PURPLE LINE LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT FACILITY

Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park / Northeast Branch Stream Valley Park
Prince George’s County, Maryland

February 1, 2018

Record of Decision

Statement of Decision

The National Capital Planning Commission finds that the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 have been satisfied for improvements made to the Northwest and Northeast Branch Stream Valley Parks to accommodate the Purple Line project as proposed by the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). The Purple Line alignment and mode (light rail transit) were selected through a multi-year Alternatives Analysis / Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Draft Section 4(f) Evaluation studies. The parkland improvements were designed based on detailed engineering studies and close coordination between the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, State of Maryland, and Purple Line development team.

Alternatives Considered

Alternatives Analysis / Draft Environmental Impact Statement (AA/DEIS)

The United States Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) undertook an Alternatives Analysis / Draft Environmental Impact Statement to compare potential impacts to the natural and manmade environment from a No Build, Transportation Systems Management (TSM), and six build alternatives. The build alternatives included three bus rapid transit (BRT) alternatives and three light rail transit (LRT) alternatives with varying levels of infrastructure investment. The project intent was to improve east-west mobility within the suburban corridor between Bethesda (Montgomery County) and New Carrollton (Prince George’s County). The study identified the “Medium Investment LRT” alternative as the Locally Preferred Alternative in 2009.

Final Environmental Impact Statement

Led by the United States Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Maryland Transit Administration (MTA), the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Draft Section 4(f) Evaluation for the Purple Line project described and summarized the transportation and environmental impacts of a new east-west light rail transit service in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties, Maryland. The light rail transit facility was selected through the previous
Alternatives Analysis / Draft Environmental Impact Statement (AA/DEIS) study, known as the Locally Preferred Alternative. The intent of the Purple Line is to:

1. Provide faster, more direct, and more reliable east-west transit service connecting the major activity centers in the Purple Line corridor at Bethesda, Silver Spring, Takoma/Langley Park, College Park, and New Carrollton;
2. Provide better connections to Metrorail services located in the corridor; and
3. Improve connectivity to the communities located between the Metrorail lines.

The 16.2-mile Purple Line alignment extends between the Bethesda Metrorail station in Montgomery County and the New Carrollton Metrorail/MARC/Amtrak station in Prince George’s County, with Silver Spring, Takoma/Langley Park, and College Park located in-between. The FEIS evaluated the new Purple Line project against a No Build Alternative, comparing long-term (operational) and short-term (construction-related) impacts with regard to the following: public transportation, roadways, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, parking and service access, safety and security, land use and zoning, neighborhoods and community facilities, property acquisition, economic activity, parks, recreational, and open space, historic resources, air quality, noise, habitat and wildlife, water resources, energy use, environmental justice, and irreversible and irretrievable resources. Measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts were identified, and the FTA concluded the study with a Record of Decision (ROD), which was issued on March 19, 2014.

Further Project Development

Since the 2014 Record of Decision, the project has continued to be refined as part of a continuing, coordinated design development process between the State of Maryland, Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, and Purple Line development team. The project design (corridor-wide) has been refined to treat all stormwater impacts within the limit of disturbance (exceeding State requirements by approximately four acres). In addition, affected area of forest was reduced by one acre, with seven fewer specimen trees requiring removal, within the corridor-wide limit of disturbance. The following sections provide additional detail.

National Capital Planning Commission Review

Land for the Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park and Northeast Branch Stream Valley Park (where the two Purple Line project sites are located) was acquired with federal funding appropriated under the 1930 Capper-Cramton Act, which gives NCPC approval authority over park development. The Act vested property ownership in the State of Maryland, with administrative jurisdiction granted to the County through the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission. Congress enacted the 1930 Act to provide for the acquisition of lands in Maryland and Virginia for development of a comprehensive park, parkway, and playground system in the National Capital. A subsequent 1931 Agreement between NCPC and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission prohibits “in whole or in part, conveyance, sale, lease, exchange or use or development of lands acquired with Capper Crampton funds for other than park purposes; and requires Capper-Crampton lands to be developed in accordance with plans approved by the NCPC.”
NCPC’s review focuses on protecting the character and setting of the parks and ensuring that any improvements are compatible with existing park use. Projects that provide public benefits such as improving the water quality of streams along with improving park accessibility and park resources are encouraged. Examples of compatible improvements include adding wetlands & meadow areas to a steam valley park, adding a hiker-biker trail section to improve the regional trail network, and adding a foot-bridge and connector trail to improve access to an existing park. For the purposes of this project, NCPC review will focus on mitigation and minimization measures related to park access and stormwater management/water quality.

*Park Access*

The Purple Line’s Purpose and Need Statement describes the intent of the new facility as follows:

- Provide faster, more direct, and more reliable east-west transit service connecting the major activity centers in the Purple Line corridor at Bethesda, Silver Spring, Takoma/Langley Park, College Park, and New Carrollton;
- Provide better connections to Metrorail services located in the corridor; and
- Improve connectivity to the communities in the corridor located between the Metrorail lines.

Earlier technical studies (developed as part of the project’s NEPA process) that assess future ridership, social effects and land use planning, and economic effects, demonstrate the Purple Line as a higher-quality link in the regional transit system compared to local (often slower and less reliable) bus service. As links in the future Purple Line alignment, the Northwest Branch and Northeast Branch crossings support the following NCPC planning policies from the Transportation Element:

- Capacity and service expansion of the regional Metrorail and Metrobus systems and other regional and local transit services, particularly where these services will support existing or planned federal facilities;
- Encourage ridesharing, biking, walking, transit, and other non-SOV modes of transportation for federal commuters and visitors;
- Support multimodal connections and transportation alternatives in the regional system;
- Extend the transit system’s reach into developed, but underserved areas of the region.

The new Purple Line facility will improve access to Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park through construction of a new nearby station, and new bicycle lanes, widened sidewalks, and streetscapes along University Boulevard. Currently, there is a narrow, 4-foot sidewalk along the south side of University Boulevard, and a discontinuous narrow sidewalk along the north side, with no bicycle lanes. The new Purple Line will supplement existing bus transit service along University Boulevard as well.

The project will improve access to Northeast Branch Stream Valley Park with a new nearby station and completion of the south side sidewalk along River Road to its intersection with Kenilworth Avenue. The new Purple Line will supplement existing bus transit service along River Road. The planned temporary detour of the Northeast Branch Trail during project construction will be a short-term adverse impact to park access.
From a larger perspective, the new Purple Line will serve an important need for east-west mobility across the Maryland suburbs, with connections between three Metrorail lines and several employment centers. The project will support Montgomery and Prince George’s County planning goals for more efficient development patterns concentrated along major transportation corridors and preservation of open space, agricultural, and park within the jurisdictions. The proposed improvements to the Northwest and Northeast Branch Stream Valley Parks will enable the Purple Line to cross through the parks along existing transportation routes, which have gradually expanded over time to accommodate local and regional travel needs.

**Stormwater Management / Water Quality**

Water quality within the Northwest Branch and Northeast Branch streams will be improved through better stormwater management based on a variety of strategies including: new bridge designs using the latest industry design standards/materials, improved drainage patterns, improved streetscaping, and reforestation/invasive vegetation removal. The specific stormwater measures to be implemented within each park are described below.

Within the Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park, the new bridge design has one pier (compared to the existing two pier bridge) situated outside of the main stream channel to remove an impedance to water flow, thereby minimizing turbidity (and improving water quality) in the stream. Improved drainage patterns will reduce stormwater runoff velocities, which will reduce erosion and improve local water quality. The new transportation corridor is designed with as much pervious area as possible (with new tree boxes and landscaping beds) to accommodate direct absorption of precipitation from storm events, reducing runoff into the Northwest Branch. Lastly, the project will plant new native trees (202 over-story trees, 22 evergreens, 95 flowering trees) within the park (and additional off-site trees through a State-sponsored reforestation program), as well as new vegetation (208 shrubs) in the area to help improve local stream water quality.

Within the Northeast Branch Stream Valley Park, the new bridge design has one pier outside of the stream channel to eliminate any impedance to the stream’s water flow under non-storm conditions. Improved drainage patterns will reduce stormwater runoff velocities, which will reduce erosion and improve local water quality. Lastly, the project will plant new native trees (589 over-story trees, 69 evergreens, 284 flowering trees) within the park (and additional off-site trees through a State-sponsored reforestation program), as well as new vegetation (40 shrubs) in the area to help improve local stream water quality. Required tree/vegetation removal and soil disturbance during the project’s construction phase will result in adverse short-term environmental impacts to each of the parks.

**Project Mitigation**

As stated in the Federal Transit Administration Record of Decision (ROD), Environmental Compliance Plan, and additional information provided by the project team, the following measures would be implemented during the project’s construction and post-construction phases. Some of this information is described as part of the previous NCPC Review section, which addresses project consistency with the 1930 Capper-Cramton Act.
The Maryland Transit Administration will implement mitigation for all project-related stream impacts in accordance with permits obtained from the United States Army Corps of Engineers and Maryland Department of the Environment.

The development team will comply with all temporary construction phase stormwater management permits from the Maryland Department of the Environment. All permanent infrastructure will be reviewed for compliance with FEMA requirements, USDOT Order 5650.2 "Floodplain Management and Protection," and Executive Order 11988.

The project team will comply with the project’s approved Forest Conservation Plan, which includes on-site reforestation and purchase of credits for off-site reforestation in mitigation bank areas in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties. Landscaping plans were developed in coordination with State and County planning staff, and tree preservation and protection measures for construction are included in the Erosion and Sediment Control Plan.

Throughout construction on all parks, the project team will stage roadway and/or sidewalk closures to maintain pedestrian and vehicular access. Trail access will be maintained through temporary detour routes developed in coordination with the Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission, and all trail routes will be restored following construction.

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