

**AUDUBON NATURALIST SOCIETY • FRIENDS OF ACCOTINK CREEK •
SIERRA CLUB, GREAT FALLS GROUP**

September 8th, 2020

Mayor and City Council
Fairfax City Hall
10455 Armstrong Street
Fairfax, VA 22030

Dear Mayor Meyer and Members of the City Council,

The Audubon Naturalist Society, Friends of Accotink Creek, and the Sierra Club Great Falls Group are supportive of the goal of connectivity through expanding multi-use and bicycle trails in the City of Fairfax to allow safe transportation alternatives to residents. However, **we urge the City to examine alternatives for the George Snyder Trail which better support the City's Environmental Comprehensive Plan goals**, especially "ACTION NE1.3.1" which aims to "...protect the City's urban forest and increase the quantity, density, and diversity of trees on public and private land.¹

We hope the ideas in this letter can help spur discussion about more ecologically positive alternatives for the current plans at the City Council's George Snyder Trail work session later this evening, on Tuesday, September 8th.

We support connectivity

More than ever, we are seeing the public getting out and using trails as a way to access the outdoors during these difficult days of the pandemic. The George Snyder Trail will fill the gaps in the existing trail network, allowing the public to get more easily from the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) shared use path at Chain Bridge Road over to the Wilcoxon Trail. From there, users will be able to access both the Pickett Road Trail to the Vienna Metro as well as the Cross County Connector Trail through Fairfax County.

We support preserving tree canopy

We understand that all new trails will have impacts on existing conditions, and we encourage weighing the human benefits of these trails – safe healthy walking and biking access in a beautiful setting – with their environmental impact. With a Tree City USA designation², we know the City of Fairfax appreciates the value of its urban forest as well.

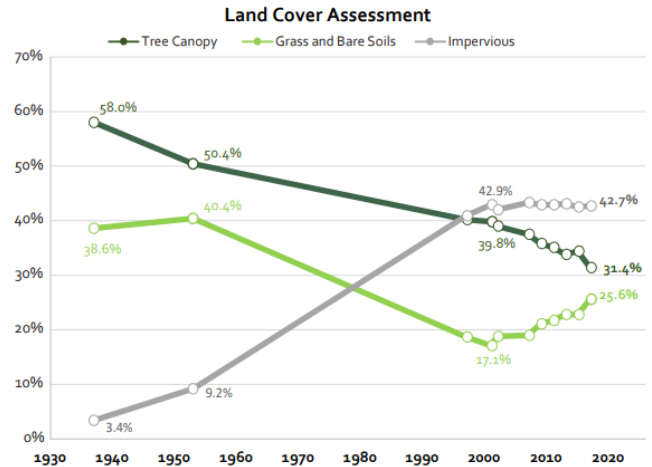
The pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to plan ahead to mitigate climate change effects through the reduction of our greenhouse gases. Trees are a critical component of this task, but also come with significant ecological co-benefits such as wildlife habitat, stormwater

¹ <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=12382#page=8>

² <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/government/environment-sustainability/climate-and-air/tree-city-usa>

management, and soil stabilization. The City of Fairfax has seen a steady downward trend in tree canopy to 31.4%, and we know mature tree canopy will decline with development, such as the upcoming Northfax West and Mathy Park redevelopments. This can seem unavoidable in an urbanizing area.

The current plans for the trail show a 20-foot-wide clearing of trees will be required. Staff is still investigating the estimated number of trees that will be lost with the current plan, however, we believe the number to be in the 300-500 range based on the tree survey.



Historical City of Fairfax land cover. Source: Environmental Comprehensive Plan <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=12382#page=3>

Along with this tree clearing, parts of the proposed path are routed on steep slopes requiring retaining walls up to seventeen feet high. Other parts of the trail will require clearing trees in the one- and two-year floodplain of the North Fork of Accotink Creek. Minimizing impacts to the North Fork of Accotink Creek is crucial given the increased pressure it is under from the I66 widening work as well as the future impacts from the redevelopment of Northfax West.

We urge the City to consider alternatives which reduce the number of trees lost while preserving the goal of connectivity.

Current plan

In the map below, orange indicates existing paths, while yellow indicates the proposed additions to connect current paved paths. We appreciate that an earlier path to the west of E1 (indicated as D1 in earlier plans³) has since been removed in the most recent “Alternative alignment” plan⁴, thus preserving tree canopy in that area.



³ <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=9510>

⁴ <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/home/showdocument?id=16545>

Ranger Road alternative

This alternative path below (shown in purple) provides an alternative which minimizes the impact on the forested western area by avoiding it, allows the use of Ranger Road, and uses the eastern parts of the proposed trail (shown in yellow) and a sewer line easement on the far east. This alternative also makes use of an existing, informal pedestrian path on the far western side, though this connection may require coordination with Fairfax County, as it is on the border.



Ranger Road is a quiet, side street with no outlet. In terms of traffic load, this is an ideal location for a shared road. This alternative minimizes both additional tree loss and increased impervious surface, while using the safest parts of Ranger Road.

However, in order to best support safe cycling, investments should be made to Ranger Road to allow for protected bike lanes. The example to the right from Arlington shows how this is possible while still allowing street parking as exists today.



Quincy St. in Arlington. Source: Safe Streets for All / Active Transportation Webinar (Slide 15)
http://transportation.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Webinar-Presentation-7-29_DN.pdf#page=15

Sewer line easement alternative

Another alternative to consider minimizing both tree loss and sharing of Ranger Road would be to use the current sewer line easements, indicated by the red lines in the map below. This area is already required to remain clear of tree canopy, and as such, additional tree loss will be drastically reduced. Using this existing clearing also limits the potential cultural resources being impacted.

(map and further comments on next page)

Sewer line easement alternative (continued)



At points, this easement clearing is as wide as fifteen or twenty feet already, as is shown in the photo to the right. While this trail area largely exists in the floodplain and Resource Protection Area of the North Fork of Accotink Creek, steps could be taken to minimize impact in this environmentally sensitive area. To mitigate impacts, the use of durable boardwalks in the most sensitive areas, such as one- and two-year floodplains would allow the ground underneath to absorb stormwater.



The use of sewer line easements for trails has been a standard practice in neighboring Fairfax County through an agreement between the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) and the county's Wastewater division, as long as the use does not interfere or damage the sewer line. Tom McFarland, FCPA's Trails Program Manager, Planning and Development Division mentioned this as a win-win for both groups: the Wastewater division gets a high-quality access route to their pipe via a path they do need to maintain, and the Park Authority minimizes tree loss as additional connectivity is developed.

In conclusion

We hope the City of Fairfax will continue to explore alternatives which preserve far more of the tree canopy and utilize existing infrastructure options where the George Snyder Trail can be routed.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with City Council and staff and request a meeting in the coming weeks, prior to the October 13th, 2020 public hearing. We will follow up on this letter to schedule a mutually convenient time.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important discussion. If you have any questions about our comments, please contact Renee Grebe by email at renee.grebe@anshome.org or by phone at 703-261-4668.

Sincerely,

Audubon Naturalist Society, Renee Grebe, Northern Virginia Conservation Advocate
Friends of Accotink Creek, Philip Latasa, Volunteer Steward
Sierra Club, Great Falls Group,
Norbert Pink, Chair
Ann Bennett, Land Use Committee

Cc:

Cathy Salgado, Director of Parks & Recreation, City of Fairfax
Wendy Block Sanford, Transportation Director, City of Fairfax
Christina Alexander, Transportation Capital Projects Manager, City of Fairfax
David Summers, Director of Public Works, City of Fairfax
Satoshi Eto, Stormwater Resource Engineer, City of Fairfax
Stefanie Kupka, Sustainability Coordinator, City of Fairfax