

The Connection



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‘Something Permanent for Future Generations to Use’

Fairfax City Council Committed to George Snyder Trail



A map of the many trail connections planned along the way.

By [Bonnie Hobbs](#)

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Construction of the George Snyder Trail was first added to Fairfax City’s Comprehensive Plan in 2012. Since then, the City has worked through its design with staff, consultants, the community, the Parks and Rec Advisory Board (PRAB), Environmental Sustainability Committee, and a trail advisory group.

This project has had a public hearing, a third-party review and has been revised accordingly. And now that its design is 100-percent complete, staff brought it to City Council’s work session, last Tuesday, July 11, for an update, plus guidance moving forward.

The most controversial part is that 510 trees must be removed so the trail – including boardwalks and bridges – may be built. But, said Councilmember Tom Ross, “We’re trying to create a balance, and I think the overall outcome will outweigh the environmental impacts.” Named after a former City mayor, it’ll be a shared-use trail connecting Chain Bridge Road (Route 123) to the Wilcoxon Trail at Draper Drive, south of Fairfax Boulevard (Route 50). It’s

also planned to be ADA-compliant, with some sections porous asphalt and others, concrete boardwalk.

510 trees must be removed to make way for the trail, but it's 'an investment for the next 50 years.'

The goal is to improve regional trail connectivity within the City, with a design that limits impacts as much as possible to environmental resources, right-of-way and utilities. And having an off-road trail provides safe and comfortable access for pedestrians and cyclists of all ages and abilities.

Part of the project will be constructed within Fairfax City parks. Five prefabricated, steel-truss bridges with concrete decks will span small tributaries and Accotink Creek. The trail, itself, will be 10 feet wide, with 2-foot-wide shoulders on each side and no blind spots at bridge approaches.

It will link to existing trail segments at Marketplace Boulevard, Stafford Park, Cardinal Park and Draper Drive Park, connecting to neighborhoods, as well as to the City's commercial corridor. Disturbances to the Resource Protection Area and floodplain will be minimized. Raised crosswalks and new signage will be added to neighborhood intersections. Dark-sky-compliant lighting is planned for just the intersections and trail junctions.

Boardwalk segments along the bridge approaches will have retaining walls and railings, and the bicycle/pedestrian bridges will be 14 feet wide, with concrete decks. Their purpose is to minimize floodplain impacts by eliminating the need for an embankment and to keep the trail above water.

Four retaining walls, ranging from 3-17 feet high, will be built between the trail and private properties and will also reduce grading impact to the forest. Viewing areas, educational markers and rain gardens are also included in the plans.

The \$18.8 million project includes more than \$13.6 million in Outside the Beltway I-66 Concessionaire funding, plus \$360,000 in federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality money. The City currently has \$17.6 million in available funding, It's currently finalizing right-of-way acquisitions and plans to start construction in spring 2024.

Before last week's Council work session, residents gave their opinions of the trail during public-comment time. Economic Development Authority Chair Beth Young called it "an investment for the business community and an added convenience for their customers and employees." Business-owner A.D. Hill said it would be a City amenity.

Central Fairfax Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jennifer Rose said the trail would help Fairfax connect to the rest of the region. And John Gordon, who owns the WillowWood I and II office buildings, said, "Leasing office space is difficult, and having access to a bike trail directly from the office buildings will help attract more businesses and real-estate revenue to the City."

However, Kathryn Johnson had a petition with 1,577 signatures asking Council to "Preserve our forests – move the trail to a less ecologically damaging area." But she incorrectly stated 3,000 trees would be removed.

Susan Chyler didn't want the woodlands "destroyed," and Jeb Mann wanted the project's scope "reassessed. You don't need to plow up the trees and pave over the woods." And Sherry Dealy contended that this trail would duplicate another, existing one.

“We need permeable surfaces,” said Ellyn Pence. “Paving trails is just wrong.” Jack Call asked Council to reconsider and not harm “this island of peace and tranquility.” And Boomer Dormity decried the disruption of birds and wildlife this trail would cause, telling Council, “Don’t prioritize blacktop above trees and wildlife.”

Later, during the work session, Councilmember Kate Doyle Feingold said, “I think people are legitimately concerned about the environmental impacts. Trees are too important a resource to lose.”

But Steve Zehnder with Stantec, the project consultant, said the “vast majority” of the project area would remain wooded, and 55 of the 510 trees to be removed are already dead. And they’ll be replaced in a more than 1:1 ratio with native trees and plantings.

In addition, City Sustainability Coordinator Stefanie Kupka said since the trail will encourage people to bike and walk, instead of drive, it will actually “reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and pollution.”

And Councilmember Jon Stehle, a former PRAB chair, said he was “ecstatic” about this trail. “This project will change people’s lives in how they connect,” he said. “And the bridges and boardwalks make sure people of all types can experience the forest.”

Councilmember Jeff Greenfield asked about other options, such as widening Cardinal Road. But, replied Transportation Director Wendy Sanford, “If we had to look at alternate options, it would be a lot of work and time, after all the work and time we’ve already put into it, and might even increase the cost.”

“If we step back and start looking at all these things, it’ll cause delays and could put this whole project at risk,” added Ross. “And we don’t want staff to have to redo things they’ve already done.”

“A third-party consultant already reviewed it, so I’m comfortable moving forward with it, as is,” said Councilmember So Lim.

“After 60-percent design was reached, we hired Timmons to look at how the cost and environmental impacts could be reduced, within the scope of the project,” said Public Works Director David Summers. Timmons suggested some trail realignments and expanded use of boardwalks – reducing forest disturbance by 30 percent – and these changes were made.

Councilmember Billy Bates said he supports the vision of this trail but wants to make sure all the tree mitigation is done.

Speaking last was Mayor Catherine Read, whose words clarified another reason this project is needed and gave staff permission to move forward.

“It’s magical to be inside a forest in Fairfax City, and we have more forests than most cities do,” she said. “But we’re looking at this in terms of what we’re losing. I look at what we gain – and it’s not just about us.

“As part of health care, it’s important for people who are ill or disabled to be able to get outside and enjoy what the rest of us can. So, to me, it’s an equity issue – and at some point in the future, this could be us. There’s a balance in nature, and this has to be an investment for the next 50 years. There’ll be more trees and more people, so I’m fully behind this project. We’re adding something permanent for future generations to use.”

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