

Rt. 601 Pedestrian Safety Virtual Meeting
Supervisor Tony Buffington Aide, BRMCA and LCPCC
3-4 pm; August 12, 2021

Supervisor Tony Buffington (Loudoun County Blue Ridge District Supervisor, Loudoun County Board of Supervisors) requested insight on how mountain residents would respond to the idea of creating a natural surface trail adjacent to the Rt. 601 road. This proposed trail would connect the VDOT parking lot (adjacent to the Rt. 7 and Rt. 601 intersection) to Bear Chase Brewing Company (BCBC). He is concerned about pedestrian safety along Rt. 601 and wishes to explore possible solutions to this growing hazard.

Of note, Supervisor Buffington has created a collaborative Working Group to explore solutions to the Rt. 7 and Rt. 601 intersection issues. This group consists of: Ms. Christi Maple (Legislative Aide to Supervisor Buffington), Loudoun County's Department of Transportation and Capital Infrastructure staff, Loudoun County Sheriff's Office, Virginia State Police, both VDOT Northern Virginia and Staunton District offices (NoVa covers Loudoun County, while Staunton covers Clarke County), Clarke County Administrator Chris Boies, U.S. National Park Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, and Bear's Den representatives. The group has met monthly since December of 2020 to discuss opportunities for improved vehicular and pedestrian safety for this intersection.

Virtual Meeting Participants:

- Ms. Christi Maple, Legislative Aide to Supervisor Buffington
- Ms. Margit Royal, Blue Ridge Mountain Civic Association (BRMCA) representative to the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition (LCPCC); BRMCA – immediate past President
- Mr. Scott Seeberger, BRMCA Land Use/Commercialization Committee – Chairman

The meeting commenced with Ms. Maple explaining that Supervisor Buffington wishes to explore possible solutions to the growing pedestrian safety issue on the northern section of Rt. 601 as it approaches Rt. 7. He does not wish to facilitate any private business.

Mr. Seeberger (BRMCA) began and emphasized that it would be nearly impossible to build such a path without also facilitating a business – specifically BCBC. Additional concerns relayed:

- Proposed path would commence from a public parking lot (VDOT) directly to a business.
- Proposed path would be built with tax payer dollars, ultimately facilitating a business.
- West side of Rt. 601 from the VDOT parking lot to Bear's Den is owned by the U.S. Government (Appalachian Trail - AT). It seems unlikely that the U.S. National Park Service and/or Appalachian Trail Conservancy would condone a path across public land to facilitate access to a business, but as note above, both have been included in monthly meetings.

- East side of Rt. 601 is privately owned. Even if land owners agreed to a path on their property, pedestrians would still be required to cross Rt. 601 near the Rt. 7 and Rt. 601 intersection.

Ms. Margit Royal (BRMCA representative to the LCPCC) added:

- This problem did not exist until the establishment of BCBC.
- A west side Rt. 601 path from the VDOT parking lot to BCBC would still require pedestrians to cross Rt. 601 near the brewery, where vehicles are entering and exiting, and possibly backed up beyond the entrance/exit.
- Hikers already access a path from the VDOT parking lot to the AT and Bear's Den.
- VDOT should consider installing digital speed signs approaching the Rt. 601 intersection on Rt. 7 advising motorists if they are exceeding the posted 55 MPH speed limit. Similar signs are installed along Rt. 17 in Fauquier County between Rt. 50 and I-66. Although this may not directly affect pedestrian traffic on Rt. 601, it still alerts motorists of proper speed control approaching this dangerous intersection.

Ms. Maple raised the possibility that loosening of Covid pandemic restrictions resulted in a surge of traffic and patrons to the BCBC and AT. Ms. Royal agreed that there may be some contribution of the pandemic situation to the swell of patrons, but noted that the reputation of BCBC via advertising has grown over the past three years, as well as the fact that they advertise Bear Chase Manor (Vrbo on site) for weddings, reunions, etc. If Covid indeed is a major factor in the swell of traffic to these venues, all the more reason to step back and observe over the coming months before investing additional public funds in attempts at correction.

Ms. Maple expressed her concerns regarding the dangerous Rt. 7 and Rt. 601 intersection and mentioned the three serious automobile accidents that recently took place there over a 48-hour window. She reiterated that Supervisor Buffington has led the effort in convincing fellow Loudoun County supervisors to allocate \$550K in the county's 2022 fiscal year budget to study the intersection. The funding will provide for planning and the preliminary design of safety, operational and access improvements. She further added that Supervisor Buffington has had discussion with State Senator Jill Vogel about obtaining state funds to improve the safety of this intersection.

Discussion ensued by Mr. Seeberger and Ms. Royal over the fact that Loudoun County did not have the proper strategic vision in allowing a brewery and event venue within a residential community. Had this business been properly vetted with specific limitations, the Rt. 601 community and Loudoun and Clarke Counties would not be facing the previously mentioned issues. Business growth has now surpassed capacity for the BCBC parking lot, which has resulted in the use of an adjacent neighbor's property for vehicle parking (which Loudoun County has taken no action to prevent). As both of these parking locations overflow, patrons seek parking at the VDOT public lot at the Rt. 7 and Rt. 601 intersection. This parking scenario is ultimately what causes pedestrians to walk along Rt. 601 to the business. BRMCA firmly believes that Loudoun County must incorporate a capacity limit at BCBC (as takes place at other

businesses in the county) to prevent the parking and pedestrian issue from worsening. Furthermore, Loudoun County should take steps to protect the mountain and its natural resources from commercialization. Mountain land is vastly different from other areas in the county and should by all intents and purposes be an area that is prohibited from developments like BCBC.

There was additional discussion by Mr. Seeberger regarding growing “sign clutter” forming at this intersection and along Rt. 601. Presently, there are 14 sign posts with 18 separate messages within the first 100’ of Rt. 601 from Rt. 7. It was mentioned that this area is within the Bear’s Den Rural Historic District, a fact Ms. Maple was unaware of. This district is on the U.S. National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register. Any future signage should be carefully considered, as such clutter diminishes the historic character of the district.

The meeting concluded with Ms. Maple agreeing to take the concerns expressed to Supervisor Buffington and the Working Group. BRMCA will strive to become an additional stakeholder in future Working Group meetings.

Supervisor Buffington and his staff were also invited to the following BRMCA events:
BRMCA General Board Meeting at Bear’s Den – October 12 at 7 pm
BRMCA Chili Cookoff at Blue Ridge Volunteer Fire Department – October 16
BRMCA Biannual Road Cleanup – October 23