

Columbia Downtown Focus Group

Minutes from Meeting July 26, 2006

Issued: August 18, 2006

The 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

Linda Burton, facilitator, opened the meeting requesting Focus Group reactions to the presentations at the prior meeting and also identification of topics which remain open for discussion.

Review of Focus Group Meeting Minutes from July 5 and July 12, 2006

In response to questions on how corrections were incorporated into the minutes, staff responded that the succeeding set of minutes record any corrections to the previous set of minutes. The group found this to be acceptable.

Focus Group Discussion

Traffic Analyses

The Focus Group reflected upon the Traffic Analysis with a wide variety of perspectives. Some felt that the analysis did not provide enough detailed information about what might happen, while others felt that the traffic analysis itself was a diversion from addressing the more important vision-issue of walkability in Downtown.

Land use, transit options and parking strategies were mentioned as powerful tools that affect traffic and should be considered as part of the traffic analysis. Also, diverting through-traffic away from or around Downtown and away from Columbia itself was discussed as desirable. Overall, the Focus Group members expressed concerns about changing the current, vehicular-traffic dynamic in Downtown either by too much or by too little.

In response to some specific requests, DPZ will ask the traffic consultant to provide more information regarding which road improvements were assumed; a sub-group will form to review this information.

Divergent Visions

The vision in the Vision Plan was challenged as being insufficient to the task of creating a vibrant Downtown. Some members of the group are looking for an even greater vision – one that is as visionary now as Rouse's was in the 1960's. One member noted that in order to look at the big picture one also needs to look at the small details.

Some members valued pedestrian mobility and related improvements over easy flow of vehicular traffic in order to create a more pedestrian-friendly and *urban* environment, while others wished to protect the *suburban* atmosphere of easy traffic flow and generous, free parking.

Also, some members thought that Columbia Downtown should be for Columbians only, while others see Columbia as a regional center that would draw in many people from many places. These underlying assumptions greatly affect both the formulation of a vision and its desired outcomes for Columbia Downtown.

Staging

The Focus Group presented at least two perspectives on the motivating force for development within Columbia. Some accepted the profit motive and see property owners as the force driving development,

while others see the social vision of Columbia as the driving force. Both forces were harnessed within Jim Rouse's vision. DPZ asked: "Should we shrink or expand the vision in the draft master plan?"

Presentation of Montgomery County's LATR by Mr. Shahriar Etemadi

Mr. Etemadi, Transportation Planning Supervisor, Montgomery County, gave a summary of the Montgomery County Local Area Transportation Review (LATR) program. Mr. Etemadi used a PowerPoint presentation to step through the main elements of the report and to discuss several key principles of transportation planning. A brief summary of the presentation is provided below.

To review a full-length version of Mr. Etemadi's presentation, please visit the web at: <http://www.co.ho.md.us/DPZ/Community/ColumbiaMasterPlanCharrette.htm>.

Mr. Etemadi explained how Montgomery County assesses traffic including study updates every five to ten years in order to channel development where infrastructure exists. Mr. Etemadi described the CLV for different areas in Montgomery County and how developers are required to provide mitigation when CLV exceeds adopted standards. To provide a level of comfort to the community regarding the transportation improvement mechanisms in place, pre-development traffic studies are also followed up over the years with other traffic studies.

Discussion of Presentation

In response to inquiries, Mr. Etemadi clarified that traffic monitoring organizations need to be established. Also, traffic effects need to be studied both at the large scale and at the project scale. Large scale sets the policies for the area, while project scale determines specific improvements made at the local intersections. Finally, when CLV standards are exceeded, it does not trigger the end of development but the beginning of mitigation, which often improves the pedestrian environment instead of making improvements to vehicular travel lanes.

Open Items

The Focus Group identified the following items as possible future topics for further discussion; however, some members opined that these topics have been addressed and need not be repeated:

- Pedestrian safety
- Project staging
- Open space parks / plazas
- Collaboration among existing property owners
- Environment / green building
- Better use of transit
- Social values (arts, affordable housing, diversity)
- Building heights
- Fiscal analysis
- Big picture vs. details
- Parking (hire experts to review)

DPZ agreed to cover the topics of revised development program, building heights and fiscal issues at a future meeting; DPZ will prepare a summary of Focus Group input that will be presented at an additional meeting. The Focus Group expressed that they were coming to a closing point, having addressed in some fashion the many topics raised during the charrette that required further discussion within a community-based setting.

Audience

Comments centered on the desire to see a vision developed by the people, not by GGP or DPZ or the Focus Group. Both the Focus Group and the original, 300-plus charrette participants were viewed by some as unrepresentative of the community. The commitment by the developer to a community-based vision as well as DPZ's ability to implement any vision were questioned. In response, another member of the audience reasoned that other projects managed by GGP should be reviewed to see if the projects work. It was suggested that large property owners should solicit for public input on any new vision for Downtown development.

Schedule

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, August 30, 2006, and will be held in The Other Barn.

Attendees:

Focus Group

Bobo, Liz
Brown, Maggie (Chuck Rhodehamel, rep)
Coyle, Cynthia
De Vermeil, Andre
Hollis, Rob
Kirsh, Phil
Laidig, Patricia
Malone, Jud
Mugane, Bridget
Orenstein, Toby (Hal Orenstein, rep)
Parrish, Jane
Pivar, Mary (Alex Hekimian, rep)
Richardson, Lee
Saleem, Mohammed
Sosinsky, Tim
Talkin, Richard
Tennenbaum, Robert
Tousey, Hugh

Facilitator

Burton, Linda

Guest Speaker

Shahriar Etemadi

Press

Blakely, Andrei
Hedenberg, Sam
Merrell, Gerald

Council Reps

Feldmark, Jessica

DPW

DeLuca, Mark
Schwarzman, Diane

Public

Bess, Carl
Broida, Joel
Brown, Todd
Chambers, Joann
Cole, Ray
Edwards, Al
Feldmark, Joshua
Harris, Ben
Howell, Sherman
Johnson, Rebecca
Ketley, Jeanne
Klein, Alan
Lapine, Chuck
Lawson, Marvin
McLaughlin, Jo
Meskin, Stephen
Mikkelsen, Lisa
Seiler, Tom
Sigaty, Mary Kay
Sponberg, Bob
Templeman, Evelyn
Templin, Scott
Toback, Rhoda
Walter, Ed
Wells, Marty
Wengel, Lisa

DPZ

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