



Board asks MC Planning Board to ask developer to preserve trees on Chelsea School site in Silver Spring

**Sent on April 23, 2013 by Bruce Sidwell
Advocacy chair, Friends of Sligo Creek**

I am writing on behalf of The Board of the Friends of Sligo Creek to request the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission to fully and carefully consider the development of Chelsea School site. It is a critical decision and may well set a precedent for how seriously stormwater issues are handled by the County in the future. Since the site is completely in the Sligo Creek watershed we are especially concerned about pollution and excess run-off from the development.

As you may know, the Friends of Sligo Creek is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to protecting, enhancing, and enjoying the ecological health of Sligo Creek Park and the wider watershed. Despite long-term damage from urbanization, the Creek has rebounded in the last fifteen years, thanks to informed, time-consuming, and expensive efforts by the County, the Park and Planning Commission, and citizen groups like ours. The beauty, water quality, forest cover, and wildlife habitat of the Park will continue to improve with concerted efforts by all parties.

Needless to say, we support the concentration of development near mass transit and businesses. Silver Spring is being redeveloped into a high-density population and mass transportation hub. We applaud this environmentally responsible plan. And we support the development of the Chelsea site reflecting this overall plan. However, it is the mechanism of development and County approval of exemptions, which deeply concern us. Such growth should not be carried out in a way that imposes undue damage to nearby streams and other natural areas.

The Friends of Sligo Creek is deeply concerned that EYA, the developer, is being given exemptions to important regulations and agreements as it moves to clear the site of most trees (64 - with dozens larger than 20 inch diameter) and significantly re-grade the hillside. This violates the Maryland Department of the Environment Stormwater Design Manual requiring use of natural features. Further, we understand that Chelsea School had a conservation easement for the central stand of mature trees. It would be vitiated by this clear-cut development. This is an extraordinary step, threatening any conservation easement agreement merely by sale of a parcel to a new owner.

What has been lost in this overall Silver Spring redevelopment is maintenance of open space, and in particular, trees. In many areas being developed downtown, there haven't been trees or open space since the 1950s or before. This is not an excuse for the new developments to fail to include open spaces in their plans, instead it argues for creation of new green space. In the Chelsea example, there is green space. There is a small swath of mature trees which are virtually all being removed. This is a significant mistake. Tree cover is a critical measure in the health of streams and biome in general. Silver Spring is teetering on the edge of being an impervious jungle with only 10% tree cover in the Sligo Creek watershed, compared with a goal of 50% healthy cover. Destroying it in the name of highest theoretical capacity is short-sighted and problematic.

Cutting through the center of the property is a curving steep slope, adjoining the main stand of trees. That slope (>25%) has highly-erodible (D) soils, as noted in the most recent soil books, which are required to be used in development plans. Disturbance of highly-erodible soils is prohibited as it can result in catastrophic soil erosion and sediment pollution. This site is only blocks from Sligo Creek, and street under drains take a straight piped route to the Creek. Once off the site, no sediment mitigation is possible. How can the County

allow this entire slope to be regraded and developed? This is, depending on the reading of maps, a new development or quite close to it. And looking at the site, it is clearly a completely new use except for a very small historic house and only part of its original lot that will remain. This should be a model site for ESD – Environmentally Sensitive Design - to the MEP (maximum extent practicable), not an example of how these hard-won regs and work can be ignored and bypassed.

For all of these reasons, we strongly urge the Commission to ensure that tree canopy damage and stormwater drainage associated with the Chelsea site be fully managed in complete compliance with existing laws and regulations so as to protect streams and other natural areas that will be affected. The corridor from Wheaton to Silver Spring will no doubt continue to be heavily impacted by buildings and roads – all the more reason that a project such as the Chelsea site should NOT be rubber-stamped without full review.

We are watching this case very closely. Thank you for your support of these important regulations and rules and work to make our community more liveable. We look forward to working with you to protect and enhance our parkland and watershed.