

Residents encouraged to lobby for capital projects

County officials offer suggestions for drawing attention to small-scale improvements

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

While large county projects planned for Silver Spring are already funded in the county's upcoming Capital Improvements Program, residents urged county officials Monday to provide future funding for smaller road improvements and trail projects.

Construction for the new civic building transit center has already been funded, as has the design phase for the new Silver Spring Library, county officials told the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board.

But county officials said residents should lobby the county executive and County Council to get funding for smaller projects, such as improvements to Seminary Road and a comprehensive study of traffic conditions along Dale Drive.

"If there is a tremendous amount of support on some project and it can be shown, that will have a significant impact," said Bruce Johnston, chief of the division of transportation engineering for the county Department of Transportation.

The meeting was the first of several CIP forums that officials will conduct with county civic groups over the next few weeks.

Community groups may submit suggestions for the fiscal 2011-2016 CIP by July 15 and county departments must submit suggestions in September.

CIP projects include buildings, roads and other facilities planned by county agencies. CIPs are submitted in even-numbered years.

On Monday, residents encouraged funding for smaller CIP projects that may not be top county priorities.

The county's Department of Transportation has proposed widening Dale Drive near the intersection of Colesville Road and adding sidewalks near the intersection. But residents from the nearby Woodside Park neighborhood told officials those changes would not improve traffic conditions and suggested a larger study of the busy roadway.

"Much of Dale is being addressed in piecemeal measures," said Barbara Ditzler, president of the Woodside Park Civic Association.

According to the CIP, \$4.9 million is budgeted for the project through fiscal 2012, but no money for a large study of Dale Drive has been appropriated. Johnston said if enough residents lobby county officials, a larger study could be considered. But the study would have to compete with other CIP projects.

Other residents asked about the status of the Metropolitan Branch Trail, a proposed eight-mile multi-use trail that would run from Silver Spring to the District of Columbia.

Advisory board member Casey Anderson said the trail was a high priority for residents and wanted to know who is responsible for the project's lack of progress.

"It's frustrating because we have been the dog chasing its own tail on who is going to move on this," Anderson said.

Johnston said the county has not been able to reach an agreement with CSX and WMATA, which own sections of the right of way on which the trail would be constructed, and the project had "dropped off the radar." But if the board lobbied County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), it could draw more attention to the project.

"That can go a long way in making that project move," Johnston said.

For a project such as the proposed intersection improvements surrounding Seminary Road in Montgomery Hills, Johnston said there are specific points in the planning process where residents should voice support.

The first two phases of that project, including a conceptual study and detailed design, have been funded and will be completed by spring 2010. Johnston said resident should start lobbying next year for future CIP funding to complete the project.

More details on Fillmore music venue

The company donating land for a long-awaited Fillmore music hall in downtown Silver Spring wants to ensure its plans for a mixed-use commercial project on the site will not meet opposition from the county Planning Board before it finalizes land-use details with the county, a county economic development official said Monday.

The county's agreement with Live Nation to open a Fillmore music venue at site of the former J.C. Penney building on Colesville Road is finished, said Steven A. Silverman, the director of the county's Department of Economic Development.

But negotiations are ongoing with the Silver Spring-based Lee Development Group, which donated the land for the Fillmore in exchange for protections from changes in the county's land-use laws for its commercial project.

The deal has been delayed – the County Council approved the land-use provisions last year – because it is difficult to predict how the "third player," the Montgomery County Planning Board, will receive the Lee's future plans, Silverman said.

"This is the most complicated transaction in the history of Montgomery County," Silverman said Monday at the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board's monthly meeting.

The Lee Development Group and the county are determining all the possible outcomes when Lee Group's project comes before the Planning Board, Silverman said. A date has not been set for that review.

"We are trying to do what lawyers are bad at doing: determine all the possible contingencies," Silverman said. "... It has been a challenge to project ahead eight years from now what would make Lee's project unviable."

Silverman was optimistic the deal could be finalized by the end of the summer.

In early May, Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group, said the deal was "at the one-yard line" and that construction on the Fillmore could begin within a year.