

SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY



FOR ARLINGTON COUNTY

November 17, 2022

Mr. DJ Stadtler,

Thank you for providing additional information regarding VPRA's difficulty in widening the Long Bridge Bike/Ped span, the proposed environmental mitigation for the Long Bridge expansion as part of Transforming Rail in Virginia. We would like to propose a design adjustment that would evade these difficulties as well as raise an overall concern with VPRA's transparency and public engagement based on our experience to date.

Background

We are strongly supportive of the overall Long Bridge project. The additional rail capacity is crucial for growing rail transit in the region from Commuter Rail, which largely benefits white-collar office workers commuting into the downtown core, to Regional Rail which can benefit many more people by supporting non-commute trips throughout the region on weekends and outside traditional commute times or in traditional commute directions.

We are strongly supportive of the bicycle & pedestrian span proposed as mitigation; it is a generational opportunity to add the only purpose-built and dedicated connection across the river for people walking, biking, and scooting.

However, we have serious concerns about the width of the bicycle & pedestrian span as currently designed; we believe it to be insufficient for the expected volumes of bicycle and pedestrian usage at the time it opens, and certainly insufficient for the growing volumes that will occur over the life span of the bridge. We are very concerned about conflicts with users who stop along the bridge whether voluntarily (to take in the sights) or involuntarily (need to rest, deal with a flat tire, or soothe a crying child in a stroller). We believe the width to be inconsistent with best practices for trail design that recommend providing separate space for pedestrians from those on wheels to prevent conflict between users traveling at different speeds on high-traffic facilities.

Design Response to Pinch Points on the Virginia and DC ends of the Project

In an email dated October 18th, VPRA outlines two areas of tight horizontal clearances which make expansion of the bike/ped span beyond 16' difficult: near the Virginia landing, due to the additional width required for the ramp down to the Mt Vernon Trail, and near the DC landing, due to the turns required to reach the landing zone in the vicinity of the WMATA bridge pier.

These objections seem to ignore a fairly fundamental design feature: unlike a railroad bridge, a bike/ped bridge doesn't need to be the same width all the way across the river. In fact, the middle of the bridge (away from the constrained areas near the shorelines) is where additional space is most needed.

At the Virginia shore, a portion of traffic will be taking the main bridge to Long Bridge Park and a portion of traffic will be taking the ramp down to the Mt Vernon Trail. This essential splitting of traffic means each individual span to Virginia doesn't need to be as wide as the main span of the bridge.

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At the DC side, having a constrained width of only 16' could function essentially as traffic calming – signaling the users as they approach the DC side that they need to slow down and go single-file to successfully navigate the landing in DC.

In the middle portion of the bridge is where additional width is most needed. By our measurement this bridge will be approximately half a mile long. Some users will need to stop and rest part way across. A person on a bike who gets a flat tire will not be able to wait until they are across the bridge to pull off onto the grass to deal with it, they will need to do so on the bridge itself. It is absolutely necessary to have wider parts of this bridge in the middle of the span to allow people to safely pull to the side and stop.

Additionally, having a wider area in the middle of the bridge would provide space for tourists and other bridge users to pause and take in the views or to stop and catch their breath or deal with problems. Much like the Esplanade at Long Bridge Park is often filled with stopped onlookers enjoying views of passing trains & planes, we expect numerous folks to stop and take in the view of trains, transit vehicles, boats & waterfowl as they travel across this new bridge span. Other just may need to take a rest while on a long walk or ride, or deal with a crying baby in a stroller; it is important that they have a safe place to do so without creating conflict with other users.

In its email, VPRA also outlines several overarching concerns with widening the bike-ped span, which we do not find convincing: increased costs, delay in the engineering schedule, and the aesthetic effects of bulkier piers and ramps.

The costs both seem questionable (a large chunk of the cost of building bridge piers is in bringing in the equipment to do it – the incremental cost of going to a larger pier is not linear) and ignores that VPRA recently received \$20 million in unexpected, previously unplanned-for money to fund the bike-ped span. Any delays seem unlikely (since the bike-ped span is proposed to be built after the main rail span, so still many years away) and of VPRA's own making (since a design process for this bike-ped span was called for in the draft Environmental Impact Statement and could have been started much earlier but VPRA chose to forge ahead without the process). Finally, we will note that the National Capital Planning Commission (one of the design agencies cited) agreed with our call for a wider bike/ped span.

VPRA Transparency and Engagement Going Forward

While we appreciate VPRA engaging with us on this issue, we are concerned that this conversation is happening outside of a formal public design process as called for in the draft Environmental Impact Statement (excerpt attached).

VPRA will be the lead on multiple critical infrastructure projects in Northern Virginia over the coming years, some of which will be controversial. This project, coming so early in its existence, is an important opportunity to prove that it is a trustworthy partner that will keep its promises, be transparent, and take public feedback to heart to make a better project for everyone.

Conclusion

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In the draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project, which is the last document the public had an opportunity to comment on, it was stated on page 22-12 (attached) that “The materials and **dimensions** of the bridge would be confirmed in a final design phase following completion of the EIS” (emphasis added). This line appears to have been removed from the final EIS and VPRA seems to have skipped this design phase with the public entirely. If this process had moved forward earlier, these public desires for changes to the bridge design could have been incorporated earlier when changes in design are less costly and less likely to endanger the schedule.

Please bring forward an updated design for the Bike/Ped span that is 24’ wide in the center, to provide safe opportunities to pass; space to pause, rest, and observe; and to reduce conflicts between users. It seems that at least a 500’ long section of wider bridge should be possible in the middle of the span while still avoiding the constrained areas at either end. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity and there are numerous examples throughout the US of wider dedicated bike/ped bridges to draw from.

Thank you for your time, we hope to be a strong partner to VPRA going forward to transform rail in Virginia.

Handwritten signature of Christopher G. Slatt.

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302 The bridge superstructure, including the railing, would be either steel or aluminum and would have an
303 approximate overall height of 7 feet and width of 14 feet. The materials and dimensions of the bridge
304 would be confirmed in a final design phase following completion of the EIS. The bridge railing would
305 have vertical pickets and an overall height of approximately 4.5 feet. Specific designs for the bridge and
306 railing have not yet been determined but would be ADA compliant and in accordance with the
307 requirements of the authority having jurisdiction over final design and construction.

308 **Figure 22-5 | Preferred Bike-Pedestrian Crossing Option – Independent Bridge Structure**



309
310 After crossing over the GWMP, the bike-pedestrian crossing would connect to the MVT via a ramp near
311 the shoreline of the Potomac River. A level landing area would extend from the bike-pedestrian bridge
312 and connect to the ramp. The ramp would slope downward at a 5-percent grade to another level landing
313 area before changing directions 180 degrees and continuing down to the MVT. The overall length of the
314 ramp to the MVT would be approximately 225 feet with approximately five 6-foot diameter piers
315 supporting the structure.

316 The bike-pedestrian bridge would continue over the Potomac River, 25 feet upstream from the new
317 railroad bridge. The bike-pedestrian bridge would have approximately 22 single-column, 6-foot diameter
318 concrete piers with concrete caps, which would be aligned with the railroad bridge piers. The navigation
319 clearance of the bike-pedestrian bridge would match the vertical clearance of the new railroad bridge
320 providing additional clearance beyond the 18 feet provided by existing Long Bridge. After crossing the
321 Potomac River, the bridge would continue across Ohio Drive SW in the District and terminate in NPS
322 Parking Lot C in East Potomac Park. The ramp down from the northern terminus of the bike-pedestrian
323 bridge to the parking lot and Ohio Drive SW would be similar in design to the ramp down to the MVT
324 with approximately five 6-foot diameter piers supporting the structure.