Arboretum Bridge and Trail Project: Overview, Benefits, and Background

Rendering courtesy of DDOT and NPS.

Project Overview + Benefits

The Arboretum Bridge and Trail Project completes the 28-mile Anacostia River Trail system, first introduced 20 years ago in the 2003 Anacostia Waterfront Initiative. **The project is situated on National Park Service lands, and therefore underwent extensive Federal Environmental review**, led by the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) in partnership with the National Park Service (NPS). The National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) is holding a hearing on November 2nd, to allow the project to proceed from the Design stage to the Implementation stage, so it can begin construction in 2026, and become a reality by 2028. The proposed location of the bridge abutments results in the least adverse impact on surrounding wetlands, contaminated land in Kenilworth Park South, and potential archaeological sites (FAQs).

This project will:

- **Fill a critical gap in the region's trail network to connect District residents and neighborhoods who are most-impacted by historic underinvestment,[1]and create a connection between Ward 5 and Ward 7**, directly linking the National Arboretum, Kenilworth Park North, and adjacent neighborhoods including Mayfair, Kenilworth-Parkside, River Terrace, Eastland Gardens, and Deanwood.
- **Ensure people of all ages, abilities have safe, healthy recreation and transportation options, and create a great place for neighborhoods to thrive.** The project will be fully ADA compliant for both trail and river users.
- **Shorten trip times, and enhance connectivity to the entire regional trails network for residents** who live in surrounding neighborhoods to multiple public rail and bus transit lines, employment centers, schools, colleges and universities, grocery stores and retail centers, health care facilities, and recreational opportunities.
    - **Currently people getting around without a car can only cross the Anacostia River 1.5 miles south, to Benning Road, or 2.5 miles north, to the pedestrian bridge at Bladensburg Waterfront Park to cross the river.** These crossings are next to high-speed vehicle traffic, and feel unsafe to many users, and the increased distances impact travel times or simply make the trip impossible.
- **Provide direct community access to Federally-owned outdoor gems that were long isolated from the neighborhoods they were in within DC, including:** The U.S. National Arboretum, Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, Anacostia Park, and Langston Golf Course, in addition to connecting residents and visitors to the many District-owned parks and recreational assets along the Anacostia River.
- **Advance the District of Columbia's Equity, Environmental and Economic Development goals:** The proposed alignment is in accordance with moveDC, the District's multimodal long-range transportation plan. DDOT has plans to connect the trail to other safe corridors for walking and biking, including from the Arboretum

[1] DC reports that Wards 8, 7, and 5 had the highest incidences of reported traffic fatalities and injuries between 2017-2021, while at the same time, households in Ward 7 and 8 also had the highest rates of households in DC who live without access to a car (43.1% in Ward 8, and 37.8% in Ward 7).

Gate to Maryland Avenue, which will add important connectivity when the Arboretum is closed, though that connection is not part of this project.

Community Engagement: Creating a Shared Vision

Community members have been engaged in the project process from 2017 onward, after the project had initially been discussed as part of the AWI process (details below) between March 2000 to Fall 2003.

- DDOT coordinated with numerous stakeholders and agencies with authority over other Anacostia River projects which were consulted during the Environmental Assessment process. The project team continues to engage with residents, ANC Commissioners, civic organization leaders, businesses, and other stakeholders to provide periodic updates on the status of the project.
- Watch the recording of the most recent July 2023 DDOT project meeting.
- Review the May 2019 Meeting report for a sample of the public outreach and engagement activities conducted around the project including distributing approximately 2,000 information cards/door knockers, electronic communications, social media, and signage in 12 public locations, leading up to the public meeting and comment period.

Review responses to frequently asked questions including:

- ***Q: How was the location for this project determined, and were other locations considered?*** *A: Excerpt: …the need of this project is to provide a link across the river for the neighborhoods north of Benning Road, and specifically provide direct and safe access from the eastern side of the river to the National Arboretum and western side. The Anacostia Waterfront Initiative Framework Plan from 2003 first identified the need for a pedestrian bridge at this location to connect trails on either side of the river, and the proposed alignment is in accordance with moveDC, DC's 2014 transportation master plan, which is the result of multiple planning studies that carefully vet needs and feasibility. Additionally, the proposed location of the bridge abutments results in the least adverse impact on surrounding wetlands, contaminated land in Kenilworth Park South and potential archaeological sites.*

- ***Q: Why is a clear span not being considered?*** *A: A clean span, meaning a bridge supported only on abutments and having no intermediate piers, is not feasible for several reasons. First, the Environmental Assessment states that a cable-stayed bridge, which appears similar to a suspension bridge, would be highly visible and would be inappropriate in a park setting. The US Commission of Fine Arts has also made strong objections to large structures that would visually compete against the park setting. They are in support of the currently proposed option as it best compliments the natural setting. Second, the bridge is constrained by the US Arboretum on the west and trail alignment on the east. A clear span would require much larger abutments to be placed on the river banks and would require much larger construction equipment on the river banks and within the river. Finally, the currently proposed option will minimize excavation to protect the natural environment from potential pollution reaching the river.*

- ***Q: What about river user safety?*** *A: Bridge layout options were evaluated against several factors outlined in a matrix. Among factors such as Pier Footprint, Constructability, and Bridge Profile, the River User Experience factor, i.e. safety, was a key consideration in the decision process. Based on feedback received from the rowing community on the evaluation, the original bridge design was revised. The recommended design now includes two approximately 132 ft long spans between piers that can accommodate river users. One of these spans, provides the 80 ft navigable channel as required by the US Coast Guard. To accommodate these larger spans, the bridge piers have been aligned to avoid primary rowing lanes as provided by the rowing community. The revised design has essentially one bridge pier in the river if it is assumed that the pier closest to the US Arboretum is placed in shallow and generally unnavigable waters as expressed by the rowing community and the east pier is constructed integral with the sea wall. The bridge will also include navigation lighting as required. The*

project team continues to discuss other possible safety measures such as pier buffers, shallow water signage and railing lighting options.

- ***Q: How has the project team considered situation and debris build up that could be caused by placing piers in the river?"*** *A: Excerpt: The bridge is designed in conformance with the approved Environmental Assessment (December 2011) and FONSI (June 2012) and the design team explored several alternatives and due to the shallow river depth and site location; channel intrusion, bridge footprint, impacts to the hydraulic efficiency of the channel, debris collection under the bridge, and future maintenance were key factors in determining the superstructure depth and profile.*
  Further, NPS and Commission of Fine Arts have instructed DDOT to design the lowest profile bridge possible so that the viewshed obstruction will be minimized. While a clear span bridge would remove obstructions from the river, its design would directly conflict with viewshed preservation due to the height of the vertical support structures required to support such a span. A clear span is also technically infeasible given the constrained site and adjacent landfill. Bridge pier spacing and orientation is designed to prevent debris accumulation during construction and upon completion…

  During construction, there would likely be a barge on the river and additional disturbance of the riverbed during installation of the pilings; however, the EA found that these impacts would be of short duration and not likely measurable…

  In addition, DOEE's Anacostia River Sediment Project is currently investigating remedial and restoration efforts to treat sediment in the river. This effort includes gathering information from all river users to help establish a recreational depth for the river. It should also be noted that the United States Army Corp of Engineers (USACE) Baltimore District's Potomac and Anacostia Rivers Drift Collection and Removal Unit operates out of dock facilities adjacent to the Washington, DC, Navy Yard and conducts year-round drift removal operations. The Anacostia River area extends from the head of tide (Bladensburg Bridge) to its confluence with the Potomac River at Fort McNair. The collection and removal effort is intensified following storms, extreme high tides and high river flows. More information can be found on the 2019 Drift Collection and Removal Unit Factsheet: https://cdm16021.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16021coll11/id/543

- ***Q: What are the effects upon wildlife in the vicinity of the project?*** *A: Excerpt: The bridge is designed in conformance with the approved Environmental Assessment (EA) (December 2011) and FONSI (June 2012). The EA states that the project would result in short-term minor adverse impacts on wildlife during the construction period and long-term minor adverse impacts during the operation of the trail due to increased visitor accessibility. The EA states that following construction activities, it is expected that any displaced species would likely return to the area.*

  Construction of the proposed trail through areas that are currently undisturbed natural wildlife habitat would result in the loss of those habitats; however, impacts would be minor because of the relatively small area being affected when compared to Anacostia Park as a whole. Additionally, the EA states that there would be short-term minor adverse impacts on those species inhabiting wetland areas that lie within the footprint of the trail.

  The EA finds that cumulative impacts on wildlife and wildlife habitat would be long-term, minor, and adverse, with the proposed alignment having a noticeable contribution to adverse impacts. With this is mind, the design team undertook a bridge type study and evaluated several bridge types, and the selected option creates the least impact to the environment. For example, clear spans would require larger footprint and excavation, and a truss

would require larger piers. The preferred option is streamlined and creates the lowest environmental impact, especially during construction due to minimized use of heavy equipment. During construction, measures will be taken to mitigate any adverse effects upon wildlife, such as; vegetation clearing will only occur outside the breeding season for birds, occupied bird nests will not be disturbed, and work will be coordinated to avoid impacting resident amphibians during their breeding seasons.

The EA requires that avoidance and minimization measures shall be applied throughout the project design and construction to reduce impacts on sensitive resources. As a result, the trail will be routed to minimize disrupting existing trees and will be landscaped with native plants. Final site restoration shall include seeding all pervious areas that were disturbed by construction.

- ***Q: The Environmental Assessment was carried out in 2011. Will this be updated?*** *A: NPS's NEPA Handbook addresses the scenario of old and outdated analyses, recommending that the agency complete a memo to file "when an NPS NEPA review was previously completed for a specific proposal, but its implementation was delayed because of unavailability of funds or other reasons." This memo to file is meant to "document the adequacy of the existing NEPA review" by considering a number of questions, including "Are the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts associated with the action as currently proposed the same or essentially the same as those described in the existing NEPA document and associated decision document?" NPS has considered these questions and does not believe that there have been any significant changes since the Environmental Assessment was undertaken. A memo will be provided with further information. The Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact documents, which include a public scoping and comment period, can be found on the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment site here: https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?parkID=428&projectID=25872*

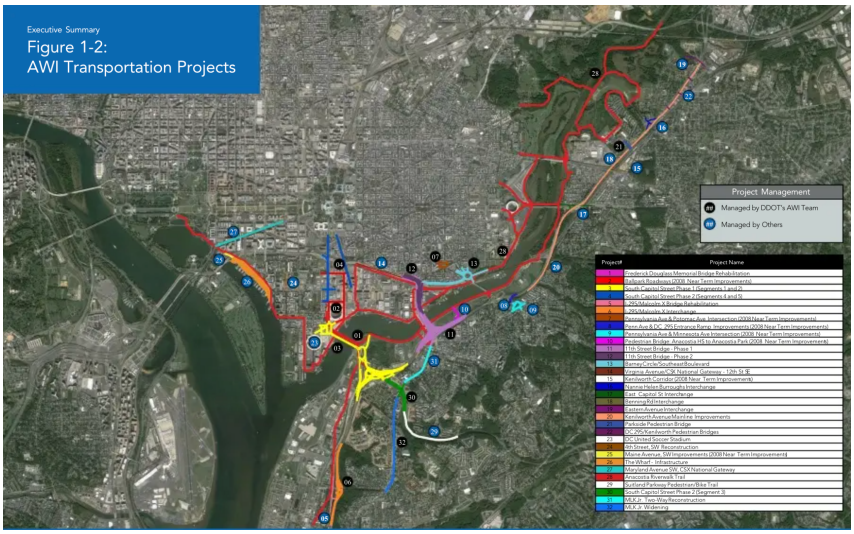
Broader Context: Anacostia Waterfront Revitalization and Restoration

The **Anacostia Waterfront Initiative (AWI)** was "initiated in 2000 to transform the shores of the Anacostia River into a world-class waterfront. Led by the District of Columbia government with support from 19 regional and federal agency partners… the AWI promises a clean river environment, new parks and other recreational facilities, more job-creating commercial centers, revitalized residential neighborhoods, and multi-modal transportation options." See the 15 year progress update toward the AWI released in 2018 here.

- In 2003, the AWI put forth a visionary and ambitious agenda for the revitalization of the Anacostia waterfront as a world-class destination and the center of 21st century Washington, DC. The AWI Plan set in motion the implementation of a comprehensive blueprint for transformation including new mixed-income neighborhoods, environmental restoration, transportation infrastructure, enhanced public access, new connected parks, and cultural destinations.
- **The Arboretum Bridge and Trail project is one of sixteen (16) District Department of Transportation (DDOT) transportation projects that serve as the "spine" that supports the overall Anacostia Waterfront Initiative**. These projects will reconnect communities on both sides to the river and to each other by providing better mobility – for walkers, cyclists, transit riders, and drivers.

The preparation and completion of the Anacostia Waterfront Framework Plan was informed by contributions of more than 5,000 District of Columbia citizens and Anacostia River stakeholders who participated in the public meetings, workshops and briefings conducted by the Office of Planning.

- AWI Public Planning Workshops and Presentations took place between March 2000 and Fall 2003, including **more than 40 events**.
- The AWI Citizen Advisory Group lists more than **120 participants**.
- **District of Columbia participating agencies include** *the Office of Planning (Designated Coordination Agency for the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative), Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, Department of Transportation, Department of Parks and Recreation, Department of Health, Department of Housing and Community Development, Department of Corrections. and the Government of the District of Columbia General Services Administration.*
- The Anacostia Waterfront Initiative Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the **DC Government and 19 federal agencies**.



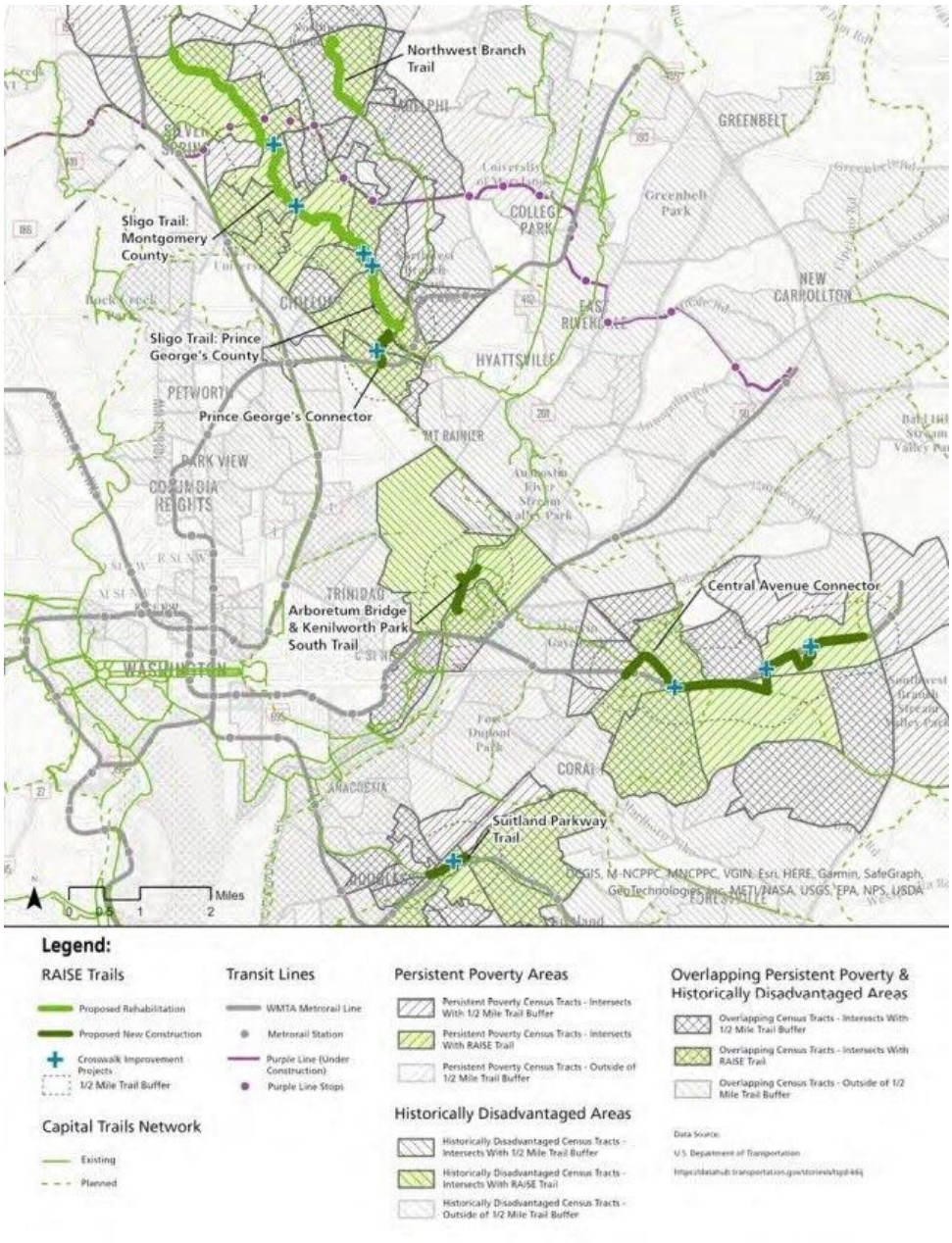
Anacostia Waterfront Initiative Projects. AWI Transportation Master Plan - Feb 2014 Update.

Related Federal Funding: $25M RAISE Grant Application

Working with the Prince George's County Office of the County Executive and Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, DDOT **secured $25 million in federal funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation to address the urgent and critical need to rehabilitate existing trails and construct new multi-use paths** to fill key gaps in the regional bicycle and pedestrian trail network in June 2023.

The funding will help build the Arboretum Bridge to help complete the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail, rehabilitate Sligo Creek Trail and Northwest Branch Trail, and support construction of the Central Avenue Connector Trail, Suitland Parkway Trail, and Prince George's County Connector.

- The total package of nonmotorized transportation trail network improvements will include seven miles of new construction, eight miles of trail rehabilitation, and safety improvements at nine intersections and at-grade crossings.
- There will be new trail connections to four Metrorail stations; in total, the project will be within a half mile of nine rail stations, including three future Purple Line light rail stations.
- The projects will close gaps, rehabilitate and upgrade substandard facilities, increase carrying capacity, enhance safety, improve access for people with physical disabilities, and expand access to the Capital Trails Network for underserved communities.



The $25M award represents 34 percent of the $73 million total cost for this project. This investment maximizes the economic and recreation benefit of existing infrastructure, while significantly mitigating financial risk to the federal government.

Significant delays to the project process could put the RAISE grant funds at risk of expiring before they can be fully obligated. The grant requires agencies to stick to a relatively short timeline to complete infrastructure projects: all of the grant funding must be obligated on a contract by September 2027 and expended by September 2032.