

NORTHWEST CURRENT

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

Klinge study backs repair of park route

By **ELIZABETH WIENER**
Current Staff Writer

A long-awaited draft environmental impact statement on Klingle Road is finally out, and it lists restoring the old two-lane road through Rock Creek Park to its original alignment as the "preferred alternative."

But the hefty document and the long study that preceded it have been overshadowed by a 2003 vote by the D.C. Council, which in essence dictated the outcome. The council, after acrimonious debate,

voted that the road must be reopened to automobile traffic.

The statement issued by the Federal Highway Administration and District Department of Transportation June 29 says the two-lane option "satisfies the full intent of the purpose and need of this project as set forth by the D.C. City Council."

Non-road alternatives, such as a bike or hiking path, were ruled out early on because of their "inability to meet the project's purpose and need."

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The ultimate fate of Klingle Road is still unclear. The Sierra Club has vowed to sue to block a motorized road through the park, and the National Park Service has not backed away from statements that it will not yield any federal parkland to build a road.

The two-lane option would require use of federal parkland to construct needed retaining walls and would "impact approximately 2.28 acres of Rock Creek Park that are in poor condition," according to the draft environmental statement.

The comment period on the report could be a replay of the acrimonious debate that has gone on ever since the seven-tenths-of-a-mile-long stretch of road was closed to vehicle traffic in 1991. A briefing and public hearing has been scheduled for the evening of July 21 at the Visitor Center of the National Zoo. The comment period is set to end Aug. 15, but some opponents are already pushing for an extension.

The short stretch of road between Porter Street and Cortland Place, running through the park, was blocked off in 1991 due to severe deterioration of the roadway and storm-water problems. At the time, the city simply lacked the funds to repair it.

Prior to the closure, Klingle was used by roughly 3,800 vehicles a day, providing east-west access for residents of Crestwood, Mount Pleasant, Cleveland Park, Woodley Park and other neighborhoods, according to the report. Since 1991, it says, "the closed portion has disrupted the continuity of this circulation route," increasing travel times and sending cars onto other congested local streets.

The roadbed itself has become unsafe for pedestrians, "due to

heaved and failed pavement," while the "uncontrolled storm water" that pours down Klingle Valley has eroded the valley and poured sediment and pollution into Rock Creek, the report states.

But opponents of rebuilding the road have argued that the narrow and vulnerable stream valley should not be used for cars and that opening more roads merely encourages more people to drive. They have urged the city to repair storm-water problems and convert the park road into a pedestrian or bike path.

Two-and-a-half years ago, after a heated lobbying campaign, Mayor Anthony Williams sided with the environmentalists. But he was quickly trumped by the D.C. Council, and the creaky environmental impact process began.

The new draft statement says current conditions in Klingle Valley "are not representative of a small, healthy urban stream." The roadbed is deteriorated and hazardous, many larger trees have fallen, land and stream banks are severely eroded, and uncontrolled storm water contributes to "the degraded water quality" in Rock Creek.

Any road-building alternative would be coupled with extensive work to improve storm-water management, including repairing gutters and drains and restoring Klingle Creek to its natural appearance.

Road options examined included one-way alignments, perhaps with a bike path alongside, or other two-lane configurations. The "preferred alternative" would reconstruct Klingle to its original 22-foot-wide alignment, with two 10-foot-wide travel lanes and a one-foot clearance on each side to accommodate curbs and gutters.

"The proposed project would be beneficial to residents and local commuters by improving safety and enhancing local circulation," the report concludes. "Erosion through-

out Klinge Valley would be greatly improved."

The draft statement also acknowledges, "Opening the road would diminish the park experience of those who currently use the area for jogging, bicycling, dog walking, and those who enjoy the quiet and solitude." But, it argues, "the long-term benefits are anticipated to outweigh any expected adverse impact."

Under federal law, the participating agencies must weigh all comments on the report before publishing a final environmental impact statement, which would presumably clear the way for reconstruction of Klinge Road to begin.

Laurie Collins, a Mount Pleasant activist who has been pushing for the road to reopen, said she was pleased by the report but not surprised at its recommendation. "That's what the legislation required. And there's really no environmental issue," Collins said. "The road's been there for 160 years."

"DDOT wrote the report to cover every base," said Collins, noting there may still be lawsuits challenging its conclusion. "Did they drag their feet? Sure, this is 2005, and the legislation passed in 2003. They were licking their wounds. But now all the studies are done."

But Jason Broehm, chair of the Sierra Club's D.C. chapter, said his

group will challenge the draft report's conclusion and sue if necessary to halt the reconstruction.

"It's a road that doesn't make any sense, from a transportation, environmental or financial standpoint," said Broehm, noting the \$7 million estimate for reconstructing the seven-tenths-of-a-mile stretch.

"The whole [draft environmental impact statement] is predicated on a split council vote," Broehm said. "The Barry and Williams administrations were against rebuilding it, but the council and some community activists forced their hands. Even DDOT would say there's no real transportation reason for rebuilding that road."