

This is a response to “Shady Grove Science Center: A Smart Growth Community” ,By Elaine Amir, Johns Hopkins University, Wednesday, July 29, 2009 in Maryland Politics Watch blogspot.

The Science City: A Massive Growth Community

Once again, Johns Hopkins (JHU) tries to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. Let’s deconstruct Elaine Amir’s missive on the features of JHU’s massive proposed development on Belward Farm and the “Science City”, now referred to as the “Shady Grove Science Center” that will be created by the Gaithersburg West Master Plan.

The claim that this development is “smart growth” has been debunked so many times by Smart Growth advocates I won’t even bother to reiterate all their points.

Elaine waxes on about the walkable-bikeable neighborhoods created by the monstrous Science City development. She fails to mention, however, that the area would be divided into five distinct parts separated by six- and eight-lane highways, the central feature being a ten- or twelve-lane multi-level highway interchange.

The razzle-dazzle about the “New Plan is a Huge Improvement over the Current Master Plan” tries to disguise the fact that under the current master plan there would be a total of 38,000 workers in the Life Sciences Center. Whereas under the “new and improved” Science City there would be at least 40,000 **additional** workers and residents for a total of over 60,000 people in the less than two-square-mile area. When our roads and schools are already over-crowded, that can hardly be considered an improvement.

Elaine uses the euphemism “some taller buildings” on Belward Farm instead of saying their buildings will be up to 150 feet tall, even though the high-density development on the farm, expected to accommodate 15,000 people on the historic 107-acre Civil War-era farm, is immediately adjacent to three residential neighborhoods.

JHU has requested that the Corridor Cities Transit (CCT) traverse the farm and travel out onto Muddy Branch Road. That would require a **twelve-lane multi-level highway interchange** at the corner of Muddy Branch Road and Great Seneca Highway which is surrounded by four residential neighborhoods. I have seen the footprint of this interchange and it is massive. It will result in the loss of homes and will require the redesign of at least two of the neighborhoods.

In addition to the above havoc at this intersection, the installation of railroad-style gates may be required at the entrances to two of the neighborhoods in order to facilitate the passing of the CCT.

Elaine mentions the CCT and its importance in handling the resulting traffic from 40,000 additional people. Quite to the contrary, the CCT will not be the magic carpet it is touted to be. See “The Gaithersburg West Master Plan and the Magic Carpet”.

Elaine says there will be no permanent housing on Belward Farm. There will be 300 “temporary housing units”. She said earlier the housing would be for people who are visiting for seminars. JHU will maintain 300 housing units for people who might or might not choose to stay on Belward for seminars? Sounds fishy to me.

Elaine refers to the “parks” on the perimeter of the Belward Farm development...Muddy Branch “Park” and Darnestown “Park”. Muddy Branch Road is adjacent to the farm and is scheduled to be widened to a six-lane highway to accommodate the resulting traffic. Also, JHU is requesting that the Corridor Cities Transit (CCT) traverse the farm and travel out onto Muddy Branch Road. The buffer along

Muddy Branch Road is now scheduled to be 300 feet. No definitive answer has been given as to whether the 300 foot buffer will be used to widen the road or accommodate the alignment for the CCT. Also, having recreational fields in a strip along Muddy Branch Road which will be a six-lane highway seems less than bucolic.

The Darnestown Road “park” is a 60 foot buffer between a six-lane highway and high-rise buildings. This is almost as inviting as the “linear parks”, otherwise known as median strips, planned for Key West Avenue which is scheduled to be widened to eight lanes.

Elaine mentions the “street grid” within the Science City that will disburse the traffic...if the traffic still has to come out onto the six- and eight-lane highways that surround each part of the Science City, I fail to see how a few internal cross-streets will disburse the traffic. Also, the Smart Growth advocates have said the “blocks” created by the cross-streets are too big to be walkable so essentially the cross-streets were inserted to accommodate more buildings.

One of the “major recreational features” touted for the Science City is the LSC Loop which is a combination of roads around the Science City. The Loop will have twenty intersections which would involve crossing the eight-lane highway twice and the six-lane highway twice. I doubt that many people would want to risk life and limb to use the Loop for recreational purposes.

On to the assertion that “The Community’s Voice has been Heard in Crafting this Plan”. Johns Hopkins Real Estate did hold a series of community meetings and then announced in December that they would build 4.6 to 6.5 million square feet of space in 12- to 15-story high-rise buildings for 15,000 people. I attended those community meetings and I don’t recall anyone requesting that the farm be filled with high-rise buildings for 15,000 people.

To the contrary, we knew Johns Hopkins had purchased the farm for a fraction of its value by accepting restrictions in the deed. We assumed they would abide by the deed restrictions and fulfill the wishes of the former owner, Elizabeth Banks, whom Elaine Amir knew very well. It was Ms. Banks’ wish, and understanding, that Johns Hopkins would build a minimally intrusive medical or educational campus that would carry on the legacy of Belward Farm, a farm that had been in her family for over 100 years. Instead, Johns Hopkins has chosen to completely ignore the deed restrictions and her wishes to build a massive high-rise, high-density commercial complex that will dwarf the historic buildings and the surrounding neighborhoods as well as create gridlock on our roads.

Needless to say, there is wide-spread opposition to the Gaithersburg West Master Plan, the Science City (aka the “Shady Grove Science Center”) and to Johns Hopkins’ plans for Belward Farm. A website has been set up to monitor the plans and to disseminate information to the community.
www.scale-it-back.com

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Two comments:

[Cavan](#) said...

As Donna mentioned, Smart Growth advocates are against “Science City” as it is currently planned. To make a long story short, (Donna does a really great job with the long story!) the plans basically call for a suburban office park. There is nothing smart about that. If you

make a low-density suburban office park, and widen roads that are already too wide to co-exist with a traditional town environment, you're going to get another Tysons Corner. It will have all the drawbacks of the car-dependent arrangement and none of the advantages of the traditional human-scale town.

Remember, height does not necessarily equal density. A lack of surface parking lots makes things dense. For example, DuPont Circle is very dense, yet very few buildings are over 4 stories tall. That's because of the lack of surface parking that kills walkability.

The lack of residences in the "Science City" plans is also negative. Single-use land use is the fundamental aspect of car-dependent suburbia. Single-use land use is antithetical to Smart Growth. Take a look at Bethesda. One of its characteristics that make it so walkable and Smart is that it has a mixture of uses within very close proximity and even in the same building. For example, the Safeway on Old Georgetown is underneath a bunch of offices. It is also across the street from condos, restaurants. There are durable goods retailers within a block. There are also townhouses within another block.

Science City has none of the features of Bethesda. If it looks like car-dependent suburban sprawl, functions like car-dependent suburban sprawl, and is unwalkable like car-dependent suburban sprawl, it's car-dependent suburban sprawl. There is nothing Smart about that.

9:28 AM

D said...

Cavan, thanks for the Smart Growth perspective. I guess I left the housing element out of the "long story". 5,700 multifamily housing units are being proposed for the "Science City". However, they are not included in the staging requirements in the Gaithersburg West Master Plan so there is no assurance that anyone who will live in the housing will work in the "Science City".

Also, I have read that some in the biomedical community are concerned that the housing, which is to be one-third of the proposed square footage in Life Sciences Central, will take the space that should be reserved for the hospital and the biomedical companies. The primary purpose for this area has always been to be a biomedical campus rather than a "City".

In 1995, the Planning Board wrote a report stating: "The campus of the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center is virtually built out..."

We are not starting with a clean slate with unlimited space so it is very important to

carefully evaluate the best uses for the space available.

Another point to consider regarding housing is that there are currently over 25,000 homes within 2.5 miles of the proposed "Science City". This includes apartments, condos and townhomes as well as single-family homes.

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