

Village Center Revitalization

Columbia Association, Planning and Strategy Committee Listening Session

July 31, 2008 Session Notes

Introduction

Steve Lafferty, Kimberley Flowers, Bill Mackey and Randy Clay, DPZ; Candace Dodson-Reed, County Public Relations; Ian Kennedy, Executive Assistant; and Jessica Feldmark, Senior Advisor to the County Executive, were present at the July 31 listening session hosted by the Planning and Strategy Committee. The full CA Board of Directors was present. Chairman Miles Coffman introduced the committee's agenda and the format for the meeting. Bill Mackey presented a brief overview of the previous listening sessions with Columbia's villages.

Board Discussion

Village Center Function

One board member characterized Columbia as a "place about people," and spoke about the need to create more places for residents to come together. In comparison to some newly developed commercial areas built without sidewalks to walk to; the village centers were seen as ideal settings for gathering. Pedestrian main streets without cars were also mentioned as important elements to preserve in promoting the social qualities of the centers. Another member questioned the desire of some village centers to continue their role as gathering places, noting that in many cases, the police are called to remove people who get together.

Other members spoke about how the village centers were meant to provide neighborhood services for residents yet, over time, have been losing these businesses to other outside locations. Many felt a mom-and-pop commercial focus should be maintained emphasizing the importance of the grocery store as a supporting anchor. A member of the audience talked about the economics of today's grocery market indicating how transitions to "big-box" retail may suggest a less prominent role for grocery stores in the future of village centers. Another point was made about how difficult it was to make small retail work given the inward design of many centers. The speaker encouraged looking at all aspects of the centers when searching for assets to build upon that could make them true destinations. One recommendation was for villages to fund a consultant who would evaluate what could be viable given each market. Another was to encourage more partnerships that create destinations. The recent commitment by the County in Oakland Mills' Meridian Square project was cited as an example of the type of revitalization commitment that will bring people into village centers.

For some, the development of residential uses was seen as a threat to maintaining the primary service function of the village centers. Some felt there were appropriate levels of housing already surrounding the centers in some villages and felt it would be difficult to position units within the centers themselves. Others were open to the possibilities of residential units mixed in with other uses, but cautioned that the scale of any new residential development would need to be appropriately balanced with the scale of what already exists.

Compatibility of Adjacent Area Development

Board members discussed the need to ensure compatible development of areas in close proximity to village centers. New development along Route 108 in Clarksville was seen as an example of incompatible development that led to traffic congestion, light pollution and increased crime. One member talked about the need to see nodes of activity coordinated so that development among different places is well connected.

Questions were raised about how “out parcels” fit into the overall revitalization process. These are pieces of land adjacent to property within Columbia’s New Town zoning district but are zoned differently and not subject to Columbia’s covenants. Many board members expressed frustration with development occurring on these properties and felt they should be evaluated to see how changes in these areas can be more harmonious with what occurs in the villages. One suggestion was to create an overall zoning plan that brings “out parcels” and those in Columbia under the same regulations.

Revitalization Tools

There was much interest in seeing the County develop programs that could enable the village centers to support local mom-and-pop businesses and maintain their role in providing neighborhood services. One suggestion was to create subsidized space. Another was to create opportunities for space sharing among similar businesses.

One board member talked about revitalization in Oakland Mills over the last few years. The process has been documented so others villages facing similar issues could use it as a guide for their own enhancement strategies. The Oakland Mills Village Center master plan is a product of these revitalization efforts. Another suggestion was that the County do similar planning for each center but include the entire village so that influences outside the village centers would be looked at comprehensively. Expanding on the idea, it was suggested that such planning be even broader to become County-wide and utilize Columbia as a basis and a model for the County-wide effort.

One speaker encouraged the board to look to itself as a part of the solution and find more ways of becoming involved in the revitalization process. There are a number of facilities in each village center under CA ownership which could be utilized in creating more vibrant and viable places. Board members were enthusiastic about pursuing a stronger advocacy role and collaborating with the interests of the village boards. Many agreed that emerging questions over parking arrangements and signage should be among the list of items being studied.

Questions were raised about the village center revitalization effort and its timeframe. It was explained that while there’s a sense of urgency to give the villages centers the opportunity to evolve, the County doesn’t want to rush into any specific recommendations before listening to the various stakeholder views on changes. What previous meetings have indicated is that there can be wide disagreement about what the path for village center revitalization is. One suggestion was to move forward with Wilde Lake and Oakland Mills now while continuing to develop something for other centers without more pressing immediate needs. Another was to set up a listening session with village merchants to get their perspective on revitalization opportunities.

Gatekeeper

There was general agreement on rethinking the gatekeeper role for development in Columbia. However, many of the ideas shared indicated there is much difference in opinion. A request was made to see the pros and cons associated with different ways a gatekeeper could perform. One option would be to approve development through a two-step process involving the village and CA before submitting to the County. Some members felt the villages should have more control over how development occurs and that CA had the most interest in ensuring the philosophy and ideals of Columbia would be adhered to. Other opinions raised issue with whether or not everything should have to go through CA, given the amount of property in Columbia that CA doesn’t own.

One concern was about seeing a one-size-fits-all approach taken towards the village centers. If the process is looking to the next thirty years, there needs to be a framework for citizen input in how decisions are made. Some of the differences being heard might be accommodated more easily if each village was zoned differently.

One board member felt the current gatekeeper role is broken because General Growth Properties, Inc.(GGP) as a private business, oversees its function, and doesn't necessarily have the interests of other owners in mind. There was general concern about the relationship some villages have with their center's owners. Some were thought to be starving existing businesses of patrons and raising rents to force existing tenants out to pursue redevelopment opportunities. Many did not want to see existing owners rewarded for pushing merchants out.

Another member questioned the need for a gatekeeper if the existing zoning process could become more predictable. Suggested changes included restricting exceptions to regulations, allowing public input throughout the review cycle and better informing the public. Other suggestions recommended having all site development plans go through public review by the Planning Board and requiring "out parcels" adjacent to property in the new town zoning district to go through Planning Board review as required for property in Columbia.

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