

A proposal for a "belt of green" hiking trail
that would make an 11-mile circuit
around the outer belt of green
that surrounds Greenbelt, Maryland

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Greenbelt is surrounded by a nearly complete belt of forest that is owned primarily by the town, county, state, and federal government. Over the past 80 years, millions of dollars of public funds have been expended to acquire over 1,700-acres of green space and establish trails and other outdoor recreation facilities in this area. This green space has the potential for enriching the lives of the 50,000 people who live within a 2-mile radius of the center of Greenbelt.

The proposed "belt of green" trail would serve a number of purposes, such as to bring equity to the various neighborhoods of Greenbelt and to bring unity to the town by connecting these neighborhoods.¹ This trail would increase the proportion of residents who could walk in large parcels of forest near their home, which is an urban-planning metric believed to improve quality of life.

Trails already exist along half of this proposed 11-mile circuit, so a modest investment in new trails could increase the utilization of the existing green infrastructure. Building a trail along any one of the missing segments of the 11-mile circuit would bring benefits in terms of access to green space.

If the public and local officials decided that a complete circuit trail were desirable, it would likely take a decade or longer to complete it. One reason that a long-term effort would be required has to do with one 300-foot segment of the 11-mile circuit. At this location, the circuit trail would have to pass either under or over the Capital Beltway (aka, Route 495). Here, the trail would exit Greenbelt Park, owned by the National Park Service, and enter city-owned forestland next to the Sunrise Tract of the Greenbelt Forest Preserve. If a bridge were built so that the Beltway could to pass over the trail and a tributary to Still Creek, the construction cost would likely be \$1 million or more. The

¹ Greenbelt West currently has 0.6 miles of trails (next to Greenbelt Station). The proposed belt-of-green trail would add 1.5 miles of trails to Greenbelt West and link it with Old Greenbelt and with the extensive trails along Indian Creek south of Greenbelt Road. Greenbelt East currently has 0.9 miles of trails (in Schrom Hills Park). The proposed belt-of-green trail would add 1.5 miles of trails to Greenbelt East and link it with Old Greenbelt and National Park Service land in Greenbelt Park.

bridge construction cost, while it may seem high, should be weighed against the fact such a bridge would give the thousands of residents of Greenbelt East easy access to 1000 acres of National Park Service forest and the fact that millions of dollars of public funds have already been invested in acquiring the regional mesh of green space.

Efforts to establish a belt-of-green trail around Greenbelt would draw attention to the successes of three environment-related initiatives. First, the trail would celebrate Greenbelt's New Deal heritage, as planners during the Great Depression emphasized the importance of the town being surrounded by a belt of green, not just patches of green here or there. In this regard, it would be especially appropriate if the trail were a complete circuit.

Second, the belt-of-green trail would celebrate the citizen/government collaboration to protect the three watersheds whose streams surround Greenbelt. The three watersheds are named after Beaverdam Creek, Still Creek, and Indian Creek. Segments of the proposed belt-of-green trail pass along the banks of streams in all three of these watersheds. These watersheds flow into the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River, the Potomac River, and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay.

Third, the belt-of-green trail would celebrate the success of a regional-planning goal of preserving several "green wedges" emanating from Washington DC and growing wider as they extend further from the urban center. Since the 1960s, regional planners intended that one of these green wedges begin at Greenbelt and extend outward to include the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center and Patuxent Wildlife Refuge. Much of this green wedge, including the area of the proposed belt-of-green trail, is currently classified as a priority conservation area at the county and state level.