

THE NORTHWEST CURR

Park Service re-enters fray on Klingle

By ELIZABETH WIENER
Current Staff Writer

The National Park Service has belatedly weighed in on the city's plan to reopen Klingle Road to two-way traffic, saying transportation authorities should not have ruled out converting the winding roadbed through Rock Creek Park into a bike and pedestrian path.

The city's "preferred alternative ... is not the preferred alternative of NPS," an official comment letter says.

But park officials, in formal comments on a draft environmental study to reopen the road, also say they agree severe drainage and erosion problems must be corrected. "Under the no build alternative, park resources would continue to be affected by the flooding and erosion caused by uncontrolled storm water runoff," according to the letter.

The Jan. 4 letter — on letterhead of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Park Service's parent agency, and signed by Willie Taylor of the Interior Department's Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance — is written in careful bureaucratic jargon. It says that Taylor's department "has a continuing interest in working" with federal and city transportation officials "to ensure that the project's impacts to resources of concern ... are ade-

See **Klingle**/Page 46

KLINGLE

From Page 1

quately addressed."

But it still makes clear that Park Service officials are unhappy with the proposal to reconstruct a two-lane road, now endorsed by the D.C. Council and, also belatedly, by Mayor Anthony Williams.

"We are disappointed that the alternative which would construct a recreation path within the D.C. right of way is not included in the current DEIS," the letter says. That alternative "would cause no road or path construction-related impacts to park resources, and would require no use of parkland for transportation purposes."

It is not clear whether the Park Service's reluctance to give up parkland will create further roadblocks for a controversial project. The fate of Klingle Road has been the subject of hot debate ever since the stretch through the park from Porter Street to Woodley Road was shut to traffic in 1991 because of severe drainage problems and the lack of city funds to fix them.

In the past, the Park Service has been direct in its opposition to reopening the road, but the agency had essentially stayed silent on the draft environmental impact study until its recent letter.

But the belated comment letter could prolong an already long process of crafting the environmental impact study required for federal funding. Mayor Williams initially opposed reopening Klingle Road to cars but acquiesced after the D.C. Council voted in March 2003 to demand reconstruction. Environmental studies have been under way ever since.

Maurice Keys, the city transportation staffer charged with assembling the final document, said the Park Service's comment came in well after the comment period on a draft environmental impact statement closed Sept. 15. Keys said he had prepared responses to all other comments, incorporating changes in the document

where necessary.

"We're trying to complete the final, and that was the missing piece," Keys said, adding it is not clear whether the Park Service submission will require substantive changes to the final statement. "We are preparing a response, trying to figure out how it impacts the document," he said.

Keys said the D.C. Department of Transportation received 281 pieces of correspondence, with 400 separate comments, on the Klingle Road study, and must respond to all of them. Some are simple state-

"We are trying to complete the final, and that was the missing piece."

— Staffer Maurice Keys

ments in favor of or opposition to reopening the road, but others are more technical and complex.

The Park Service letter, for example, says the city's "preferred alternative" — reconstructing a two-lane road with no shoulder for a recreational path — would require the construction of five retaining walls and four culvert end-walls on the parkland.

But it suggests the parkland needed for the retaining walls could be swapped for "unused [city] land within the Klingle Road right of way," a suggestion apparently not considered in the city's plan.

Other comments received by the Transportation Department are more clear-cut.

The D.C. Chapter of the Sierra Club, in comments filed on the deadline day of Sept. 15, said it is still flatly opposed to "reintroducing vehicular traffic into Klingle Valley" and criticizes the Department of Transportation for not considering alternatives that would create a bike or recreational path.

The Sierra letter notes that the National Park Service "has repeat-

edly objected to the reconstruction of a road" there because of concerns about harming the parkland. It points out that a 2001 study found that reopening Klingle "would produce negligible long-term beneficial impacts to traffic congestion or safety."

"Despite the lack of a demonstrated transportation need," the preferred alternative "is estimated to cost \$7.18 million for a 0.7 mile" stretch of two-lane road, the letter from D.C. chapter chair Jason Broehm concludes. "A simple cost-benefit analysis even without consideration of the significant adverse impacts to the environment demonstrates the sheer absurdity of this proposed project."

Others want the city to get on with the reconstruction. Laurie Collins, a Mount Pleasant activist, said Klingle is "a vital east-west road, a vital artery to get across the park."

The prolonged closure affects many residents who live east of the park, she said, but especially those in Mount Pleasant, "who have to go north and south to go east and west."

She is also impatient with the seemingly perpetual studies. "We're a city, and we can't afford to lose our roads," Collins said. "We can't do more studies. Put it back the way it was. Fix it. Just get on with it."

But even after the environmental impact study is finalized, there's still a long road ahead.

Keys said he hopes to submit the corrected and edited study to the Federal Highway Administration by the end of January. That agency has 30 days to review and decide whether to approve the project, a requisite for federal funding.

Then, according to an "implementation strategy" posted on the Transportation Department Web site, design work would begin, with actual construction expected to begin late this year and to be completed in 2007. But, the schedule notes, "this date is subject to change based on federal review requirements."