

FOREST PRESERVE ADVISORY BOARD
REPORT TO COUNCIL

Report No. 2014-01

SUBJECT: Reestablishment of trails in Area D of the Forest Preserve

DATE: April 24, 2014

BACKGROUND: In 2004 with the establishment of the Greenbelt Forest Preserve, significant restrictions were placed on the maintenance and creation of trails in these protected areas. The exception to this general policy is in that part of the forest preserve known as Area D. Area D extends from Gardenway to Hamilton Place, and is bounded by the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and GHI property.

The Adopted Management and Maintenance Guidelines (MMG) describe Area D as being heavily impacted by improper use, as well as noise intrusion from the Parkway. However, the MMG note that Area D could be improved with appropriately designed trails to encourage appropriate use of the area, as well as providing more readily assessable access to part of the forest preserve. The MMG describe Area D as follows:

"In spite of the negatives associated with the proximity of this area of the preserve to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway and the current use activities, this area could be utilized to provide hiking trails, which are convenient to large areas of the North End neighborhoods, without changing the essential character of the park area. Due to the topography, as well as the limited number of stream and similar crossings, this, of all preserve areas, would be most suitable for planning and management as an open access hiking area. Further, the encouragement of desired activity in this area could help reverse the evident pattern of misuse and undesirable use of the area. Accordingly, formalization of the path system which has developed over time is recommended.

Another benefit of the management of a designated park/hiking area is that such a park can reduce the demand on the primitive areas of the preserve where public use is not actively encouraged."

DISCUSSION: Over the past several meetings, the Forest Preserve Advisory Board has discussed options for reversing the damage caused to this area of the preserve by misuse, as well as options to reestablish a trail system. The informal trail system that had existed has been overgrown and is largely impassible. This limits this area for public use, as the options for hiking are limited and often obstructed.

In keeping with the recommendations of the MMG, the FPAB has extensively hiked and evaluated Area D with the objective of identifying possible alignments for a new, or recreated system of trails. The purpose of these trails would be to provide designated routes between Gardenway and Hamilton Place. Designating trails would

help provide access for the general public to the forest preserve, and would introduce appropriate activity into Area D (hopefully discouraging inappropriate activities).

There are remnants from many paths and trails throughout Area D. However, these trails are largely blocked or have been overtaken by growth of weeds and ground cover. Consequently, anyone attempting to hike through this area is forced to create their own path. This has the consequence of causing greater impact within the preserve. Designation of a trail would encourage use and reduce impact, if Area D remains unmanaged.

It is the goal of the forest preserve to protect the valuable wooded areas of Greenbelt. This is done through preservation and control over activities. Creation of trails in the preserve is largely prohibited. However, the MMG recognize that some programmed access into the preserve will allow focused public access to the preserve while protecting the less impacted areas of the North and South Preserve. It is for this reason that Area D was recognized as the only portion of the forest preserve considered appropriate for formal public access.

It is the FPAB's desire to obtain the support of the City Council to study Area D and prepare recommended alignments for a newly designated trail or trails. It is anticipated that such trails, when approved, would be cleared to an appropriate width, marked with approved trail designation, and would then be maintained for future use. It will probably be necessary to construct a crossing over the major creek, but this would be addressed as part of the trail planning.

South Preserve – Gardenway to Community Gardens at Hamilton Place – Area D

I. Purpose and User Expectation

This area is relatively flat and exhibits the heaviest use of any Forest Preserve area. Use patterns indicate that both desirable and undesirable activities occur in this area. In addition, this area suffers noise intrusion from the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, which detracts from the natural character of the woodland.

Of all preserve areas, this is the most readily accessible, which explains the use patterns. Given the accessibility, amount of usage, quality of that usage, and flat topography, this area is most suitable for planning and designation of trails offering access to the widest range of users.

II. Trail planning

- ... An inventory of existing trails, sensitive areas, areas of misuse and/or environmental decline, connections, stream crossings, and similar features, should be conducted. This will provide a basis for a comprehensive trail plan.
- ... Based on the results of this inventory, the following can be determined:
 - Existing trails and suitability for use as a designated trail segment.
 - Areas of sensitivity, where trails and public intrusion should be avoided.
 - Areas of decline, where past activities have compromised the character, health and/or condition of the Forest Preserve, and require treatment to restore the area.
 - Unique opportunities to make a portion of the Forest Preserve available to a larger segment of the public without threatening or compromising the character and quality of the preserve.
- ... Following this evaluation, consider planning for a system of easy to use, barrier free, interpretive trails which would provide an opportunity for citizens to enjoy the experiences of a naturally forested area, without compromising the larger, primitive areas of the North and South Preserve.
- ... Trails resulting from inappropriate or prohibited use are not permitted.

III. Trail layout

- ... Trail users should contain hiking to existing trail to minimize disturbance to flora, fauna and undisturbed ground spaces.
- ... Hiking on courses on a steep slope should be avoided in order to minimize potential for erosion. Switchback hiking patterns are recommended.

IV. Stream crossings

- ... Stream crossings should be kept to a minimum.
- ... Hikers should cross streams at the narrowest point, where banks are gently sloped and the stream bottom consists of gravel or sand.
- ... The construction or creation of bridges shall be considered in the context of trails planning. Should a barrier free trail be planned, any stream crossings shall match the experience associated with the planned trail system.

V. Surface drainage

- ... Alteration of existing surface drainage patterns shall be considered only when runoff creates conditions considered to be unsafe to the public or damaging to the surrounding natural conditions.
- ... Should surface drainage patterns require modification, such modification will only utilize natural materials.

- ... Culverts, storm drain inlets, swales, rip rap channels, or other measures that require excavation and/or the introduction of non-natural materials, are not permitted.
- ... Surface drainage adjustments, if required, should focus on redirection of the surface flow.
- ... In lieu of the use of surface drainage treatments, access to an impacted area may be restricted for a time period necessary to allow the undesirable condition to naturally repair/restore.
- ... Under any circumstances, the countermeasures employed shall be the least destructive options available, and shall be limited only to that area which must be impacted to improve the unsafe or degraded condition.

VI. Subsurface drainage

- ... Subsurface drainage is prevalent throughout Greenbelt. No special treatments shall be considered to address subsurface drainage.
- ... In the event subsurface drainage impacts adjacent, private properties, no countermeasures shall be implemented until a study of all possible treatments, and the severity of the problem, has been conducted.
- ... Treatment of subsurface drainage problems impacting adjacent private properties through the alteration of surface or subsurface conditions on the preserve shall be considered only if no other options are available. More expensive options that protect the natural condition of the preserve are preferred to options which will impact the preserve.
- ... In the event that subsurface drainage is impacting a trail or other area being utilized by the general public, measures may be taken to reduce and eliminate muddy and/or erosive conditions. Such measures may include placement of stepping stones over the muddy areas, or redirection of the path.

VII. Trail signage

- ... Trail signage should be posted at the major points of public entry to this area of the preserve. These signs will indicate that the area is a Forest Preserve, state general rules of use, and give a phone number to call to report problems.

VIII. Trail markings/blazes

- ... Trail markings and/or blazes shall be utilized to mark only the designated trail(s).
- ... Blazes shall be indicated through the use of flags or marking tapes, if at all possible. Different loops or legs of the trail may be indicated through the use of different colors.
- ... Signs, markings, or other identification of a permanent nature should not be affixed to a tree, vegetation, rock, or other natural element.

- ... Blazes should be placed to be visible from all trail approaches.
- ... Each blaze location should have visibility to the next blaze in sequence.

IX. Trail clearing

- ... Trail clearing is prohibited except to create a designated trail, if authorized by Council.

X. Trail surfacing

- ... No foreign materials, including wood chips, straw and gravel, are permitted to be used for trail surfacing, unless a barrier free trail is planned.

XI. Maintenance

- ... Area D of the South Preserve shall be inspected on an annual basis, on foot by City personnel as assigned by the City Manager, to evaluate the condition of the preserve.
- ... Permitted maintenance activities during the inspection include removal of trash and refuse and removal of improvements installed by others and considered inconsistent with the Management and Maintenance Guidelines.
- ... Any conditions believed to be dangerous to the public or potentially injurious to the natural environment shall be reported to the City Manager, who will determine the appropriate response within these guidelines.

XII. Accessibility

- ... The decision regarding the possibility of designating any trails, including barrier free trails, should be based on the findings of the trail planning assessment.