



Welcome the new Park Director - Mike Riley

**Letter Sent on Dec 11, 2014 by Kit Gage
President, Friends of Sligo Creek**

Dear Mr. Riley:

On behalf of the Board of the Friends of Sligo Creek, I want to express how much we are looking forward to working with you on looking after Montgomery County parks. We are committed to making sure our parks and their management remain a shining example of what a County park system can be.

As you may know, Friends of Sligo Creek (FOSC) is a nonprofit, all-volunteer, community organization dedicated to enhancing the natural beauty and ecological health of Sligo Creek Park and its surrounding watershed. In support of our goals, for more than 12 years, we have worked on litter control, removal of non-native invasive plants, improving water quality and storm water control, and educating residents about wildlife habitats and their enhancement. An important part of our work is engaging the community in appreciating and protecting the Park. Each year, FOSC members along with other concerned residents - probably more than a thousand people in total - donate thousands of hours to the maintenance of this Park. We also advocate for programs important to the ecological health of Sligo Creek and other parks. These include control of invasive species, deer management, and numerous other problems needing forceful remedies.

Our membership is extremely proud of the quality of our parks in every sense. But, we are especially appreciative of the attention that has been paid to protect and enhance their natural qualities. In addition to protecting ecological functions of providing natural habitat, clean air and water, in our stream valleys in particular, residents can enjoy a great variety of magnificent trees and other wonderful plants. There are also abundant birds and other wildlife to be studied and enjoyed. In our own park, every weekend all year around, even in the most inclement weather, I see families on our paths exploring our streams and woods.

We have been impressed and delighted to work with your talented and dedicated staff. They are undoubtedly among the finest public employees we know. It has been rewarding to work with them on many projects through the years. As we know there are, and will always be, many challenges to protecting the ecological health of Sligo and our other public lands, you may be assured that we will encourage and support our park system and work collaboratively with Parks employees.

As an example of an important area we believe needs attention right now, I'd like to bring up the Park's efforts to control non-native invasive plants. Since our founding, FOSC has been very involved in the removal of non-native weeds in the park. In 2014, FOSC along with various schools and organizations contributed over 1600 hours removing non-native invasive plants in Sligo Creek Park. The removal of non-native invasive plants comes under the supervision of Carole Bergmann, the Parks Forest Ecologist and Field Botanist. She deserves much credit for creating the Weed Warrior and Weed Warrior Supervisor programs. She wisely recognized that the only way to adequately control non-native invasive plants on the thousands of acres of Park property was to involve volunteers to help her tiny staff. This was "leveraging" at its best.

Unfortunately, the effort has recently faltered due to severe cuts in the program. In about 2009, Carole had a staff of one full time and 2 half time employees working on invasive plant removal. All three employees retired around 2010. A part time employee (Meghan Fellows) was hired to coordinate the Weed Warrior (WW) & Weed Warrior Supervisor (WWS) activities. In addition to the lost positions, operating budgets were drastically cut. This reduction in operating funding meant that contractors were not hired to control

invasive weeds with manual removal and with herbicide treatments. While this large reduction in non-native invasive weed funding occurred, the weeds didn't stop growing. In most areas, weed populations got worse.

There are now more Weed Warriors than ever removing non-native invasive plants. However, many long-term volunteers have become concerned that they frequently have to come back too quickly to areas to remove perennial species like porcelain berry, Oriental bittersweet, wisteria, bush honeysuckle, etc., because there were insufficient funds and personnel to treat the regrowth or cut stumps with herbicide. Volunteers are not allowed to apply herbicides or use power equipment in the Parks. However, herbicides are needed after cutting the vines otherwise the root system immediately sends up new shoots. Sometimes these cut stems produce almost as much biomass the following summer as was cut off. We understand that there are many demands on Park resources and personnel, and it takes constant vigilance to keep invasive plants in check. However, we strongly believe, and ecological science clearly supports, that comprehensive treatment of invasive species has a dramatically positive impact on the ecosystem in ways that can be measured and many others about which we can surmise.

In conclusion, FOOSC Board strongly urges you to make every effort to have the funding and positions restored for the non-native invasive plant program so our Park forests have a chance to be improved. It is going to take a long time for the Parks to recover from the current infestation, and the longer we wait, the harder it is going to be. Our volunteers and hundreds in other organizations continue to do our part, but we cannot be effective without an adequate effort from our County government.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of the best County park system in the land! I'd be delighted to talk with you further on our concerns, and we look forward to meeting you and introducing you to the organization at an upcoming meeting.