



Sierra Club Opposes Development in Dogue Creek Floodplain

by Dean Amel

Dogue Creek in Fairfax County is probably best known for the portion that flows through the western part of Huntley Meadows Park. The creek begins in Kingstowne, flows generally south through Huntley Meadows, crosses Richmond Highway and runs next to George Washington's Grist Mill (now whiskey distillery) before emptying into the Potomac River.

Earlier this year, Fairfax County adopted the Embark Richmond Highway Plan to shape and encourage revitalization along Richmond Highway, a part of the County that has not developed as rapidly as many other areas in recent decades. The Embark plan focuses on transportation and contains several positive elements, including pedestrian and transit improvements and an evaluation of a possible bus rapid transit (BRT) corridor. The plan calls for denser, mixed-use development near BRT stations, with preservation of residential neighborhoods between stations. Many of those neighborhoods contain affordable housing that is increasingly scarce in northern Virginia. The Embark Plan also calls for protection of resource protection areas (RPAs) along streams, the expansion of stream buffers and green corridors, increased acres of parkland, and protection of the unique natural and historic resources in this area.

Local environmentalists suffered a case of whiplash when, just months after adoption of the Embark Plan, a proposal was brought forward to amend Fairfax County's comprehensive plan and rezone part of the Dogue Creek area to allow construction of 43 houses almost entirely within Dogue Creek's 100-year floodplain. This development would require 41,000 cubic yards of fill to raise the houses enough to avoid frequent flooding. By fundamentally altering the future functioning of the creek in ways that are almost certain to be harmful, this proposal threatens not only the ecological integrity of the watershed, but also the safety of residents living near the floodplain. Parts of Dogue Creek already show evidence of erosion caused by development and impervious surfaces within the watershed. Downstream from the proposed development, there is substantial erosion of the creek's banks near George Washington's Grist Mill and the creek's crossing under Richmond Highway. Infilling a large portion of the floodplain is likely to increase the velocity of stream flows during rain events and increase downstream erosion. It also could increase flooding beyond the traditional floodplain. With storms becoming more frequent and intense in recent years, our local streams are already stressed; filling in part of a stream's natural floodplain will make things worse. We need to protect our floodplains in order to minimize the damage caused by the kind of extreme weather that has recently affected the Gulf Coast, North Carolina and Houston.

In addition to being inconsistent with the new Embark Plan, the proposal also would violate Fairfax County policies against development in Environmental Quality Corridors and RPAs. Acceptance of the

proposed plan amendment and rezoning would set a terrible precedent for problematic development proposals in other watersheds and elsewhere throughout Fairfax County.

Fairfax County staff, to their credit, oppose both the comprehensive plan amendment and rezoning. However, some local homeowners' associations and members of both the Fairfax County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors support the proposal. Most supporters cite the long wait for new development in the Richmond Highway area. However, no one benefits in the long run, if environmental assets are damaged by development.

The Dogue Creek area falls within the Mount Vernon Group's territory, but most of Fairfax County is part of the Sierra Club's Great Falls Group, our neighbor to the west. The two groups worked together to develop the Club's position on this proposal and to publicize that position. At press time, presentation of this plan to the Fairfax County Planning Commission has been indefinitely delayed. However, we expect the proposal to be brought forward again at some point. Those readers living in Fairfax County will then receive an email alert asking you to weigh in against this development. Please do so!

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