

## Residents for Reasonable Development

January 3, 2009

Royce Hanson, Chairman, Montgomery County Planning Board  
8787 Georgia Avenue  
Silver Spring MD 20910

Re: Gaithersburg West Master Plan

Dear Chairman Hanson and Planning Board members:

Residents for Reasonable Development is a group of residents in the neighborhoods near Gaithersburg West, representatives of local civic associations, and representatives of environmental groups. We are very concerned about the extent of development that is being proposed and are dismayed at the public process to date. We suggest positive steps to improve both the public process and the resulting plan.

The planning staff's process for public input was far more constricted than the process for other recent master plans. Gaithersburg West had four meetings over a five week period. For the Potomac master plan, a citizens advisory committee interacted with planners for 18 months. For Shady Grove, regular interactive public meetings were held over two years.

Requests for a citizens advisory committee and for more public input into planning this area are not new. One such request was made by letter dated November 6, 1996 from the Mission Hills Architectural Review Board to Mr. William Hussmann, Chairman of the MCPB which read as follows: "A commission, with representation for the neighboring communities, should be created that will work with the planners/builders to insure that impact to the surrounding residential areas is minimized." Much more was discussed in this letter, but a response was never received.

During the third and fourth Gaithersburg West public meetings (only two of the four meetings allowed for community participation!), members of our group began to outline a comprehensive alternate approach to development of the area. We made a formal presentation of our ideas during the final meeting. Our approach strives to meet the goals of County officials and landowners for further growth, while preserving the integrity of the surrounding low density neighborhoods. Although community members conveyed the essentials of our plan in break-out discussions during the third public meeting, the presentation given by the planning staff during the final meeting did not respond to our input at all. In particular, their set of development caps for the traffic zones is identical to the excessive caps they proposed before the public process began.

Furthermore, we have been unable to get information and answers to questions from the planning staff. In other words, we have been deprived of the normal interaction between staff, residents and developers that characterizes the master planning process. For example, we have tried repeatedly to obtain traffic modeling results that we know the staff has done, with no results.

Now the public meetings are over. Planning staff has a very limited amount of time to prepare a

draft plan for the Planning Board. The purpose of this letter is to provide a snapshot of the alternative plan being prepared by Residents for Reasonable Development. We ask that the staff respond to our proposals and integrate them into their own draft as appropriate.

## **THE ALTERNATIVE PLAN**

Our “Reasonable Plan” recognizes the benefit of some urban redevelopment of the planning area: using the land more efficiently, providing for growth of biomedical businesses, orienting development more toward transit, and accommodating more housing. *Our goal is to cap development over the whole planning area at about the maxima that are theoretically achievable under the existing plan*, but to rearrange it in a more compact, transit-oriented form. Densities would follow an overall gradient from densest on the east side, to least dense in the west.

The upper limit would thus be about 38,000 jobs, 12.5 million square feet of non-residential building (which amounts to about 6 million sf of new construction for the entire Gaithersburg West development area). Where appropriate, housing should be increased and commercial/industrial development reduced. The number of housing units is uncertain, and would depend on what seems feasible in mixed use development on the outer parts of the LSC properties, Danac and other low density buildings near the LSC station. We will send shortly a chart showing preliminary targets for jobs, housing, and square footage of commercial space for each traffic zone in the planning area.

*The logical place for the central core of Gaithersburg West is around the Life Sciences Center Core CCT stop in the eastern part of the planning area, encompassing parts of traffic zones 215, 216, and 218.* This center would span Key West Avenue and encompass expansion planning by Shady Grove Hospital (Adventist Group).

The area centered on the LSC Core CCT stop is closest to the existing and currently planned large scale development around the hospital, Crown Farm, Danac property and Falls Grove. It is farthest from small scale residential neighborhoods. It has the highest accessibility in the planning area, with the shortest transit trip to the Shady Grove Metro station. The relatively direct transit trip to Metro and the presence of nearby residential areas at Decoverly and Crown Farm make this a logical place for a mixed use center which includes significant housing. This center should be the location of highest density and tallest buildings. Density should taper down near the residential areas of Decoverly, Crown Farm and Washingtonian, with compatible residences exclusively as a transition to the residential areas.

We agree with the need for housing and support the staff’s proposal to *move the PSTA facilities and develop housing and public services, including a potential school, on that site.* We generally agree with the proposed density of about 2000 units, assuming a compatible form for the buildings.

Belward Farm is closest to neighborhoods, farthest from the current center of biomedical activity, farthest by transit from the center of the I-270 Corridor, and perhaps for those reasons is the last major green place in the planning area. *Our goal for Belward is to keep as much green space as possible, with a large park like area on the north, west and south sides and generous buffer for the farmstead.* We propose to move the proposed CCT station farther east toward the

currently developed part of the original farm. Development should be clustered around the station. Buildings should be compactly spaced and limited to five stories in height.

Because Belward Farm is so valuable as green open space, part of its potential development should be transferred elsewhere in the planning area. This would be done via a Transfer of Development Rights program, similar to the program by which farmers in the Agriculture Reserve are awarded TDRs which they cannot use to build on their farms. Rather, the TDRs are sold to developers in urban and suburban areas, who receive a density bonus on the developing property.

In this case, the owners, JHU would be awarded TDRs for Belward Farm, which could be transferred to their classroom property at the LSC CCT station, or sold to other developers in Gaithersburg West.

The Reasonable Plan would improve the vision of the staff draft by concentrating the densest development in a single center with highest accessibility, and tightening the axis along which development nodes are placed at adjacent transit stations. The transit station developments would follow a logical hierarchy, with the major center at the LSC, associated housing at PSTA, and a smaller more specialized Science City on Belward.

Finally, we note that neither JHU nor the planning staff has offered a detailed plan for the use of the Belward property that would justify the densities that have been proposed. The famous Biopolis in Singapore, offered as an example by JHU, is a smaller part of a larger technology and other office and residential urban center. Biopolis itself has only about two million square feet of space and 2000 bioscience-related employees. [See article in "Urban Land" magazine, October 2008]

## **TRANSPORTATION**

*This plan is intended to be truly transit oriented, with the CCT being the only major new facility added.* Further construction of highway interchanges is not acceptable, though smaller road improvements may be needed. If the level of development proposed above cannot be served adequately by a lightly augmented road system, the CCT, added bus service, bikeways, transit use incentives, etc., then development capacity should be reduced. Staging of development must depend on funding for construction of the CCT as far as Metropolitan Grove.

Finally, The Reasonable Plan would change the route of the CCT. As stated, the Belward stop should be moved farther east. The route then would turn north to Great Seneca Highway. This route would better protect the green farm, and take the CCT off Muddy Branch Road which has a narrower right of way than Great Seneca. Muddy Branch Road near the intersection with Great Seneca Highway is frequently clogged with backed-up traffic, and thus difficult for pedestrians to cross. We do not want the CCT to create another obstacle.

In addition, a station could be added on Great Seneca near the site of the currently planned station. This would serve the Danac property and Discoverly. In the short term, this station may substitute for the PSTA station if redevelopment does not occur.

The Reasonable Plan should increase CCT ridership compared to current forecasts, making the

CCT more competitive for public funding without gross increases in development. First, the plan clusters development in a more intense pattern around the stations, focusing on the strong center at the LSC station. Second, the more concentrated urban pattern should increase the feasibility of infill or redevelopment in the designated areas. Thus it becomes more feasible to achieve the employment level theoretically possible with the existing master plan. Adding housing would further increase transit ridership.

## CONCLUSION

The members of Residents for Reasonable Development will continue to work hard to provide a reasonable alternative plan for Gaithersburg West. We intend to function as a citizens advisory committee, which has been denied a role in this plan. We will ask for a reasonable amount of assistance and information from staff as we work on the details of our plan.

Our criticism of the process and its lack of responsiveness is not directed at staff. We realize that their schedule is as constricted as ours has been. This plan, however, will not be acted on by the County Council until September 2009. During the next months, we hope the public input process will continue, and that the Planning Board will respect and respond to our efforts, as they have done with citizen efforts in other master plans.

Sincerely,

Jan Fine

Secretary of Mission Hills Architectural Review Board,  
Spokesperson for Residents For Reasonable Development

Dan Drazan	President, North Potomac Citizens Association
Pamela Lindstrom	Smart Growth Chair, Sierra Club Montgomery County group
Scott Jamison	President, Washingtonian Woods Homeowners Association
Gary Robinson	Washingtonian Woods resident
Lynne Rose	President, Mission Hills Architectural Review Board
Wayne Moore	Member of Mission Hills Architectural Review Board
Carolyn Moore	Resident of Mission Hills
Magda Clyne	Mission Hills resident
Peter Clyne	Mission Hills resident
Jack Song	Mission Drive resident
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Carol Vam Dam	President, West Montgomery County Citizens Association
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Ed Alera	Westleigh resident
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Lisa Patterson	President, Darnestown Civic Association
Dolores Milmo	Conservation Associate, Audubon Naturalist Society