

The Sierra Club Needs to Look at the BIG Picture!

The debate over Klinge Road, has exposed a serious shortcoming in the basic approach taken by many local Sierra Club chapters in fighting individual battles related to development. Despite the national organization's embrace of "Smart Growth" Principles, many chapters at the local level still look at every infrastructure issue as one that polarizes the debate, pitting so-called "environmentalists against, well, I can only assume anti-environmentalists." However, such polarizing gambits are simplistic and ultimately destructive. If Klinge Road is reopened, as I hope it is, not only will it represent an unnecessary loss for the Sierra Club, but more importantly, it will in my opinion erode the the local chapter's credibility as an advocate for a sustainable environment, an environment, in which humans enjoy the potential for a rich social and community life, within a regenerative natural environment. I consider myself an environmentalist, yet I support the opening of Klinge Road.

As many have pointed out, there is an inextricable relationship between individual decisions like whether to reopen Klinge Road -- with its corresponding environmental effects, (both deleterious and beneficial) and the larger picture, of transportation efficiency, air and water pollution and even social equity. Like so many issues related to growth, whether to open Klinge Road will clearly effect traffic on 34th Street, Porter Street, Connecticut Avenue and other local streets. One of the most basic principles of smart growth relates to the physical form of communities and clearly preferences an interconnected network of streets.

While Rock Creek Park serves as a wonderful amenity for the City, it does come with a drawback, it separates the City into halves (halves that have historically been divided in many ways as we all know). Because there are so few links across the park, each linking street absorbs significantly more traffic than adjacent parallel streets. The closing of Klinge Road represented a severing of one of those interconnections, forcing yet more traffic onto the few remaining collectors. Clearly this has resulted in greater VMTs and longer idling time thus increasing air pollution.

The Klinge Road opening opponents however, have invoked the principles of "induced demand" a theory, that is clearly applicable in suburban and Greenfield environments in that new roads make previously unserved land developable. However this is probably the first time this argument has been applied in an already developed urban environment, moreover, applied to a street that had been open until a decade ago. One could argue, that the City developed to a density consistent with the limits of its infrastructure, which at the time included Klinge Road. Its severing forced new demand on the remaining connecting streets. Again, the use of the induced demand argument in the Klinge Road instance is unfortunate, since it can be so clearly refuted, and as such tends to dilute its effectiveness in more applicable situations, i.e., fighting suburban sprawl.

Could it be that the real agenda of the Sierra Club is to fight Klinge Road's reopening because they see it as an avenue for new development in the City? Clearly that is the fear of some opponents. Assuming that such a result is possible, how does this square with the Sierra Club's stated goal of encouraging Smart Growth by encouraging the refill and repopulation of the nation's urban areas as an alternative to growth in further remote suburban locations. Doesn't that refill, particularly by those who pay significant taxes, provide additional revenues for the District to repair schools, hire more and better teachers, restore libraries, community centers playing fields, EMS services, yadi, yadi, all over the City, particularly in the underserved Wards east of the river?

At some point the Sierra Club has to recognize that they need to look at the bigger picture.

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