

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision

Focus Group Meeting Summary

October 10, 2007

This document is a summary of the discussion held by the Focus Group, which is the first in a series of public events to review the Department of Planning and Zoning's draft Downtown Columbia vision framework document. 101 people including 22 Focus Group members, 66 public participants and 13 Project Team members attended the meeting. Comments by the Focus Group and the public are organized by topic or theme, rather than by the order which comments were made.

Introduction

Marsha McLaughlin welcomed and thanked everyone in attendance. She described activities that have occurred since the last Focus Group meeting, including the arrival of a new administration. At the new administration's request, a new traffic study has been conducted; a new green initiative has been launched; and the future role of the DAP (Design Advisory Panel) has been strengthened. Additionally, Howard County staff has developed a guiding, thematic framework as a consensus document for the next steps towards achieving the community's vision for Downtown Columbia.

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision Presentation

Bill Mackey made a presentation summarizing the County's framework vision document. The presentation is available at: <http://www.howardcountymd.gov/downtowncolumbia>.

Focus Group Discussion

Kim Flowers, DPZ Deputy Director, facilitated a discussion among Focus Group members by asking them to introduce themselves and mention either a primary interest or a desired outcome from the process. Among the desires expressed were strengthening the role of Downtown as a mixed-use, human-scaled place, focusing on the life of the community and its people, and embracing diversity in housing, people and cultural arts. Members also expressed concern about traffic patterns, infrastructure, and relationships between Downtown and the surrounding village centers. Several Focus Group members expressed their satisfaction that *Downtown Columbia: A Community's Vision* had captured the diversity of opinion expressed over two years of Focus Group meetings.

Kim Flowers then asked Focus Group members to comment on *Chapter 1: Making a Special Place*. Each member of the Focus Group commented in turn. Feedback included the necessity of creating new public and cultural spaces that would be accessible to all; turning Downtown into a distinctive, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use community to generate vibrancy; and creating a setting that would be unique in the region. Focus Group members emphasized the necessity of providing a place for people of all ages with a full spectrum of housing. These members stated that the newfound energy from a redeveloped Downtown would advance Jim Rouse's vision of a "garden for growing people."

It was repeatedly commented that too many structures in the existing downtown are painted beige. By requiring higher design standards for buildings and implementing a more walkable, pedestrian-friendly street network, Downtown would move towards becoming a more distinctive place.

Some Focus Group members summarized the chapter as a "wish list," emphasizing the need to move forward with the vision and expressing concern that the County's fiscal requirements for improving Downtown's infrastructure systems be addressed. Some members cautioned that the County should be realistic about achieving the overall vision. One member questioned what role

General Growth Properties (GGP) would have in carrying out the vision, describing the task as GGP's moral burden.

Several members expressed concerns that there were few specific details as to what the character of the districts would be as well as the lack of clearly stated height limits. One member pointed out that the document's "appropriately scaled buildings" would mean different things to different people. This member was disappointed that "should/could" was used instead of "will/won't."

The discussion continued with more general comments about other chapters in the vision framework document. Marsha McLaughlin thanked the Focus Group and audience for the many positive comments made in the first round of discussion, suggesting that it would be more helpful if the group provided feedback about what they thought might be missing in the document or what they would like to see revised as the document is finalized. The following discussion then ensued.

Many Focus Group members had concerns with traffic and pedestrian issues. Several members cautioned that any development plan should wait until a traffic plan could be enacted. Others were concerned about projecting traffic changes into the future as far as 2037. Members discussed the possible roadway improvements in the framework including new roads near Symphony Woods and in the park with The Hug statue. Many members objected to new roads being located near Lakeside.

A Focus Group member expressed concerned about the proposal to move the fire station to a new location, requesting more information on the environmental context of any proposed, new location. Several members requested that there be stronger language about constructing affordable housing.

A Focus Group member stated that the overall report describes the vision rather than providing a specific process for the redevelopment of Downtown. This member cautioned against leaving the public out of the redevelopment process as it enters the construction phase. Another member said the County should only mandate the most essential components of the vision, because too many mandates would hinder development progress. Another member said that community amenities should be promised by the developer in exchange for profits reaped from Downtown development.

Public Comments

Kimberley Flowers opened up comments to the audience, requesting public input and feedback. Thirteen audience members spoke about the document including strengthening sustainability, green building requirements and the natural environment; requiring a phasing outline to ensure responsible and orderly development patterns; and the need for agreement on appropriate sources of funding for road improvements. One audience member recalled that in the 1960's, Jim Rouse had promised County Commissioners that Columbia wouldn't cost the County any dollars. This audience member then asked if GGP would be willing to offer this same commitment for future development.

Audience members called for living wages and health care for the workers in downtown, and asked the County to factor in the impact of people who will both live and work in downtown as part of the monitoring process. Other members asked about the character of each district, the role of Planning Board in the Downtown redevelopment, and requested an incubator for entrepreneurial activities.

Several audience members reflected Focus Group members' concerns on the strength of the vision. A member reminded everyone that the vision should include those who are young now, for they would inherit Downtown. Another member called on people to enact the vision now, stating that if people want a pedestrian environment, they should start walking now instead of waiting for a new pedestrian Downtown. Still others applauded the vision and said it was the right step forward. One audience member asked everyone to have faith in GGP and DPZ; otherwise, the community runs the danger of not accomplishing anything. This audience member urged everyone to move forward.

Other Comments

In response to questions about the process and revisions to the document, Marsha McLaughlin noted that *Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision* would not be submitted for County Council review. It is a guidance document rather than a legislative document. As a guidance document, it uses language such as “should, could, may.” A Downtown Development Master Plan / General Plan Amendment (GPA) and the Zoning Regulations Amendment (ZRA), expected to be proposed by GGP, would be regulatory documents that are subject to the formal, public process of consideration by the Planning Board and review by the County Council. As regulatory documents, these would include language stipulating what “shall, must, will” be done to implement the vision framework.

Focus Group

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