



Letter sent to the MC Planning Board requesting that they deny an environmental exemption for developing a gas station at Wheaton Plaza

**Sent on February 22, 2013 by Michael Wilpers
President, 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 (a) rescind the Forest Conservation Law exemption for the Costco gas station project in Wheaton and (b) require that Costco and Westfield file a Forest Conservation Plan for any future work that would affect Wheaton's green forest buffer and the health of the Sligo Creek watershed in which it partly lies.

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. At the same time, such growth should not be carried out in a way that imposes undue damage to nearby streams and other natural areas. The extensive stormwater runoff from Wheaton Plaza to adjacent streams is already a significant challenge to manage. Among other efforts, the County invested heavily in the construction and maintenance of large stormwater retention ponds on Wheaton Branch which drains large portions of Wheaton Plaza. This installation has greatly improved the water quality downstream in Sligo Creek. However, the massive scale of the proposed gas station threatens to reverse this progress and to damage the close-by Wheaton Branch, which is badly in need of more protection, not less. The gas station project will inevitably create water pollution during construction and operation and when its storage tanks are replaced.

Furthermore, the Center for Watershed Protection has found that one storm-drain outfall near Wheaton Plaza is among the most polluting in the Sligo Creek watershed. County staff members from DEP and DOT have since investigated the network of pipes leading to this outfall but have so far been unable to identify the pollution source. Given these existing illegal discharges from Wheaton Plaza, the County and Commission should take every available step to ensure that new construction will not exacerbate the problem.

For all of these reasons, we strongly urge the Commission to ensure that stormwater drainage associated with the Costco project is fully managed in complete compliance with existing laws and regulations so as to protect streams and other natural areas that will be affected. The Georgia Avenue 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 Costco gas station should NOT be rubber-stamped without full review.

We look forward to working with you to protect and enhance our parkland and watershed.