

Comments of Gary Guzy, Rock Creek Conservancy Board Member at  
Town Hall Hosted by Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton  
June 29, 2021

Thank you, Congresswoman Norton, for your ongoing leadership in protecting Rock Creek, for convening this meeting, and for the opportunity to share the views of the Rock Creek Conservancy with you. And thanks to Julia Washburn and her colleagues at the National Park Service for opening a public comment period on this and for their extraordinary work throughout the pandemic.

As you may know, the Rock Creek Conservancy is an official friends organization of the National Park Service - we work to empower and organize volunteers, facilitating people powered trash and weed and stream cleanups in the Park; we engage in restoration on the ground; we run summer jobs programs in Rock Creek for students from across the city through our Conservation Corps to learn about conservation and stewardship of our land, water, and resources and spend time in nature; and we advocate to protect and preserve the entire Rock Creek watershed.

The question we all face is not simply a question of whether we continue the closure of a road for recreation. This is about who we are and what we value as a community, as a region, and as a nation, as we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink and focus on those issues.

Rock Creek Park was founded in 1890 in a tremendous act of foresight. It was America's third national park-- protected a few days before even Yosemite -- and our first urban national park. As the Olmstead Brothers said in assessing the area," the real justification for this large park is unquestionably found in the restorative value of its natural qualities -- large stretches of forest, the river valley, dark ravines, steep and rolling hills, . . . "It is the extraordinary combination of this circumstance with the proximity . . . to a great city that gives to the Park its unique value. This is the value which was first preserved by Act of Congress for the benefit of all people." And as they wisely guided us, "The dominant consideration, never to be subordinated to any other purpose in dealing with Rock Creek Park, is the permanent preservation of its wonderful natural beauty, and the making of that beauty accessible to the people without spoiling the scenery in the process."

That contest -- and caution -- has been the core of Rock Creek Park from the start. The Park has been part of epic historic struggles -- of the rights of DC residents vs. those of the rest of the country, of nature vs. development, of foresight vs expediency.

When the area around the White House in the 1860's was characterized by crowding and had open running sewers, Congress explored the valley for protection as a Presidential retreat. But the concept of a place for all people soon took hold, "providing all, old and young, rich and poor, with that greatest of all needs, healthy exercise in the open country." and for 30 years its preservation as a park for all -- including as a national investment that would have benefits for DC area residents -- became a rallying cry, was debated in Congress, and through persistent effort, its protection as a place for all people finally prevailed. So too did that understanding prevail in the face of later proposals to fill it as a reservoir -- which were rejected in 1897 -- or with plans prevalent from the 1930's to the 1970's to use it as superhighway corridor from the suburbs -- which ultimately were rejected when Metro's red line was completed.

When the Park was created, the roads were unpaved, the speed limit was 10 mph, 200,000 people lived in the District and 25,000 north in Montgomery County. Today 700,000 people live in DC, and 1 million live in Montgomery County, and those numbers are projected to continue to grow. It is untenable to think about the protection of this resource -- its forests that drive climate resilience, its water quality, the health benefits it provides, the recreation opportunities, its wildlife -- if Beach Drive remains an ever more intensively used commuter corridor just like any other. It is inconsistent with the founding vision of the Park, as well as with the values that were rendered so clear by the pandemic and the refuge that the Park became for so many.

Plainly the Park is a huge investment and that has tradeoffs. But it is an investment we collectively hold in trust for future generations. The founders recognized that by withholding so vast an area of land *within* the city from residential and commercial use, and by what they called the steadily increasing challenge of “interrupting the convenient and natural movement of street traffic,” our nation was investing in its future.

The question we face is not a question of convenience, but of preservation of this trust and this investment. Its intensive use as a commuter roadway severely limits the ability to access nature, degrades air quality and forest health, creates noise and runoff, and threatens wildlife. Just as it would be hard to imagine a commuter corridor running through the heart of Yosemite’s sacred valley, so too should it be hard for us to imagine that happening here.

This is a question of what we value -- both in respecting what we have been given, and for today. The upside of the pandemic is a once in a lifetime opportunity to rethink the patterns that have unknowingly emerged, to recommit ourselves to those things that make our community and our region great, and to invest in them anew. The outpouring of recreational use, caring, escape through nature, sanity and *hope* that Rock Creek Park provided during the pandemic shutdown, -- shown in a count of some 28,000 users -- is now represented by some of those over 5,000 people who have signed a petition from PARC calling for the continuation of this closure. As the Conservancy has conducted conversations about Rock Creek’s future, and as we have seen during the pandemic, access to parks is increasingly recognized by the medical community as vital to promoting health and well-being and is a regional resource. We have seen the way it brings people together from all walks of life and can unify our city. We have seen that nature need not always come last and requires, in fact, that it does not. This is our chance to ensure its preservation.

We can work to find effective and creative solutions arising from permanent pedestrian use. The continued closure can enhance access and equity for residents east of the park through Sherrill Drive. We can find ways to work together to accommodate those who are unable to walk or cycle. And we appreciate the agencies who are willing to work to find solutions, including DDOT from whom we [just] hear[d], to mitigate any localized traffic problems that do arise.

But why should these few precious miles be given over to what every other street in our region is without regard for this history and these transformative values. As the PARC petition notes, “Making these upper Beach Drive car-free zones permanent would maintain a safe, quiet and low-pollution greenway in the city’s largest park for hundreds of thousands of families, walkers, runners, bicyclists, wheelchair users and other outdoor enthusiasts—seven days a week. It would also promote regional goals for climate

mitigation, air quality improvement and wildlife conservation.”

As so many other great cities have done in reclaiming and celebrating their parks and natural areas as the real impacts have become clear and values have crystalized -- whether it has been the rededication of the Zion valley in Utah to nature in 2000 or the devotion of Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City to pedestrians in 2018 and the countless cities that are engaging in similar questions today as we emerge from the pandemic -- we should be an example to the world of the values we hold preeminent, of our ability to find workable solutions, and of the constancy and boldness of our vision.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Conservancy’s views. We look forward to tonight’s discussion.