

September 20, 2023

TO: Building & Planning Committee

**FROM: Jillian Dierks, Senior Planner, Department of Building and Planning
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SUBJECT: Main Line Greenway

BACKGROUND

Many communities across the country are facing challenges to increasing bicycling access, safety, and mobility. The Circulation Element of the Township’s Comprehensive Plan addressed this challenge by calling to increase bicycle mobility through the utilization of the Township’s existing network of low traffic volume, neighborhood streets as a safer alternative to bicycling on heavier traveled primary and secondary arterials. A ‘Bicycle Level of Service Map’ developed as part of the Comprehensive Plan inventoried and classified every roadway within the Township from A+ (low stress – low traffic volumes and speeds) to E (high stress – high traffic volumes and speeds).



After the Comprehensive Plan was adopted, staff, along with local bicycle advocates including representatives from the Narberth Cycling Club and the Philadelphia Bicycle Coalition, organized dozens of community events and group rides to identify a potential low stress local bicycling network extending from the Cynwyd Heritage Trail in the east to Stoneleigh Garden in the west. Riders provided feedback regarding connectivity, convenience, and perceived safety of various streets. The resulting Main Line Greenway (MLG) was developed and refined through coordination with the Township’s Traffic Safety and Public Works staff.

The MLG utilizes a bicycle greenway concept, where locally designated roadways shared by cars and bicyclists are combined with multi-use trails and easements through institutional campuses to form a safe, attractive bicycling mobility network. The MLG was designed to cater to cyclists of all levels, from recreational riders to daily commuters, serving as a vital link connecting various destinations within the Township, including residential areas, schools, parks, and commercial districts. The MLG has steadily gained community usage through Lower Merion, Narberth and parts of Haverford Township as demand for bicycling has increased and through word of mouth and group rides.

Staff has been actively engaging with the Traffic Safety Unit and the Public Works Department on the development of the MLG to ensure that user safety and roadway improvements along the route are considered as ridership on the network expands. Staff has also been working with Narberth Borough to ensure that the timing of the project is aligned to avoid a gap in the planned network.

Earlier this year, staff began a collaboration with Narberth Borough and the Montgomery County Planning Commission to establish a formal framework for the various multi-modal initiatives taking shape within our Township with the Active Transportation Plan (ATP). Staff is actively working to align the progress of the MLG with the overall development of the ATP, recognizing its crucial role in enhancing our community's multi-modal transportation options.

The establishment of the MLG aligns with the following policies, plans, and identified Board Priorities:

- Township's Transportation Demand Management (TDM) goal of reducing traffic congestion by helping community members meet their travel needs using different modes.
- Sustainability Plan Strategy (MO4) to increase multimodal access and promote sustainable modes of transportation and ensure safe and comfortable access for cyclists of all ages and abilities.
- Identified Board priorities aimed at the creation of amenities within the Township and enhancing quality of life for residents by providing active transportation options, recreational opportunities, and improved accessibility and traffic calming.

Furthermore, the 2022 Community Needs Assessment highlighted a strong desire among community members to have access to outdoor recreation amenities. However, the Assessment also noted that the Township faces a significant challenge in meeting this demand due to limited available land for creating new recreational spaces for residents. Establishment of a greenway allows the Township to utilize existing resources for outdoor recreation and increases access to those resources within the community. Additionally, the results of the 2023 National Citizen Survey (NCS) showed that in terms of benchmarks, which are the comparisons of results from other municipalities across the nation, one of the only areas where Lower Merion ratings are lower than the average is in ease of bicycle travel, which is a continuing trend from the 2016 survey.



THE MLG PHASED NETWORK

The MLG network can be divided into Eastern and Western sections. Each section has a Northern and a Southern route to provide East/West connectivity with crossing Montgomery and Lancaster Avenues. The Eastern Sections run from the Cynwyd Heritage Trail/City Avenue District to Haverford College. The Western Sections run from Haverford College to Bryn Mawr and Stoneleigh. Each section is approximately 6 miles in length. A map of the entire route is attached.

The Eastern Section of the MLG primarily utilizes municipal roads and trails, but also utilizes public trail easements through West Laurel Cemetery, properties within the City Avenue District, and Maybrook. The Eastern Section links several public schools (Merion and Cynwyd Elementary), parks (Cynwyd Heritage Trail, Merion Botanical, Shortridge, South Ardmore, Vernon Young and Linwood), and train stations (Overbrook, Cynwyd, Merion, Narberth, Wynnewood and Ardmore). The low stress route traverses the higher stress roadways of Montgomery and Lancaster Avenue at signalized intersections. The Eastern Section of the MLG also traverses Narberth Borough in several locations. Staff notes that Narberth Borough Council unanimously passed a resolution to support the Main Line Greenway in April of 2023 and has allocated funding for signage.

The Amtrak/SEPTA regional rail corridor, Lancaster and Montgomery Avenues create physical obstructions restricting low stress connectivity on municipal roads west of Haverford College. The Western Section will require cooperation from several institutions to permit bike access. Staff is in discussions with several of these institutions regarding the benefits and potential concerns. Haverford College has a long-standing desire to improve connection via bicycle to Bryn Mawr College and has taken a lead in helping to foster conversations between institutional partners. The ongoing Active Transportation Plan will provide the framework for these conversations.

PLANNED NETWORK IMPROVEMENTS

One of the elements that makes the bicycle greenway model so desirable is that it would utilize existing low-stress roadways, so that only signage, targeted infrastructure improvements, and educational outreach are needed to establish the network. No bicycle lane striping or delineators are planned, since these minor roadways have lower volumes of traffic and speeds, eliminating the need for separating roadway users and minimizing any needed physical improvements.

The 2024 Capital Improvement Plan (Project #4477 - Bicycle and Pedestrian Path System Implementation) includes \$35,000 for the purpose of designing, fabricating, and installing wayfinding signage. These signs will serve to offer clear navigation guidance for cyclists within the current street network of the Eastern Section. Staff will be diligently working to ensure that the design and placement of the signage consider Lower Merion's longstanding commitment to high-quality signage aesthetics for neighborhood signage.

The greenway concept is flexible and can potentially be expanded to other sections of the Township including Penn Wynne and Belmont Hills. As use of the MLG increases and network expansion are considered, staff will monitor needs and coordinate with the Traffic Safety Unit and Public Works for any infrastructure improvements that may be needed to enhance the user experience.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Board support the preliminary concept for the Main Line Greenway.