

CAPITOL HILL RESTORATION SOCIETY



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October 13, 2011

Mr. Joseph C. Lawson
Division Administrator
Federal Highway Administration
DC Division
1990 K Street, NW, Suite 510
Washington, DC 20006-1103

Subject: Scoping Comments for the Environmental Assessment of the CSX Virginia Avenue Tunnel Project in Southeast Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Lawson:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide Scoping Comments as part of the Environmental Assessment for the CSX Virginia Avenue Tunnel Project (VAT) in Southeast Washington, DC. The Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS) appreciates the opportunity to share with the Federal Highway Administration, District of Columbia Division (FHWA-DC), the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT), and other involved agencies its comments and concerns about the many impacts this extensive project will have on the Capitol Hill community and the Capitol Hill Historic District (CHHD). As the oldest and largest civic organization on Capitol Hill and one of the largest in the city, CHRS is committed to preserving the historic fabric and character of Capitol Hill and protecting its neighborhoods, environment, cohesiveness, and residential nature.

The proposed major project, as described by CSX in earlier meetings and on the project website (www.virginiaavenuetunnel.com) is huge in scope and scale, as well as in its potential for substantial environmental and human impacts. Many people live, work, and attend school on or near Virginia Avenue and the project area. While we understand the need to remedy the bottleneck posed by the existing tunnel, we have many areas of concern about the number, seriousness, and scope of the environmental impacts the project would have on Capitol Hill residents, neighborhoods, historic and natural resources, and businesses.

Planning and coordination with other nearby projects and initiatives

There are a number of construction projects in the project vicinity, including the DC Water Combined Sewer Overflow Control projects, the 11th Street Bridge project, the Canal Park project, the South Capitol Street project, and other CSX projects such as the Track Lowering Projects at New Jersey Avenue SE, 10th and 12th Streets SW, and

an I-395 ramp. The New Jersey Avenue Track Lowering Project will also take place on Capitol Hill, but the community has no information about the project, when it will take place, nor how it will interface with the tunnel project. In addition, the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) has instituted a Southwest Ecodistrict Initiative. We understand that the first plan of this initiative is a Maryland Avenue Small Area Plan to deck over Maryland Avenue, SW, and thereby place the tracks in a tunnel as far east as 7th Street, SW (Hancock Park). Contributing to the potential for lack of planning coordination is that FHWA and DDOT are overseeing the VAT project, while NCPC and the city's Office of Planning are overseeing the Maryland Avenue Plan.

We and many others in the community are very concerned about how this coordination and the potentially conflicting construction plans and timetables are going to play out in our community and historic district. We also wonder why the tracks are proposed to remain open and for the most part elevated between 2nd Street SE and 7th Street SW – where they apparently would go underground again – thus continuing to pose security issues near the U.S. Capitol complex, noise, and visual obstruction of the L'Enfant grid.

Construction planning for the VAT and associated run-around track must be coordinated with planning for these other construction projects and initiatives, and potential problems must be identified and sufficiently addressed during the VAT's project review. As part of the Environmental Assessment and Section 106 review of the VAT, these issues must be fully identified, considered, explored, and addressed in full consultation with members of the affected community both prior to and during construction. Public meetings and other outreach to the community must take place to fully communicate regarding these planning and coordination issues and to hear and address community concerns.

Historic and cultural resources

Because the project will cross the Capitol Hill Historic District and lies wholly within the area encompassed by the L'Enfant Plan for the City of Washington – which is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places – it has the potential to adversely affect numerous contributing historic properties. There are direct and indirect risks not only to two historic public parks, but also to the structural integrity of many contributing historic buildings. Virginia Avenue Park is a contributing property in both the CHHD and the L'Enfant Plan that now has green space, picnic areas, and a community garden. CHRS was quite concerned to hear that CSX was expecting to use this park for construction staging, leading us to fear for other nearby historic properties as well. Garfield Park, another contributing property and a treasured green space in the CHHD, includes playgrounds for small children, benches, and tennis courts.

We are also concerned about project effects on other historic properties in or very near the project area. St. Paul's AUMP Church at 401 Eye Street SE, a recently designated DC Landmark, sits barely half a block from the tunnel. As for the tunnel itself, the DC State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concurred in 2009 that the 107-year-old VAT is eligible for the National Register. The SHPO further found that the VAT's proposed demolition would constitute an adverse effect on this historic property, which would be lost because of the project. In addition, given the huge amount of ground

disturbance involved, there is considerable potential that significant archeological properties may be encountered, including a known archeological site near the 11th Street portal.

Construction-related impacts

Noise and vibration. The extensive ground-disturbing activities involved in the cut-and-cover approach CSX has described in meetings with community groups will have huge adverse impacts in and beyond the construction area, as will demolition of the existing tunnel. The digging, potential blasting and other high-impact destructive activities, run-around track construction, transfer of dirt into dump trucks, dirt hauling, and moving of construction equipment will create a lot of loud noise and dangerous vibration levels likely to adversely affect nearby homes and businesses, some of which will be mere yards away from the project area. In addition, operation of the above-ground run-around track during construction will subject residents, customers, workers, and schoolchildren to serious noise levels they would otherwise not experience, in addition to subjecting fragile historic buildings to additional vibrations.

During the Environmental Assessment process, noise levels at nearby locations should be measured, after which modeling should be conducted to estimate noise levels during the construction period. These locations should include, at the least, Capitol Quarter yards and interiors closest to Virginia Avenue; the southern part of Garfield Park; outdoor seating areas of Barracks Row businesses near the project area; the southern corner of the Marine Barracks; Capitol Hill Day School (2nd & South Carolina, SE); outside homes between 4th and 6th Streets SE near westbound Virginia Avenue; the middle of the 100 block of 7th Street SE; Virginia Avenue Park; Dog-Ma on Virginia Avenue; Tyler Elementary School (block bounded by G, I, 10th and 11th Streets SE); and the Hopkins Apartments (a public housing project in the 1200 block of 12th Street, SE) to establish baseline noise levels. Then noise levels should be monitored periodically during construction and appropriate measures taken to reduce unacceptably loud levels. CHRS strongly recommends that CSX, DDOT, and FHWA-DC explore and implement all possible measures to avoid and/or minimize noise impacts.

Potential vibration damage to walls, ceilings, and foundations from construction activities and operation of the run-around track is also a major concern. Many historic buildings on Capitol Hill suffered interior and/or exterior damage from the recent earthquake, and historic houses on D Street, SE, particularly between First and Second Streets, were damaged due to underground subway construction. In addition, houses on F Street, NE, were damaged by vibrations when a bus line was shifted to F Street. These events sensitized the Capitol Hill community to how vulnerable historic buildings are to vibration damage. We recommend detailed engineering studies on noise and vibration levels for every stage of this project, particularly on historic buildings and landmarks, and pre-construction inspection of buildings closest to the construction area to establish a baseline for potential construction-related reports and claims. CSX must explore and implement measures to avoid and/or minimize impacts of vibrations on fragile historic structures; conduct frequent monitoring during construction for vibrations at sensitive locations; communicate frequently with owners of affected properties; make vibration studies available online; make experts available

at public meetings to answer questions from the community; and develop a plan of action to be immediately implemented if vibration damage is noted.

Dust and air quality hazards. Many cubic yards of material will be excavated and removed in hundreds of truckloads during project execution, including soil and asphalt. These materials need to be tested before removal to determine whether they include any hazardous substances. If they do, the community must be informed as to the specific hazardous materials, in advance of removal, along with the timetable for removal and plans for complying with EPA rules and protecting humans, wildlife, and the watershed. Even if none of the materials removed are hazardous, excavation and removal will produce dust, which must be controlled. Trucks must use tarps, and other measures should be taken to reduce and minimize levels of ambient dust in this area where people live, work, walk, and cycle. The same dust-reduction measures need to be taken near the end of the project when the “cover” part of the project is implemented.

Stormwater drainage. With the amount of digging and trenching this project will entail, runoff from the project area needs to be considered during environmental review to protect the Anacostia River watershed and avoid soil erosion. This must include identifying, committing to, and implementing measures to be taken to minimize, contain, direct, and treat construction area runoff so the river does not suffer adverse project-related effects.

Traffic, pedestrian, cycling, and public transportation impacts. Since the proposed project would tear up Virginia Avenue and its vicinity, we have many traffic-related concerns. Virginia Avenue and its cross streets are heavily traveled by residents and commuters alike and provide access to homes, businesses, workplaces, neighbors, restaurants, and the SE/SW Freeway. With closure of the 8th Street ramp onto the freeway and tunnel construction adjacent to the 3rd Street ramp, residents will suffer very limited access to the 11th Street Bridge and other parts of the city. With the project crossing and dividing Capitol Hill and Barracks Row Main Street, we will also suffer limited access to parts of our own community, which could harm businesses, constrain efforts of the Capitol Riverfront BID, and adversely impact community cohesiveness. Traffic-related questions to address during environmental review include:

- Where, when, and for how long will Virginia Avenue, or portions of it, be closed?
- Where, when, and for how long will Virginia Avenue cross streets be closed?
- Would construction activities necessitate any closure of the New Jersey Avenue bridge?
- How will detours caused by any closings be routed, and what effects will these detours have on narrow residential streets?
- Will 8th Street be closed at Virginia Avenue to vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists, and if so, when and for how long? And if so, how would economic and other adverse impacts on Barracks Row businesses be addressed? Avoided? Minimized? Mitigated?
- How will pedestrian and bicycle access on and across Virginia Avenue be maintained and facilitated?
- How will street closings affect Metrobus and Circulator routes and riders? Will bus stops have to be relocated, and if so, where to?

- How will Capitol Hill residents, workers, and business patrons be notified of street closures, detours, parking constraints, and rerouting of buses? Ongoing communications with the public will be crucial during project planning and implementation.

Parking. Many Capitol Hill residents have nowhere to park their cars except on the street. What impact will street closures, detours, and construction activities have on residential parking availability? Project proponents need to bear in mind that residents must be able to park reasonably close to their homes. Also, a number of people patronizing Capitol Hill businesses need places to park their cars nearby, and reduced on-street parking could reduce customer visits to Hill businesses. Will the parking lot under the SE Freeway remain open during tunnel construction?

Construction hours. Given the close proximity of the project area to so many homes and the nature of the construction activities, it will be crucial to limit construction hours to times acceptable to residents. All legal restrictions and constraints on work hours and work days must be complied with and communicated to residents so they know what to expect. We recommend that lines of communication be established – perhaps a hotline and/or website – for residents to report problems and receive feedback on actions taken in response to problems.

Economic impacts. Barracks Row Main Street has recently enjoyed a wonderful revitalization and renovation, and has become a very successful center of restaurant and retail activity. Many civic and community-based organizations are energetically engaged in efforts to similarly revitalize Barracks Row south of the freeway to create a seamless, unified commercial strip extending from Eastern Market Metro Plaza to M Street that would contribute to the Capitol Riverfront revitalization. This project promises to disrupt and impede those efforts with street closures and a ditch across Barracks Row at Virginia Avenue. This community cannot afford to compromise the economic success of those businesses and revitalization projects, and neither can the city. The Environmental Assessment must address these economic issues very seriously and identify measures to avoid, minimize and/or mitigate adverse impacts.

In addition, we have concerns regarding the direct economic impact the project will have on two affected local businesses, the Charley Horse Carriage Company located under the freeway and above the tunnel below Garfield Park, and Dog-Ma, a dog daycare and boarding business at 821 Virginia Avenue SE. We understand the owner of Charley Horse has received an eviction notice from the DC government. The economic impact on this business, which will incur relocation costs and other difficulties, should be evaluated and meaningfully mitigated, as should the health and well-being of the company's horses. The financial success of Dog-Ma is also likely to be at risk due to the effects of daily construction noise, vibrations, bustle, and dust on the dogs, whose owners might seek other options to protect their pets from these stressors. The around-the-clock, 24/7, operation of the run-around track with its very loud noise so close to Dog-Ma is also likely to stress the animals and concern their owners.

Construction offices, equipment, supplies, staging, and laydown areas. Environmental review must include study of construction functions, where they will be located, and their effects on residents, means of locomotion, historic properties,

businesses, and commuters. The Environmental Assessment or Analysis must specify the numbers and proposed locations of project offices, equipment storage and operations, construction staging, lighting, and storage and laydown areas for supplies, as well as the routes traveled by vehicles delivering supplies, equipment, and construction materials. Based on the area taken up by the 11th Street Bridge project west of the Anacostia River, these functions could take up a lot of space on Capitol Hill. For instance, CSX has told the community it plans to use Virginia Avenue Park for construction staging, which would have adverse effects on this contributing historic property and much-used recreation amenity that is also used for a community vegetable and fruit garden. Other contributing parks, triangles, parklets, and open spaces in the vicinity could be similarly at risk, and we strongly recommend they not be used, damaged, or otherwise compromised by construction.

Location and operation of the run-around track. CSX has told the community a surface-level run-around track will be constructed and operated during project implementation. We are very concerned about where this track will be located and the effects it will have:

- Where will it be located? How close will it be to homes and businesses?
- What effects will run-around track construction have on nearby residents, businesses, and those who traverse the area?
- What are the increased noise and vibration levels expected to be, and where? What effects will they have on residents, businesses, and historic buildings?
- How often will trains run? What effects will this have on traffic in the project area? How does CSX propose to monitor and mitigate the increased noise and vibration levels? How will CSX and DDOT communicate train schedules, protocols, traffic stoppages, mitigation measures, etc. to the community?
- What alternatives are there to running trains so close to homes?

Rodent control. Rats were a big problem during Metrorail's cut-and-cover tunnel construction. There must be a sound and effective plan in place prior to construction to control rats, as well as a website and/or a hotline to report rodent problems and measures taken to avoid and/or minimize them.

Utilities. Prior to construction, CSX and DDOT need to produce a map or cutaway diagram showing utilities (gas, electric, water, communications) in and near the project area and develop a plan to avoid damage to utilities and cuts in utility service. CSX and DDOT need to communicate to the community all potential effects on utility service as a result of the project. Either the project proponents or the utilities need to create and publicize their means of handling questions and problems related to project construction – again, perhaps a hotline and/or website. Similar concerns apply to traffic lights and their operation in the project area.

Also, DC Water is beginning construction of new tunnels, diversion sewers, and related structures to control combined sewer overflows in DC. Several components, including the M Street diversion tunnel, will be very near the project area, so environmental review should address coordination with DC Water to coordinate construction plans and avoid construction-related problems.

Environmental justice. As noted above, the Hopkins Apartments, a public housing project, are located on 12th Street, SE, in the immediate vicinity of the project area. Environmental review must address any environmental justice issues that could spring from the project and identify measures and commitments to address any potential problems like noise, dust, air quality, construction staging, etc.

Long-term protection of the Anacostia River watershed. Water runoff is the most serious environmental problem affecting the Anacostia River, and it is well known that vegetation and permeable surfaces help reduce runoff. For this reason, we recommend that all possible steps be taken to minimize water runoff when Virginia Avenue and its cross-streets are re-surfaced and re-landscaped at the conclusion of the project. For example, all green space destroyed during construction should be replaced in kind, at the very least, and replacement surfacing for sidewalks and street features like triangles, etc., should be permeable materials if possible. The environmental review process should be used to identify ways to handle stormwater and reduce runoff after the VAT is finished. Regarding replacement street trees:

- Soil for replacement street trees must be good topsoil, at the proper depth necessary to support healthy mature trees. The soil should be approved in advance by the Urban Forestry Administration (UFA) and all soil installed under UFA's supervision.
- Wherever feasible, the new street tree areas should be continuous "tree lawns" rather than tree boxes separated by hardscape.
- Replacement street trees must be species approved in advance by UFA and must be planted under UFA supervision, with permits issued in advance by UFA.

The DC Department of Environment's "Anacostia River Trash Reduction Plan" (ARTRP) (2009, at www.ddoe.dc.gov/cwp/view,a,1209,q,499180.asp) recommends installing rain gardens to reduce runoff. Because the project area is so close to the Anacostia, we request that rain gardens be included as part of the Virginia Avenue restoration plan.

To advance the goal of a trash-free Anacostia River, we request that the recommendations of the ARTRP regarding trash reduction be implemented in this project. In particular, we urge that project planning include installing vortex separator systems (or equivalent best management practices) in all the catch basins/storm drains in the project area (see ARTRP p. 6-12 and 6-13). In addition, nearby catch basins near but not within the project area could also be retrofitted with vortex separator systems to help counterbalance the inevitable runoff from construction-related activities.

Streetscape restoration. The L'Enfant street grid, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, must be restored following VAT construction. Also, since much of the project is within the Capitol Hill Historic District, we want to know whether and how DDOT's "Context Sensitive Design Guidelines" will be applied to streetscape restoration. The DC Office of Planning's guidelines recommend that all construction in the area "respect the historic characteristics on the street" and comply with the Capitol Hill Historic District preservation guidelines. Street features such as replacement curbs, sidewalks, benches, and lighting are among those that must be considered and compatible.

Post-construction impacts

Because trains will run through the VAT on two tracks rather than one, often at the same time, and will be twice as tall as present trains, we are concerned about the impacts of more and heavier trains on historic structures. To what extent would vibrations increase? What would that mean in terms of the foundations of the freeway, structural integrity of nearby buildings, and noise in the neighborhood?

Communication

Given the scope of the project and its impacts on the community, we recommend full and frequent communication with the community. This should include not only conveying information to the community, but also conducting a meaningful dialog between members of the community and CSX and DDOT that provides public forums for asking questions and providing answers. This needs to happen during project review, throughout construction, and for a designated period of time following construction. We recommend the excellent model DDOT created for the 11th Street Bridge project – the 11th Street Bridge Community Communications Committee – to provide a forum during planning, design, and implementation for communicating information to community representatives, asking questions, and providing answers. Indeed, DDOT says the 11-CCC has already helped improve the project. We also recommend a website and/or hotline for reporting problems and communicating solutions.

Why not an Environmental Impact Statement?

Given the huge scale and scope of this project and its many significant impacts on the quality of the human environment, we do not understand why a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not being conducted for this project. It seems indefensible to engage in a less comprehensive analysis, the Environmental Assessment (EA) that often concludes with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). We cannot imagine that anyone could claim that this project would have no significant impacts and keep a straight face while doing so. We strongly urge that an EIS be conducted for the VAT.

Thank you for considering our scoping comments. CHRS looks forward to continuing to participate in the environmental and Section 106 reviews for this project.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Purcell
President

Cc: Tommy Wells, Ward 6 Councilmember
Michael Hicks, Environmental/Urban Engineer, FHWA-DC
David Maloney, State Historic Preservation Officer, DC Historic Preservation Office
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