

Columbia Downtown Focus Group

Minutes from Meeting July 12, 2006

Issued: July 21, 2006

These meeting minutes provide a summary of the presentation and meeting discussion. Comments have been reorganized slightly so that they are grouped by topic, rather than arranged in the order in which the comments were made.

Introduction

Marsha McLaughlin gave an overview of what DPZ asked Walter Kulash to address in the Traffic Analysis. Marsha reiterated that the charrette vision was for a walkable downtown with public transportation. DPZ looked at transit prototypes in the region, but these had densities that were inappropriate for Downtown Columbia. The charrette development program is about half the density of other suburban downtowns in the region. Our Market Analyst said that the program was realistic. We thought that the program might be ambitious, especially if transit were a long-range issue. We asked Glatting Jackson to analyze what density could be supported, if we didn't include major transit service. The assignment posed three basic questions:

- How much of the charrette program could be accomplished?
- What road improvements might be needed to accommodate the program? For example, how would an interchange at South Entrance Road (SER) and improvements at the Governor Warfield Parkway / Little Patuxent Parkway (GWP/LPP) North intersection affect the program?
- Should any changes be made to the Adequate Public Facilities (APF) standards? Columbia is subject to APF, but many intersections are constrained and substantial improvements are not required because they would have a negative impact on the town center environment. This condition was based on decisions of a citizen task force that had to choose an appropriate standard for Town Center.

Presentation of the Traffic Analysis by Walter Kulash

Walter Kulash gave a summary of his report: "Traffic Analysis of Charrette Master Plan Program of Development." Mr. Kulash used a PowerPoint presentation to step through the main elements of the report and to discuss several key principles of transportation planning. That presentation has been annotated based on meeting minutes. A brief summary of that presentation is provided below. To review Glatting Jackson's traffic analysis (06-28-2006) or the annotated PowerPoint Presentation (07-12-2006), please visit the web at: <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/Community/ColumbiaMasterPlanCharrette.htm>.

Walter Kulash described the charrette plan as a "holding capacity plan" intended to show what the land could hold, if it were to be arranged in a manner consistent with community desires expressed at the charrette. The charrette plan shows what could be developed; the traffic analysis tests what can be accomplished realistically.

Mr. Kulash described the existing road network and the additional roads proposed by the charrette plan. He noted that Columbia has a very limited number of travel lanes compared to other towns and few options for improvements are available. The analysis assumed no major transit improvements and no major road improvements. He explained the analysis methodology, which built upon the 2005 study by Wells & Associates for GPP. The analysis compares traffic capacity under two standards: Critical Lane Volumes (CLV) of 1450 and 1600. He noted that there is no one ideal number. *Places of value* accept higher CLV levels because other things are valued more than free flow of traffic. His conclusions and comments are:

- 1450 CLV is a good standard if moving traffic is your main goal. Since some intersections in Downtown are already at 1450, this standard may not make sense. At this level, 1/3 of the charrette development would be reasonable with no traffic improvements.

- 1600 CLV is acceptable in urban areas. Most intersections work fine at this level, although a few only have capacity for 30-75% of the maximum charrette program.
- When asked where to reduce program to improve traffic conditions, he proposed reducing office development because it contributes considerable PM peak hour traffic. He further noted that a full interchange at US 29 would provide considerable relief.

Mr. Kulash then discussed transportation planning principles and how they relate to decision-making about community development. He focused on the fact that traffic always exceeds what is forecast because road improvements induce more traffic. Instead of building more roads, adding more pavement and improving traffic efficiency, many planners and communities are trying to move less people fewer miles – to manage transportation choices rather than solve traffic problems. The options:

- If we continue to make road improvements, people will travel more. At 1450 CLV we are providing “free” transportation (“free” flowing movement, no “costly” delays). People will consume a lot of it (drive further, move farther away for work or jobs). There is no incentive to change behavior.
- At 1600 CLV people must accept more congestion. Delay is the “cost” they have to pay. As a result, people begin to look for alternative modes of transportation, stay in place and drive less.

He asked the Focus Group what type of community they wanted Downtown to be and what conclusions they were reaching about transportation options.

Traffic Analysis Discussion

Congestion: In response to a request to explain the transportation demand curve in the presentation, Walter Kulash responded that congestion might not mean *failure*; it may mean that something different is happening - with congestion, retailing changes. National big box tenants want traffic to be free flowing to attract customers from the widest possible area, while local merchants and smaller stores benefit from slower traffic that encourages the local customers. Most people want and appreciate the resulting change in lifestyle when retailers respond to congestion. The important factor to consider is change in behavior. People change their work schedule as a response to congestion - and do not move further way.

Focus Group members provided examples, citing the need for balance so that congestion does not drive people away. In Federal Hill, Baltimore City, residents walk and use local merchants in the immediately surrounding area. However, in another example, an added traffic signal to the main street of a small town actually discouraged residents outside of the town from driving into the town.

Analysis Assumptions: In response to questions raised, Mr. Kulash defined limits of the analysis. The analysis did not assume improvements at the intersection of LPP and GWP or additional lanes on SER, LPP and GWP.

New Interchange: Focus Group entertained the idea of adding a new interchange to US 29 between MD 175 and Broken Land Parkway (BLP) and asked what impact this would have on trip distribution. Mr. Kulash responded that the impact would be monumental, but there may be concerns about intersection spacing. Mr. Kulash commented that if there were interest in going 30% to 40% above the maximum program proposed in the charrette, then this would be the option to investigate. It would be a multimillion-dollar commitment, and Mr. Kulash added that it might be better to invest in transit.

A member of the Focus Group commented that Oakland Mills could benefit from such an interchange and asked where the process goes from here. Mr. Kulash commented that this could be interesting and/or valuable, but for the charrette program (units, SFA’s), improvements at this scale would not be necessary. Another member of the Focus Group mentioned that eventually due to increased traffic and increased population, over the life of this 30-year plan, Downtown would need another interchange onto US 29.

Governor Warfield Parkway: In response to concern expressed about congestion on Governor Warfield Parkway resulting from changes in traffic at intersections affecting the areas in between the intersections, Mr. Kulash responded that there was not a large increment (referred to table in analysis) at the Windstream area.

Induced Traffic: Assuming Option A or Option B was acceptable, a Focus Group member asked, then would *induced demand* bring more traffic into Downtown, if Downtown is more vibrant and attractive. Mr. Kulash answered that *induced traffic* is the phenomenon of people going faster and further on widened roadways. Mr. Kulash also asked what would happen if we get more outsiders coming to commercial areas. Do we cut it off through zoning? Do we want to go beyond self-sufficient to being a regional attractor? Focus Group members responded that Bethesda has tremendous outside traffic and solved it with lots of public garages and shuttles. Annapolis solved it with remote parking and shuttles. If Option A or B is selected, then County needs to look at an interchange or flyover at LPP/GWP with interceptor garages.

Oakland Mills Connector: Focus Group members asked that traffic plan be based more on the charrette. A member commented that the link to Oakland Mills was repeated many times at the charrette, and the large number of proposed streets shocked people, while at the same time there was no street connection to Oakland Mills provided. It was mentioned by other members that this connection had been ruled out.

A Focus Group member expressed concern that developers would achieve density without the community obtaining connections. This should be addressed in the plan. Mr. Kulash commented that the community is talking about a major highway interchange; this would not be done without a major expansion of development. Mr. Kulash suggested that a 10% engineering project, as well as a larger forum, is needed to answer these questions.

In the 1960's, the bridge to Village of Oakland Mills was proposed because Oakland Mills was originally seen as part of Town Center. Oakland Mills sits on high point overlooking Town Center; it's also closer to the Lakefront than GWP. Rouse's original intent was to provide a bridge for a minibus and pedestrians.

Perimeter Development: A Focus Group member commented that since congestion occurs only ten hours per week, before expanding roads, why not look at traffic related to growth outside of Downtown. Also, should consider parking outside of LLP / GWP / BLP triangle. Since half of peak hour traffic is office, could some of the office be located outside of the triangle? - Instead of changing all the roads to accommodate increased traffic inside the triangle? Parking is needed for residential on every block, but for office this is not as essential; plus, there was a concern expressed that garages attract trips.

Mitigation: Mr. Kulash commented that strategy above would concentrate more office in Symphony Woods, adding that we need to decide what to put where. Option A would reduce office in the northern end. Who parks where becomes the discussion; people walk two to three blocks from a garage or shuttle. Mitigation would be a productive discussion, if adding more lanes were not the answer. To receive approval for development, developers would be required to provide for mitigation, such as additional pedestrian paths.

Affordability: A Focus Group member inquired whether change in behaviors would be due to income. Mr. Kulash had mentioned that flexible work time was linked to who will be living there. Mr. Kulash expanded by stating, "People predisposed to living in a Master Planned community" were more likely to change behaviors. Mr. Kulash also commented that traffic engineers cannot answer this, but he has worked on many similar projects that were undertaken in disadvantaged urban areas where people cannot afford to drive.

Vision: A Focus Group members stated that more discussion is needed regarding good ideas presented; 10 hours/week of congestion should not drive decisions; rather, the community should describe a vision. Also, although some reports made it sound like traffic is dooming the Master Plan, the traffic analysis is a

positive reality check. A substantial portion of the program can be accommodated; and there are options to implement the full vision, if this is desired. Mr. Kulash agreed, stating that the goal now is to move toward all of what we want from the Master Plan, not “solving” traffic. Put traffic in context of zoning - phasing plan in zoning synchronizes with road improvements. Traffic has to work for everyone.

Pedestrian Environment: A member inquired about an interchange from US 29 that could feed an air rights traffic garage. Mr. Kulash replied that this would be appropriate to bring a substantial level of development. Cities do it, but this would require a 10% engineering design in order to study. An easy flow around downtown is desired, even if accepting slow movement in the center. Mr. Kulash related that it’s difficult to have much growth without impacting perimeter roads; it’s one of the prices to be paid. However, the plan needs to pay attention to local back street networks, in order to bring residents across Little Patuxent Parkway and Governor Warfield Parkway, so residents can stay off these roadways.

Regarding pedestrian signalization, it was asked whether (referring to Figure 3) all the traffic lights would have to be lengthened for pedestrians. Mr. Kulash responded that if we want to balance things more for pedestrians, then we have to slow traffic down. It’s been his understanding that is what community wants.

Audience

Through Traffic: The traffic analysis includes through traffic (50% of the traffic). Through traffic won’t go away. The analysis did not look at traffic beyond Downtown, so it did not address the need to get people from Hickory Ridge, Wilde Lake and Harpers Choice to US 29. How to mitigate those conditions is a direction for further study and innovative solutions, so that the through traffic does not have a negative effect on Downtown. Solutions also need to ensure that conditions in Downtown don’t have a negative spillover effect on the villages. Mr. Kulash suggested that our decisions should provide solutions for local drivers, so they have routes to local destinations. We may be willing to let arterials become congested from through traffic, provided we offer a network of local streets and cross streets so that locals can walk and drive to Downtown by crossing the arterials (LPP/GWP/BLP), not driving on them. We need to decide how we want to handle it.

Wincopin Street: The traffic analysis assumed significant traffic would be diverted off LPP onto Wincopin Street. He was asked what would happen to congestion if a portion of that road remained pedestrian access only. He noted that the traffic benefits remain, even if access does not connect in the Lakefront area, because it still provides a way to get around the LPP/GWP North intersection. His preference would be to have it connected, even if it was a very local street with slow traffic, because it offers access to emergency vehicle, drop off, pedestrian sidewalks, etc. Another person expressed concern about streets near the Lake because of wetland and topography consideration, but Mr. Kulash endorsed the northern lakefront road, even if exceeds gradient standards, because it has value as a livable community-serving road. The intent would be to keep local traffic on Wincopin and off LPP.

Walkability: Many attendees reemphasized the desire for a walkable community and expressed concern that increased traffic, higher CLV levels and more through traffic would risk the pedestrian environment. Mr. Kulash stated that many cities have no CLV limits, but it remains walkable if crosswalks and pedestrian cycles at traffic lights are provided.

Congestion: Audience members expressed interest in the series of slides on congestion, but were concerned that we would be creating too much congestion by allowing traffic to grow to 1600 CLV. The increased population in Downtown will increase the number of choke points. Many people who now live in and use Downtown will be strangled by congestion. DPW and DPZ realize that there is a limit to how many lanes you can add. If we keep building more it will be to the detriment of quality of life; plus, we don’t have enough land. Decisions about the acceptable level of congestion and acceptable amount of traffic improvements need to be discussed further.

The Mall: If congestion gets too bad, will we be downgrading the use of the successful Mall? Mr. Kulash quoted Yogi Berra's comment about a very popular restaurant: "Nobody goes there anymore, it is too crowded." Congestion doesn't seem to be a problem for "lifestyle" retail centers. Those types of centers (which The Mall is evolving into) can tolerate more congestion than a freestanding suburban mall. We should ask GGP about it. Glatting Jackson has found that the more valuable the destination, the more willing people will be to go there despite congestion.

Air Quality and Congestion: When asked about the impact of added congestion on air quality, Mr. Kulash stated that he was convinced that idea of having free flowing traffic to improve air quality is wrong, and increased driving swamps improvements. Traffic congestion has little effect on pedestrians; congestion does not matter to them if you give the pedestrians a nice environment.

Other Comments

Several members of the audience asked Mr. Kulash for clarification about technical aspects of the traffic analysis. In response he offered the following information:

- He can provide some additional data, including the traffic assignment sheets for the five districts.
- The analysis does not assume additional lanes will be constructed on LPP and elsewhere, although it does assume that auxiliary turning lanes will be constructed (as noted in the Wells Associates study).
- The analysis did not look at intersections between GWP/LPP North and MD 175/US 29. Mark Deluca of DPW noted, however, that the County is looking at that segment of road and ways to add a lane and make existing lanes more efficient.
- The traffic analysis did not consider US 29. It assumed US 29 could handle added increments of traffic. DPW confirmed that a third northbound lane on US 29 is currently being planned.
- The charts in the report only show the existing signalized intersections and do not analyze new intersections or additional traffic lights.

HCCA Focus Group Listserv

HCCA offered to host a listserv for continuing dialogue related to the Focus Group. This would not be a County function; however, all correspondence received by the County via this method would become part of the public record. Focus Group thanked HCCA for this offer, and noted that all information should be made available to the public. HCCA is providing a web site where the public may access listserv items at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/columbia-focus/>.

Discussion focused on whether the listserv should allow only Focus Group members to post information or allow attendees the same level of access. Focus Group stressed that input from others is valued, noting that people have taken the time to attend and participate in the discussions. It was decided that anyone who is interested should be able to participate. It was also noted that if by increasing the volume of items the listserv were to become too unwieldy, then the HCCA moderator should have the ability to limit the discussions. Focus Group concluded that anyone who signs up should be included in the listserv. HCCA offered to provide a sign up sheet at Focus Group meetings for those interested in participating.

Meeting Minutes

Members commented that the new format for the minutes is good, noting that the points are clear and the discussion is easier to understand.

In July 5 meeting minutes, under Focus Group Mission and Expected Outcomes, in the second summary bullet point, the first sentence stating the Focus Group would prefer to concentrate on *philosophical* issues. This word should be changed to another term, since the Focus Group does deal with physical issues related to development such as transportation and traffic.

Schedule

Next Focus Group meeting could potentially be held in two weeks. DPZ will confirm potential July 26th meeting through follow up e-mail.

Attendees:

Focus Group

Bobo, Liz
Brown, Maggie
Coyle, Cynthia
De Vermeil, Andre
Godine, Doug (Jim Lano, representing)
Gray, Karen
Hollis, Rob
Kirsh, Phil
Laidig, Patricia
Malone, Jud
McCord, Nancy
Mugane, Bridget
Orenstein, Toby (Hal O., representing)
Parrish, Jane
Pivar, Mary (Brian England, representing)
Richardson, Lee
Sosinsky, Tim
Talkin, Richard
Tennenbaum, Robert
Tousey, Hugh

Facilitator

Burton, Linda

Council Reps

Feldmark, Jessica

Press

Blakely, Andrei
Merrill, Gerald

DPZ

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

DPW

DeLuca, Mark
Schwarzman, Diane

Public

Bess, Carl
Broida, Gail
Broida, Joel
Brown, Todd
Chambers, Joann
Cole, Ray
Coren, Evan
Drakos, Michael
Edwards, Al
Eland, Kristen
Feldmark, Joshua
Gallihue, Joel
Harris, Ben
Howell, Sherman
Johnson, Rebecca
Kellner, Barbara
Knowles, Lloyd
Kondo, Ursula
Lapine, Chuck
Lawson, Marvin
Levy, Julian
Mangus, Becky
Meskin, Stephen
Rappoport, Harold
Rhodehamel, Chick
Rudlin, Barbara
Ruther, Helen
Seiler, Tom
Sigaty, Mary Kay
Sitzman, Kevin
Smith, J.D.
Spongberg, Bob
Templin, Scott
Terrasa, Jen
Toback, Rhoda
Vogel, Bob
Walter, Ed
Wells, Marty
Wengel, Linda