

"Federation Corner" column
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Will ICC right-of-way become future parkland?

by Wayne Goldstein

Northern Parkway. Wisconsin Freeway. North Central Freeway. Rockville Freeway. Outer Beltway. These are the names of major highways that were once proposed for Montgomery County, were once part of master plans for decades, yet were all removed from these plans and never built. For most of those decades, most of them were considered to be inevitable, essential parts of a transportation network. Even as the State Highway Administration (SHA), sometimes using persuasion, but more than willing to use intimidation, continues buying right-of-way for the ICC that it does not already own, keep these other historic realities in mind. As SHA fills in the gaps in the land needed to build this \$3 billion highway, is it buying land for a road or is it actually assembling land that will become a future park? This is not as strange a statement as it sounds. Just consider the original right of way for the ICC, which was once officially called the Outer Circumferential Beltway.

Although you may have been led to believe that the route for the Outer Beltway/ICC was set in stone more than half-a-century ago - in 1953 - its route was first proposed for change in 1965, in part because the plan to dam the Potomac River at Riverbend was cancelled, eliminating the plan to have the highway cross the Potomac on top of the dam. After much fighting over many alternative routes, a new route was approved in 1970, going between Rockville and Gaithersburg. The original route had gone south of Rockville. Since the state had purchased most of the land for that southerly route, they renamed it the Rockville Freeway and, in 1972 proposed that it extend from its connection to the new Outer Beltway to I-270 at Montrose Road and perhaps on to Falls Road. This "road to nowhere" which had been "accepted and adopted in countless master plans for almost 20 years" was not built. Instead, in 1988, County Executive Sid Kramer proposed that most of the then-named Rockville Facility become Matthew Henson State Park. The only evidence today of once-bigger plans for this state park is the wide section of Connecticut Avenue as it crosses it just south of Aspen Hill.

The Northern Parkway was one of the first highways proposed in Montgomery County. When first unveiled in 1944, it was to run from 16th Street and East-West Highway in Silver Spring over to White Oak. By 1953, it would have begun by extending Western Avenue in Chevy Chase through Rock Creek Park to 16th Street. In 1959, land purchased for Wheaton Regional Park included 50 acres reserved for the Northern Parkway. Right of way for this road was also adjacent to Northwest Branch Park. Yet, in 1970, when the state proposed running it through Sligo Creek Park as well as Wheaton Regional Park, there was such an uproar that the County Council voted to oppose the Sligo Creek Park route. At that point government agencies owned as much as 85% of the Northern Parkway right-of-way, and intended to begin construction in 1972. Instead, in 1972, SHA dropped the plans for the North Central Freeway at the urging of county officials. This major highway, proposed in 1955, would have gone through Takoma Park and Silver Spring to connect up proposed D.C. highways with the Northern Parkway and the Beltway, while taking hundreds of homes in Montgomery County and Washington, D.C. However, after 28 years on the books, the Northern Parkway never got built, it was removed from all master plans, and land bought for or intended for it remained or became parkland.

When SHA abandoned the long-standing plans for these two major highways, it hoped to ask Congress that the proposed segment of the Outer Beltway in Montgomery County be a partial substitute for that abandonment. By 1977, plans for the Outer Beltway were also abandoned, although talk persisted to retain a portion of that proposed highway, that was originally planned to be 120 miles long. By 1978, this 18-mile piece of road, 15% of the original route, was being called the Intercounty Connector. The first of many hearings and much study for the ICC was held in 1980. However, the amount of rhetoric and study about the

ICC after an official existence of 29 years is no greater than what went into the now forgotten Northern Parkway, North Central Freeway, and the variations of the Outer Beltway and the Rockville Freeway/Facility.

Should the courts agree that many important facts and regulations were ignored in the rush to get the ICC approved, an honest and thorough restudy of county transportation needs could easily result in land bought for or intended for the ICC to remain or become parkland.

MCCF has opposed the ICC almost from the time it was first proposed, just as we opposed other long-abandoned highways before that. We never hear from anyone seriously proposing that we need a Northern Parkway, a North Central Freeway, or a Wisconsin Freeway to move us around. We've been representing County residents since 1925. On Friday, May 11th, we will be celebrating 82 years on the job with our 2007 Annual Awards Banquet. All are invited to attend. A good time will be had by all. See you there.