

Downtown Columbia: A Community Vision

Columbia Town Center Short and Long-Term Traffic Assessment

Public Meeting Summary

October 11, 2007

This document summarizes the discussion held at the public meeting to review the Department of Public Works' Town Center traffic study conducted by the firm Sabra, Wang & Associates. About 70 people including 12 county staff and consultants attended the meeting. Comments are organized by topic or theme, rather than the order in which comments were made. The following abbreviations are used for roads in the study area: Little Patuxent Parkway (LPP), Broken Land Parkway (BLP) and Hickory Ridge Road (HRR).

Introduction

Marsha McLaughlin welcomed and thanked everyone in attendance. She described the vision framework as calling for balancing cars, pedestrians and transit in a multimodal downtown.

Mark DeLuca introduced Ziad Sabra, Principal, and Paul Silberman, Project Manager, from the firm of Sabra, Wang & Associates, Inc. and described their experience as consultant for all traffic impact studies in Baltimore City, traffic modeling for new development in Rockville Town Center, a traffic report for the Upper Marlboro town improvement study and preparation of various Howard County traffic studies for the Department of Public Works (DPW).

Paul Silberman presented a summary of the report entitled "Columbia Town Center Short and Long-Term Traffic Assessment." The PowerPoint presentation is available at <http://www.howardcountymd.gov/downtowncolumbia>. In his introduction Mr. Silberman explained that the study is a road map for DPW to program capital improvements in Town Center in coordination with existing planned and proposed development. The consultant also made note of the fact that the results in the traffic study (number of intersections that will fail under various scenarios) occur if no improvements are made. Traffic conditions will improve if the County makes the intersection, interchange and multimodal improvements suggested in the Sabra Wang report and makes those improvements to the network outlined in the Columbia Downtown Master Plan (preliminary draft).

General Discussion

Individuals in the audience then had the opportunity to ask questions and share their thoughts about the study, its methods and findings. Some speakers with professional credentials in transportation engineering commended the study, especially for its use of Highway Capacity Manual (HCM) rather than Critical Lane Volume (CLV), and expressed hope the County will recommend this method for traffic studies. Many attendees expressed their appreciation to the County for conducting the study, praising the study for its emphasis on transit. It was noted that Howard County is one of the best-served places for traffic and transportation. It has experienced few problems given its growth, and it has a good balance between land use and transportation.

A general theme frequently reiterated was that infrastructure improvements need to be assumed before development is approved. Most people expressed a need to understand the traffic study so that they can feel comfortable that the impacts of the master plan are correctly estimated. When asked about the relationship of this study to previous studies by General Growth Properties' (GGP) consultants or by Glatting Jackson, Sabra Wang stated that this study is not based on other studies.

Several people asked if alternative scenarios could be run based on the model, to which the consultants replied that the model could be used to test alternative scenarios. A final comment expressed a concern that GGP will produce a plan and its own traffic study that should use the same techniques and the same base line data. If their study is different from Sabra Wang's, GGP needs to explain why it is different.

A few clarifications about methodology and plan preparation were made during the course of the evening. It was noted that the report doesn't show interchange capacity analysis. A suggestion was made that Saturday peak hour traffic should be studied. Speakers asked what revisions were made to the draft that the consultants delivered to the County and expressed a wish that they could have seen the draft earlier. The consultants said that biggest revisions were extending the study area and including interchanges. Regarding historic growth in Town Center traffic, the consultants were asked about the statistical significance of the 1.67% growth. In response, Sabra Wang noted that the percent growth rate is based on two-point projections over a two-year time period.

Major Issues

Many attendees brought up several major issues. The following reflects both the comments of the speakers and the responses by DPW and Sabra Wang.

1. Land Use and Planning Assumptions

Audience members asked several questions about the source of the development program, what formulas were used for land use types and trip generation, if it included growth of community college traffic and why so much retail was proposed in the short term. Since office trips overwhelmingly contribute to peak hour congestion, reducing office uses would reduce congestion considerably. A speaker noted that the Focus Group discussed moving offices to other locations in Downtown, such as the Crescent, to reduce impact. Also, what grid system was used for network assumptions and number of lanes?

Response: Development program information was provided by DPZ. Data from the community college and hospital expansion are included. This is a traffic report that tests scenarios; it makes no land use recommendations. The formulas for land use trip generation are national standards. The plan assumes all existing lanes will be retained on LPP. The study does not identify specific alignments for new roads.

2. Traffic Projections

In trying to understand how much worse conditions get at each step in the development, the consultants were asked if it was realistic to show that high density in the long-range assessment will create traffic that is much worse than the no growth scenario. A few speakers asked about the reliability of the five-year and 30-year projections.

Response: The five-year projections in the study are reliable. Regional level 30-year projections need continued calibration and validation. The study can add a statement qualifying that 30-year projections are hypothetical. But this Town Center 30-year study is not a generalized regional study; it is a micro-level study of intersections using data projections by DPZ. This study is much more reliable and accurate than a generalized study. This is an engineer's study using the best methods and tools currently available. The study does not say what will actually, exactly happen. This type of analysis shows where problems may occur so the County can make decisions about the effect of development on traffic situations. The exact year of the projections is less important than the fact that breakdowns

are expected in the system and what needs to be done to fix the system. This study gives the County the ability to plan for improvements.

3. Background Traffic and the Effect of Transit

Many speakers noted that the development scenarios do not take into account background growth as required by the Design Manual. They suggested that the study underestimates the traffic impact if a factor for background traffic is not included. It was noted that the “No Build” scenario included background traffic as a factor. It was noted that the study assumptions did not use a factor for transit usage to show the impact it would have on traffic. One speaker asked to have background traffic added, even if it meant adding a factor for transit.

Response: Four reasons were given for decisions about using background traffic and transit factors in the study. First, the County Design Manual generally deals with small parcel development, so background traffic addresses other traffic from parcels that may develop nearby. This study looks at Downtown from a more integrated and comprehensive level. Second, the study did not include background growth but it also did not include any adjustments based on shift to transit either. With the additional long-term development, the study could have used up to a five percent maximum level for transit (modal shift). Third, with intense development, ambient traffic growth shrinks because of congestion and choice. Pass-through drivers select other alternatives (temporal shift). Background traffic and modal/temporal shifts will balance each other out in projections. Fourth, no development is planned in nearby villages, so the study assumed there would not be much new added background traffic. Background traffic is included in the “No Build” scenario because modal and temporal shifts would not be a factor if the additional development did not occur.

The County plans to update the study in five years and run the model again to study changes over time to learn what happens with both transit and background development. This will be done to ensure that improvements are done in phase with development.

4. Wincopin Street

Several speakers expressed their concerns about and objection to the proposed extension of Wincopin Street. Portions of the road pass through environmentally sensitive areas. The impact on these open space areas and on The Hug park, lakefront activities, the library and Vantage Point residents all need to be further understood. Concern about quiet enjoyment of the lake led one speaker to ask if a noise study will be done for the road. One speaker asked if the northern end of Wincopin Street could tie into LPP at the intersection with GWP. One speaker summed up other comments by suggesting that the extension of Wincopin Street may provide a small increase in traffic capacity, but may cause a huge negative community reaction.

Response: The network needs a peak-hour parallel road (like Wincopin Street), but it can be closed on weekends. Wincopin Street has a purpose in the network, but the County understands there are other issues associated with it. It’s a conceptual recommendation unlike specific intersection improvements that are proposed in the study.

5. Transit and Transit Centers

The consultants were asked if they had tested transit scenarios and it was suggested that projections for transit and multimodal usage are needed. Given the issues around mass transit for Tyson’s Corner, a speaker asked if it is feasible for Downtown. Are bus and rail

transit both possible in Downtown? The County was asked if there is room for a transit lane in the County's rights-of-way.

Many speakers praised the idea of a Transit Center, but some suggested the County may need two centers – one each for the east and west sides of Columbia. One speaker asked if a transit hub in Town Center would affect air pollution and congestion. Having one on the east side for regional trips with a smaller center in Downtown was suggested.

Response: Transit scenarios could be tested. Although County staff knows what its rights-of-way are, it does not know about room for dedicated transit lanes.

Transit hubs provide local and regional service. A satellite transportation center with transfer points at the perimeter makes sense, but something is needed close to Downtown. Although the study focuses on Town Center, it also looked at a much broader area, suggesting that Gateway could be a transfer hub as well as Route 32 and BLP.

6. Level of Service

One speaker asked about the assumption that the Level of Service (LOS) in the long-range assessment is proposed to go from LOS D to E. He suggested it would reduce quality of life in Downtown.

Response: In Downtown areas with active pedestrian usage, pedestrians constrain traffic flow. Both pedestrians and cars cannot move at the same level of service as can be done when cars do not have to share the road. The desired policy approach for Downtown is to provide a more balanced multimodal environment to create more choices. This may require a shift in the level of service.

Other Comments

Additional comments during the evening addressed a variety of issues; some were questions about specific road segments.

- A speaker questioned the difficulty of going from the BLP interchange to turn left on HRR, noting that the weaving motion is dangerous and complicated. **In response**, the consultants noted that they had used a simulation system to model the BLP to HRR segment and that it does not break down although flow is interrupted. This study, however, led them to recommend a slip ramp into the Crescent to relieve traffic on this segment. They further noted that the County might need to restrict ability for ramp traffic to turn left at HRR if serious problems arise in the future.
- The plan shows no pedestrian crossings on LPP for a considerable length; they are needed. Mid-block crossings were suggested.
- The study proposes improvements at BLP/LPP; the impact on pedestrians was questioned.
- A couple of speakers asked about Wilde Lake and traffic west of Downtown on Cedar Lane, Harpers Farm Road and Twin Rivers Road. They asked why Wilde Lake was not in the study area and wondered if Downtown development will increase the pass-through traffic in their community making it harder for them to get out onto the streets and through Town Center. **In response**, it was agreed that Cedar Lane might need to be the subject for a future study.
- The speed limit on Broken Land Parkway is 45 mph, not 35 mph as stated in the report.
- A speaker mentioned a Japanese system that permits diagonal pedestrian crossings that is safer; this system is also used in Pasadena and Denver; it was used in Baltimore in 1950's.

- A speaker wanted an independent company to do Howard County traffic studies, rather than having developers hire their own consultants to do studies.
- One attendee suggested that a road needs to cut through the middle of the Mall; another suggested the Mall needs to be extended across LPP.
- Bike lanes to accommodate bike traffic were raised. ***In response***, the County suggested that there could be several standards for bike-lane designs on different types of roads; new roads should be compatible with bike use.
- The unintended consequences of additional road network on watershed and lake quality were questioned. The responsibility for studying water quality was also asked about. ***In response***, it was noted that stormwater from roads can be managed. Also, a stormwater management (SWM) analysis is required for all development. This responsibility may fall on the developer, but the County could also opt to provide some roadway SWM.
- The County was encouraged to move forward on Route 175 improvements now.
- Funding for the potential improvements was raised. Is funding available from the State, especially for interchanges? Will funding come from the excise tax? If funds are lacking, can development move forward? Who will pay for and make improvements? Will developers need to contribute more?

Attendance

Public Sign-in

Agustin, Bianca
 Andrews, Elaine
 Baer, Joyce
 Barker, George
 Beckerman, Froydis
 Bobo, Liz
 Broida, Gail
 Broida, Joel
 Clark, Jan
 Coyle, Cynthia
 Cole, Ray
 Coren, Ann
 Coren, Evan
 David, Alex
 Dawson, Barbara
 Dunn, Sal
 Friedberg, Jean

Harbaugh, Sean
 Harris, Ben
 Hekimian, Alex
 Herzing, M. J.
 Israel, Jane
 Jeffrey, Bob
 Jeffreys, Helen
 Jenkins, Robert
 Kassoff, Hal
 Kirsch, Phil
 Kondo, Ursula
 Laidig, Patricia
 Liu, Feng
 Marcus, Bob
 Markley, Gail
 Markley, Landis
 Meskin, Stephen
 Moon, Jean

Mugane, Bridget
 Newburn, Jessie
 Nicklas, Barbara
 Pan, Wen
 Richardson, Lee
 Rosenbaum, Gary
 Rudlin, Barbara
 Russell, Barbara
 Ruther, Helen
 Santos, Bill
 Sigaty, Mary Kay
 Singer, Betsy
 Terrasa, Jen
 Toback, Rhoda
 Walter, Ed
 Wilkins, Evelyn
 Wright, Paul
 Zaret, Shari

County Staff/Consultants

Clay, Randy
 DeLuca, Mark
 Feldmark, Jessica
 Flowers, Kimberley

Hilsenrath, Mina
 Kennedy, Ian
 Mackey, Bill
 McLaughlin, Marsha

Sabra, Ph.D., Ziad
 Schwarzman, Diane
 Silberman, Paul
 Sprenkle, Tom