

Stricter Rural Road Standards Under Study

By Nancy Jones

For years, rural conservationists have been fighting for Baltimore County public works officials to adopt new roadway and bridge repair standards that would preserve the charm and character of green and agricultural areas.

But on November 15 they opposed a proposal aimed at preserving the open feel of the north county and discouraging commuter traffic on country roads.

That's right, they said 'No way' to members of the Baltimore County Planning Board considering new rural road standards being touted by county Department of Public Works officials.

Instead, leaders of rural community associations say the proposal doesn't go far enough and are demanding stricter standards. And Planning Board members are listening to the public outcry.

Initial report

A Planning Board subcommittee has been formed to study during the next couple of months how much is enough and when something might be too much. The subcommittee, charged with looking at the proposed set of standards, is expected to come back to the Planning Board on January 17 with an initial report.

Planning Board member Wayne McGinnis, a White Hall farmer, is heading the subcommittee.

"We want to identify issues where there is a disconnect between what the public is saying and what the Department of Public Works is doing," said McGinnis. "The hope is to arrive at guidelines that will accommodate this in the future."

The subcommittee met with Department of Public Works representatives on November 26 and was scheduled to meet with community groups by the end of November.

Only guidelines

"We're happy [the Planning Board members] are deliberating and taking it so seriously," said Teresa Moore, executive director of the Valleys Planning Council.

Moore said the big three concerns focus on bridges, rights-of-way and road widths. She testified at the Planning Board meeting along with members of the Sparks-Glencoe Community

Planning Council and North County Preservation.

At issue are the standards developed by public works officials which attempt to address safer and modern design standards for roads in the rural part of the county.

The standards address various factors in determining design considerations for the roads, such as roadway and bridge minimum widths, right-of-ways, driveways, sight distances, traffic calming measures and lighting.

The new guidelines proposed by public works officials follow federal guidelines that are not only based on modern design standards but also are needed to be eligible for funding.

But community groups say the federal standards are only guidelines and want county officials to adopt stricter standards that preserve the rural feel of the winding country roads and bridges.

More involvement

At stake is more than just maintaining a quaint, meandering rural road or idyllic stream crossing, contends Moore. Expansions could result in more urban-like roads that would attract more sprawl and more traffic going at greater speeds, she contends.

By expanding the bridges at the same time the county routinely takes road right-of-ways when approving new development projects, it leads to the conclusion that there could be future plans to expand, said Moore.

In addition to tighter standards, Moore called for more public involvement on future road projects.

"The goal is to have a more flexible design standard."

— Wayne McGinnis

"A lot of adjacent land owners don't know what's coming until it's far down the pipeline," said Moore. beginning to address the call for better and earlier public input.

"Minimally acceptable"

But public works officials contend they do not go around straightening or widening roads unnecessarily. If repairs to roads or bridges can be made, that's what they do. If replace-

ment is necessary, everything is done to meet the minimal design standards.

Ed Adams, the county's director of public works, said he sees room for compromise on many of the issues. However, where there are recognized design standards, it would be hard to do anything less.

"A lot of people don't realize how close we all are [on the issues]," said Adams. "I think we can come up with something."

"The problem is we can only come down to the point of what is minimally acceptable."

Adams added that the department is

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"Match the intent"

McGinnis noted that the county's very prominent agricultural preservation program should allow for a specific set of rural road design.

"We don't feel the standards and designs they are going by really match the intent of these areas," said McGinnis. "I think some of the issues can be resolved."

McGinnis expressed concern that the proposed design standards are based on the same federal standards no matter what part of the country -- or state -- you're designing for.

"I think the goal is to have a more flexible design standard," said McGinnis. "Something more in tune with our ag preservation programs."

Context sensitive design

The VPC commissioned a study

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which was released in late 2005 that called for the county to adopt standards that would preserve the character of country roads and would mimic the already-in-place rural growth management standards

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of restrictive zoning and land use policies.

The VPC study, conducted by consultants Bridgescapes LLC and Transportation Resource Group Inc., found current federal and state transportation documents that encourage the use of "context sensitive" design, especially in scenic or historic areas.

The study recommends maintaining existing dimensions of rural county roads, allows slight expansion of bridges, and calls for the hills and curves that make up the scenic routes to remain.