

May 8, 2020

To: The Honorable Marc Elrich
Montgomery County Executive
101 Monroe Street, 2nd Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Mr. Michael Riley
Director
Montgomery County Department of Parks
9500 Brunett Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20901

Re: Opening Streets to Pedestrians/Cyclists and Closing them to Vehicles

Executive Elrich, Mr. Riley and Members of Council:

We would first like to express our gratitude for the County's recent opening of some streets within its parks system to pedestrians/cyclists and to close those road segments to cars. We urge you to consider expanding this "open streets" concept to address the needs of citizens during the COVID-19 lockdown.

We appreciate how hard it is to manage public spaces during the recent global pandemic. Around the world, park managers and elected officials have struggled to find the right balance between public access to open space and public health and safety concerns. We welcome Montgomery Parks' decision to open parts of Sligo Creek Parkway, Beach Drive and Little Falls Parkway to people on foot and bicycles during April of this year. Exercise is essential to maintain a strong immune system, and many people lack a yard or outdoor private space where they can run and play or bike. It is also essential for people to get sunshine, Vitamin D, fresh air and a change of scenery. Getting out of one's home, especially if one's living space is small, is also vital for mental health.

In the weeks since those park-adjacent streets were opened to people three days a week, the public has generally followed public health recommendations and used the extra space to spread out from one another and stay six feet apart. We also note that response to the street openings has been overwhelmingly positive.

Given that COVID-19 and its related social distancing may be with us for a prolonged period, we would like to ask that the county expand the open streets concept.

Specifically, we would like to ask for the following:

- 1) That the Montgomery County Parks Department to confirm that the three roads will continue to be open to non-vehicular traffic for the duration of the pandemic. The original announcement was only for April.

2) Allow for more hours of open street time each week. Currently, those are open to pedestrians and cyclists each Friday through Sunday from 9am-6pm. We request that they be open all day, seven days a week during the pandemic

3) That the entire length of Sligo Creek Parkway – from New Hampshire Avenue to University Avenue – be open for non-vehicular traffic on the open street days. We would also like to have Beach evaluated for a longer span of closure. Currently there are gaps in the closures, even on “closed” weekend days, despite the fact that adjacent neighborhoods can be accessed from other entrance points/arteries. This should not be a concern given the lockdown dictates that no one should be driving unless it is deemed essential.

4) We understand that the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (DOT) and Montgomery County Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) is currently evaluating closing to through traffic some of the designated “Neighborhood Greenways” as listed in the county’s Bicycle Master Plan. These closures to vehicles could be part of a special event, one that connects several neighborhoods as a long, one-day-only walk or ride that would still honor social distancing but provide people with a way to exercise safely, away from high speed traffic. Or, closures could be done on some regularly scheduled basis, such as once a month or each Sunday during COVID lockdown.

5) DOT and MCPPC should consider “hybrid” solutions to meeting the need of the public not near any of the larger parkways currently being closed off. These solutions would provide for more access to the outdoors so that social distancing during exercising, as well as social interaction are feasible for all. In the time of COVID we all want to discourage congregating, but neighborhoods could ask to have some streets made into bike and pedestrian-only routes for exercise with social distancing. Permits could be applied for, and citizens would be the ones to close off the streets during particular days and hours, just as they do during block parties.

We appreciate your time and consideration of these requests and look forward to working with you on implementing workable scenarios that will help residents in the most crowded parts of the county stay healthy during COVID lockdown.

Sincerely,

Paul Goldman, President
Action Committee for Transit

Jane Lyons, Maryland Advocacy Manager
Coalition for Smarter Growth

Alison Gillespie, President
Forest Estates Community Association

Kristy Daphnis, Chair
Pedestrian Bicycle Traffic Safety Advisory Committee

Shruti Bhatnagar, Chair
Sierra Club Montgomery County

Peter Gray, Vice President, Board of Directors
Washington Area Bicyclist Association

cc: Councilmember Gabe Albornoz
Councilmember Andrew Friedson
Councilmember Evan Glass
Councilmember Tom Hucker
Councilmember Will Jawando
Councilmember Sidney Katz
Councilmember Nancy Navarro
Councilmember Craig Rice
Councilmember Hans Riemer