

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Vol. XXXVIII, No. 29

Klinge Road partisans work to sway officials

By **ELIZABETH WIENER**
Current Staff Writer

The battle over Klinge Road heated up again last week, with a contentious public hearing on a draft environmental impact statement that tentatively recommends that the winding seven-tenths-of-a-mile-long stretch through Rock Creek Park be restored for two-way traffic.

Roughly 35 people came to testify at the National Zoo Visitor Center, nearly equally divided about the fate of the long-abandoned road.

Arguments about reopening Klinge to crosstown traffic or converting it to a parkland trail touched on myriad issues: traffic, environmental concerns, cost, legalities and the democratic process, as well as the city's geographical and racial divide.

Meanwhile, the city Department of Transportation has announced it will extend the required 45-day comment period on the controversial draft statement until Sept. 15 "due to the fact that July and August are common vacation months," said See **Klinge**/Page 12

12 WEDNESDAY, JULY 27, 2005

N CH

SIGNAL

From Page 1

a transportation staffer. The comment period had been set to end Aug. 15, yielding a slew of complaints.

Still, many witnesses said the two-minute limitation allotted to testify was too short. A red card repeatedly interrupted speakers in amid often-emotional statements.

Others complained of what they called "blatant" inaccuracies and omissions in the document itself.

The report states, "There are no proposed or existing developments in or adjacent to Klinge Valley in which implementation of any of the proposed alternatives would assist with future development."

Critics described the passage as an alarming misstatement, particularly in the midst of a dispute over a proposal to build six luxury homes on the landmarked Tregaron estate — homes possible only if Klinge Road is reopened to traffic.

"The deck is stacked," complained one witness. "They strikingly omitted multimillion-dollar houses on Tregaron."

Adrienne Coleman, superintendent of Rock Creek Park, delivered an enigmatic statement as the hearing began. Although National Park Service officials previously said they would not yield parkland needed to rebuild the road, Coleman said only that "we are here to listen. We have not made a decision about use of parkland or alternatives."

"This is DDOT's preferred alternative," Coleman said in an interview. "The Park Service has its own perspective. We will make a decision on our preferred alternative" after the comment period is over.

The short stretch of Klinge was closed to vehicular traffic in 1991 after the collapse of portions of the road, abutting a narrow creek that leads into Rock Creek. After a decade of debate, Mayor Anthony Williams recommended converting the roadbed to a trail while repairing the drainage system. But the D.C.

Council in 2003 overruled him, with legislation requiring that the stretch between Porter Street and Cortland Place "be reopened ... for motor vehicle traffic."

The draft environmental impact study, issued in late June by the city Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration, carries out that "purpose": to reconstruct and reopen the seven-tenths-of-a-mile portion — at an estimated cost of \$7.18 million — "as required" by the city council.

"It was not a big swallowing of our previous position," said Transportation Department associate director Ken Laden, whose agency had previously recommended against reopening Klingle. "We were somewhat torn. We saw advantages and disadvantages [to both options]. If all the analyses had shown the road was the wrong thing to do, we wouldn't do it."

Laden also said a restored two-lane road is "the preliminary preferred alternative, basically the way we're leaning at this time. We're still very open, not locked in."

For the next two hours, a stream of witnesses expressed contrasting views.

Ward 4 Council member Adrian Fenty, who has pushed to reopen Klingle, said the closure disrupted traffic for his constituents and "served as a choke point." At-large Council member Carol Schwartz, through an aide, called Klingle "a vital east-west passage ... [that] should have been completed yesterday."

But at-large member Phil Mendelson indicated the council is still split. Reconstructing the road "may cost over \$9 million. But when I talk to transportation experts, they say there will be no significant improvement to traffic."

Residents, too, were split — and not always by geography.

Mary Vogel of upper 16th Street said she analyzed Klingle for the city Office of Planning when the

issue first came up. There was ice in Klingle Valley when the rest of the city was enjoying a warm spring day, she said. "It was so obvious that nature was reclaiming this road and that it should never have been built."

Vogel said the Planning Office at that point weighed in against reopening the road, as did transportation director Dan Tangherlini a few years later, citing, she said, "severe soil erosion, water quality degradation, noise pollution and mixed traffic benefits at best."

Scott Bush, who lives just off Klingle Road in Woodley Park, called the draft environmental impact study "ludicrous on its face." It does not analyze the hiker-biker trail option initially recommended by the mayor and concludes that the additional 4,000 to 5,000 vehicles passing through his neighborhood would have "no health or safety impact" on residential streets and the many children who live there, Bush said.

Christina Jones of Cortland Place said the report ignores the needs of city residents who use bikes, buses or their own feet to travel and considers only the needs of drivers. And of those drivers, said John Campbell of Klingle, "the vast majority are Maryland commuters who pay nothing for our services or the environmental damage they cause."

Jim Dougherty of the D.C. Sierra Club noted that cost estimates for reconstructing Klingle keep rising, from \$3.1 million five years ago to more than \$7 million now. "When you consider it's only seven blocks long, it would probably be the most expensive highway ever built," he said.

Dougherty noted that the environmental impact study proposes a 20-mph speed limit and special lighting — indications, he said, of how dark and dangerous the windy stretch is.

Eric Gilliland, of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, scorned the draft document as a whole: "Its purpose is not to find the best alter-

native for the valley, but the best way to put a road through it."

There was also pointed testimony on the other side.

Joann Crandall of Mount Pleasant said simply, Klingle was a major east-west access road. "There's no justification for keeping it closed," she said. "There are miles of paths and running trails in Rock Creek Park, and now Porter Street gets backed up, polluting the air. Klingle needs to be reopened."

Paul MacKenzie of Shepherd Park cited concerns about "homeland security," saying safe crosstown access could be vital in an emergency. And Klingle is especially useful, he said, because it goes under Connecticut Avenue, unobstructed by cross traffic and stoplights.

William Carroll of Yuma Street said that Klingle is designated as a "collector road," and that it collapsed mainly because of poor maintenance. "Roads shouldn't be closed because of city neglect," he said.

Gabe Fineman, who lives on Porter Street, said Porter has absorbed much of the cross-park traffic since Klingle closed. The old route provided "a balanced highway environment that was crippled [with its closure]. When crossing the park becomes difficult, the city becomes that much more divided," he said.

Susan Keshner of Ward 4 said Klingle was never legally closed, and she called for reopening it in the name of "diversity for the city." She described the opposition as "a few privileged people in Cleveland Park who want to keep it for their own private road and dog walk."

Written comments can be submitted through Sept. 15 to: The Louis Berger Group, 2300 N St. NW, Eighth Floor, Washington D.C. 20037 or via a Web site, www.Klingleroadeis.com. After the comments are evaluated, the participating agencies expect to issue a final environmental impact statement and then a "record of decision" — the formal decision document — by the end of this year.