

PART I: INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE MASTER PLAN

Damascus has always been a rural commercial center and residential community anchoring the northeast corner of Montgomery County. The General Plan designated Damascus a rural community planned to remain a "small and simple" town, and subsequent master plans have continued that vision. Through the thirty-seven years that have elapsed since the first master plan for Damascus was approved and adopted in 1966, the subsequent master plans and their amendments continue to share the underlying vision of a low to moderate density primarily residential community, with a compact "town center" core. The current Damascus Master Plan was approved and adopted in 1982 and has been amended twice.

Master Plan Proposal - In May 2002, the County Council asked The Department of Park and Planning to amend the Damascus Master Plan beginning in July 2002. This was at the request of Damascus residents who believe that the recent changes in the area justified reconsideration of a plan that is now 20 years old. The staff supported this request as the master plan will provide an opportunity to review and incorporate the recommendations of other plans and policies that have been adopted since the 1982 Master Plan and its 1993 Amendment were completed. A number of new policies, plans, and initiatives have been put in place countywide since 1982 that particularly impact the central part of this master plan area.

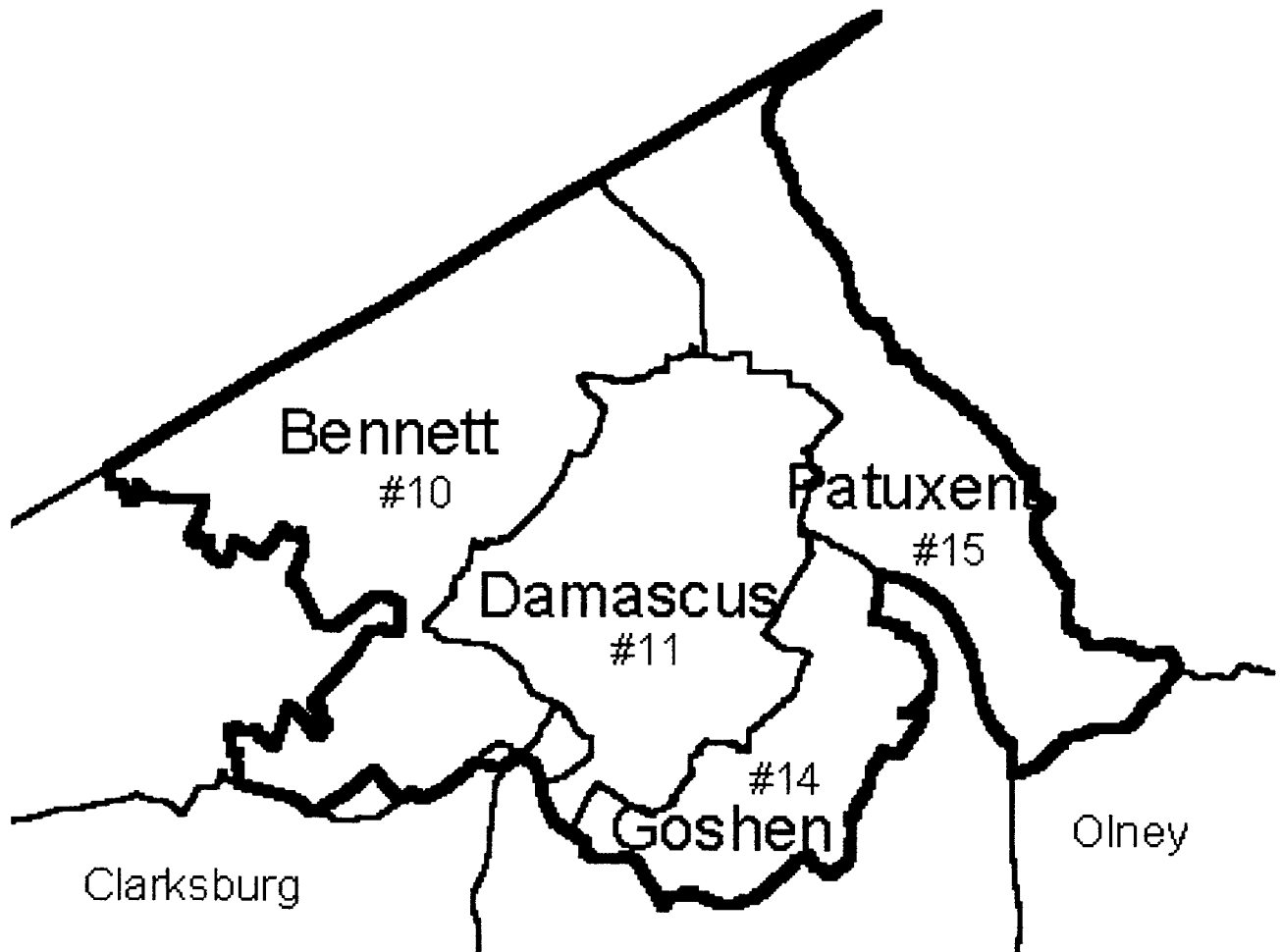
Issues proposed for consideration in this Master Plan process are drawn from Damascus residents (most strongly represented by the Damascus Alliance), and the M-NCPPC and Montgomery County staff. Most of the issues raised by the community are confined to the Damascus planning area (#11), so the greatest effort on the plan will be confined to that portion. Past recommendations will be refined to form a planning template for a center that serves the surrounding community more effectively. Regarding land use beyond the town center, this master plan will augment the planning assumptions made in previous master plans and incorporate any new policies, plans or initiatives that have occurred since 1982.

Major Themes - The purpose of this Master Plan is to address the following, which will be discussed in greater detail in Part II of this report:

1. Land Use and Zoning
Town Center Land Use
Land Use Along Woodfield Road Extended
Guidelines to enhance a "sense of place" for the Community
Guidelines to protect the community identity and character
Appropriate Zoning for Rural Villages
2. Housing
Determining Sufficiency of Affordable Housing
Guidelines for Encouraging Housing for the Elderly
3. Transportation Issues and Pedestrian Access
Pedestrian Access – especially in the town center
Through traffic along MD 27 and MD 124
Status of Master Planned Roads Facing Environmental Constraints

4. Environment and Watershed Protection
Environmental aspects of roadway connections and zoning issues
Compliance with Policies Governing Watershed and Stream Valley Protection
5. Parks, Trails, Recreation, and Legacy Open Space
Expanding Network of Recreational Trails and Bikeways
Expanding Potential for Trail Connectivity
6. Community Facilities
Evaluating sufficiency of existing and proposed community facilities to adequately serve the community.

EXISTING PLANNING AREAS AND TRAFFIC ZONES



PROPOSED MASTER PLAN BOUNDARIES

The current Damascus planning area covers approximately 50 square miles of northern Montgomery County. It is bounded by the Frederick, Carroll and Howard County lines to the west, north and east; and the Clarksburg, Agricultural and Rural Open Space, and Olney Master Plan areas to the south. It encompasses all or part of four planning areas, and all or part of seven traffic zones:

Damascus #11 (Traffic Zones [TZ] #279 and #280)

Patuxent Watershed Conservation Area #15 (TZ #281)

Part of Bennett/Little Bennett Watershed #10 (TZ #278 and part of TZ #277)

Part of Goshen, Woodfield, Cedar Grove #14 (parts of TZ #247 and TZ #245)

The Master Plan boundaries will be adjusted in order to avoid split traffic zones. The revised Damascus Master Plan boundaries will encompass all or part of four planning areas and all of five traffic zones:

Damascus #11 (Traffic Zones #279 and 280)

Patuxent #15 (Traffic Zone #281)

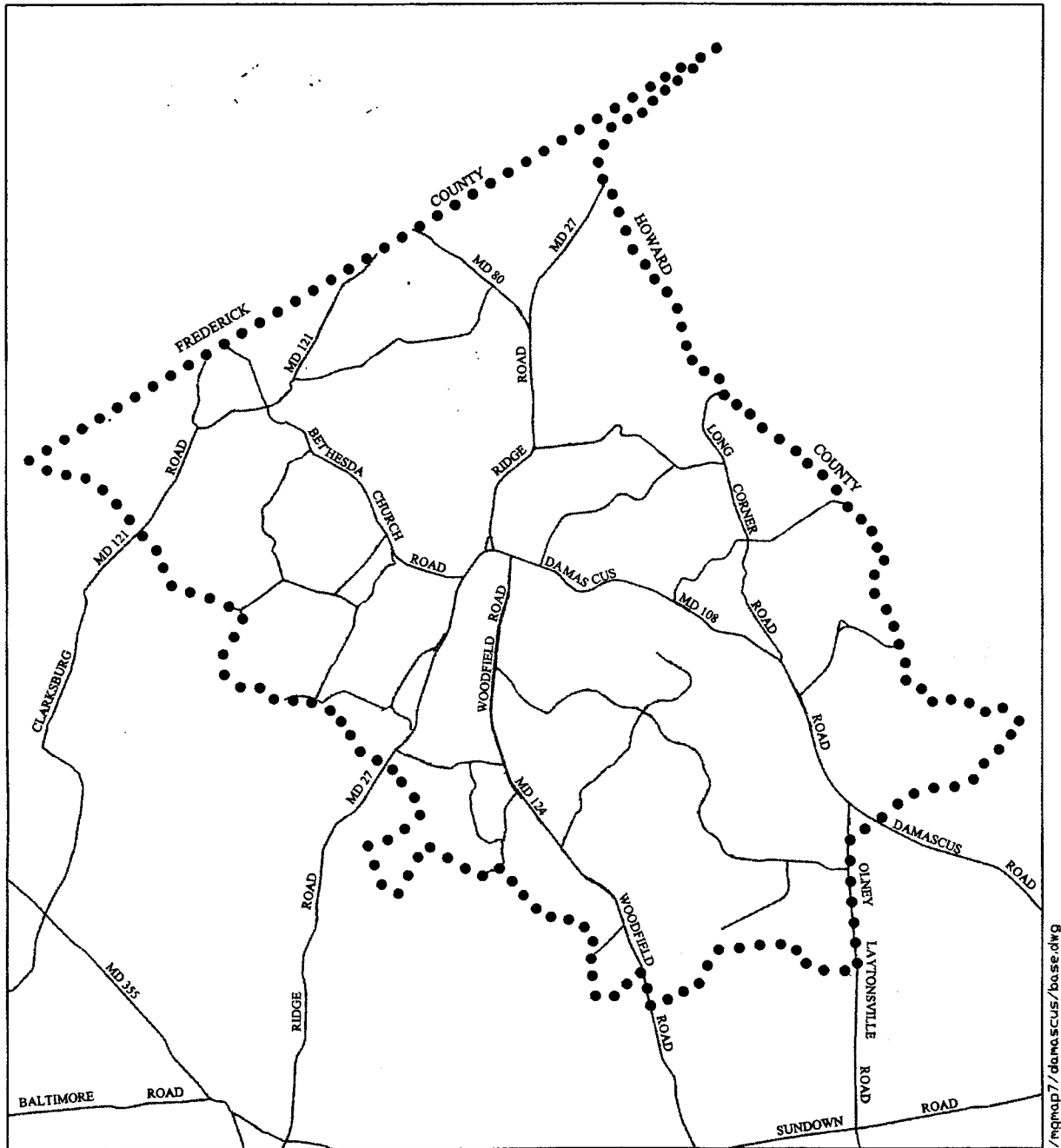
Part of Bennett and Little Bennett #10 (Within Traffic Zone #278); and

Part the Goshen, Woodfield, Cedar Grove #14, (Within Traffic Zone #245)

The Plan will no longer address the portions of Traffic Zone #277 in the Bennett and Little Bennett planning area #10, or the portions of the Goshen planning area #14 that are within traffic zone #247. The boundary change also consolidates the remainder of the eastern portion of the Goshen planning area (#14) contiguous to Damascus that are within traffic zone #245. It will be moved from the Agricultural and Rural Open Space Master Plan into the Damascus Master Plan.

Most of the areas being deleted in planning areas #10 and #14 are sparsely populated. A small area along MD 27 near Kings Valley Road is fully developed and unlikely to see further development potential. The areas removed will remain under the guidance of the General Plan amended by the 1982 Damascus Master Plan. In addition, a small portion of this area off MD 27 was incorporated into the Clarksburg Master Plan when it was adopted in 1994.

PROPOSED DAMASCUS MASTER PLAN BOUNDARIES



●●●● Master Plan Area Boundary



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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION FROM THE 1982 MASTER PLAN, AND 1985 AND 1993 AMENDMENTS

The Damascus Master Plan of 1982 and its amendments in 1985 and 1993 built upon each other and previous plans to implement the vision for the community contained in the 1964 General Plan of a rural residential community and commercial center in Damascus.

1982 Damascus Master Plan and 1985 Amendment

The vision statement of the 1982 Damascus Master Plan (and continued in its 1985 and 1993 amendments) designates Damascus as a rural community planned to be retained as a "small and simple" town; surrounded by low-density and rural zoning to separate it from higher density suburban development in Germantown and Clarksburg. That Plan focused its attention on central Damascus (planning area 11), but also reviewed appropriate planning land use for planning areas 10, 14, and 15. The primary land use in these outlying areas was agriculture but including these areas provided an opportunity to comprehensively review the transportation system in upper Montgomery County.

1. *Business/Town Center Area* - The 1982 Plan recognized the generalized design concept for retail and office development in the 1966 Plan providing an identifiable, well-integrated commercial center for Damascus. The Plan made three changes to the 1966 zoning and land use recommendations for the business area concept plan:

First, the 1966 Plan had located 15 acres of commercial development in the headwaters of the Magruder Stream Valley. By 1982, environmental regulations designed to avoid harm to the steep slopes and erodible soils associated with fragile headwater areas led to severe limits on commercial development potential in this area. The Plan recommended medium density residential housing at this location instead.

Second, the 1966 Plan had recommended 100 acres for low-density employment centers via an industrial or office park development. The 1982 Plan recommended that this concept be eliminated due to the proximity of large employment areas subsequently designated in the I-270 corridor. This area was instead recommended as rural open space (one house per five acres with a cluster option) and agricultural reserve as a TDR sending area.

Third, the Plan designated a future shopping area east of Ridge Road, subsequently built under the recommended Planned Development Zone.

2. *Agriculture and Open Space* – The 1982 Plan reinforced the goals of the 1980 Master Plan for the Preservation of Agricultural and Rural Open Space by adding three TDR receiving areas, all subsequently developed using the TDR option. Further, residential densities along Great Seneca Creek were reduced from two acres to five acre zoning.
3. *Transportation* - The 1982 Master Plan eliminated a bypass of the business area that had been in the 1966 Master Plan in recognition of funding, land use and environmental constraints. It instead recommended a series of road improvements in the business area including a northern extension of Woodfield Road (A-12) to intersect MD 27. The Plan stated that if the extension of Woodfield Road was found to be insufficient to adequately handle the traffic need, then the bypass alternative should be reconsidered.

This Plan also proposed a series of road improvements, subsequently implemented, to relieve congestion at the intersection of MD 27 and Main Street. The Plan recommended the elimination of Damascus Boulevard because it would cross the headwaters of the Magruder Branch and would require substantial fill and grading. No new roads were proposed outside the business district area, but previously existing master plan roads were confirmed, and alternate possible routes for existing master plan roads were evaluated.

4. *Environment* – The goals of the 1982 Master Plan included a range of environmental policies that have since become institutionalized through the County's Stream Protection Strategy and the adoption of the 1993 Patuxent Watershed Master Plan. These include protecting sensitive headwaters that drain away from the town center/business area, conservation easements along stream channels, the use of stormwater management facilities in the Magruder and Little Bennett watersheds, and the use of cluster and planned development to encourage protection of slopes and other environmental features.

Further, housing densities of 12 to 14 units per acre on some properties in the upper Magruder Valley recommended in 1966 were considered too high when compared to the existing residential character of the surrounding area and the environmental constraints. This area was instead recommended for moderate densities of six to eight houses per acre.

5. *Community Facilities* - Most major goals of this Plan have been all or partially achieved including the development of the Magruder Valley trail, the construction of a new library, and approval of a new community recreation center.

The 1985 Amendment served three technical purposes. It deleted alternate road A-11-A in the Magruder Valley from the Highway Plan Map (and Valley Park Drive became the designated arterial), clarified certain zoning boundaries in the business area, and clarified the Plan language concerning a conservation buffer at the rear of Damascus Motors.

1993 Amendment to the Damascus Master Plan

This was a limited amendment to the 1982 Damascus Master Plan. The Amendment addressed -again - whether or not there should be a bypass of MD 27 in Damascus and, if one were needed, where the alignment should be located. Also, five specific properties were reviewed: Heritage Builders, Watkins Amalgamation Joint Venture, the King Farm, Cramer, and Burdette (located in the Damascus Business Area). In summary, this Amendment recommended the following:

1. *Transportation*

Bypass – The Amendment recommended that no bypass of MD 27 be built, and in order to protect the "linear residential development pattern" of Damascus, and that MD 27 should remain a two-lane road. This followed an extensive study and evaluation, conducted for the County by Rummel, Klepper & Kahl that began in January of 1990. That study represented the first detailed look at alternate alignments for a potential bypass. The Planning staff held a series of meetings with the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Master Plan, and organized two public workshops to describe and discuss the alternates. The Planning Board selected three alternates for further study by the consultant.

The consultant's ultimate conclusion was based in large measure on its evaluation of environmental issues, particularly compliance with federal and state environmental regulations, and on the probability that the alignments under study could receive permits for construction in sensitive areas. The Amendment concluded

that all of the alternatives faced significantly difficult constraints, and that no bypass should be considered until the relief from the completion of Woodfield Road Extended could be evaluated. This recommendation was incorporated into the Master Plan.

Woodfield Road Extended (A-12) - The Amendment evaluated several alignments for the intersection of MD 27 and Woodfield Road Extended (A-12). Due to unanticipated difficulties the alignment recommended for this intersection was later rejected in favor of one of the other alternatives during the subsequent final planning.

Damascus Boulevard – Due primarily to environmental concerns, this road had been deleted in the 1982 Master Plan. The Amendment recommended that it be reinstated as a “rural” business street with a 40-foot right-of-way, a narrower road than originally contemplated.

2. *Land Use*

Of the specific properties evaluated, the Amendment recommended rezoning the Cramer property on Lewis Drive to I-1; including the Heritage Builders site (near Woodfield Road at Watkins Road) in the sewer service envelope; not authorizing a TDR receiving designation for the King Farm (along Kings Valley Road between Mountain View Road and Kingstead Road) due to its distance from existing sewer service; and a Corrective Sectional Map Amendment to rectify zoning map errors for the residual properties studied.

Master Plan Implementation Report

Since 1998, the M-NCPPC staff has compiled the Master Plan Status Report, a biennial review of progress in implementing the land use recommendations of the various county area master plans. In addition to reviewing land use and policy recommendations, the report outlines the projects recommended in the Plan, and their status in the Capital Improvements Program. Many of the recommendations in the 1982 Damascus Master Plan and its subsequent amendments have been implemented. A summary of the achievements in implementing the recommendations of the Damascus Master Plan is contained in the Appendix on 8. Major remaining issues to be addressed that have been incorporated into the proposed issues for this Master Plan include:

1. *Land Use*

The long-term use for the older shopping center at MD 108 and Woodfield Road Extended. Construction of the new post office and the completion of the Woodfield Road extension should provide impetus for improvements to this center. Given these pending changes, the appropriate zoning for this area and its context in the town center will be a topic of review in the master plan amendment process.

2. *Parks and Recreation*

Completion of planning and development for the Magruder Valley Stream Park, the Oak Ridge Conservation Park, and the Little Bennett Stream Valley Park.

3. *Transportation*

Unresolved recommendations to be discussed during the master plan review process relate to the downtown area, roads traversing the Magruder Valley, the upper Patuxent watershed, rural area connector roads, and bikeways.

DAMASCUS MASTER PLAN AREA TODAY

The Damascus community today is much as envisioned in its master plans, a low-key, pleasant, primarily residential community with a range of service commercial uses, offering its residents a variety of housing types in a setting surrounded by the beauty of the County's Agricultural Reserve. The issues of greatest concern to its residents revolve around the quantity of "pass-through" commuter traffic and issues related to inadequate facilities – in terms of schools and recreation – for the children in the area. Both of these issues affect the quality of life for all residents of Damascus. The following is an overview of the general characteristics of Damascus today.

1. *Land Use Characteristics*

Land uses are generally as envisioned in the Master Plan, with moderate density choices in and immediately adjacent to the Magruder Valley (where there is sewer service) and lower density (one to five dwelling units per acre) in the surrounding periphery, all bounded by the very low density (one dwelling unit per 25 acres) of the Rural Density Transfer Zone. The commercial heart of Damascus offers retail and service choices at two shopping centers, free-standing stores, a few office buildings, and some light industrial uses.

2. *Demographic and Housing Profile*

Damascus offers reasonably priced housing in a small town environment, surrounded by Montgomery County's rural wedge. The housing is primarily single-family; there are few apartments. Housing for the elderly is limited to two, small group homes. Subsidized housing comprises a relatively generous 4.2 percent of the housing stock, compared to 3.5 percent County-wide, and market rate housing tends to be more affordable than in most areas of the County. Townhouses are more plentiful than in most small towns, but contribute to the affordability of the area. Population growth is modest, four percent between 1990 and 2000 compared to the County's 15.4 percent.

Overall, the mix of housing types and prices is appropriate for a small town. Damascus, in its current configuration, is an excellent housing resource for the County and a pleasant place to live for its residents. Attractive housing prices combined with a small town location contribute to its appeal. Unfortunately, County-wide and regional development pressures and a strong County housing market are already evident in higher prices in the area, especially for new housing, whether this trend is desired or not. The one area of potential housing need, within the context of the town's current character, is senior housing.

3. *Transportation*

In recent years the major transportation-related initiatives in the Damascus area have been the final planning for the construction of Woodfield Road Extended (A-12), and the current construction of the Park and Ride lot in the town center area. The four interim rustic roads within the Master Plan area are currently under review for final designation in an amendment to the Rustic Roads Functional Master Plan.

4. *Environment*

The Damascus town center is located at the headwaters of four major stream systems. The Patuxent River and Little Bennett Creek are designated as Use III-P, the highest water use classification in the State. Many of these headwater streams are characterized by steeply sloping stream valleys with severely erodible soils. The rural nature of the area outside the town center has protected some key natural resources that are potentially threatened as land use changes are considered. In addition, the portion of the Upper Patuxent River that falls within the planning area drains to two water supply reservoirs (located downstream of the planning area) - the Triadelphia Reservoir east of Georgia Avenue and the Rocky Gorge Reservoir near the Prince George's County line. As a result, land use decisions through the planning area and in the Damascus town center will continue to have important impacts on environmental resources in general, and on water quality and supply in particular.

5. *Parks and Recreation*

The Damascus Recreation Center is to begin construction soon. This was an important achievement for the community. Final planning is also underway for a Disc Golf Course at the Damascus Recreational Park. The Magruder Trail is one of the most heavily used recreational facilities in the Damascus area. Completion of the trail with a trailhead in the Damascus town center area is a primary goal for the community. For the future, increased attention is warranted to the concept of connectivity. This would allow existing trails to gradually be connected into the County's vision of a "network of green" and allow Damascus residents to connect to Little Bennett and other area park and trail systems in the County.