Natural Areas Recreational Users Green Infrastructure Focus Group Meeting

October 25, 2006   7:00 – 9:00 p.m.
Adult Education Room, Brookside Gardens, Wheaton Regional Park

AGENDA

1.   Welcome and Introductions

2.   Presentation on Green Infrastructure (20 minutes)

3.   Discussion Questions (~ 40 minutes)

    1. How important is natural area connectivity to your recreational activity?

    2. What do you perceive as the needs in support of recreational activity in natural areas in the following examples:

        a. General "wilderness" experience/Communing with nature

        b. Enjoyment/study of natural features, e.g. birdwatching, botany, butterflying, mushroom hunting, dragonflying, etc.

        c. Fishing d. Walking/Hiking e. Biking f. Equestrian g. Other

    3. What are the opportunities and constraints in developing a green infrastructure plan with respect to your particular outdoor recreational activity?

  4. Breakout Groups (~30 minutes)

    a) Additional Discussion Questions

  5. Wrap-up (15 minutes)

Desired Outcome of the Meeting:

- Participants understand the plan goals, process, and general concepts.
- Park and Planning staff understand the green infrastructure-related issues and concerns of recreational users of natural areas, as well as opportunities and constraints.
- A follow-up process that allows continuing input and coordination as needed/desired.

ADDITIONAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Do you have any suggestions for what general principles should be considered in setting minimum green corridor widths and node sizes, and maximum gaps? (In other words, what should the size criteria be based on?)

2. Do you have any suggestions for what types of areas should be included in the green infrastructure network? (e.g. What types of areas are of Countywide Significance?)

3. Should any areas that cannot be connected to a larger network be included? If so, what kind?

4. Do you have any suggestions for ways to enhance the overall effectiveness of green infrastructure or natural area preservation plans?

Any feedback you can provide on the above issues would be appreciated. If you would like to take more time to consider these questions, please feel free to do so and send your responses to:

Mark A. Symborski
Environmental Planner Coordinator
Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

301-495-4636
301-495-1303 (Fax)
mark.symborski@mncppc-mc.org

Natural Areas Recreational Users Focus Group
10/25/06

Meeting Summary

<u>**Attendees:**</u>

Pricilla Huffman, TROT; Sandy Boyd, TROT; Naomi Manders, Potomac Bridle and Hikers Trails; Austin Steo, MORE; Jon Ellifritz, Mycological Association of Washington; John McLachin, SVTU; Michael Darzi, Sierra Club MWROP; Joe Fritsch, Mid County Recreational Advisory Board; Mark Nelson, REI; Cheryl Czekaj, MCCAB; Greg Caley, County Resident; Jim Keil Potomact-Patuxent Trout Unlimited; Paul Elliot, Sierra Club MWROP; Doug Redmond, MNCPPC

<u>**Questions and Comments**</u>

- How are stream buffers related to reforestation? *(Where streams lack buffers there may be opportunities for reforestation.)*
- How wide should buffers and natural corridors be? *(We will be conducting a review of the scientific literature to come up with minimum green infrastructure criteria.)*
- Water quality and drinking water supply are concerns – What might the GI Plan provide in the face of development pressure? 60 percent of the land draining to Seneca Lake is developed. How will this Plan protect areas from development? *(The GI Plan will show where the opportunities are for enhancement and protection of green infrastructure. It will help optimize the application of the County's Environmental Guidelines.)*
- Has the County purchased parkland? *(Yes.)* What is the acquisition process? *(The Parks Department has the park planning function in the County. Certain areas are targeted for addition to the park system in area master plans are purchased as the opportunity arises. Some funds for park acquisition come from the State's Program Open Space; some are from the local capital improvement program.)*
- Is there an up-to-date priority list for parkland acquisition? *(Prioritization of land for park acquisition is done in the Parks Department based on a variety of criteria included recreational and natural resource value and significance. The Green Infrastructure Plan will help with this process)*
- If the cost of buying a corridor is too much, what then? Are there other ways to protect networked natural land? Other ways to protect and conserve natural lands should be looked at. *(Different mechanisms for increasing the amount of protected green area in the County are possible including park dedication and conservation easements via the development review process. Other mechanisms will be considered.)*
- What is an "ideal" buffer? *(Buffer and corridor widths vary depending on the goals. We will be conducting a review if the scientific literature to determine the best minimum green infrastructure criteria for the County's network.)*

- What about trails in buffers? *(Generally, we try to plan new trails outside buffers unless there is a need to cross the stream. Where there are existing trails in the buffers, we try to get them out if space is available.)*
- Are there policies or programs that encourage individual owners to do things to enhance green space – avoid impervious paving, plan for wildlife? *(Yes. The County has initiatives and programs to encourage rain gardens, better stormwater management at home, green roofs, etc.)*

Importance of Connectivity

Outdoors recreation (walking, hiking, biking, nature study, trail running, etc.) all involve linear movement along a trail of some kind. Trails are necessary to get large numbers of recreationists into and through natural areas while funneling them along an eco-sustainable narrow corridor, helping to preserve the surrounding natural area they've all come to see/recreate within. Depending on one's activity, the length of trail is variable. Nature study might need only 100 ft of trail to get to an observation area providing a satisfactory morning's or evening's outing. Biking or trail running needs miles of trail to contribute to the same level of user satisfaction. Connectivity is vital to provide the necessary resources to satisfy the diversity of recreation needs. And loop circuits are vastly more popular than out-and-back or shuttle trails. Connectivity need not mandate that the trail remains the same. For example, a section of a trail loop may be boardwalk, another section asphalt, another section natural surface, and a final link may be a few blocks of sidewalk. Tying together existing resources makes more opportunities available with less development costs.

As we approach a million citizens in Montgomery County, with the transportation challenges that presents, **connectivity** and **convenient proximity** to the outdoor recreation green infrastructure are the most important factors to outdoor recreationists, and to the portion of the economy that meets their needs: we need outdoor recreation resources, and they need to connect.

- Connectivity is essential to all natural area recreational activities
- Connectivity of natural areas is important for the health of people and the land.
- It is important to be able to get to natural areas even from the most congested areas.
- Even small connections can be important
- Watershed protection is a key element.
- Think strategically. Natural hub size may be increased in certain areas.
- Once Seneca is connected, it will connect an enormous network
- People need natural areas – need to relax and be with nature
- REI has a list of trail building volunteers.
- Many users of natural areas need close, easy access to natural areas, and places to park cars.
- Better to make official trails than to have people's choice trails
- Some users of natural areas – e.g. mushroom hunters – need specific habitats to support their activities. It is important to have such areas available and protected.
- Other types of connectivity are important for recreation– e.g. bike paths, trails, etc. between major and smaller parks.
- Better signage is needed along trails.

- Natural area fragmentation is a problem– need contiguous natural areas to protect headwaters – be strategic in doing this.
- Balance development of land with development of trails
- Defeats the purpose if you have to drive to a trail
- Making connections to the Patuxent River and across Rt. 108 is important for trail connectivity.
- Natural corridors are important

Needs:

- Fewer road crossings are better for natural areas and connectivity
- Noise reduction is important for users of natural areas.
- Preserve natural areas that still exist
- Displaced wildlife is a problem.
- We need trails that are located away from houses
- There needs to be as much forest around trails as possible.
- Trails need to be better maintained.
- Species diversity is important for both plants and animals. There should be species surveys. Natural area enhancement should support a diversity of species.
- M-NCPPC needs to limit the taking of fish
- Keep trails away from streams – causes erosion, etc., which damages streams and fish habitat. Wider buffers are needed in Paint Branch.
- Trails should connect desirable destinations.
- Compromised headwaters will give you a dead stream. (e.g. Wildcat Branch is at risk) Acquire/protect more land in headwater areas.
- The Plan will need to be effectively implemented.
- Natural trails and off-road bikes: there are connectivity issues: e.g., Rachel Carson and Northwest Branch. Little Bennett is a good example of an ideal situation for mountain bikes.
- Paved trails: don't eliminate them in stream valley parks—they can be moved away from streams, and boardwalks can be used where needed to protect key resources.
- ICC – the proposed bike trail was eliminated (18 miles will be discontinuous), paved access points should be connected.
- a) Enough size to the area that it becomes a perceivably "different", natural area as much as possible visibly and audibly separated from roads and development.
- b) The space in (a) delivers some necessary space for birds and wildlife to be present.
- c) Maintaining and enlarging park and other natural areas to increase "internal forest" and to increase connectivity.
- The Plan should do more than just slow down the rate of natural area loss— reverse the trend.
- Development shouldn't compromise the preservation of existing forest.
- There should be more trout streams in the County – forestation is vital, esp. in headwater areas. Stream by stream assessment is needed.
- Better public education is needed to help landowners understand the need for buffers.

Opportunities and Constraints

Connectivity enhances opportunities to get more folks to commute by bicycle, and to think about living near their work, by placing significant outdoor recreation possibilities within their reach without use of an automobile. The more people we get interested in outdoor recreation, the fitter they are, and the more interested they become in their "ownership" of and stewardship to public land and water resources.

Lack of connectivity and dedicated nodes that enhance "island hopping" between connected corridors will definitely "constrain" the growth of outdoor recreation, especially if longer and longer periods of time spent in a car are necessary to access the recreation resource. Shenandoah National Park is a great example of this. Annual visitation has dropped consistently since 2001, and evidence points toward increasing drive times and traffic frustration reducing time for actual recreation and increasing frustration.

- Parks – wheel chair access – need certain widths and surfaces (pervious paving is an option). Have some trails that provide good access for wheelchairs.
- Mushroom hunting: education/information varies by park
- Trails sometimes are put through important resources that should be protected— trails may have more impact than activities like mushroom hunting
- Need to focus on which activities have the most negative impacts on natural areas.
- Clubs can be resources for conducting natural area inventories, assessments
- Trail head parking is needed for equestrian trailers
- Population is aging – include that in trail planning and access considerations.
- Look at intersection of various interests in setting natural area priorities
- Look at connectivity between priority areas Road crossings increase invasive species and decrease biodiversity. Consider special crossings for wildlife. Look at crossing designs in other places
- GIS should provide good and current information for planning.
- The Plan should allow more effective application of the environmental guidelines.

RESPONSE TO ADDITIONAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
(Received by email after the Focus Group Meeting)

1. Do you have any suggestions for what general principles should be considered in setting minimum green corridor widths and node sizes, and maximum gaps? (In other words, what should the size criteria be based on?)

- Minimum size should offer a real visible/audible buffer from roads and development. Obviously, this would change from summer to winter.
- Gaps should be no larger than what leaves an obvious "island-hopping" connectivity.

2. Do you have any suggestions for what types of areas should be included in the green infrastructure network? (e.g. What types of areas are of Countywide Significance?)

- Headwaters areas: meadows, basins and narrow ravines all the way to the divides if at all possible; if not, at least include a forest buffer.
- Wetlands, including seasonal ponds and seasonal wet meadows
- Unique plant communities or geological areas (shale barrens, or serpentine areas, etc.)
- Any large undeveloped or reclaimed area. The county will be built out within the next few years. Any land that can be saved is absolutely essential for quality of life recreation, to say nothing of eco-sustainability.

3. Should any areas that cannot be connected to a larger network be included? If so, what kind?

- Non-tidal wetlands of all types
- Pockets of mature forest
- Any area offering an "island-hop" to other pockets or between connected corridors.

4. Do you have any suggestions for ways to enhance the overall effectiveness of green infrastructure or natural area preservation plans?

- Emphasize connectivity in land acquisition and infrastructure development
- Emphasize development of interconnected trail systems that connect different user groups and different transportation modes and surfaces in order to create greater opportunity and more loop circuits.
- Involve and develop a volunteer maintenance constituency to foster and grow the idea of land/water stewardship and responsible land use and recreation.
- Develop a calendar of park naturalist guided outings to introduce the public to the county's outdoor recreation opportunities, its natural treasures, and emphasize the fragility and inter-connectedness of our landscape. Start now with what we have and expand with the plan development. Many people, especially children, find the outdoors frightening. They will not venture out, or learn on their own, unless a completely planned opportunity is presented. For business and ecological sustainability, we need to provide those opportunities.