

Testimony to the Montgomery County Council about the

Westbard Sector Plan

by Daniel P. Dozier, President

Little Falls Watershed Alliance

February 2, 2016

The Little Falls Watershed Alliance (LFWA) is a local citizens organization founded in 2008 to foster the protection and improve the water quality in the Little Falls watershed located in southern Montgomery county and Northwest DC.

LFWA strongly supports the environmental provisions of the Sector Plan in large part because it proposes a new Stream Valley Park and a naturalized Willett Branch creek that would pass through the sector like a green ribbon, providing residents with walking trails, seating in new green spaces and a way to enjoy the creek and outdoors. The Park and stream naturalization are, by far, the single most important amenity offered to the community in the Plan.

The Park will provide interconnectivity of the urban green infrastructure between the Capital Crescent Trail, one of the most important trail corridors in the County, and the growing Westbard community. The Plan calls for the new Park, as with all such parks, to be owned, operated and maintained by the Parks Department.

We also support the portions of the Plan that provide for the aforementioned Park and other stream improvements and watershed protection; more trees to provide shade over streets and parking lots; some other green spaces including pocket parks; and green buffering zones along the creek.

We wish to publically thank the Montgomery County Planning Board and staff for listening to citizens as it developed this creative and innovative plan

to focus on the Willett Branch by making improving the watershed a central, organizing principal of the Westbard Sector Plan.

The Willett Branch upgrades will improve the watershed by creating an urban greenway to connect with the Capital Crescent Trail and the Little Falls Parkway, by establishing more green spaces within the Sector, and by improving in-stream water flow and water quality. These watershed improvements should be considered an amenity in the Sector Plan.

If implemented, the environmental and watershed approaches in the Plan look good. However, we are concerned that funding and ‘on the ground’ decisions may delay or even prevent this urban green amenity from becoming real. From difficult experience based on the 1982 sector plan, which promised environmental benefits to buffer the creek that were never implemented, we want to make sure that this time the environmental promises in the plan actually happen.

We ask that the Council approve the environmental provisions in the Sector Plan as written, in particular with regard to the Willett Branch and the Urban Stream Valley Park.

In addition we ask that the Council:

- Act to insure that the cost of creating the Park be included in the County’s Capital Improvements Program (CIP) budget **this year**. Numerous tools exist for acquisition of primarily undevelopable portions of properties that will make up the Willett Branch Stream Park - dedication through the regulatory review process, or fee-simple acquisition via the Legacy Open Space funds - are but two examples.
- Deny exceptions and waivers that encroach upon a 100’ setback and buffers. A naturalized stream would meet many of the goals of the County’s storm water (MS-4) permit, by removing significant impervious surface while creating natural infiltration areas and restoring the floodplain.

- As an owner of property along the creek, the County must be a financial participant – along with Equity One and other owners along the stream – to improve the watershed. Adjacent owners benefit from a healthy watershed. The HOC apartment building and property is located exactly where the sector plan proposes significant stream and stream-side improvements. The HOC property along the stream is currently a disgrace as it looks like an urban dump. Park views and access will increase property values across the entire Sector, especially in new residential units adjacent to the park - some studies show an economic boost to property values by as much as 70 percent.
- Enforce Montgomery County modern stormwater management regulations to improve stream water quality, while granting appropriate stormwater credits to landowners who significantly contribute to improving the Willett Branch by helping to implement the Sector Plan’s vision of stream improvement.

Thank you.