

M-83 options are unveiled

■ Midcounty Highway extension is crucial to Clarksburg growth but would have significant environmental, residential impact

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Highway planners have unveiled their four recommended alternatives to the current alignment of M-83, a controversial proposal to extend Midcounty Highway north from Montgomery Village into Clarksburg.

M-83 has been in the planning stages for decades, all the while mired in controversy as environmentalists and Montgomery Village residents blasted the harmful impacts they say the road would have.

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M-83

But it is also crucial to the future of Clarksburg and would work in concert with the proposed Corridor Cities Transitway and development of the Life Sciences Center around Shady Grove.

The alternatives were whittled down from a list of 11 choices that the county's Department of Public Works and Transportation studied to gauge their impacts on traffic, the environment and residential areas that would be effected. They were presented at a meeting of more than 100 people at Seneca Valley High School in Germantown on Dec. 12.

As currently envisioned M-83's "master plan alignment" would extend Midcounty Highway from Montgomery Village Avenue (Route 124) to Brink and Ridge roads. Several roads planned by developers at M-83's northern end would extend into Clarksburg. A roadway at M-83's southern end would link it with the Intercounty Connector.

The six-mile highway would be the longest road project ever

attempted solely by Montgomery County.

The master plan alignment offers the most improved travel times, according to DPWT. But there are "significant" impacts on natural resources, parks and neighborhoods. The alignment cuts near Watkins Mill Elementary School, neighborhoods and through stream valleys and sensitive wetlands.

The "no-build" option has the least impact of any alternative, but also provides the least benefit — a DPWT study shows that most intersections along Route 355 as far south as Shady Grove will have an "unacceptable level of service" by 2030.

The other three alternatives shift the proposed highway's alignment and improve other upcounty roads and intersections.

One alternative would widen Goshen, Wightman and Brink roads — rather than build anything new — improving pedestrian and vehicular safety while having a "relatively low" environmental and neighborhood impact. However, it improves only a few of the over-congested intersections.

Another alternative is to start the highway at the southern end of Watkins Mill Road instead of Route 124, thus avoiding some of the wetlands. It would have a "moderate" impact on improving travel times but would still have "significant" impacts on natural resources and properties north of Watkins Mill Elementary, according to DPWT.

The last alternative would widen Route 124 and Stedwick and Watkins Mill roads then build the northern third of the highway. That option would have a "moderate" impact on travel times and natural resources but would run through areas with high pedestrian traffic and would have "relatively high" impacts on residential property.

Once a public comment period closes Jan. 31, the five options will be "retained for detailed study," said Bruce Johnston, a division chief of with the county's DPWT. A decision on an alternative route won't be made for several years, he said.

"You can't not build the road

— too much growth was predicated on that road being there," said County Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

M-83 is especially important for Clarksburg, where growth is booming and is projected to multiply to more than 30,000 residents in the next decade. Many residents bought homes there expecting the congestion relief M-83 will provide, said Kathie Hulley, president of the Clarksburg Civic Association.

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"We are well aware of concerns of Montgomery Village, but the alignment has been fixed for a long time. I hate to pit communities against each other, but somehow or another it always comes down to that," she said. "There's not a lot of common ground...Once it's built, people get over it."

For Montgomery Village activist Jane Wilder, the presentation came up short on crucial details that she believes would convince people of just how harsh the highway's impact will be — and was skewed against the alternatives to the master plan alignment.

"They want the master plan [alignment] and they're making it so that everything else has this outrageous impact," she said. "They have an agenda and they're slanting everything toward that."

But before any of the details of exactly where and how M-83 happens, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will weigh in with its environmental impact study, which is expected in spring 2010.