

Columbia Downtown Focus Group

Minutes from Meeting July 5, 2006

Issued: July 12, 2006

The format of the meeting minutes has been changed in response to suggestions made during the Focus Group meeting. A few members suggested that the discussions be summarized, synthesized and presented in a way that indicates DPZ had heard and understood what was said at the meeting. Comments have been reorganized slightly so that they are grouped by topic, rather than arranged in the order in which the comments were made. The Focus Group is asked to let DPZ know if they prefer this new format or the former approach, which attempted to document most of the individual comments made during the meeting.

Introduction of Focus Group Facilitator

Steve Lafferty introduced Linda Burton, the Focus Group facilitator invited by DPZ. Ms. Burton suggested the meeting be considered an “expectations session” and asked the group to engage in a conversation about the Focus Group process rather than any specific topic.

Review of Focus Group Meeting Minutes from May 24, 2006

Bob Tennenbaum asked that the first sentence under the third bullet at the bottom of page 2 (beginning “Concerned about the logic...”) be stricken from the minutes.

Traffic Study Update

Bridget Mugane distributed a paper entitled Comments on the "Traffic Analysis of the Charrette Master Plan" Dated June 2006, written by her and two traffic consultants (available on the County's web site at <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/DPZDocs/FocusGroupTrafficAnalysisComments070506.pdf>). She asked that the July 12 meeting be delayed until the consultant could provide written answers to the questions posed in the paper. DPZ expressed the wish to have the consultant answer the questions in person at the next meeting, as scheduled, and offered to have the consultant, Walter Kulash, return for a second meeting, if needed, to resolve any unanswered issues.

Ms. Burton asked other members of the group about their preferences. Opinions varied from a desire to delay the meeting until complete information was available and able to be studied by the members, to a wish to get an understanding directly from the consultant. A member suggested that other people may have additional questions they would like to ask, not just the ones on the written comment paper. Although having multiple meetings with the consultant sounded inefficient to some, others were anxious to get the process started. Enough people spoke in favor of discussing the issue in person with the consultant on July 12, that most of the group appeared willing to hold the meeting as scheduled.

Focus Group Mission and Expected Outcomes

Mission and Approach

Many members seemed to agree that the goal of the Focus Group was to provide a “reality check” on the plan produced during the charrette and that the vision plan needs to be refined and turned into something more real, something that can be implemented. The charrette was a huge undertaking in just one week and it was not able to adequately address many important issues that need continuing community input.

Several members expressed frustration. Some thought the process had gone too quickly, others too slowly. Some thought the meetings would only go on for a month or two, but they have been held once or

twice a month since December. The Focus Group was unclear as to whether they were being asked to make decisions, or whether DPZ would be making the decisions. They were unsure if DPZ intended to revise the charrette plan based on Focus Group comments. The need to understand how the group was influencing DPZ's decision making process was a theme repeated several times during the discussion. The group did not think voting on issues was an appropriate way to resolve issues. They doubted that a vote would represent the full range of opinions expressed by group members.

The Focus Group has gone into a level of detail and breadth of issues that many did not expect when the session began. Some felt that they were not prepared or did not have the expertise to respond to certain issues. Many believed they brought expertise on certain topics and agreed that the group is well informed. When they thought they were being asked to make decisions about these issues, they felt a strong sense of responsibility, thus asked for more details to become more educated. This direction (toward details and decision making) was one the group did not anticipate. It slowed down the process and led to many differing opinions. If they cannot make the decisions based on available information or level of expertise, they need to hear from more experts or to be assured that there is another public review mechanism to make the decision. They expressed concern that some of the issues (especially social aspects) go beyond DPZ's ability to address them.

Some members expressed a positive view of the process, thanking DPZ for the information provided and for continuing to partner with the community in trying to find solutions. Many feel the discussions have been fruitful and provide an important venue to express real concerns. Although there may not be agreement on some of the issues, members have the same goal of working toward a better Downtown

Issues for further Discussion

- **Affordable Housing:** This remains a topic of ongoing discussion because the Focus Group has proposed percentages that exceed those in the DPZ draft proposal. DPZ and the group suggested that a more appropriate approach may be to not state a number in the master plan, but to make a statement that all can agree on: Downtown should have a full spectrum of housing. Since an Affordable Housing Task Force and the BRAC Task Force are also tackling this issue, the Focus Group might defer to them to make recommendations. The group, however, wanted to be informed about external discussions and noted that they will continue to emphasize how important they feel this issue is to Downtown.
- **Social Issues:** Most members believe that civic, cultural and community facilities and activities need to be addressed in the plan. Recognizing these topics is a way to link the plan to the original goals and vision of Jim Rouse when Columbia was founded. The group did recognize that some of these issues may go beyond the scope of DCI's physical plan and DPZ's zoning authority and implementation ability. Focus Group member Mary Pivar has expressed an interest in forming a separate group to further study the potential for expanding the arts and cultural activities in Columbia.
- **Design Issues:** Several members of the group expressed their willingness to continue working on the design guidelines for Downtown.

Communication

DPZ should chair the meeting in a way that keeps the agenda on track. Discussions should be terminated when they become redundant. DPZ should reconfirm what they are hearing during the meeting to ensure that everyone understands what is being said. This feedback loop from the group to DPZ and from DPZ back to the group is very important. DPZ should synthesize the conversation in meeting minutes. The synthesis should describe the opinions - pro and con - expressed about the topics.

DPZ will ask Linda Burton to continue as Focus Group facilitator, helping to keep the dialogue on track, so that all members are heard from and that ground rules for discussion are followed.

Summary

- The purpose of the Focus Group is to provide feedback to DPZ. Members will serve as a sounding board, responding to the materials presented by DPZ.

- The Focus Group would prefer to concentrate on philosophical issues rather than making decisions about details of the plan and its implementation strategies. Details will sometimes need to be part of the discussion to ensure that the Focus Group understands the scope of the proposal and is able to react to it.
- The Focus Group will not put its “stamp of approval” on the Columbia Downtown Master Plan. The intent is not to reach consensus, but rather to expose DPZ to a range of opinions on Downtown issues so that DPZ can gauge the level of support to expect from the larger community. DPZ will use Focus Group comments to refine the plan for future public presentation at Planning Board meetings and County Council hearings.

Audience Discussion

Ms. Burton opened the discussion out to audience members. The audience discussion also involved comments from Focus Group members and DPZ.

- **Focus Group Process:** Audience members seemed to concur with many of the opinions expressed by the Focus Group members: they appreciated the facilitator; some were unclear about the goals and the role of the Focus Group; the vision expressed at the opening session of the charrette was not carried through into the master plan; and the Focus Group process is important so that the version of the plan that moves forward will represent community wishes.
- **Issues:** The group should discuss social issues, not just physical planning issues, sometimes details (such as heights) will need to be discussed as well as philosophical issues. When DPZ revises the master plan, the public should be made aware of what changes have occurred.
- **Focus Group Membership and Attendance:** Several participants criticized the composition of the group for not being inclusive enough (lacking sufficient racial, ethnic, age and economic diversity) and for being held during normal business hours, thus limiting involvement by some community members. Although several people defended the membership and selection process or spoke about the difficulty of composing a truly balanced committee, the issue of diverse participation was acknowledged as an important consideration for scheduling future hearings.
- **Room Arrangements:** Audience members expressed concern about the arrangement and acoustics of meeting rooms, which haven’t always been conducive to participation by attendees. The room layout at The Other Barn made it difficult for many to hear the discussion. DPZ agreed to see if another location was available or to rearrange the room to make it easier to communicate.

Schedule

The next meeting will be on July 12 from 3:00 to 5:00 at The Other Barn in Oakland Mills Village Center. The Other Barn room will be arranged to improve the ability of the audience to see and hear the traffic study presentation. Amplification equipment will be provided.

Attendees:

Focus Group

Bobo, Liz
Brown, Maggie
Coyle, Cynthia
De Vermeil, Andre
Godine, Doug
Gray, Karen
Hollis, Rob
Laidig, Patricia
Malone, Jud
McCord, Nancy
Mugane, Bridget
Parrish, Jane
Pivar, Mary (Alan Klein, representing)
Richardson, Lee
Saleem, Mohammed
Sosinsky, Tim
Talkin, Richard
Tennenbaum, Robert
Tousey, Hugh

Press

Blakely, Andrei
Hedenberg, Sam

Council Reps

Feldmark, Jessica

Public

Broida, Gail
Broida, Joel
Brown, Todd
Buonora, Dave
Chambers, Joann
Cole, Ray
Coren, Evan
Drakos, Michael
Dunbar, Harry
England, Brian
Feldmark, Jessica
Feldmark, Joshua
Fox, Suzanne
Hekimian, Alex
Howell, Sherman
Johnson, Rebecca
Lawson, Marvin A.
McLaughlin, Jo
Meskin, Stephen
Paumier, Cy
Rhodehamel, Chick
Ruther, Helen
Sigaty, Mary Kay
Smith, John D.
Terassa, Jen
Wengel, Linda
Wright, Phillip

DPZ

McLaughlin, Marsha
Lafferty, Stephen
Hilsenrath, Mina
Blaumanis, Dace
Clay, Randy
Sprenkle, Tom
Mackey, Bill

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