

David Cottingham
2914 Kanawha Street NW
Washington, DC 20015

June 14, 2019

Mr. Matt Mullenax
Hagerstown/ Eastern Panhandle MPO
33 West Washington Street
4th Floor, Suite 402
Hagerstown MD 21740

Concerning: Weverton Rail Crossing Feasibility Study

Dear Mr. Mullenax,

First, I want to thank you and the staff at HEPMO for taking the initiative to secure funding for the Weverton Rail Crossing Feasibility Study and directing the study. My personal interest in this study is that I am both a whitewater paddler who likes to take-out from the Potomac River at Weverton and an avid cyclist who has used the crossing to leave the C&O Canal towpath. Weverton has become a more important paddler take-out on the Maryland shore now that CSX has closed off a long-used trail between the Potomac and road at Sandy Hook, MD. As this could become a significant access point between the road and the Potomac, NPS should commit to improving the trail system between the C&O Canal and Potomac for access.

I am disappointed that the Weverton Stakeholders Group (WSG) did not include anyone from the canoeing/kayaking community. I hope that as you finalize the plan and move toward implementing it, you will add one or more representatives of the paddling community to the WSG. The Canoe Cruisers Association (CCA) of the metropolitan Washington area has over 250 members. CCA members regularly paddle the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers and would use an improved take-out at Weverton.

I am not an expert on property boundaries and ownership in the area. Yet, I understand it is complex due to private landholdings along the Potomac. Furthermore I understand that the crossing was formerly a public road to the Weverton community. Wasn't this once a public road managed by Washington County? If so, Washington County should take an active role in decision-making for the project.

CSX considers this a "private crossing". I don't know what that means technically, but if a road previously crossed the tracks, that would seemingly make it access public. I understand designating this a public crossing would open opportunities for public funding of crossing improvements. How could one challenge CSX determination of whether this is a public or private crossing?

From my perspective, and that of many in the paddling community, the lack of parking at Weverton is something I/we hope the next iteration of the plan could address. Paddlers need access to rivers where they put in and take out. Fishers and hunters also need access to the river. They need to park at the points of entrance and exit. At this time, public parking and access on both the Maryland and Virginia sides of the Potomac River are non-existent in this stretch of river. It is out of the question to expect white water paddlers who have navigated the rapid sections of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers to paddle to Brunswick where public boat launch facilities exist. For this and other reasons, having a place to get off the Potomac near Harpers Ferry is essential to whitewater boating. Now that National Park Service has designated the Potomac as a Natural Heritage River, they should be assisting HEPMO and others secure public access to the river.

The Feasibility Study succinctly points out the need for a safe railroad track crossing at Weverton. A safer situation is warranted for all people who cross there – fishermen, cyclists, hikers, casual walkers, and paddlers.

I am disappointed that CSX has not offered more in terms of measures it could undertake to improve the current at grade crossing until such time as one of the proposed alternatives is implemented. CSX could take measures to slow trains, sound alert horns, and other steps to improve safety there. I consider it imperative that CSX not restrict access to the C&O Canal NHP and Appalachian Trail while discussions continue to improve safety conditions at Weverton.

Discussion of Rail Crossing Conceptual Designs

HEPMO and the engineering team have done a good job assessing the needs and offering two alternative solutions to have a safe crossing. Initially I would have suggested that the at-grade crossing would suffice by meeting the public's need at the least cost. Yet, upon further discussion with fellow paddlers and cyclists, I've concluded that the bridge, while more expensive, is the path to take. I base this on experience of fellow paddlers who could not cross the tracks at Weverton for more than 30 minutes while a train sat idle (essentially parked) there. Having cyclists or pedestrians who are going from the Canal and river to their cars parked along Keep Tryst Road wait 30 or more minutes, sometimes in inclement weather, for a parked train will no doubt frustrate them. When they get frustrated they might be inclined to do stupid things, like walk around or under a train. This would be an invitation to someone getting hurt badly. Furthermore, the illustrations show gates and fences at other at-grade crossings.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime decision. If implemented properly, it will solve the safety issue once and for all. It is worth spending a relatively little more money up front for long-term peace of mind and safety for the public.

Parking

I urge HEPMO and your contractors to work with Washington County, Maryland DOT, NPS, CSX, and other government entities to expand parking along Keep Tryst Road. Parking is extremely limited for Canal and river users, including fishermen, hunters, and boaters, here and along the C&O Canal NHP. The use data document that Weverton is an important regional access point for many types of recreational users – hikers, fishermen, hunters, cyclists, paddlers, etc. This is an opportunity for a well-designed parking area to be integrated into a river access plan. As the photographs in the feasibility study show, and my personal experience validates, there are not enough parking spaces at Keep Tryst Road. That leads people to park illegally or in dangerous places. Parking should be part of the overall project design with full cooperation of involved government agencies and CSX.

Next Steps

I encourage HEPMO and others to add members of the paddling community to your WSG prior to you finalizing the Feasibility Study. Members of the CCA are local and ready to participate in any way that can help. Please let us know how we can best assist.

We look forward to seeing the comments you received on this draft and the next reiteration. Having a feasibility is but one step in a long process of further planning and implementation. Don't hesitate to ask for assistance and input as you and other agencies proceed. We want to help because having safe access to rivers and the C&O Canal NHP is critically important to me personally, the greater Washington metro area paddling community, cyclists, fishermen, hunters, casual walkers and all others.

Sincerely,

David Cottingham

Email: david.cottingham@starpower.net

