

Garbers Church Road Shared Use Path  
Public Comment Summary  
January 23, 2018

The Garbers Church Road Shared Use Path project began as an initiative to connect schools, parks, and residential neighborhoods on the southwest side of the City. On November 9, 2017 the Department of Public Works (DPW) held a design public hearing at Bluestone Elementary School. This design public hearing was an opportunity for DPW staff to share with citizens the right of way plans for this project and collect comments from citizens concerning this project. This report is a summarization of those comments and responses from DPW for City Council's consideration.

**Project Background**

The project has been included in the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan for over a decade, and City Council included \$1,500,000 in funding with Bluestone Elementary School. DPW was awarded an additional \$1,500,000 Revenue Sharing grant from the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to construct the project. DPW has recently submitted a VDOT Revenue Sharing grant request for an additional \$600,000, which will be matched with \$600,000 of local funds. If awarded this additional grant the City will have \$4,200,000 for the design, right of way acquisition and construction of this path. The path is intended to provide students, parents, staff, and the general public with additional safe transportation options to access schools and other community facilities. It will ultimately connect Harrisonburg High School, Thomas Harrisonburg Middle School, and Bluestone Elementary School to Hillandale and Westover Parks, including the Cecil F. Gilkerson Community Activities Center. At approximately 3 miles in length, this is the largest bicycle/pedestrian project the City has ever implemented.

**Project Benefits**

The public input received for the project at the January and November, 2017 public meetings was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the community's appetite for bicycle and pedestrian oriented projects, and for this project specifically. Additional project benefits are described below.

- Safety - The project will have a significant safety benefit by providing a dedicated facility to school commuters and others. Since the schools are located on major arterial routes with no bicycle infrastructure, gaps in sidewalks, and many conflict points, only the most dedicated students and families are currently making school trips on foot or bike. The improved safety provided by the path is likely to increase the number of people walking and biking for school and other trips.
- Improvement of Public Assets – The project will improve accessibility and amenities offered at two parks, as well as three schools. Since the majority of the ultimate vision for the path will be constructed on public property, the overall cost of right-of-way is less of a barrier.
- Transportation Demand Management – The project offers additional transportation choices at peak school hours, which coincide with AM peak hours of City streets, having the potential to

reduce congestion around schools and adjacent streets, and the air pollution associated with idling vehicles when parents pick up and drop off children at school.

- Community Health – Several members of the public reminded us that paths increase exercise opportunities, and this particular path offers the opportunity for families to make healthier lifestyle choices. Connecting everyday destinations such as schools and parks mean residents can make exercise part of daily routines.
- Accessibility and Equity – To the extent that academic achievement is a function of access to school resources, including extracurricular activities, tutoring, facilities such as libraries, computer labs, etc., increasing options for access to schools beyond the school bus will increase opportunities for academic success of all students, including those that may be transportation insecure. Likewise, increasing accessibility to parks for both active and passive (connecting with nature) recreation will increase the quality of life for all, especially the transportation insecure.

### **Project Challenges**

While we anticipate many benefits from the path, constructing the facility has not been free of challenges. These are described below.

- Private property acquisition – The project requires right-of-way acquisition from 30 property owners. Approximately half of the properties are already partially encumbered by a powerline easement, and the path right-of-way will follow the powerline easement. The path right-of-way, therefore does not limit the use of these portions of property beyond the limits already established by the powerline easement. We have received several communications from property owners on Wyndham Drive in opposition of the path, which would traverse their back property lines within the powerline easement. We have received similar communications from the owners of the single property between Hillandale Park and Garbers Church Road that is currently for sale, with R-1 zoning. Reasons for their opposition can be found in the attached comments received at the November 9, 2017 public meeting where plans for the path were shared with the public, including affected properties owners, who received personal invitations to the meeting. Most concerns are related to the path reducing property values, and of the potential for crime, due to the location of the path at the back of the property.

Fortunately, there are decades of experience and research to draw upon in responding to these challenges that support the benefits of paths both for affected properties and communities, at large. For these reasons, communities across the nation continue to build these facilities. Also attached are excerpts from, and links to, a collection of studies that strongly indicated that property values are either unchanged, or, more frequently, that they increase, as a result of the presence of a trail. Similarly, there have been studies conducted that indicate that crime on paths is much less of a problem than is perceived by affected property owners. Studies show that crime is nearly nonexistent when compared to national crime statistics, demonstrating property owners are at no greater risk of being victimized due to the presence of a path than they or anyone else is, due to the presence of any other public transportation facility. The fact

that the public may access the path from either direction, at any time, is a likely deterrent for illicit activity. Study references regarding crime and paths are also attached.

Another concern of the property owners of the undeveloped, for-sale property between Hillandale Park and Garbers Church Road is that we are requiring too much of the property. However, we have worked with our consultant engineers to reduce the footprint, as much as possible, while still allowing the path to be designed to standards. We worked with the property owners to find the best alignment through their property, taking into account the somewhat complicated conditions of the current (agriculture) and future (R-1) land uses of the property. The property owner will also be compensated for the fair market value of the right-of-way and easements obtained.

- Dominion Power easement – As discussed previously, the path follows a powerline easement from Hillandale Park, terminating at the cul de sac of Wyndham Drive. Dominion must approve the plans for the path within the easement, which could present challenges resulting from the differing priorities of the City and Dominion. However, we are optimistic that any differences can be worked out to the benefit of both parties.
- Stormwater Management – Stormwater management for linear projects is often awkward, due to the small drainage areas and narrow footprints to work within. We have worked with the consultant engineer to identify options for compliance with the Virginia Stormwater Management Act and Regulations, as described below.

### **Options**

The Public Works Department has identified the most desirable alignment for the path that maximizes the safety and utility of the path, while minimizing impacts to property owners. This alignment is attached and can be view in greater detail in the .pdfs found on the project website ([www.harrisonburgva.gov/garbers-church-road-sup](http://www.harrisonburgva.gov/garbers-church-road-sup)).

- Private Property Acquisition – The alternative to the off-street alignment along Wyndham Drive would be to construct a sidewalk at the front of the properties along Wyndham Drive, and have bicycles use the street. However, this will require that the on-street parking be removed to ensure the safety of bicyclist. While students are currently using this street to access Thomas Harrison Middle School, it is not ideal, and will become less so when the new path opens. This is because the path will provide a bicycle/pedestrian route to destinations beyond the middle school, therefore increasing the bicycle and pedestrian traffic through this area. While Wyndham Drive is a relatively low traffic, dead end street, it still has 13 private entrance on it, out of which vehicles are backing onto the street multiple times per day. This creates a lot of opportunity for conflict, and reduces safety for bicycles and pedestrians. This is why Public Works recommends the off-street alignment.

Public Works has tools to use in negotiating with property owners in sections where the path is currently opposed, such as to offer fencing or landscape screening to create a barrier between the property and the path. Attached are renderings along the Wyndham Drive section of the path illustrating the path with privacy fencing running along the backyards for the off-street alignment, and another rendering of what a sidewalk at the front of the properties would look like. Fencing is also an option for other properties, including the one between Hillandale Park and Garbers Church Road.

- Dominion Power powerline easement – Continue to work with Dominion to develop a plan that meets both our and their needs
- Stormwater Management – The plan for this project is to construct quantity control measures within the project, and purchase credits from a water quality bank to meet much of the water quality requirement of the Virginia Stormwater Management Program (VSMP) construction general permit. However, the purchase must be completed before the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality adopts the updated Blacks Run/Cooks Creek Total Maximum Daily Load (aka TMDL), after which no new construction project will be able to use the purchase of credits to meet the water quality requirements of the VSMP construction general permit.

### **Recommendation**

DPW staff recommends to begin right-of-way negotiations for the proposed alignment, including the off-street alignment parallel to Wyndham Drive. In addition to the favorable safety conditions for path users on the off-street alignment, this alignment also offers a seamless connection to the next phase of the project (as yet unfunded) that will connect this phase to Thomas Harrison Middle School via the powerline easement, and is also planned to connect to Westover Park, W. Market Street, and to neighborhood street(s) in the Sunset Heights neighborhood.