A Regional Approach to Trail–Road Crossings

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Our regional trails increasingly function as one transportation network, but similar road crossings give conflicting instructions: STOP for the trail, STOP for drivers, or ordinary crosswalk rules. The differences warrant a regional safety and design review.

Proposal: CTC could bring trail owners and roadway agencies together to compare crossing practices and develop shared, context-sensitive principles. The goal is safer, more predictable crossings with clear rules for everyone.

Why this deserves a regional conversation

The region has improved crossing safety through better sight lines, markings, traffic calming, medians, flashing beacons, signals, and bridges. STOP signs serve a distinct function: requiring a full stop and signaling who should proceed.

Differences are sharpest at minor streets. The W&OD commonly has trail-facing STOP signs, sometimes alongside road STOP signs. Virginia sidepaths and parts of Rock Creek Park Trail generally stop the side street. Alexandria moved STOP signs from the Mount Vernon Trail to the road at several crossings. Much of the Anacostia tributary network uses ordinary crosswalks. Different agency histories help explain the variation.

The engineering question: Who needs to stop, and why? The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) directs designers to consider the relative speeds, volumes, and importance of trail and road. Traffic controls should fulfill a need, communicate clearly, and command respect. A STOP sign must do more than signal caution.

The legal and human-behavior wrinkle

A trail crosswalk operates differently from a two-way road intersection. Across DC, Maryland, and Virginia, cyclists in crosswalks generally have pedestrian-type rights and duties: they must enter with due care, and drivers must yield or stop as required. But the legal force of trail STOP signs differs. DC allows cyclists to treat many STOP signs as YIELD; Virginia provides a local-ordinance mechanism for requiring stops at shared-use-path crosswalks; Maryland applies different rules. These distinctions are hard for users to infer from the signs.

Design must also account for actual behavior. Observations at two W&OD crossings in Falls Church found roughly 1% of cyclists fully stopping. That raises questions about the effectiveness of the control; it does not excuse dangerous riding. Drivers also stop unpredictably at crossings without road STOP signs. Good design should protect cautious users while making expected behavior clear.

What a common approach might look like

A regional framework could distinguish three situations, subject to site-specific engineering review:

- Minor, low-speed streets: Apply crosswalk rules and assess relative trail/road importance. Consider road-facing STOP signs, trail warnings, and speed management as appropriate.
- Intermediate crossings: Address higher speeds, exposure, sight lines, and difficult gaps with medians, geometry, RRFBs, or other measures. Require a trail stop when a full stop serves a clear purpose.
- Major or complex roads: Where yielding alone is inadequate, consider signals, pedestrian hybrid beacons, redesign, or grade separation.

Risks still require careful evaluation: e-bike approach speeds, limited sight lines, turning conflicts, and rear-end crashes. Crash comparisons alone cannot establish the safety effect of STOP signs because more difficult crossings often have them. Agencies should review representative sites using observations, crash histories, and engineering judgment.

A practical first step for CTC

CTC could convene NPS, NOVA Parks, DDOT, VDOT, local transportation agencies, and Maryland park and roadway authorities. An initial product could identify representative crossings and draft principles for assigning priority, using STOP signs, selecting other treatments, and reviewing legacy designs. Agencies could then evaluate a few pilots using before-and-after measures.

For our meeting: Following a 10–15 minute overview, use 15–20 minutes to discuss: Is this worth pursuing regionally? Who needs to participate? What first deliverable or pilot would build momentum? The goal is to assess a few crossings and launch a useful agency conversation—not decide every STOP sign at once.