

Matt Peters, homeowner and expert treehugger

Comments on the Mon-Oak-Con

To the people of the community in the realm of Hazelwood, elected representatives and appointed bureaucrats, residents and visitors and all who have business here: Hear!

Since the marvels of modern technology include technical complexities of a mysterious nature that exclude me from these on-zoom-public meetings let this letter serve to convey my declaration for the record. Let it be known throughout the land that I think this proposed road through the park is A HORRIBLE IDEA and the people whose job it was to think it was a good idea should be sacked. The scale of community disruption and solidarity of opposition to the threat of oblivion for the sake of a superfluous driveway for students speaks to the many reasons why with many voices, and I join mine wholeheartedly with theirs and hope that I bring a new note in the chorus.

My objections to this project are rooted in a general opposition to giving public money to private corporations. In this case, we have the richest of the rich assembled into the ALMONOlith, host to the research and development grounds for UBER these last five years, and the two biggest education institutions CMU and my alma mater Pitt which, it must be pointed out, for all their contributions to the local economy are tax-exempt institutions, proposing to sacrifice our parklands and an entire neighborhood for the convenience and benefit of a private shuttle corporation. This malexpenditure of public funds thereby subsidizes an industry that directly competes with our public transportation system, upon which the public depends! This double-whammy is followed up with the further degradation to our public lands themselves.

The wrongsighted and misguided road idea is tangled up with a necessary floodwater mitigation program, which is where the expense of public funds is right and proper. The City is fully engaged in the vast and complex problems associated with the management of stormwater runoff, and our major Parks offer a place where the focus on so-called Green Infrastructure is well underway. Rather than compound the recovery of the ecological or geological unit that is the Four Mile Run watershed with yet another (expletive deleted) road—and be honest it is indeed a road in all manner of form, function, and impact—only mitigated at best by the stormwater aspects proposed, Hazelwood’s transportation needs are best served when you scrap the road entirely, invest in our existing public transportation system, and focus on these ecological aspects. The communities most directly affected by the proposal have self-organized and written a detailed analysis of our actual transportation needs, and published this in the Our Money, Our Solutions document. I urge you to accept this alternative and abandon your plans to build this road.

The worst aspect of the entire proposal, from strictly a forest perspective (and there is a growing body of legal precedent that says yes, the trees do indeed have a right to speak for themselves, see Rights Of Nature) is the Phase 2 Sylvan Avenue corridor. Why would a slow-moving shuttle take this long-way-around empty stretch, that serves nobody, when there is a whole neighborhood just up on top of the hill that might like to be in on the loop? Let the Sylvan Avenue corridor remain true to the name that the city long ago bestowed upon it, perhaps unintentionally prophetically, and maintain this corridor as the ONLY vehicle-free alternative for those who like to walk. Being situated halfway up the hill, the mild exertion of walking, riding a bike, pushing a baby carriage, or other such modes of perambulation can find a place up off the valley floor, out of the place where air pollution seems to concentrate as well as originate, making a difference that literally means life or death. In its current unmaintained condition, a determined stride is all it takes to get to Oakland from the Gladstone School in less time than this slow-moving shuttle.

The Sylvan Avenue corridor is an essential and irreplaceable part of Hazelwood's green infrastructure. It is a strip of serenity and natural wildness in what is about to become as densely built-up as Oakland, Lawrenceville, or the South Side. Its current ecological disrepair disguises its potential to provide quality forest habitat, as no effort to restore the scars of demolished houses was made other than to haul away the debris (and even then but a gesture). A roadway built to the specifications of an automated shuttle bus would compromise both of these functions beyond repair, degrading the ecological functions of the entire steep hillside at great public expense and no real public benefit. The City recognizes the seriousness of Climate Change, does not dispute the science behind these issues, yet continues to adhere to the model of development that is driving these issues. The Climate Action Plan states unequivocally, "HALT the conversion of forest canopy to development" and such a conversion is exactly what is being proposed here. To build up this closed roadway to vehicle-sized specifications necessitates a much bigger canopy gap than a true trail for bicycles and pedestrians only, with associated future years of budget savings in maintenance costs. The abandoned coal mines underneath would require enormous expense to remediate, with no guarantee of success; the geology is entirely unsuited for a road, which is why it was closed in the first place. Truly, Sylvan Avenue's best function is as a low-impact low-maintenance footpath, with an eye toward future canopy restoration not a permanent canopy fragmentation. Maintaining the integrity of the Greenway forest habitat allows the small park along Bigelow Street in Greenfield, the Bud Hammer Memorial Park, to join this greater greenway roadless recreation complex that leads right into the heart of Hazelwood. That degree of integration with the natural world is rare, and offers our city value beyond compare.

Far be it from me to speak against something without providing an alternative. Our planning documents state the value of building walkable neighborhoods and encouraging outdoor exercise. The best way to promote walking is to provide places where that is the only (or best) option, and Sylvan Avenue by virtue of its very existence shows that it is the perfect out-of-the-way place for that. I suggest that the Sylvan Avenue Corridor be

considered as a place for outdoor sculptures and art installations, part of a cooperative and coordinated system of forest and greenway management envisioned by the neighborhood Urban Ag Team. A partnership with this group and the community arts organizations, local employment organizations like POORLAW and Landforce, with support from the city's parks and public works departments, along with involvement from citywide groups Grow Pittsburgh and Grounded, can maintain these forests in a way that provides economic opportunities for neighborhood residents in harvesting and processing forest products ranging from hazelnuts to heart medicines, supporting employment in the culinary arts and medical institutions, and achieving Planning goals for encouraging walkable neighborhoods as well as providing for public art. Restaurants featuring seasonal specials of an ingredient like wild mushrooms, followed by an after-dinner experience walking in the nearby Greenway forest listening to songbirds, are equally part of a city's economy that claims to meet the standards of what is truly meant by ecological sustainability.

The City is beginning to embrace sustainable forest maintenance practices, with goats to eat invasive plants and as our forests get healthy we can begin to cultivate these forest areas for a range of non-timber forest products, NTFP. Ginseng, goldenseal, and the many hundreds of native plants that have medicinal value or food potential can provide research opportunities for our medical institutions and economic opportunities for residents living as neighbors to these forests. Hazelnuts, our neighborhood's namesake, is of particular interest to culinary ecologists as a high-nutrient and high-calorie native plant that could provide alternatives to wheat as a staple crop. A forest system featuring a diverse array of food species, mixing in tree species like peach, apple, persimmon, pawpaw, hardy varieties of pecan, cultivars of walnuts instead of ailanthus, sugar maples instead of Norway maples, designed to include the full array of diversity that the Appalachian Mixed Mesophytic Forest has to offer. In this way, the non-park forests of the city's Greenway network can provide food security and/or seasonal supplemental income to a household, whereby investments in ecosystem health and restoration provide direct economic benefits to the actual people who live here. Even the native grape component, if pruned properly, will give you grapes, but first the invasive vines must be weeded out, and the work required for this ecological intervention could even be part of a Green New Deal job stimulation package. I think a city that has gone through several cycles of modern industrial boom-and-bust can and does understand the need to develop this Green Infrastructure on a landscape scale, and the Sylvan Avenue corridor is a place for that vision. A road is the path that leads away from that possibility, a trail facilitates this potential.

We are running out of time to realize that we cannot continue to degrade our forests—be they our urban greenways or our state and national forests—for the benefit of the legal abstractions we call “corporate persons”. Stop the con, stop the road!