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Clouds gather over 'Science City'

Without \$1.3B in transportation fixes, jobs-housing imbalance will cause 'severe congestion,' state says

Gazette.net by Sebastian Montes | Staff Writer

Add the state's transit, highways and transportation agencies to the growing chorus of critics calling the 800-acre Science City proposed in Shady Grove unrealistic and ultimately untenable without massive government spending.

Under a draft the County Planning Board approved in July, the Gaithersburg West Master Plan would allow the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center — the county's largest biotech node — to triple in size, jobs and housing over the next several decades. Research, labs, office and other commercial space would grow from 7 million square feet to 20 million square feet. More than 5,000 residences would spring up next to the existing 3,300 and as many as 40,000 workers would join the 20,000 already there.

A state analysis of the plan's traffic and community impacts, still in draft form but conveyed in a letter to County Council President Philip M. Andrews last week, rejects one of Gaithersburg West's core principles: that the area will be a world-class community where the best and brightest minds can live, work and play without having to step inside a car.

Without enough housing to support the 40,000 new jobs, most Science City workers will "have little choice than to commute in from areas throughout the Washington area," according to the Sept. 15 letter signed by department directors with the Maryland Transit Administration, the State Highway Administration and the Maryland Department of Transportation. Those commuters, added to an already strained road network, will overwhelm local roads and clog Interstate 270 to a choke point between Muddy Branch Road and Route 28, they wrote. And the infrastructure needed to ease the congestion will cost hundreds of millions of dollars — including a proposed mass transit line that would run through Science City brings that cost to \$1.3 billion.

The county's Housing Opportunities Commission joined the fray, writing in a Sept. 10 letter that because the jobs-to-housing imbalance — fewer than 300 of 5,700 new residences will be "moderately priced" — Science City's lower- and middle-income workers won't be able to live there.

To further complicate the outlook for Science City, the prospect of a lengthy legal battle over the future of the Belward Farm has emerged, as the family that owned the 107-acres off Muddy Branch and Darnestown roads believes Johns Hopkins University's plans for Belward run afoul of the 1989 deed.

Long skeptical of Gaithersburg West's traffic and planning assumptions, Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg sees the state's critique as validation of what neighbors and civic groups have been saying since Science City and "Vision 2030" surfaced more than two years ago: "The plan can't be supported."

"The amount of proposed density can't be supported by any reasonable ... increases in the road network capacity," Andrews said Monday. "We're going to have to decrease the amount of density."

Planning Board staff rebuffed the state's critiques Monday, saying that the state analysis failed to include nearby housing.

"They looked at the hole of the donut instead of the whole donut," said Rollin Stanley, director of the Montgomery County Planning Department.

State officials want the County Council to delay Gaithersburg West until the state determines in the next few weeks whether to shift the Corridor Cities Transitway, a proposed light rail or rapid bus line, further into Life Sciences Center.

The council's first of four committee work sessions is set for Tuesday morning. With Gaithersburg West not going to the full council until November, Andrews isn't sure if it will be necessary wait for the CCT study.

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