Reflecting on Rustic Roads

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The Montgomery County Rustic Roads Advisory Committee in March published “20 Years of Rustic Roads, Status and Reflections on the Montgomery County Rustic Roads Program, 1996 – 2016.”

The report looks back through the 20 years since the program started in 1996 and contains a call to action, warning that, “While the program has proven to be broadly popular, the roads that are protected by the program have been incrementally changing and losing the character that makes them special. The stated purpose of the Rustic roads Program is the preservation of the rustic roads. To accomplish this, the program must be strengthened and it must be supported at the top levels of our county agencies.”

Rustic roads are described by Montgomery Planning as “roads in the Agricultural Reserve or rural parts of Montgomery County that exemplify the rural and agricultural character of the area. Exceptional rustic roads are roads that have such unusual and pleasing character that preservation of these roads is highly desirable.”

POTOMAC RESIDENTS don’t have to go far to enjoy the scenic beauty of some of the county’s rustic roads. A part of South Glen Road, Glen Mill Road, Boswell Lane, Glen Road and Stoney Creek Road, all in Potomac are designated Rustic Roads with the section of the Glen Roads where they come together designated as Exceptional Rustic Roads. The program is broadly supported by county residents, but there are problems, according to the report. Those include road closures, “unsympathetic” bridge replacement, changing pavement materials and road widenings. In order to maintain Rustic Road designation, roads need to keep their original look and feel.

“There was a reason these roads were included,” Caroline Taylor, executive director of Montgomery Countryside Alliance said. “They are part of the experience of getting to the Agricultural Reserve.” Taylor emphasized the importance of balance when it comes to maintaining Rustic Roads and safety. “Public education is part of it,” she said. “They are narrower roads, some are gravel and drivers may encounter farm equipment on them. These are things to watch.”

Another negative impacting the Rural Roads program, according to the report is that its administration has been “notably weak.” “The County Code needs to be updated to support the committee and to improve coordination between agencies. The Executive regulation needs to be updated to fully support the preservation intent of the program and reflect the County road Code provisions for Context Sensitive Design,” the report says.

In order to assure the program continues as a way to support the County’s agricultural, historic and scenic areas, the report makes eight recommendations ranging from a renewed commitment to the preservation of the designated roads, to “Clear and full support from our top County officials and agencies down to the boots on the ground staff.”

“We applaud the efforts of the rural roads Advisory Committee in putting together this report,” Taylor said. “Most importantly the imperative of additional work. We think the Rural Roads Advisory Committee should be given more strength…we are hoping the county will embrace the difference of protecting the country roads differently from regular country roads.”

The report contains many beautiful photos of Montgomery County rural roads and can be read through the Montgomery County Planning website: montgomeryplanning.org.