

THE GAITHERSBURG - NORTH POTOMAC - ROCKVILLE COALITION MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS and CONCERNS

Much has happened in the past few weeks to emphasize the inadequacies of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan. The Gaithersburg - North Potomac - Rockville Coalition, representing over 400 residents from sixty-four different subdivisions and areas throughout the county, offer the following recommendations to improve the master plan while addressing the concerns of the community, the local jurisdictions and the state.

THE PREMISE:

Current plan: The Gaithersburg West Master Plan is based on a faulty premise...that Johns Hopkins Real Estate must build 4.6 million square feet of commercial space for 15,000 people on Belward Farm. The master plan was contrived to accomplish this goal.

Recommended starting points:

1. The community fully supports the sensible expansion of the hospital and the bioscience companies.
2. The area near the "Science City" is filled with residential subdivisions which are auto-dependant and the roads are at or approaching full capacity. (See attached map)
3. For the most part, transit will be useful only if sufficient parking is available at the stations.
4. Belward Farm is an historic property which demands careful planning to ensure that development is compatible with the historic buildings and the adjacent communities.
5. The overall density of the master plan must be reduced to an appropriate level for a suburban area filled with established residential neighborhoods where multilevel highway interchanges are entirely inappropriate.

BELWARD FARM: Belward Farm is the most controversial area, the master plan's reason for being and therefore the starting point for our recommendations. The entire Belward Farm is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. It is a treasure and the dignity of this very special property must be maintained.

Existing deed restrictions and agreements in place on Belward Farm dictate the extent and character of the future development on Belward Farm. Belward Farm is adjacent to three established residential neighborhoods. Therefore, the concept of compatibility, which has been so critical to other projects in the county, should be of utmost importance. To that end, we strongly recommend that Johns Hopkins' low-density educational campus be built on Belward Farm. If that is not possible, a low-density, world-class biomedical research center like the Howard Hughes Janelia Farm Research Campus or the Scripps Research Institute should be considered.

Further, we recommend that Johns Hopkins be limited in perpetuity to the remaining density from its 1996 agreement with the family of the late owner, Elizabeth Banks, which is approximately 1.2 million square feet. This is not an issue we look forward to revisiting every six to ten years. Ms. Banks, who sold the farm to Johns Hopkins for a gift price, is deceased and cannot change her mind about how she wants her property developed. Ms. Banks wanted a minimally intrusive medical or educational campus that would carry on the legacy of the farm. Her wishes were crystal clear and were agreed upon by Johns Hopkins and the family in 1989 and 1996.

The farm was worth \$40 million to \$52 million at the time of the sale, yet JHU paid only \$5 million because they promised to honor Ms. Banks wishes. Now they are trying to renege on those promises and the County should not be a party to this potential violation of a legally binding agreement. The ability to hire high-paid attorneys does not excuse JHU from its legal or ethical obligations.

Belward Farm is not a vacant lot to be filled with non-descript commercial office buildings. It is imperative that the character of this 100-year-old Civil War-era farm be carefully maintained. The historic farm should be celebrated rather than blocking off the farmstead or grading and destroying the contour of the land for mundane buildings, parking lots or, the final insult, two rectangular fields adjacent to two six-lane highways. Putting soccer fields on Belward Farm is akin to putting a rusty metal swing set in your front yard.

Instead, buildings on Belward Farm should be clustered on the eastern portion of the property. The buildings in the vicinity of the farmstead should be no more than three stories in height and all the buildings should be built in an architectural style that is compatible with the historic structures. The western half of the farm should be reserved for open space using sustainable landscaping with walking paths for the community while maintaining the contour of the land. This would create a real amenity for the community rather than the “buffer parks” and the median-strip “linear parks” proposed by the master plan. Belward Farm is not and never will be appropriate for a high-rise commercial complex. Johns Hopkins Real Estate must be forced to honor its promises to the former owner and her family, its obligations under the deed restrictions and its responsibilities to the community.

Further, the proximity of the farm to area homes makes it imperative that the environmental, health and safety issues be addressed in the master plan in order to determine the proper occupant(s), density and zoning of the farm.

A recommendation has been made by County Executive Isiah Leggett’s office to extend Sam Eig Highway directly into Belward Farm, an entirely misguided notion that would ensure that Belward Farm would be the most highly populated area in the “Science City” and would completely destroy the farm. Also, according to Eric Hu, local resident and traffic engineer, the ramp over the wetlands and up the 40-50 foot rise into Belward would be a costly and destructive engineering feat. This alignment would require the destruction of twelve single-family homes and would potentially isolate the remaining neighborhood between two six-lane highways. Mr. Hu also said it would exacerbate the traffic congestion on Great Seneca Highway.

LIFE SCIENCES AREAS: We fully support the sensible expansion of the hospital and the biomedical organizations with the highest density for the biomedical organizations on LSC Central and the commercial companies on LSC North. The highest buildings and the highest density should be clustered along Key West Avenue between Great Seneca and Omega Drive. We strongly recommend that non-biomedical/educational organizations be limited to 25% of LSC Central and Belward in order to maintain the integrity of the Life Sciences Center areas.

However, the level of job density that might fit in the LSC areas is irrelevant because the roads are currently at or above capacity and there is no practical solution to get the people to and from the LSC areas. If the requirement could be made that all the additional people who work in the LSC areas must live there, thousands of homes would be needed in the master plan area. However, we know that most of the people who live in the housing will work elsewhere and building another mega housing development is not what the Life Sciences Center is all about. Therefore, workers or residents = cars = traffic. The Corridor Cities Transitway is expected to carry only 12% – 15% of the additional traffic so 85% of the additional workers will instead arrive by car, exacerbating rush-hour traffic as they pass the residents who will be driving out of the LSC on their way to their jobs in Rockville, Bethesda or Virginia.

Ideally, new accurate traffic and housing numbers would be run with various scenarios regarding traffic and housing options, but the time constraints placed on this plan apparently require that the previously calculated figures be used. Therefore, we propose that an acceptable level of density be determined by the very inelegant method of backing out cars from the traffic figures to the point that the grade-separated interchanges and the widening of

Muddy Branch Road are not necessary, and the failing intersections are at an acceptable passing level. That would determine the total number of **additional people** (workers and residents) that could be accommodated. The expected population from the pipeline (approximately 8,000) and the additional population from Crown Farm (2,250 residents) and the Rickman property must be factored into these calculations.

The jobs/housing ratio would then be calculated by dividing the total number of “additional people” to determine the ratio of workers to residents. The central purpose of the LSC must be maintained and the housing should be included in the staging requirements and built in conjunction with commercial construction. The Public Services Training Academy (PSTA) property would be appropriate for housing as determined above, along with the school, firehouse and soccer or play fields.

THE CORRIDOR CITIES TRANSITWAY: The construction of the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) should be planned to have the lowest possible impact on existing communities and should follow the original alignment. It must not be allowed to traverse Belward Farm which will cause traffic and pedestrian havoc on Muddy Branch Road and at the corner of Muddy Branch and Great Seneca Highway, one of the most congested intersections in Montgomery County.

Since most of the people in the western portion of Montgomery County live in subdivisions and must drive to get out of their subdivisions, the only people who are likely to walk to the CCT are the people in areas such as King Farm, the Washingtonian, Crown Farm, Decoverly, Kentlands, and the PSTA. From the alignment map provided by the state, the CCT does not appear to go through additional grid-pattern subdivisions in the upcounty where people would walk to the CCT. If the number of walkers is added to the number of parking spaces at the stations, for the most part you will have the ridership.

STAGING: We highly recommend that the staging requirements regarding the CCT and all other phases of the master plan be performance-based and include all LSC areas as well as all phases of development. The housing must be included in the staging to ensure that some of the people who live in the LSC will work there. Improving predictability in the staging will protect the community.

JOBS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTY: We believe that a master plan can be developed that will protect the current communities and allow our life sciences organizations to flourish here and throughout the county. Community leaders have expressed concern that the high job density proposed for the Science City might reduce the job opportunities available elsewhere in the County, such as Montgomery College/Germantown and the East County Science and Technology Center, so a reduction in the number of jobs in the “Science City” is actually good for the county as a whole. We recommend spreading the jobs throughout the county.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS ARE BASED ON THE FOLLOWING CONCERNS:

RESIDENTS AND COMMUNITY GROUPS: During the recent Public Hearings the Council clearly heard the voices of the residents, community groups and civic associations from communities surrounding the “Science City” and beyond. There is no doubt that the opposition to this master plan is strong, widespread, determined and based on legitimate concerns.

STATE AND LOCAL JURISDICTIONS:

The letter from the Maryland Department of Transportation (9-16-2009*) highlighted several serious issues:

1. The timing of the approval of the plan before there is any certainty that the Corridor Cities Transit (CCT) will be “realized”.

2. The billion-dollar costs associated with interchanges and realignment of the CCT and the additional projects proposed by the county.
3. The faulty calculation of the jobs/housing ratios used in the master plan as well as transit mode share figures and master plan sequencing.

The letter from Ms. Susan R. Hoffman, Mayor of the City of Rockville (9-16-2009*) voiced other concerns:

1. The staging of infrastructure construction and the large amount of automobile traffic that would be going in and out of the planning area.
2. The requirement that projects be simply “funded” but not under construction before large portions of the project would be built.
3. The lack of adequate and proper open space and public amenities.

The memorandum to the Mayor and City Council of Gaithersburg (9-1-2009*) noted other concerns:

1. The impact on the residents is a major issue – “Based on the conceptual improvements provided to date, the City believes that these grade separated interchanges could require the taking of both residential and commercial properties, would harm pedestrian and bicycle conductivity, and would adversely affect the character of existing neighborhoods.”
2. “The proposal establishes a higher traffic congestion standard for the LSC than the standard that is applied in the City of Gaithersburg and the remainder of the Gaithersburg West Planning Area.”

COUNCILMEMBERS: The letter from Councilmembers Valerie Ervin and Nancy Navarro (7-22-2009) voiced their concerns:

1. The second bio-tech center on Rt. 29 should be a consideration when planning the “Science City”.
2. The potential for employment and development in the Rt. 29 corridor should not be negatively impacted by everything that is planned for the “Science City”.

PLANNING BOARD MEMBER: Planning Board member Joe Alfandre expressed concerns:

1. If the plan for Belward Farm were allowed to proceed, it would suck the economic engine out of the “Science City”.
2. The proposed master plan will create a series of “Science Villages” rather than a “City Center”.

TRAFFIC: Eric Hu, a traffic engineer and transportation planner with WMATA, testified as a resident of Flints Grove, emphasizing these points in regard to the Gaithersburg West Master Plan:

1. The project is not a Transit Oriented Development which echoes the testimony given by Action Committee for Transit at the Planning Board hearing.
2. The CCT is not mass-transit.
3. The transportation modeling was unrealistic and masked the fact that the plan is unacceptable.
4. The interchanges are impossible to build without extraordinary measures.
5. The traffic analysis is flawed and the traffic has been underestimated by at least 20-30%.
6. Recommends that a comprehensive study must be done before proceeding.

According to Mr. Hu:

In regard to Metro capacities: “I did a Shady Grove Station Access and Capacity Study about three years ago. This Study indicated that Shady Grove needs facility improvements in order to accommodate existing and future growth. Without the improvements, adding trains would result in overcrowding at platform level. Besides that, with current headway, Red line trains are operating very close to capacity at the maximum load point. (I did a Rail

car capacity study several years ago) The next big question: does Metro have enough financial resources to purchase more railcars?"

In regard to the proposed master plan: "...They compromised the study. They have to be very honest to use the correct trip rates and to include normal traffic growth in the built and no-build conditions. Then, they have to use the projected traffic volumes (for different scenarios – density) to find acceptable mitigation measurements. I know the conclusion is not correct, but I cannot tell if the data used in the study is wrong. I do know the methodology is not correct."

ENVIRONMENTAL: The proposed master plan does not address environmental issues in regard to:

1. The proximity of six- and eight-lane highways and highway interchanges adjacent to homes.
2. The destruction of wetlands and the threats to the streams in and around Belward Farm or in the area surrounding the "Science City".
3. The Belward Farm sits on a piece of land that rises to 50 feet above the surrounding roads and communities so whatever is built on Belward Farm will have the following impact:
 - Create an adverse visual effect of the buildings being five stories higher than the actual height
 - Cause serious run-off issues
 - Require careful oversight and restrictions on grading, grading design, their application to site planning, and preparation of land form grading plans as well as drainage plans. Much of the appeal of Belward Farm lies in the contour of the land and it must be protected in the development of a site plan.

Art Slesinger, who worked as the Executive Director of Environmental Affairs and Safety for a major, research-based pharmaceutical company for 15 years has voiced his concerns:

1. EPA studies have shown adverse health effects to people living near major roadways. They are at increased risk to cardiovascular and pulmonary disease. The source of the problem is not just engine emissions, but tire and friction surface particles. This project condemns a large number of county residents to this outcome and this is not addressed in the county's plans. The appropriate separation would significantly increase the footprint of the highways.
2. The Belward Farm improvements should mandate that a vastly expanded park be created. This park should be at least 25 acres and not be partitioned by roads or other contrivances. Ecologically it would be much more effective and considering the planned population spike, such a space is very much needed.

ZONING: The integrity of the Life Sciences Center and Belward must be maintained. Non-biomedical/educational uses on Belward and LSC Central should be limited to no more than 25%.

The provisions of the new zones that are being proposed for the different areas of the "Science City" (CR and LSC) have not been finalized. The preliminary materials on these zones indicate that they are extremely developer-friendly without giving any predictability or certainty for the residents who will be affected.

CONFIGURATION OF THE AREA: Please see attached map of our **suburban** area with its dead-end streets that end in cul-de-sacs. Any true urban area would have a grid of streets that are walkable to transit. The County and the Planning Board allowed developers to build subdivisions on each separate parcel (farm) without a grid of connecting streets. The area is, by design, auto dependant and will never be urban in any sense of the word. Residents cannot get out of their subdivisions without their cars so applying urban traffic standards to our area is a contrived way of adding additional traffic without a defensible reason.

In the map below, Belward Farm is the open square next to the words “Muddy Branch”. Most of the subdivisions in the surrounding area have only one or two exits onto secondary roads that funnel all the traffic onto a few highly traveled highways. These highways are at or above capacity and once those highways reach gridlock we will not be able to get out of our subdivisions. Four of the multilevel highway interchanges are proposed for Great Seneca which is just north of Belward Farm. The housing areas are red on the map because the housing is so densely packed.

Even though the CCT is scheduled to run up Seneca Highway, it will not be accessible to any of the residential areas on this map other than Decoverly and Kentlands which is the area at the top center. For most of the residents in Kentlands, it would be a difficult hike to the CCT station which is off the top of the map.

As you can see, this area is now and will forever be suburban because there will never be a grid of streets that would allow access to transit, even if a rapid bus runs through it.

Please re-write the Gaithersburg West Master Plan to accommodate both the life sciences organizations and the residents of our suburban communities. The residents have well-founded concerns about the master plan and must not be treated as collateral damage in the race for revenue. Your support will be appreciated by grateful residents throughout the county.

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*The full-text of the aforementioned letters can be found on the Home Page of the website, www.scale-it-back.com.

