



Working to Preserve and Enhance our Urban Forest

June 24, 2023

The Honorable Catherine S. Read
Members of the Fairfax City Council

Re: Destruction of 1,200 trees and jeopardy to endangered American Chestnut Trees from Bike Paths in Fairfax City

Dear Mayor Read and Members of the Fairfax City Council

The Fairfax Tree Stewards urge the city to reconsider and relocate planned bike paths through the small amount of urban forest remaining in the city. The Fairfax Tree Stewards is a non-profit organization of trained volunteers whose mission is to preserve, plant, and maintain trees in the face of development threatening our environment.

Several Fairfax Tree Stewards recently walked the areas where the trails would be constructed. It appears that little consideration has been given to the environmental impact of construction of the trails. Following are examples of avoidable environmental harm from the proposed trails:

- The George Snyder Trail would be constructed through urban forest, and many trees would have to be cut down. The trail would pass along several areas with significant cross slopes. It would be necessary to either excavate the upper side of the slope or fill the lower side to make the path level, and retaining walls would have to be constructed to prevent the slopes from eroding. This would damage trees adjacent to the trail because roots would be cut or buried as the side slope of the path is leveled. A photograph of one of the cross slopes is at the bottom of this letter.
- A portion of the George Snyder Trail could be located to the existing sewer cut, which has already been cleared of trees, instead of passing through urban forest. A portion of the trail also passes through Resource Protection Areas and wetlands that would be damaged by the construction of a trail. Portions could be routed to Cardinal Road and then through Ranger Road Park to Fairfax Blvd using the existing trail to Fairfax Blvd, which could then be aligned with the Extension Trail along Fairfax Blvd. Ranger Road Park is adjacent and the trail could be continued through Draper Drive Park. This alignment would require much less disturbance to Accotink Creek, its RPA, and floodplain.
- The Pickett Road Connector Trail would be constructed through urban forest parallel to Pickett Road, which already has a 7-foot wide trail.
- The Country Club Hills Common Trail would require construction of a boardwalk across a stream, and the initial slope is too steep for easy access absent significant construction activity.
- The John Mason Trail would be constructed adjacent to the tank farm through beautiful woods where as many as 20 endangered, 'functionally extinct,' American Chestnut trees survive.

The trail could be relocated to the road behind the adjacent shopping center, where it would also encourage users of the path to patronize the stores.

Trails through Fairfax City's urban forest would cause irreparable damage to the forest ecosystem. The construction of the trails will result in the cutting of more than 7 acres of woodland habitat and more than 1,200 mature trees. The construction equipment will compact the soil adjacent to the paths, which will damage the roots of trees adjacent to the path. (Contrary to widespread belief, most tree roots are located within 18 inches of the surface of the soil, typically extending as wide as the canopy of the tree.) Cutting paths through the forest will open it up to more light, which will allow invasive plants, which are already visible at the entrances to the trails, to grow along the paths and compete with the native plants. We have all seen what damage invasive vines can do to trees along the edges of urban forests. That same damage could occur all along the proposed paths. The elimination of the trees and the construction of impervious surfaces through the forests also will increase runoff, making it likely that erosion will cause more damage.

If lights are added to the trails, they will disturb the lives of both plants and animals in the forest. Lights will attract some species of insects, where they will be at greater risk of being eaten; they will repel other insects, forcing them to relocate. Birds are seriously disturbed by nighttime light, causing them to become more stressed and less likely to reproduce. Even plants, which are adapted to regular cycles of light and dark, show signs of stress when those cycles are disrupted by artificial light.

Many options are available for safe and convenient travel through Fairfax City that do not require damaging our remaining forest. We urge the city to relocate the paths to the adjacent side streets where they will not damage the environment.



Portion of the proposed George Snyder Trail showing significant cross slope

Sincerely,

Brenda J. Frank
President, Fairfax Tree Stewards

Cc: Anna Safford, Fairfax City Urban Forester