

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision

Meeting Summary

Comments at Public Forum, Oakland Mills High School

October 30, 2007

This document summarizes the discussion held at the County-sponsored public forum. The purpose of the meeting was to solicit input about the Department of Planning and Zoning's draft framework document. About 75 people participated including 3 elected officials and 11 DPZ staff members. Comments are organized by topic rather than the order in which comments were made.

An audio recording of the meeting is available from the Department of Planning and Zoning. Please call Bill Mackey at 410-313-4321 or email wmackey@howardcountymd.gov.

Introduction

Marsha McLaughlin welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending this sixth and final public review session for the framework. The purpose of these meetings is to ensure that DPZ is on the right track with the document and to continue receiving public comments to be integrated into the final document. Bill Mackey explained the format for the evening.

Open Microphone for Speakers (three minutes)

Livability/Economic Vibrancy/Downtown Character

Many speakers voiced excitement about Downtown's future. Comments made repeatedly endorsed the reinvestment needed in infrastructure and to increase economic activity in Downtown. Older office buildings, dated public spaces and inaccessible amenities were examples given to describe parts of Downtown in need of new vibrancy to sustain business. One speaker cautioned that without filling in the details for Downtown, it too might become obsolete. Many speakers talked about how businesses are relocating away from Downtown and the need to redevelop outdated places with newer buildings to support shops, amenities and diverse housing.

Many speakers expressed concern about new development and the long-term best interests of Columbia. One speaker stated that the livability of Downtown, not skyscrapers or bustling traffic, draws people to Columbia. Another speaker proposed a height limit of 150 feet for all buildings. Another speaker characterized tall buildings as the "Manhattanization" of Columbia and questioned whether the cost of growth to the County would be too great. Some speakers also expressed the need for human-scaled development.

When reflecting on the desire to see Downtown be more than just a mall, one speaker told how coming to Columbia was to be part of a new city that hasn't happened yet. Other speakers were looking to the County and GGP to ensure Downtown is livable and economically successful.

One speaker voiced discontent with letting the developer decide the character of districts in Downtown, stating the County should provide these details. Some questioned how well different owners could work together. One speaker noted not all development has to be in Downtown and called for expanding the vision beyond Columbia to the entire County by extending water and sewer services to the west for development.

Environmental Sustainability

Several speakers stated that the environmental section is in need of further clarification. One speaker encouraged developers to address environmental concerns from the beginning of the process, designing buildings to minimize energy use. Another concern was the impact of an extension of Wincopin Street to Hickory Ridge Road and Vantage Point Road. One speaker warned that while Howard Countians are proud of recent green initiatives, pollution is a problem because of driving behaviors; hard choices are coming.

Pedestrian Mobility/Traffic and Congestion

Many speakers expressed concern about the potential traffic that new development might create. Some questioned why the traffic study proposes different levels of service but doesn't address why new standards are needed. One speaker talked about the need for more exits out of Downtown and specifically mentioned the bridge over Route 29 and the effect a connection from there would have on Oakland Mills.

Many speakers expressed concern about a Wincopin Street extension and the desire to see the Lakefront remain the center of events with its ambiance undisturbed by cars and noise pollution.

Several comments addressed the need for enhanced pedestrian connections and highlighted the desire for a walkable, multi-modal, vibrant place. Crossings from the Mall to the Lakefront and a promenade along the lake were given as examples. One speaker recommended the connections from Downtown to Wilde Lake (WL) village center and Oakland Mills (OM) village center be highlighted as important features. There were also comments about existing conditions and pedestrian safety.

While talking about the future possible expansion of the green line, one speaker encouraged preparations be made now. Others cited more immediate needs such as garage facilities for supporting the park-once concept. One speaker questioned whether such a parking scheme could work given the nature of how people travel.

Affordable Housing

The call for affordable housing in Downtown was repeated throughout the meeting. One speaker complimented DPZ for including "full spectrum" housing that was not in the previous plan. Another speaker wanted affordable housing to be located within the Downtown area and not in Wilde Lake or Oakland Mills. Others called for further clarification on how affordable units are financed. One specific recommendation for the document included using the term "diverse mix" to more fully describe the different land uses, incomes and locations needed to create affordable housing throughout Downtown. Another speaker emphasized the need to define affordable housing for low-wage workers, while encouraging the largest number of total units possible be built in Downtown to deliver the most affordable units. There was also a question about the role a Design Advisory Panel (DAP) plays in creating good design for affordable housing.

Specifics of the Framework/Flexible Process

Several speakers agreed overall with the values contained in the framework citing there was a lot of creative thought in the document. Many thought the framework is a good approach and touches on the key issues that need to be discussed. It was recommended that "shoulds" remain rather than "shalls".

Some speakers questioned the lack of specifics on such issues as development schedules and funding. One speaker who was displeased with the framework recommended an open competition between professionals to create a legitimate plan.

One speaker recognized the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) for its involvement and concerns about GGP. Another spoke of a report about GGP development financing and negative impacts on local government funding. Several speakers shared the view that the County government be active in its guidance of Downtown development.

While speaking about the final development plan process and zoning for Columbia, one speaker noted the many benefits of a flexible zoning process. A contrasting viewpoint raised concern over the use of flexible zoning when the developer has its own interests, citing GGP's decision not to purchase the "tower" as an example of acting in the corporation's best interest and not Columbia's.

Another speaker cited *General Plan 2000* as an existing document that already contains details on residential units and redeveloping older properties. There was a question about why the General Plan needed to be amended. One speaker requested the numbers used for dwelling units in the traffic study be inserted into the framework. Others felt the County's framework document is the beginning of a multi-step process. Several speakers also called for no closed meetings and to make sure the Planning Board allows for adequate public comments on the GGP plan.

Closing Comments

Bill Mackey expressed thanks to all who spoke. Marsha McLaughlin closed by saying DPZ looks forward to reviewing all comments. Marsha noted that the period for input has been extended to November 16. Next steps are to incorporate comments into a final framework document.

Attendees:

Public Sign-in

Agustine, Bianca
Appletree, Roy
Barker, George
Bobo, Liz (Delegate)
Bonstingl, Jay
Carson, Larry
Chamber, Joane
Choi, Hae-Lin
Coren, Evan
Cosentino, Sal
Davis, Michael
DeVerneil, Andre
Dlhopoisky, Heather
Eagan, Lin
Erskine, William
Fox, Susanne

Gross, Valerie
Gruhl, Werner
Howell, Sherman
Jenkins, Robert
Kennedy, Lena
Klein, Alan
Knowles, Lloyd
Kondo, Ursula
Lincoln, Emily
Malone, Jud
Mikkelsen, Lisa
Rosenbaum, Gary (PB)
Russell, Barbara
Schneider, Wolfger
Sherman, Caroline
Slater, John

Summerford, Rod
Thiebaut, Jean
Thompson, Mark
Tillman, Kathy
Tillman, Ned
Wilcox, Paul

County Staff

Clay, Randy
Feldmark, Jessica
Hilsenrath, Mina
Kennedy, Ian
Mackey, Bill
McLaughlin, Marsha
Sprenkle, Tom
Stoney, Samantha