

# Conservation Montgomery

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## Finding our Voice

*Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors*

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### **A Roadmap for Pedestrian Safety**

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Conservation Montgomery Board of Directors

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**M**ost people might be surprised to learn that pedestrians are struck by moving vehicles on a daily basis here in Montgomery County. And as the county grows its urban centers, more people will find themselves in the crosshairs of traffic. That is why we need to increase our public safety measures, our vigilance against aggressive driving and continue pressuring the state of Maryland to view state roads as more than a means for moving cars.

Over the previous five years, an average of 1.2 pedestrian-related incidents occur every day in Montgomery County. This number may seem insignificant in a jurisdiction of nearly one million people, but to the 435 individuals who are annually affected, the issue can be a serious matter of life and death.

In my neighborhood of South Silver Spring, we have long struggled with the impassable sidewalks due to new construction, which create dangerous situations for thousands of residents who routinely walk to the Metro station or the neighborhood businesses. The problem has been so bad that we are still dealing with an inoperable crosswalk due to construction of a residential building that was completed over one year ago.

To its credit, the county has devoted millions of dollars to a pedestrian safety initiative, which has facilitated the construction of new sidewalks, street lights and traffic calming measures. But that funding has been cut by one-third, from \$4.96 million in FY 2010 to \$3.17 in FY 2012. While funding cuts for important programs have been par for the course in the past two budget cycles and are likely to continue in the short term, there is cause for concern about its long-term impacts.

The pedestrian safety program is focused mainly on the county's urban cores of Bethesda, Silver Spring, Rockville and Wheaton— a natural choice given the amount of foot traffic in those high-density areas. And as these areas continue to grow, there are a host of vehicular related issues that will need even more attention.

The biggest barrier to increasing protections for those walking in these downtown areas is that most of the main arteries are state roads. Georgia Avenue, Routes 355 & 29, and East-West Highway are all controlled by the state, with the improvement of any requiring approval by Maryland's State Highway Administration (SHA). Unfortunately, many pedestrian safety advocates in the county believe that state officials are more concerned with keeping vehicles flowing at higher speeds on their roads than allowing safer passage for pedestrians. SHA cannot continue to apply a one-size fits all approach to the state's urban communities that is only well suited to suburban and rural areas.

Another area of concern relates to the influx of empty nesters and older residents who have already begun selling their single family homes in favor of relocating to these walkable downtown neighborhoods. According to the latest census, residents over 65-years-old represent 12% of the county's general population, a number that will only grow. To properly plan for this shift, greater sidewalk access needs to be created and timers at signalized intersections need to be refined to accommodate varied walking speeds. Not everyone can cross the street at the fast rates currently in effect.

It is also extremely important to note that nearly half of all pedestrian related accidents are not the driver's fault, but that of the individuals who jaywalk or ignore cross signals. Jeff Dunckel, pedestrian safety coordinator for Montgomery County, notes that police reports traditionally reflect a 50-50 fault ratio between drivers and pedestrians in all county incidents, though that figure has recently increased to 60-40 against drivers. We all bear responsibility for our actions, whether we're walking or behind the wheel.

All this belies the importance of information and education on safety precautions in downtown areas. As the county begins discussions on the upcoming five-year capital improvement budget, we should strongly consider using funds to restripe crosswalks, improve sidewalk access and recalibrate signals at intersections in our central business districts. These steps would help provide individuals and drivers with a clear roadmap for pedestrian safety.

*Evan is the president of the South Silver Spring Neighborhood Association and serves on the Board of Directors of Conservation Montgomery.*

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