

Montgomery County Council Testimony – September 17, 2009

My name is Michael Weiss, and I have been a county resident for nearly 30 years, the last nine in the Westleigh subdivision around the corner from the Belward Farm. Like many of my neighbors, I moved to the area for the quiet suburban lifestyle. So it is with great concern and apprehension that I come before you today to discuss the threat to our area in the form of the massive Gaithersburg West Master Plan

From the first meeting I attended sponsored by the County Planning Department, the entire project has seemed nothing more than a bloated development for the benefit of Johns Hopkins University and not the people who live here. Yes, there were community meetings where we residents were invited to express our views. And we did. And for the most part, we were politely ignored. Somehow, the message never got across that the people who moved to this area for a quiet suburban lifestyle don't want nearly 6,000 new housing units, 40,000 new jobs and tens of thousands of additional cars clogging our roads.

To my neighbors and me, a 14-story office building planned for beautiful Belward Farm isn't "smart growth." It's an eyesore.

Now I am not entirely new to battles over development, and I've heard charges that we residents are just NIMBY opponents who don't want any development coming to our backyard. That is false. We are fine with appropriately-sized development. But as a journalist for 30 years and the author of three books on American lifestyles, I've seen neighborhoods destroyed by outsized developments from small-town Iowa to the South Bronx. And the one thing that is common to all these settings is the fact that nothing destroys a community faster than development that is totally out-of-character with the current lifestyle. It shatters the identity of residents. It alters the time-worn traditions. It makes a mockery of the natural evolution of how a community grows and changes.

And this is what I foresee happening with the current Gaithersburg West Master Plan. What is proposed is not in keeping with the character of the community, it is not following the pastoral campus that Mrs. Banks envisioned for her beloved Belward Farm, it is a monstrous assault on the enviable qualities that first drew my neighbors and my family to this part of the county. It's just like the bait-and-switch tactics that the county has deplored when used by crooked car dealers in the past. And we all know such tactics are wrong, unethical and not worthy of the county's proud tradition of good government.

So I come to you today recognizing that you are our last line of defense against the proposed Science City. The Planning Board has virtually ignored us for the last year. But my neighbors and I hope that you recognize your role as our elected representatives to protect us from this massive development. We came to this area because we loved the county's suburban lifestyle. And now we find ourselves threatened with a proposal for a bloated city. Please don't let this happen. Please scale it back to a livable size. We have nowhere else to turn. Thank you for listening.