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Compromise on ActiveFairfax plan aims to ease tensions between trail users, nature advocates

By [Scott McCaffrey](#) Published March 20, 2026 at 1:45PM



Bicycle riders on trail (via Vito Natale/Unsplash)

Fairfax County staff have revised language in the proposed [Active Transportation and Trails Plan](#) in an effort to smooth out friction between advocates for pedestrians/bicyclists and environmental issues.

The Fairfax County Planning Commission on [Wednesday night](#) (March 18) reviewed the proposed changes and recommended approval of the new plan by the Board of Supervisors when the issue is addressed in May.

Braddock District Commissioner Mary Cortina said wording changes made since a public hearing held a week earlier should meet with approval from both sides of the issue.

“Protecting the environment is so important, as are [issues raised by] the bicycle advocates,” Cortina said.

Aiming to establish a clear vision for and improve the safety of facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and other non-motorized travelers, the new plan has been in the works [for several years](#) since the county launched an ActiveFairfax study in 2020.

The new transportation and trails plan will consolidate the county’s 2021 [Countywide Trails Plan](#) and 2021 [Bicycle Master Plan](#) into a [single document](#) as part of the county’s comprehensive plan.

While the effort generally has received positive reviews, environmental groups voiced concerns in recent months that phrasing in the proposed consolidated document would not guarantee protections of wetlands and other sensitive areas.

Any pedestrian/bicycle paths through sensitive areas should “consider alternative alignments before seeking funding or design work beginning,” said Betsy Martin of the [Northern Virginia Bird Alliance](#).

Philip Latasa, volunteer steward for [Friends of Accotink Creek](#), expressed similar sentiments.

“The maps and language of this study must more clearly provide protection of natural habitats,” he said.



Planned route of the Cinder Bed Road Bikeway, which has drawn opposition from environmental advocates (via Fairfax County)

Environmental advocates have been [particularly vocal](#) about the planned [Cinder Bed Road Bikeway](#), which they see as detrimental to sensitive areas between Newington Road and the Franconia-Springfield Metro station.

“Our region suffers from an excess of paved surfaces, with all the problems all that asphalt brings,” Latasa said. “We do not need more pavement slicing into our last woods and wetlands.”

Martin and Latasa were among speakers at the [March 11 public hearing](#) held by the planning commission. Given the wide range of opinions expressed, commission members opted to delay final action for a week.

During that time, Cortina joined at-large Commissioner Timothy Sargeant in working with staff to craft further environmental protections.

The result was “extremely important and helpful changes,” Sargeant said.

Changes to the draft document included adding a new phrase that designing of trails will consider “avoiding and/or mitigating environmental impacts,” evaluated through a two-step assessment process.

The result will be creation of trails only “where it is appropriate, where it makes sense,” said Laura Ghosh, active transportation section chief for the Fairfax County Department of Transportation.

With that bump in the road out of the way, the overall Active Transportation and Trails Plan heads to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors for its review and final approval on May 5.

“We could not be more excited to see it finally approach the finish line,” said Kevin O’Brien, Virginia organizer for the Washington Area Bicyclist Association.

Speaking at the March 11 hearing, O’Brien said the plan would be “potentially transformative” by focusing county attention and resources on trails for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The result, he hoped, would be “a comprehensive, low-stress network that connects every resident and corner of the county.”

“It offers a comprehensive and dynamic toolkit for implementation,” O’Brien said.

Not everyone at the hearing was quite as enthusiastic.

William Johnson, president of the [Fairfax-Alexandria-Arlington chapter](#) of the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, cautioned that there could be unintended consequences of pushing too aggressively for trails.

“It is essential that expectations remain proportional” to economic realities and other real-world conditions, he said.

Planning Commission chair Phil Niedzielski-Eichner said the revised plan recommended for adoption by supervisors “does indeed thread the needle,” taking into account a variety of issues.

Niedzielski-Eichner called the overall result “a phenomenal accomplishment” that required “a phenomenal amount of work, a lot of participation.”

Photo via [Vito Natale/Unsplash](#)

About the Author [Scott McCaffrey](#)



A Northern Virginia native, Scott McCaffrey has four decades of reporting, editing and newsroom experience in the local area plus Florida, South Carolina and the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. He spent 26 years as editor of the Sun Gazette newspaper chain. For Local News Now, he covers government and civic issues in Arlington, Fairfax County and Falls Church.

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