



December 5, 2011

REF: Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park Deer Management Proposal

Residents and citizens:

Thank you for your comments on the proposed 2012 deer management program in the Sligo Stream Valley at the Sligo golf course.

First, we acknowledge that none of us is happy about a lethal deer management operation in the Sligo golf course area. We were asked to implement a deer management program in this area by community groups, individuals, and the Montgomery County Council due to the increasingly adverse impacts of the burgeoning deer population on local neighborhoods, an increase in deer-vehicle collisions, Lyme disease from deer-borne ticks, and damage to the natural ecosystem of Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park. Native plants are being browsed heavily, dying with no chance to reproduce, and birds and other animals that rely on a balanced ecosystem are disappearing. We agreed to investigate how these impacts could be addressed and considered both lethal and non-lethal methods to reduce the damage caused by the huge whitetail deer population. In developing recommendations, the Department of Parks and the County's Deer Management Work group considered all available, viable options in terms of safety and effectiveness, and initially determined that the sharpshooting option was the best.

We then opened a comment period for our citizens, notifying the local media outlets and providing a link on our website. So far, we have received hundreds of responses. The vast majority of respondents favor the sharpshooting alternative. Nonetheless, there were several commentators who raised the question of safety and suggested an alternative option of using birth control, so let me address those two issues.

Safety is always the first concern in choosing deer management actions. The use of sharpshooting is done under very strict conditions using specially trained park police officers using special weapons and ammunition. Shooting is always done from an elevated position, so that all shooting is downward in trajectory assuring that if a miss occurs, bullets travel a very short distance and end up in the ground. This method of deer reduction has been used effectively and safely by the Parks Department since 1999 and there has never been a case where the public was put at risk. If anyone familiar with the program believed that this could not be done in this area with complete confidence in the safety of the public, it would not be considered. In addition to the high level of safety, this method also represents an extremely humane, near instantaneous, death and the meat is used to feed the hungry in our community. Other lethal methods could lead to wounded injured animals moving through the area, and a prolonged and inhumane death.

The use of contraception to control deer numbers is something that many, including park staff, would prefer. However, at this time only one drug is approved by FDA for use in the contraception of wild deer. It is called GonaCon™ and it can only be hand-injected into deer. This means that each deer needs to be captured, marked, injected and released. This needs to be repeated for each deer every two years or so. Unfortunately, this is not a method that can be used effectively for wild, free-roaming deer. Several letters have suggested that we employ the deer contraception method being used “successfully” on the NIST grounds in Germantown . We investigated this option, and found it to be inapplicable to the deer population in Sligo Creek. The drug being used at NIST is an experimental drug that has not yet been approved by FDA. Even though they have been conducting the NIST experiment since 1994, FDA has not yet approved the drug for general use. Another important factor is that NIST is a fenced facility. That greatly reduces expansion of the herd by immigration from non-treated deer. The deer population at NIST is largely closed to both immigration and emigration, unlike Sligo. In an open population where deer would mix and mingle with non-treated deer, the limited success experienced at NIST is unlikely to be replicated in the open Sligo Creek park area. Moreover, there are many who would argue that the work done at NIST has not been very successful at all in reducing deer populations. When the program began, the population of deer in NIST was 211 deer; the population increased to a high of 291 in 1997. Since that time, contraception has been administered annually, yet the population for 2010 in NIST was 193 deer. In 16 years, they have not been able to reduce the herd below 200 deer per square mile, even though preferred population levels are around 30 deer per square mile. Since 1994, the two highest causes of deer deaths at NIST, where cause of death could be determined, have been deer vehicle collisions and malnutrition. Therefore, the overall evidence so far appears to be that even with the long-term immunocontraceptive effort, the deer population has not declined. Because most of our parks are not fenced and deer can move in and out of them at will, we conclude that immunocontraception is not a viable control option. To be fair, the research at NIST has helped increase our knowledge of deer contraception and in that respect it should be considered in some circumstances.

We certainly understand the concern that some have with the killing of deer. Given the conditions, however, that exist in much of Montgomery County – the lack of wild predators and a habitat that provides easy access to food sources -- we are left with two equally undesirable options: to use the most humane method at our disposal (sharpshooting) to reduce the herd and make use of the meat to feed the hungry, or allow the deer to continue to increase in number, knowing that the end result is likely to be greater impact to the nearby community, continued severe degradation of the natural ecosystem in Sligo Creek Park, and ultimately, as we are beginning to see now, a herd of sick and starving deer.

Sincerely,

Mary R. Bradford
Director of Parks