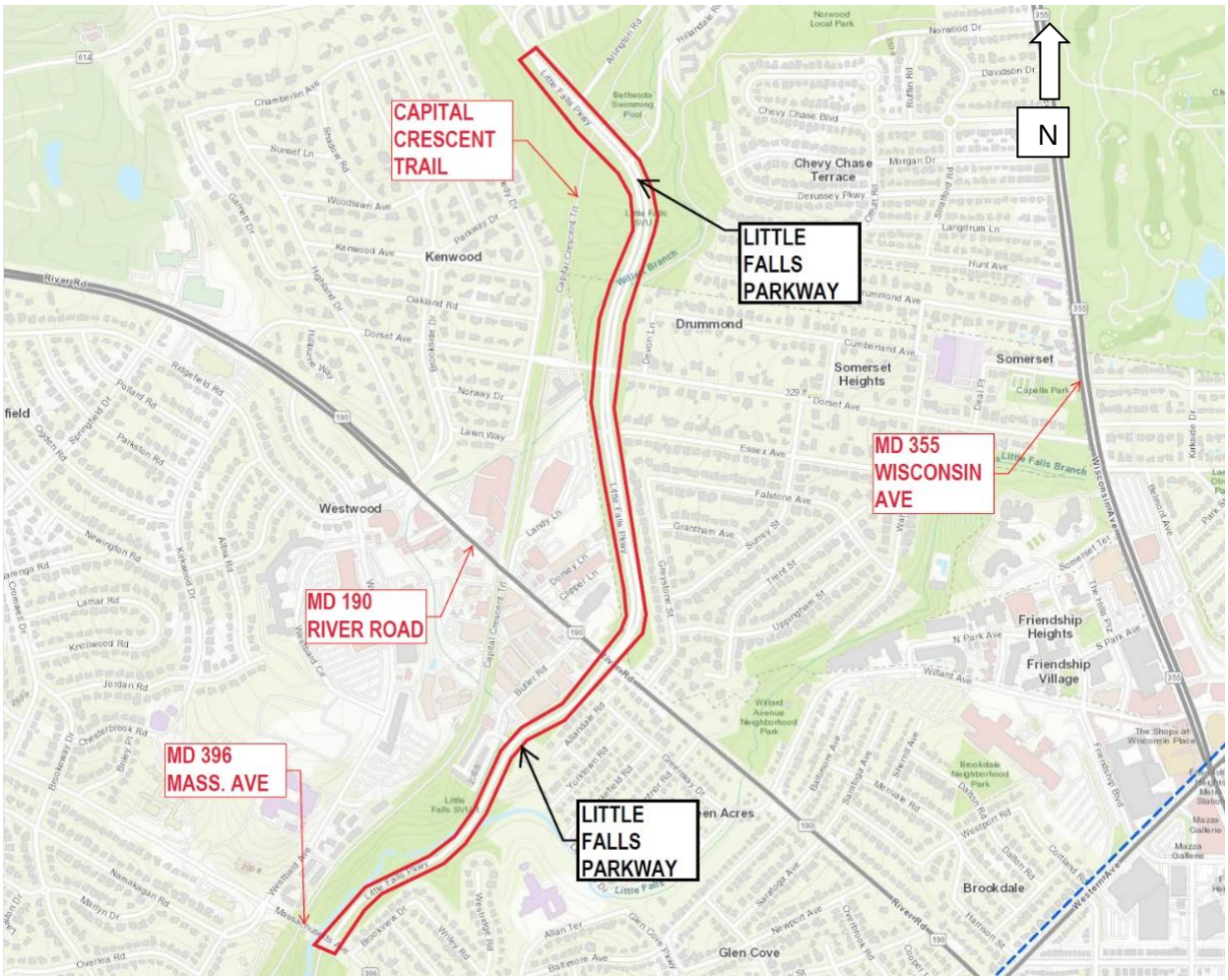


*Figure 6: Location Map*

Little Falls Parkway is located within the Little Falls Stream Valley Park (SVP), with a northern terminus near Fairfax Road (north of Arlington Road) and southern terminus at MD 396 (Massachusetts Ave). The Little Falls SVP is located within the Willett Branch watershed and contains established diverse forest stands consisting of tulip poplars, white oaks, and other species.

The Parkway was originally built with a two-lane cross section (opposing drive lanes) at its northern terminus at Fairfax Road and between MD 190 and MD 396, and a four-lane cross section (two drive lanes northbound, two drive lanes southbound, with a grass median separation) between Arlington Road and MD 190.

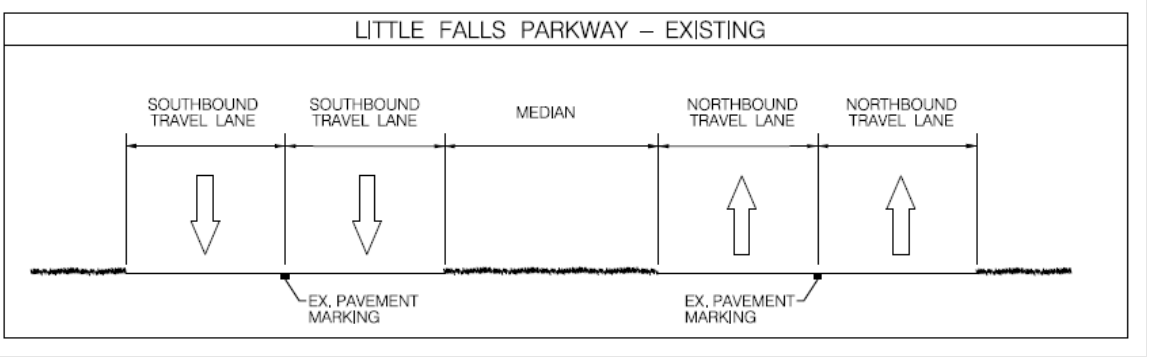


*Figure 7: Existing Road Section in 2016 between Arlington Rd and MD 190*

The Planning Board-approved configuration and Council requested alternate option are for the segment of the Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue. Additional information on Parkway existing conditions is available in the previously published Planning Board staff reports.

## TRAFFIC AND SAFETY DATA

The information below is a summary of the traffic data and analysis collected throughout the project. Collection and analysis were conducted by licensed professional engineers and planners via standard industry best practices. Additional comprehensive information is available in the previously published Planning Board staff reports.

### Little Falls Parkway History and Design

Little Falls Parkway was constructed in the late 1950's and the original General Development Plan for Little Falls Branch Park envisioned a parkway connecting the current northern terminus all the way to the George Washington Parkway as a limited access parkway with two-lanes of traffic on each side of a grass median. The 1957 General Development Plan also includes plans for several active recreation areas along Little Falls Parkway to include tennis, basketball, multipurpose areas, tot lots, parking, picnicking, trails, and more. These recreation areas were never developed.

The originally planned cross-section with two lanes in each direction divided by a grass median was implemented only between Fairfax and River Roads. By the time the section of parkway between Massachusetts Avenue and River Road was under design, the plans for extending the parkway all the way to the George Washington Parkway had been abandoned and the cross-section was revised by planners and engineers to reflect the updated character of the parkway, which would now terminate at Massachusetts Avenue. The final design of this section featured two opposing travel lanes with no median and limited shoulders mirroring the cross-sections of Beach Drive and Sligo Creek Parkway.

Later changes to the original vision for Little Falls Parkway included the Little Falls Trail and bike lanes along the parkway. When the National Capital Planning Commission reviewed the trail and bike lane project in 1979, they described the prospect of developing the Little Falls Stream Valley Park in accordance with the General Development Plan of 1957 as, "…no longer reasonable, since it is highly unlikely that the unbuilt parkway improvements and other facilities in this plan

would ever be constructed even if the approved plan were not modified."[3] In summary, plans for Little Falls Parkway changed from its original concept as a commuter thoroughfare connecting to the George Washington Parkway with recreational amenities to a much shorter limited access parkway that no longer necessitated four total travel lanes.

**Capper-Cramton Act (National Capital Planning Commission)**

Because the parkland along Little Falls Parkway was purchased with federal funding from the Capper-Cramton Act, permanent modifications to the Parkway are subject to National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) review and approval. In 1979, NCPC approved construction of the Little Falls Trail and bike lanes along Little Falls Parkway as these projects "would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment."

Parks coordinated with NCPC throughout the pilot project process and NCPC confirmed that interim operational modifications would not require NCPC approval. NCPC's review is primarily focused on ensuring the protection and preservation of the region's valuable watersheds and parkland, and this project includes potential pavement removal and stormwater management consistent with that goal. Parks will coordinate with NCPC to initiate its review before moving forward with construction of the permanent Vision Zero road improvements.

**Area Growth and Traffic Volume Trending Down**

The population of the Bethesda and Chevy Chase area in 2000 was 64,658 people. Per the 2020 census, the population had increased to 74,893, an increase of 15%. The population of Montgomery County increased from 877,478 to 1.05 million, and the population of Washington D.C. increased from 572,046 to 712,816 in the same period.

Despite the growth in the overall area, traffic volumes on Little Falls Parkway and surrounding State highways (per public Maryland State Highway Administration counts) have been decreasing steadily since 2001. On Little Falls Parkway, daily traffic has decreased from 15,800 vehicles/day in 2016 to 10,300 vehicles/day in December 2022.

Long term traffic data on the Parkway and adjacent state highways demonstrates that area wide growth in urban areas has not translated to an increase in vehicle traffic.

**Two-Lane Parkway Accommodates Current and Future Traffic Growth**

The 2016 *Westbard Sector Plan* envisions Little Falls Parkway as a two-lane road. Little Falls Parkway currently processes about 10,000 vehicles per day (vpd) but two-lane roads with dedicated turn bays like the Parkway can accommodate approximately 20,000. During peak hour conditions, the road has capacity for 350 additional vehicles per hour (vph), in each direction, before reaching critical thresholds. This would represent a 35% increase from 2016 conditions, and a 50% increase over 2022 peak hour volumes.

Travel time runs were conducted in January 2023 along Little Falls Parkway between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue, by vehicle, during morning and evening peak commuting hours, when

[3] Little Falls Branch Stream Valley Park Units 1 and 2, Montgomery County, Maryland Modification to the General Development Plan

traffic along the roadway is the heaviest. The peak hour travel times, which represent the highest traffic volumes throughout the day, have levels of service of B (reasonable and stable free flow) and C (slightly restricted but stable) during all peak periods and travel directions. The travel times include time spent at the signalized intersections as well as yielding to trail traffic at the CCT crossing.

Parks has worked with Montgomery Planning transportation planners to forecast Year 2045 traffic growth for the area using Montgomery Planning's trip-based four step, regional travel demand model (Travel/4). This is a standard model used by all local counties and jurisdictions for growth modeling. The model conservatively assumes the following conditions and inputs:

- An assumption that traffic will grow. While seemingly intuitive, this is not supported by traffic counts on the Parkway and area highways since the early 2000's as volumes have steadily decreased.
- Pre-pandemic observed 2015 traffic counts were used as a traffic baseline condition.
- The model assumed full buildout estimated in approved planning documents including the *Bethesda Master Plan* and *Westbard Sector Plan*. It also incorporates general growth forecasts for the area as given in the year *2045 Round 9.2 Cooperative Forecast*. This is an overall growth forecast developed among the District of Columbia and surrounding jurisdictions.

Based on these conditions and inputs the subsequent Travel/4 model forecasted a 5% traffic growth factor on Little Falls Parkway, which is likely overstated given the historical decline in traffic volumes in the area. A 5% growth factor would result in a 2045 PM peak hour volume of 1,200 vph, and an average daily traffic of approximately 11,000 vpd, well within the capacity of a two-lane suburban roadway, which can typically accommodate up to 20,000 vpd. The National Parks Service *Park Road Standards* also states that two-lane roads should be implemented for vehicle peak volumes of 1,500 vph, with a standard paved width of 22'.

Montgomery Planning staff have re-affirmed that the two-lane configuration of Little Falls Parkway more than accommodates potential future traffic growth and stand by the 2016 Westbard Sector Plan recommendation that Little Falls Parkway should be a two-lane road.

**Adjacent Residential Traffic Significantly Reduced**

The Open Parkways closure of the Parkway resulted in unintended cut-through traffic along neighboring residential roads. Traffic counts conducted in 2022, after implementation of the interim pilot project allowing for 24/7 vehicular operation and recreational usage of the closed lanes, demonstrated significant decreases in residential traffic volumes. For example, Kennedy Drive in the Kenwood community experienced a 66% decrease in weekend traffic volumes.

**Planning Board Approved Configuration Meets Emergency Response Needs**

During the community meetings and public input period, some residents submitted correspondence and testimony about the inadequacy of a two-lane undivided roadway for emergency response travel and operational access. These concerns were coupled with requests to return to a four-lane parkway, a configuration that is demonstrably less safe with higher vehicle speeds and more crashes. In addition, this testimony is directly contradicted by Montgomery County Fire Rescue (FRS) and Park Police, who have stated unequivocally that two-lane undivided roads meet emergency travel access and operational requirements.

Parks has coordinated with FRS, MCDOT, and Park Police since implementation of the interim road diet at the CCT crossing in 2017. According to FRS Operations Chief Charles Bailey, a March 2023 letter written by a Montgomery County Fire Rescue Service (FRS) assistant chief officer expressing potential safety concerns submitted by residents to the Board "DOES NOT represent the official position of FRS on the issue of Little Falls Parkway."

In addition, Jessica Baxter with Montgomery County Public Schools has said "the district's transportation department has not documented any delays associated with school bus pickup and drop-off for Somerset Elementary, which is near the now-two-lane parkway."

**Vision Zero: Reducing the Parkway to Two Lanes is Safer**

Staff have continually monitored the road diet (which reduced the four-lane road to a two-lane road) and raised crosswalk improvements implemented in early 2017 at the CCT crossing between Arlington Road and Hillandale Road. The improvements eliminated the multiple-lane threat condition and slowed vehicle speeds at the crossing. The data below was obtained from County crash reports:

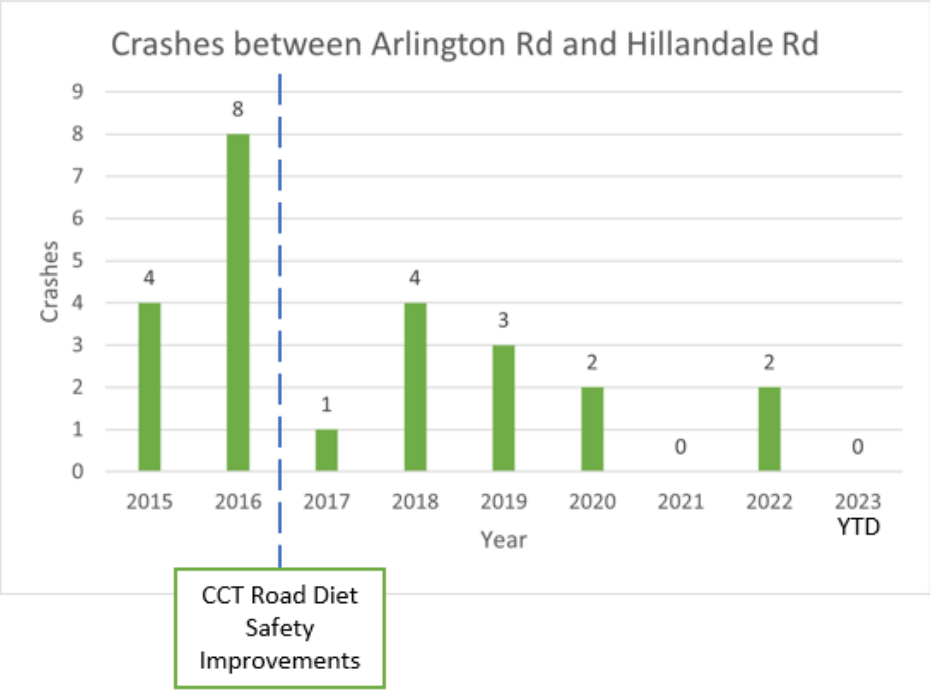


*Figure 8: Crashes Between Arlington and Hillandale 2015*

The road diet at the CCT crossing resulted in a substantial reduction in overall crashes between Arlington Road and Hillandale road.

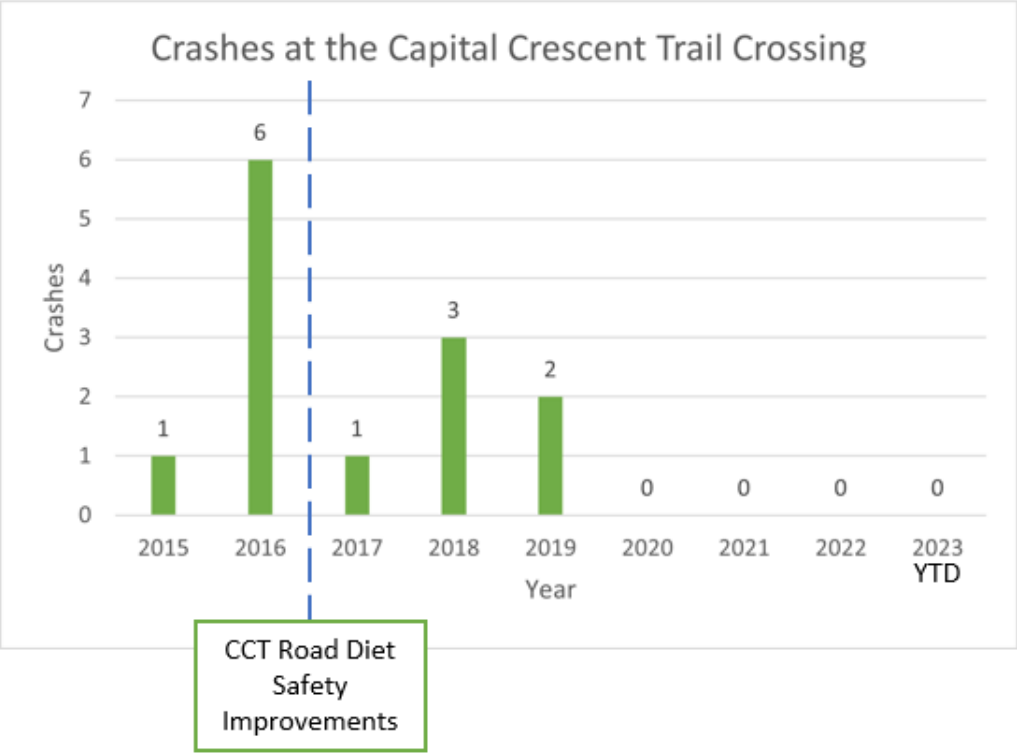


*Figure 9: Crashes at Capital Crescent Trail Crossing Since 2015*

The CCT crossing road diet safety improvements resulted in significant overall crash reduction at the crossing, with none reported, including 2023 year to date, since the raised crosswalk was installed in 2020 (compared to six in 2016 alone).

A speed study, measuring vehicular spot travel speeds, was conducted before the end of the school year in June 2023 along the two-lane segment between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue, and the four-lane segment south of Dorset Avenue to MD 190. Average speeds were compared to previously measured average speeds along the two-lane segment between Arlington Road and Hillandale Avenue.

- Between Arlington and Hillandale (two-lane, with raised crosswalk for Capital Crescent Trail crossing): 18 mph, 1% of traffic exceeding 30 mph
- Between Hillandale and Dorset (two-lane): 33 mph, 5% of traffic exceeding 40 mph
- Between Dorset and MD 190 (four-lane): 36 mph, 23% of traffic exceeding 40 mph, multiple drivers exceeding 65 mph.

The speed data re-affirms that a four-lane road is demonstrably less safe as it allows higher vehicle travel speeds than a two-lane road, *with several drivers measured above 65 mph traveling past the entrance to the Washington Episcopal School.*

**The crash and speed data demonstrate that extending the road diet between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue further improves safety by reducing speeds along this segment of roadway. A two-lane road with additional traffic calming results in slower vehicle speeds, fewer vehicle crashes, and substantially reduces conflicts with trail users, compared to a four-lane road.**

## PLANNING BOARD-APPROVED CONFIGURATION

The objectives for the continued design development of the Planning Board-Approved Configuration include:

- A permanent two-lane road configuration that meets County and Parks Vision Zero safety goals
- Re-purposing the closed off drive lanes to provide safe trail connectivity from Arlington Road to Dorset Avenue, including to and from the Capital Crescent Trail and Little Falls Trail
- Meeting emergency response operational access needs
- Environmental benefits in a sensitive stream valley area by removal of unused asphalt, implementation of stormwater management practices, and additional plantings
- Meeting requirements of the Capper Cramton Act and the National Capital Planning Commission, which ensure protection and preservation of the region's watersheds and parkland

During the spring 2023 Planning Board review and public input process, Parks considered repurposing a portion of the unused southbound travel lanes for development of a linear park. The Planning Board did not request that Parks pursue this study, and it is no longer being considered. Parks is proposing the removal of unused pavement to reclaim natural areas of Little Falls Stream Valley Park and creation of a separated shared use path connection alongside the Parkway.

A summary of the Planning Board-Approved Configuration is presented below. Full sized drawings are included in the appendix.

The typical section consists of two opposed drive lanes with median separation. The existing grass median remains in place, and a 10' shared use path connection is provided in the previous southbound lanes of the Parkway:

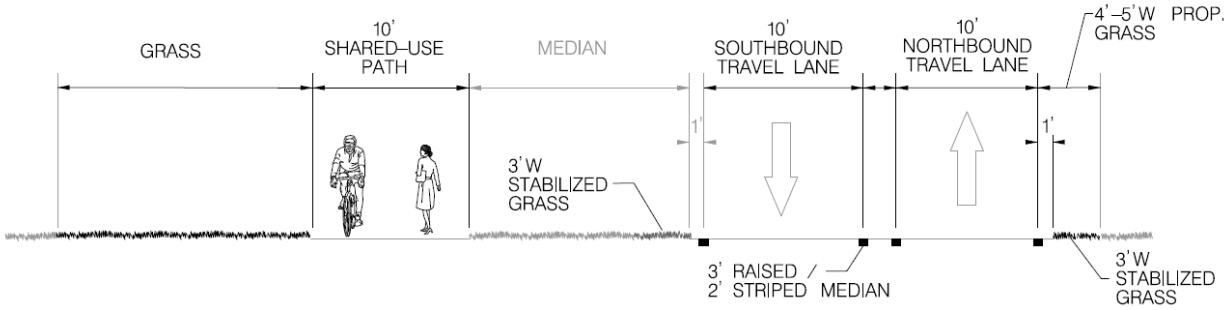


*Figure 10: Planning Board-Approved Configuration Cross Section*

Per the Planning Board approval recommendation, a median between vehicle drive lanes will be incorporated where feasible. The proposed median will vary between a flush, non-structural median, to a raised concrete median (3" maximum height) with either grass or concrete surface.

At the northern end of Little Falls Parkway at Arlington Road, additional Vision Zero based intersection improvements are proposed to enhance safety and improve bike connectivity to the Capital Crescent Trail from Arlington Road. Extraneous asphalt pavement will be removed and restored to grass:

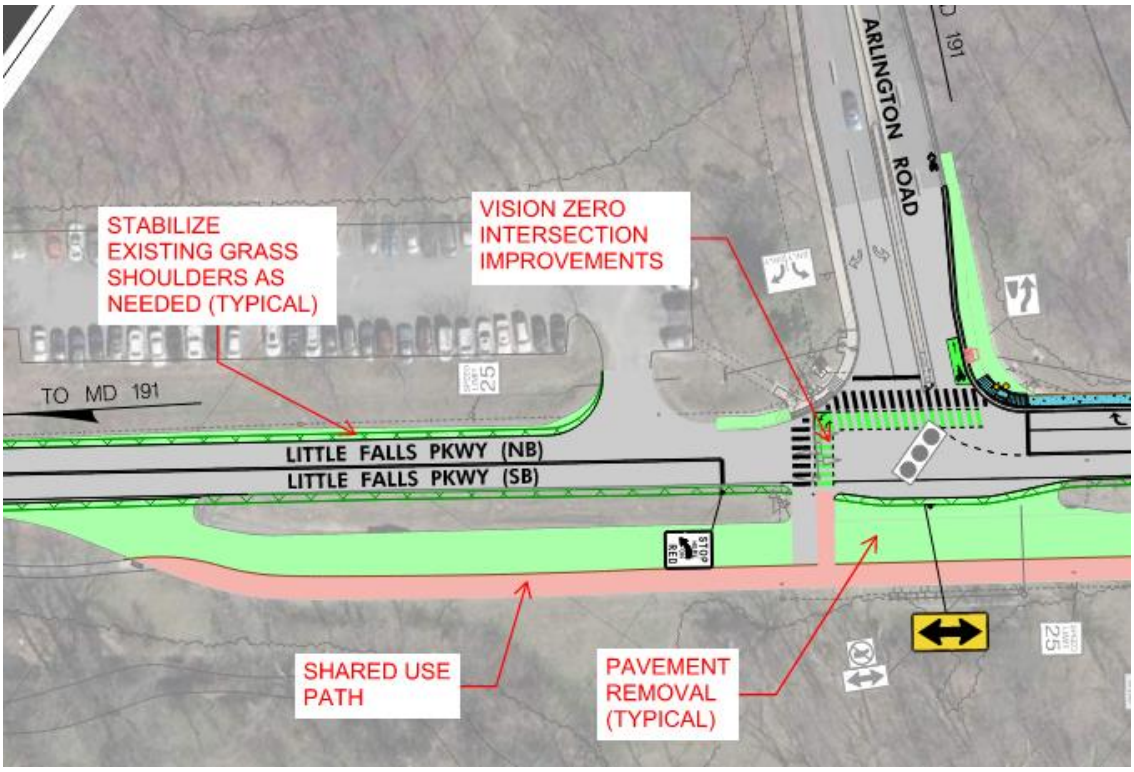


*Figure 11: Little Falls Parkway at Arlington Road*

A median and refuge for Capital Crescent Trail users will be implemented at the crossing:

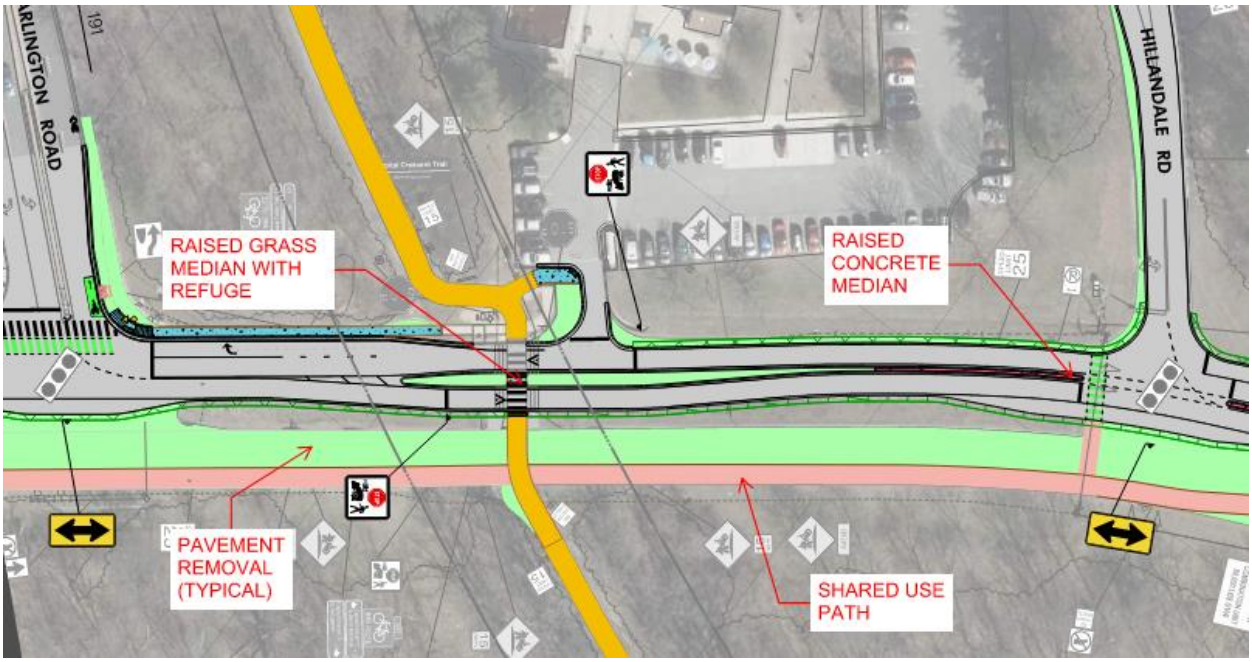


*Figure 12:Little Falls Parkway at Capital Crescent Trail*

Additional traffic calming measures are proposed between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue to reduce vehicle speeds. A summer 2023 speed study showed an average speed of 33 mph in this segment, well above the 25 mph Parkway limit:

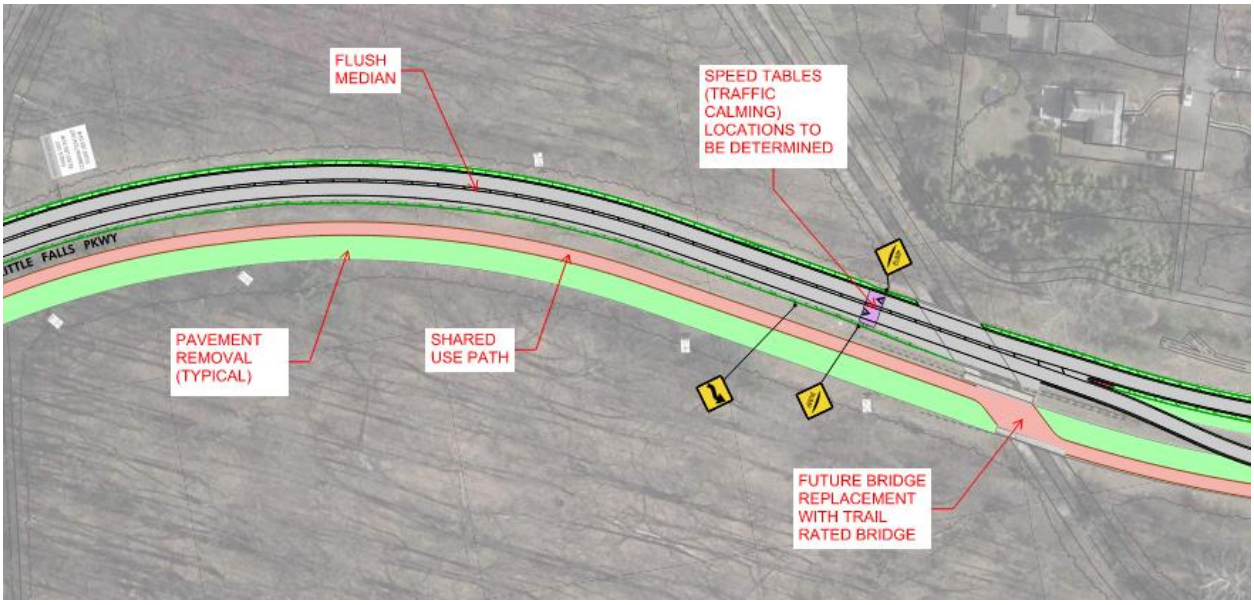


*Figure 13: Little Falls Parkway B/W Hillandale and Dorset*

The existing southbound concrete bridge over Willett Branch (Little Falls) was constructed in 1958 and was rated as “Fair” condition in 2017. The bridge over the northbound lanes was already re-constructed in 2005. The southbound bridge will need to be replaced in the next 10-15 years; however, the Planning Board approved configuration will allow the bridge to be replaced with a less expensive, lower traffic rated trail bridge, at substantial cost savings.

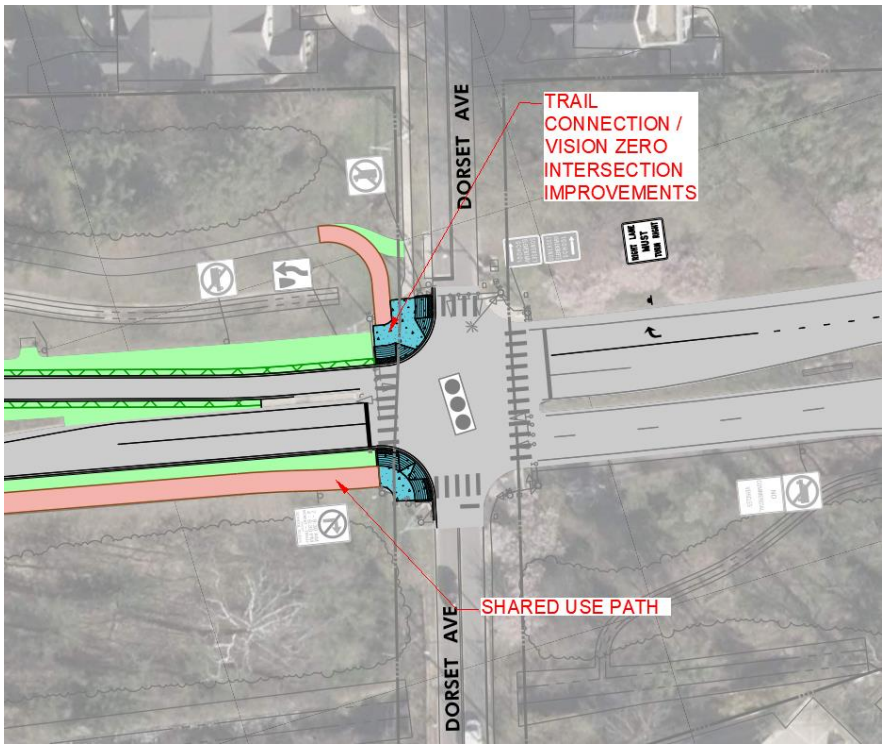


*Figure 14: Little Falls Parkway at Dorset Ave*

At the southern terminus of the project at Dorset Avenue, trail connections to the existing sidewalk along Dorset Avenue and Little Falls Trail will be installed, in addition to Vision Zero crossing improvements at the existing signalized intersection.

**Emergency Access Coordination**

In Fall 2023, FRS, Park Police, and the County Fire Marshall again expressed support for the Planning Board-Approved Configuration. Per the attached September 27, 2023, memorandum from Fire Chief Kinsley, "t*he preferred road diet cross section (see page 3 of the attachment) approved in April meets all prescriptive code requirements for fire department vehicular access. These code requirements can be found in NFPA 1 Chapter 18 and Montgomery County Executive Regulation 8-16. From an operational standpoint, the MCFRS prefers a road cross-section similar to what is found on Beach Drive or Sligo Creek Parkway. The design of these roadways offers more flexibility for the fire department to easily use the opposite lane to access emergency incidents within or close by the roadway, even if the affected lane is completely blocked by an accident or traffic. This is similar to the engineering of Sligo Creek Parkway, which offers adequate fire department access.*"

**Planning Board-Approved Configuration Cost Estimate**

The preliminary construction cost estimate is $600,000.

## COUNCIL-REQUESTED ALTERNATE OPTION

On October 25, 2023, the Council sent the attached letter to Montgomery Parks, requesting Parks develop a non-Planning Board-recommended option (Council-Requested Alternate Option) that "includes a road diet on either side of the median."

The objectives for the development of the Council-Requested Alternate Option are similar to the Planning Board-Approved Configuration and include:

- A permanent two-lane road configuration that meets County and Parks Vision Zero safety goals, *utilizing the existing grass median to separate the northbound and southbound drive lanes*
- Re-purposing the closed off drive lanes to provide safe trail connectivity from Arlington Road to Dorset Avenue, including to and from the Capital Crescent Trail and Little Falls Trail
- Meeting emergency response operational access needs
- Environmental benefits in a sensitive stream valley area by removal of unused asphalt, implementation of stormwater management practices, and additional plantings
- Meeting requirements of the Capper Cramton Act and the National Capital Planning Commission, which ensure protection and preservation of the region's watersheds and parkland

A summary of the Alternate Option is presented below. Full sized exhibits are included in the appendix.

The typical section consists of two lanes separated by the existing grass median. A 10' shared use path connection is provided along the southbound lane of the Parkway. A traffic barrier is required to provide safe separation between the shared use path and vehicle traffic.

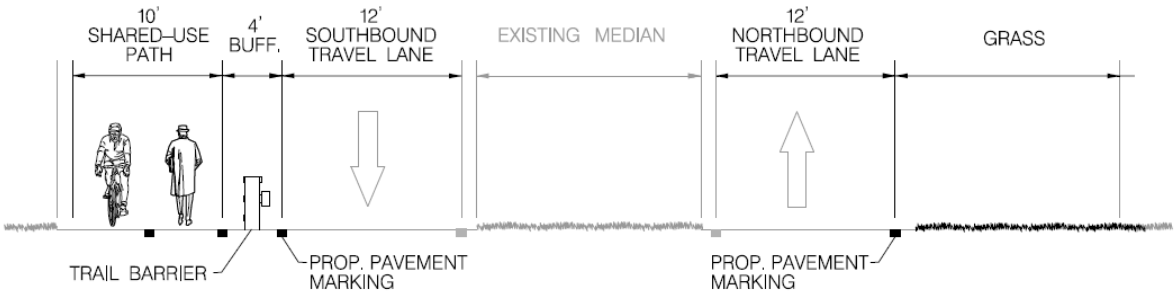


*Figure 15: Alternate Option Cross Section*

At the northern end of Little Falls Parkway at Arlington Road, additional Vision Zero based intersection improvements are proposed to enhance safety and improve bike connectivity to the Capital Crescent Trail from Arlington Road. Extraneous asphalt pavement will be removed and restored to grass and an existing traffic signal pole will require relocation:

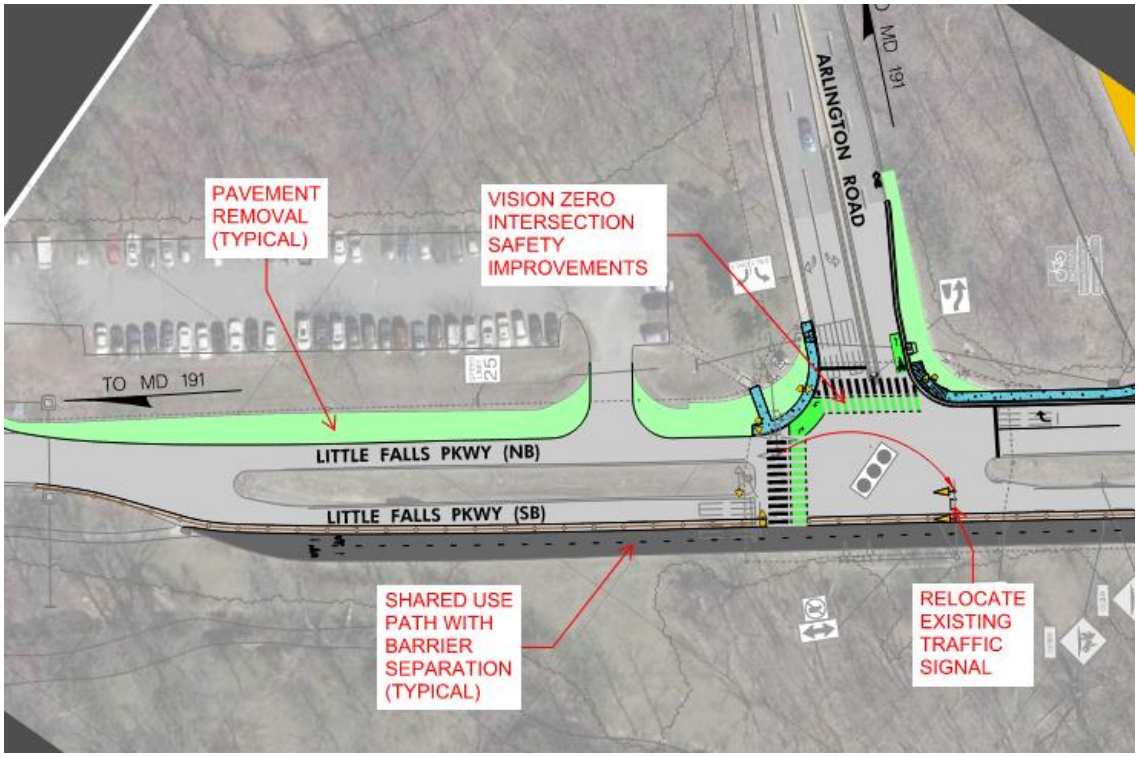


*Figure 16: Little Falls Parkway at Arlington Road*

The existing grass median and median refuge at the Capital Crescent Trail crossing will remain:

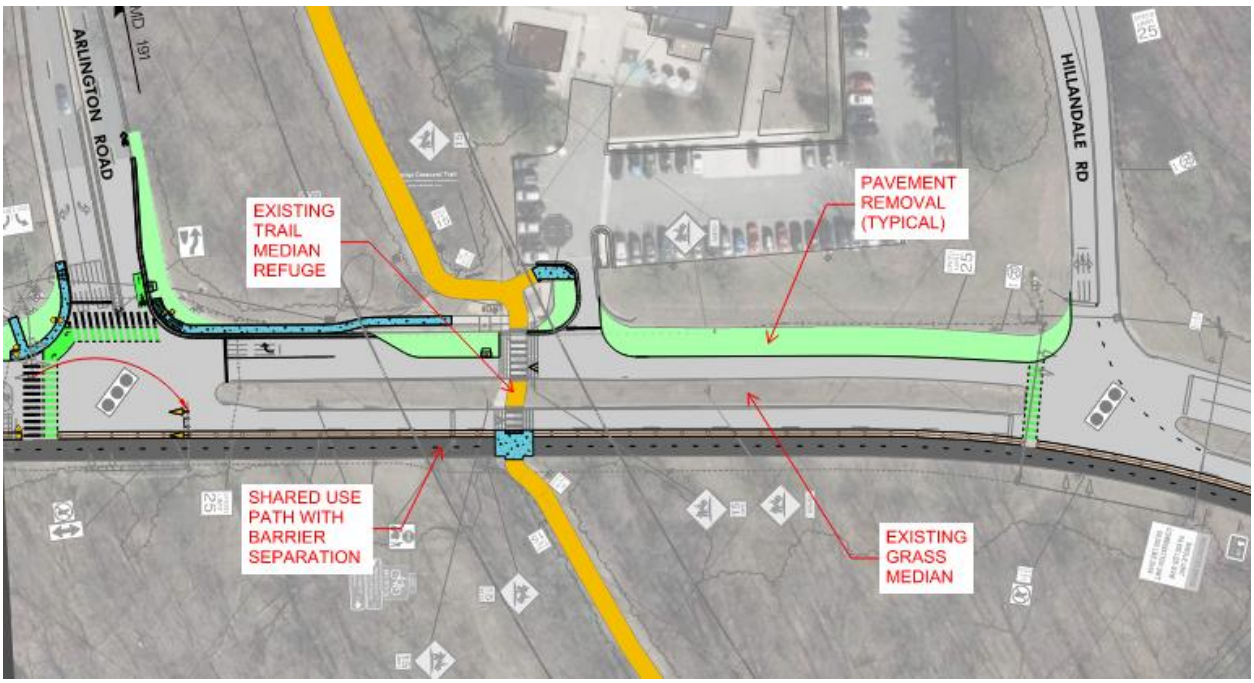


*Figure 17: Little Falls Parkway at Capital Crescent Trail*

Additional traffic calming measures are proposed between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue to reduce vehicle speeds. A summer 2023 speed study showed an average speed of 33 mph in this segment, well above the 25 mph Parkway limit. Per the Fire Marshall, due to the

configuration of the existing median and pavement, up to three emergency response operational bays would be required in the grass median between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue to meet prescriptive fire access code.




*Figure 18: Little Falls Parkway B/W Hillandale and Dorset*

The existing southbound concrete bridge over Willett Branch (Little Falls) was constructed in 1958 and was rated as “Fair” condition in 2017. The bridge over the northbound lanes was already re-constructed in 2005. The southbound bridge will need to be replaced in the next 10-15 years, and the Council-requested alternate option will require bridge replacement in kind with a vehicle traffic rated bridge, at a significantly greater cost than the Planning Board-approved configuration.

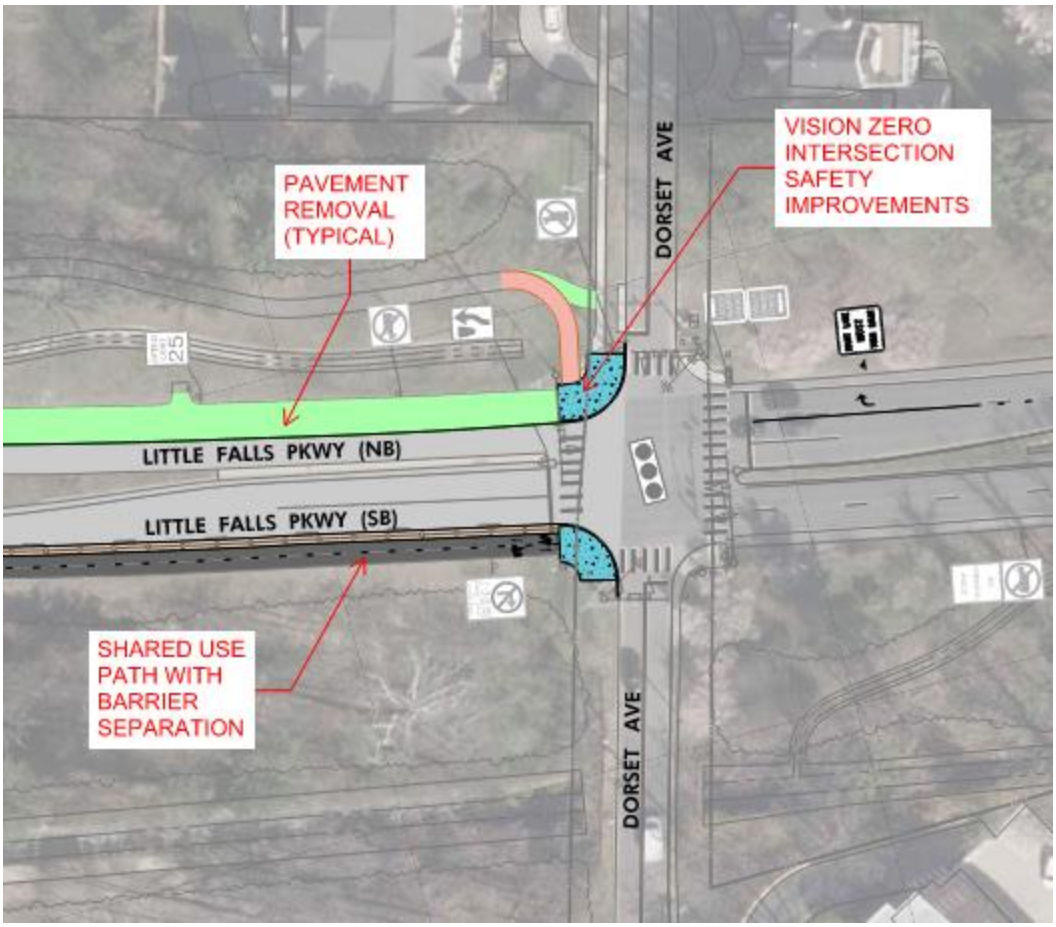


*Figure 19: Little Falls Parkway at Dorset Ave*

At the southern terminus of the project at Dorset Avenue, trail connections to the existing sidewalk along Dorset Avenue and Little Falls Trail will be installed, in addition to Vision Zero-based crossing improvements at the existing signalized intersection.

**Emergency Access Coordination**

FRS, the County Fire Marshall, and Park Police have stated that the Council-Requested Alternate Option is not preferred from an emergency access and operational standpoint. Per the attached September 2023 memorandum from Fire Chief Kinsley: "*The alternative road diet cross-section proposed by the County Council, also shown on page 3 of the attachment, does* ***not*** *meet the prescriptive code*."

Unlike opposing lanes, single lanes separated by a median are more restrictive and do not allow easy passing by emergency vehicles. To address this, the Fire Marshall has stated that up to three emergency operational bays in the existing grass median would be required between Hillandale Road and Dorset Avenue.

**Council-Requested Alternate Option Cost Estimate**

The preliminary construction cost estimate for the Council-Requested Alternate Option is $900,000.

There are several cost drivers for the Council-Requested Alternate Option, compared to the Planning Board-Approved Configuration:

- To ensure safety for trail users, the alternate option requires a structural barrier separating the shared use path along Little Falls Parkway from vehicle traffic. The cost estimate assumes a guardrail style barrier, similar to the barrier installed along MD 586 (Veirs Mill Road) for the Twinbrook Connector Trail in Rockville will be utilized.
- The alternate option requires the relocation of traffic signal poles, traffic signal heads, and storm drain infrastructure.
- The alternate option will not remove as much existing impervious asphalt and may require additional stormwater management.
- The alternate option requires additional emergency operational bays in the grass median in order to meet prescriptive fire code.

These costs do not account for the future in-kind replacement of the existing southbound bridge across Willett Branch, built in 1958. The Planning Board-Approved Configuration could utilize a less expensive trail rated (as opposed to vehicle rated) bridge.

**PROJECT FUNDING AND SCHEDULE**

Construction of either option will be funded entirely through existing funds in the Parks Capital Improvements Program (CIP).

- The Planning Board-Approved Configuration is at approximately 60% level of design and ready for NCPC review. Estimated construction completion is one year to 15 months after Council review, dependent on the federal NCPC review process.
- The Council-Requested Alternate Option is at a concept level of design. Estimated construction completion is two years to 30 months after Council review, dependent on the federal NCPC review process.

**RECOMMENDATION**

While both options provide a permanent two-lane road configuration that meets Vision Zero goals and can accommodate current and future traffic in the area, Parks recommends Council approval of the Planning Board-Approved Configuration for the following reasons:

- It was approved by the Planning Board after a full input and community outreach process, including a public meeting and a Planning Board hearing;
- It builds upon the current pilot project configuration with demonstrated reduction in crashes and conflicts, meeting safety and Vision Zero goals;
- It allows for significant unused pavement removal, while re-purposing the closed off drive lanes to provide safe trail connectivity from Arlington Road to Dorset Avenue, including to the Capital Crescent Trail and Little Falls Trail, without a structural traffic barrier or other infrastructure;
- It can be constructed and implemented in less time and at less cost;
- It is preferred by County Fire Rescue, Fire Marshall, and Park Police for emergency response access and operations and does not require the construction of emergency operational bays within the existing median;
- It will allow for a significantly less expensive future replacement of the existing vehicular rated southbound bridge over Willett Branch; and
- It is more consistent with the National Capital Planning Commission review goals, which are to ensure protection and preservation of the region's watersheds and parkland.

Council approval of the Planning Board-Approved Configuration will allow Parks to resume NCPC review of the project, followed by final design, permitting, and construction.

**Attachments:**

- Appendix A: Planning Board-Approved Configuration 60% Construction Drawings
- Appendix B: County Council-Requested Alternate Option Concept Sketch
- Appendix C: County Council Historical Correspondence
- Appendix D: Speed Study Memorandum
- Appendix E: MCFRS Review of Little Falls Parkway Design and Engineering
- Appendix F: March 2023 Planning Board Report *Recommendation for Permanent Two-Lane Configuration of Little Falls Parkway Between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue*
- Appendix G: April 2023 Supplemental Planning Board Report *Recommendation for Permanent Two-Lane Configuration of Little Falls Parkway Between Arlington Road and Dorset Avenue*
- Appendix H: 2019 Facility Plan *Recommendation for Capital Crescent Trail Crossing at Little Falls Parkway Safety Improvements Project*

# Little Falls Parkway Council Memo Fall 2023

Final Audit Report 2023-10-31

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