

VILLAGE CENTER REVITALIZATION

GOOD MORNING, AND THANK YOU ALL FOR BEING HERE TODAY.

FROM THE TIME OUR NEW TOWN'S FIRST BRICK WAS LAID, COLUMBIA HAS BEEN A COMMUNITY BUILT ON PRINCIPLES, IDEALS, A SHARED VISION, AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE BELIEF THAT, IN FOUNDER JIM ROUSE'S WORDS, "WHAT OUGHT TO BE, CAN BE."

IN DEVELOPING COLUMBIA, ROUSE SET OUT TO BUILD A REAL CITY, NOT JUST A BETTER SUBURB. YET HE BELIEVED THAT THROUGH CAREFUL PLANNING AND DESIGN, IT WAS POSSIBLE TO PROVIDE ALL THE AMENITIES, CULTURE, BUSINESS, AND VIBRANCY OF A TRUE CITY WHILE ALSO PRESERVING THE CHARACTER OF A SMALL TOWN.

THAT SMALL-TOWN CHARACTER CAN STILL BE FOUND IN COLUMBIA'S VILLAGE CENTERS WHERE RESIDENTS SHOP WITH A SENSE OF LOYALTY AND PRIDE AND MERCHANTS KNOW THEIR CUSTOMERS BY NAME. COLUMBIANS UNDERSTAND THAT A VILLAGE CENTER IS MORE THAN A SHOPPING CENTER, IT IS – AND WAS DESIGNED TO BE – THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY.

THE VILLAGE CENTER CONCEPT INTRODUCED THE INNOVATIVE NOTION THAT COMMERCIAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CAN AND SHOULD BE COMMUNITY ORIENTED. UNLIKE THE TYPICAL STRIP SHOPPING CENTER LOCATED ALONG A MAJOR COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR, VILLAGE CENTERS BROUGHT CONVENIENT SHOPPING AND COMMERCIAL SERVICES INTO THE VILLAGE NEIGHBORHOODS AND SERVED AS COMMUNITY FOCAL POINTS NOT ONLY FOR BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS BUT ALSO FOR CIVIC AND SOCIAL INTERACTION.

VILLAGE CENTERS WERE CAREFULLY PLANNED TO CO-LOCATE THE LOCAL SHOPPING CENTER WITH COMMUNITY AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES. HERE IN WILDE LAKE, COLUMBIA'S FIRST VILLAGE CENTER, WE CAN CLEARLY SEE THE COMPONENTS OF THE ORIGINAL VILLAGE CENTER MODEL: SLAYTON HOUSE, THE VILLAGE GREEN, THE INTERFAITH CENTER, THE SWIM CENTER, THE TENNIS CLUB, AND WILDE LAKE HIGH

SCHOOL AND MIDDLE SCHOOL ALL SURROUNDING THIS COMMERCIAL CORE TO HELP MAKE IT MORE THAN JUST A RETAIL CENTER.

THE VILLAGE CENTER CONCEPT WAS, LIKE COLUMBIA ITSELF, AN EXPERIMENT IN COMMUNITY PLANNING. AND IT WAS, AND IN MANY RESPECTS STILL IS, A SUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT. ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN TO THE BAGEL BIN ON A WEEKEND MORNING, OR EVEN A WEEKDAY MORNING FOR THAT MATTER, KNOWS YOU FIND MUCH MORE THAN PEOPLE HAVING BREAKFAST. YOU FIND NEIGHBORS RECONNECTING...AND A COMMUNITY BEING SUSTAINED.

DESPITE THE OVERALL SUCCESS OF THE EXPERIMENT, COLUMBIA'S VILLAGE CENTERS—PARTICULARLY OUR OLDER VILLAGE CENTERS—ARE CAUGHT IN THE CHANGING TIDES OF THE RETAIL MARKETPLACE AND THE SHIFTING PREFERENCES OF THE CONSUMERS THEY SERVE.

FOR OAKLAND MILLS AND WILDE LAKE, COLUMBIA'S TWO OLDEST VILLAGE CENTERS, THESE SHIFTS HAVE BEEN ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT. HERE IN WILDE LAKE, THE SPACE FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY GIANT HAS BEEN VACANT FOR ALMOST A YEAR AND A HALF, AND SADLY, WE HAVE ANOTHER VACANCY NOW THAT PRODUCE GALORE HAS CLOSED. AND JUST ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN CENTER WE FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN OAKLAND MILLS.

THE OAKLAND MILLS VILLAGE CENTER HAS STRUGGLED THROUGH YEARS OF VACANCIES IN ITS GROCERY STORE SITE, AND ALTHOUGH THE CENTER THANKFULLY NOW HAS FOOD LION, IT STILL STRUGGLES WITH A VACANT LOT WHERE A GAS STATION ONCE STOOD, A VACANT BANK SITE, AND UNFORTUNATELY, A NEW VACANCY CREATED BY THE RECENT CLOSING OF THE FIRE ROCK GRILL RESTAURANT.

THESE SETBACKS ARE NOT INDICATIVE OF THE FAILURE OF THE VILLAGE CENTER CONCEPT. IN BOTH OF THESE VILLAGE CENTERS, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY IN THE RESIDENTS OF THESE VILLAGES, THE VALUES AND IDEALS IN WHICH THE VILLAGE CENTER CONCEPT IS GROUNDED ARE STILL STRONG.

RATHER, THE SETBACKS WE HAVE SEEN ARE INDICATIVE OF THE GROWING NEED FOR VILLAGE CENTERS TO EVOLVE IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THRIVING, BOTH AS

COMMERCIAL VENTURES AND AS GATHERING PLACES WHERE THE COMMUNITY CAN COME TOGETHER.

THE TIME HAS COME TO STRENGTHEN OUR COMMITMENT TO OUR VALUES BY RE-EXAMINING HOW THEY ARE MANIFEST IN THE PHYSICAL SPACES OF OUR COMMUNITY.

KEEPING VILLAGE CENTERS ECONOMICALLY VIABLE IN TODAY'S MARKETPLACE HAS BEEN AND WILL CONTINUE TO BE A MAJOR PRIORITY FOR THIS ADMINISTRATION. WE WILL NOT ALLOW COLUMBIA TO SUFFER THE SAME FATE THAT COUNTLESS OTHER ONCE-STRONG COMMUNITIES HAVE ENDURED.

THE UNFORTUNATE STORY OF A ONCE PROUD AND STRONG COMMUNITY WHICH SUFFERED A CRIPPLING DECLINE IS ONE WE KNOW ALL TOO WELL. OFTEN WITHOUT NOTICE AND SEEMINGLY WITHOUT CAUSE, STREETS GREW DANGEROUS, SCHOOLS UNDERPERFORMED, RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES FLED; AND THOSE WHO STAYED FACED THE DAUNTING TASK OF RESTORING A FRACTURED COMMUNITY TO ITS FORMER GLORY.

THIS IS A FATE THAT I WILL NOT ALLOW COLUMBIA, ANY OF ITS VILLAGES, OR ANY COMMUNITY IN HOWARD COUNTY TO ENDURE.

I DO NOT MEAN TO SOUND ALARMIST OR PESSIMISTIC, BUT WE MUST BE COGNIZANT OF OUR VULNERABILITY AND COMMIT OURSELVES TO VIGOROUSLY MAINTAINING THE STRENGTH AND SAFETY OF OUR COMMUNITY THROUGH SOUND, FORWARD-FOCUSED INVESTMENTS AND POLICY INITIATIVES.

WE HAVE, IN A SENSE, COME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD, AND WE MUST CHOOSE OUR DIRECTION.

EITHER WE COMMIT OURSELVES TO REVITALIZATION OR WE CAN SIMPLY THROW UP OUR HANDS AND EXPRESS REGRET WHEN THE NEXT STORE CLOSSES AND AT EACH ADDITIONAL GRIM MILESTONE ALONG A GRADUAL DECLINE.

IN MY MIND, THERE IS NO CHOICE. OUR PATH IS CLEAR. WE MUST REVITALIZE AND RE-INVENT OUR STRUGGLING VILLAGE CENTERS.

WE CERTAINLY ARE NOT IMMUNE TO THE PROBLEMS WHICH HAVE CAUSED OTHER COMMUNITIES TO DECLINE. WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT, HOWEVER, AND WILL HELP PROTECT US FROM A SIMILAR FATE IS OUR COMMITMENT AS A COMMUNITY GROUNDED IN SHARED VALUES AND A SHARED VISION.

GOVERNMENT MUST BE AN ACTIVE PARTNER IN REVITALIZATION. WORKING TOGETHER WITH RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES, HOWARD COUNTY GOVERNMENT WILL SUPPORT REVITALIZATION IN EVERY WAY WE CAN.

JUST AS WE HAVE TAKEN PROACTIVE STEPS TO UPLIFT THE ROUTE 1 CORRIDOR, WE WILL WORK TOGETHER WITH THE COMMUNITY TO CRAFT REVITALIZATION PLANS THAT RESPECT THE UNIQUE NEEDS AND CHARACTER OF EACH VILLAGE CENTER IN NEED OF RENEWAL.

WHETHER IT IS THROUGH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND GUIDANCE FROM STAFF IN THE DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND ZONING, INVESTMENTS IN NEEDED INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS, PROACTIVE COMMUNITY POLICING, AS THE FACILITATOR BRINGING ALL PARTIES TO THE TABLE TO WORK TOGETHER TOWARD SOLUTIONS, OR BY INVESTING DIRECTLY IN VILLAGE CENTERS WHEN OPPORTUNITIES ARISE, WE ARE COMMITTED TO MAKING VILLAGE CENTER REVITALIZATION SUCCESSFUL.

IN OAKLAND MILLS, THAT COMMITMENT INCLUDES INVESTING DIRECTLY IN THE VILLAGE CENTER AS PART OF THE MERIDIAN SQUARE OFFICE BUILDING. THIS PROJECT SITS ON THE VACANT SITE OF A FORMER GAS STATION, A SITE WHICH HAS BEEN A DORMANT EYESORE IN THE CENTER OF THE OAKLAND MILLS COMMUNITY FOR ALMOST 10 YEARS.

WHEN WE RECOGNIZED THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET COUNTY GOVERNMENT'S NEED FOR ADDITIONAL OFFICE SPACE WHILE ALSO SUPPORTING THE REVITALIZATION OF OAKLAND MILLS, THE CHOICE WAS CLEAR, AND WE ANNOUNCED OUR INTENTION TO PURCHASE ONE FLOOR OF OFFICE SPACE IN MERIDIAN SQUARE.

OUR COMMITMENT TO VILLAGE CENTER REVITALIZATION HAS ALSO LED US TO THE DECISION WHICH I AM HERE TO ANNOUNCE TODAY. I AM PLEASED TO TELL YOU THAT WE WILL BE INTRODUCING A ZONING REGULATION AMENDMENT TO CREATE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR VILLAGE CENTERS IN NEED OF REVITALIZATION TO REDEVELOP AND EVOLVE.

THE LEGISLATION TO ACCOMPLISH THESE CHANGES IS STILL UNDER DEVELOPMENT, BUT I BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT TO LET THE COMMUNITY KNOW THE DIRECTION IN WHICH WE ARE HEADING. I AM HOPEFUL THAT BY ANNOUNCING OUR PLANS BEFORE THE LEGISLATION HAS BEEN DRAFTED WE WILL BE ABLE TO SOLICIT AND INCORPORATE COMMUNITY INPUT.

BOTH THE PURCHASE OF OFFICE SPACE AT MERIDIAN SQUARE AND THE ZONING REGULATION AMENDMENT TO ALLOW OPPORTUNITIES FOR VILLAGE CENTERS TO REVITALIZE WILL REQUIRE COUNTY COUNCIL APPROVAL, AND I AM OPTIMISTIC THAT THE COUNCIL WILL JOIN ME IN SUPPORTING VILLAGE CENTER REVITALIZATION.

LAST WEEK, KIMCO SHARED WITH THE COMMUNITY A CONCEPT PLAN FOR THE REDEVELOPMENT OF THIS VILLAGE CENTER. SO FAR, I HAVE HEARD A VARIETY OF REACTIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY.

MANY RESIDENTS HAVE EXPRESSED EXCITEMENT ABOUT THE PLAN AND THE FACT THAT KIMCO WANTS TO REINVEST IN THIS COMMUNITY; SOME HAVE SAID THEY GENERALLY SUPPORT THE CONCEPT THOUGH THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE CERTAIN ASPECTS OF IT MODIFIED; AND OTHERS HAVE SHARED CONCERNS ABOUT HOW A VILLAGE CENTER CAN REMAIN A TRUE VILLAGE CENTER WITHOUT A GROCERY STORE AS ITS ANCHOR TENANT.

LET ME BE CLEAR: I WOULD LOVE TO SEE A GROCERY STORE IN THE WILDE LAKE VILLAGE CENTER.

AND IN FACT, I HAVE BEEN WORKING TO TRY TO HELP KIMCO ATTRACT A GROCERY STORE TO WILDE LAKE FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS, SINCE IT BECAME CLEAR THAT GIANT DID NOT INTEND TO RENEW THEIR LEASE.

FIRST AS THE COUNTY COUNCIL MEMBER REPRESENTING THIS DISTRICT AND MORE RECENTLY AS COUNTY EXECUTIVE, I HAVE MET TOGETHER WITH KIMCO AND VARIOUS GROCERY STORE REPRESENTATIVES TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO CONSIDER WILDE

LAKE, AND I HAVE BROUGHT REPRESENTATIVES HERE TO THE VILLAGE CENTER TO SEE FIRST-HAND ITS PROXIMITY TO DOWNTOWN AND EXPLAINED TO THEM THE TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY FOR REVITALIZATION OF THIS VILLAGE CENTER IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE VISION FOR DOWNTOWN.

HOWEVER, THE GROCERY STORE EXECUTIVES ALSO SEE WILDE LAKE'S PROXIMITY TO THE MANY OTHER GROCERY STORES GIVING CONSUMERS A VARIETY OF ALTERNATIVES.

AS I SAID, I WOULD LOVE TO SEE A GROCERY STORE IN THE WILDE LAKE VILLAGE CENTER, BUT WE MUST ASK OURSELVES: HOW LONG CAN WE ALLOW THE VILLAGE CENTER TO LANGUISH WITH MORE AND MORE VACANCIES WHILE WE HOPE AND TRY FOR AN OUTCOME THAT IS UNLIKELY?

CERTAINLY, THE MARKETPLACE FOR GROCERY STORES HAS CHANGED SINCE THIS VILLAGE CENTER OPENED ALMOST 41 YEARS AGO; AND REGARDLESS OF WHICH TENANTS KIMCO IS ULTIMATELY ABLE TO ATTRACT, IT IS CLEAR THAT OUR VILLAGE CENTERS MUST HAVE THE ABILITY TO EVOLVE IF THEY ARE GOING TO THRIVE. ALL OF THE COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES EXPRESSED ARE IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER, AND THESE DIFFERING VIEWS CLEARLY POINT TO THE NEED FOR A CAREFUL AND THOUGHTFUL COMMUNITY PLANNING PROCESS TO GUIDE VILLAGE CENTER REVITALIZATION.

OUR STAFF WILL WORK CLOSELY WITH THE VILLAGE BOARD, RESIDENTS, MERCHANTS, VILLAGE CENTER OWNERS AND GENERAL GROWTH PROPERTIES TO ALLOW THAT CONVERSATION TO BEGIN.

WE WILL NOT DICTATE WHAT A VILLAGE CENTER SHOULD BE, AND WE RECOGNIZE THAT EACH VILLAGE CENTER MUST HAVE THE FLEXIBILITY TO EVOLVE WITH AN INDIVIDUALIZED PLAN DEVELOPED IN CONJUNCTION WITH ITS COMMUNITY.

AS YOU KNOW, WE ARE CURRENTLY IN THE MIDST OF A PLANNING PROCESS FOR DOWNTOWN COLUMBIA, AND AFTER MORE THAN TWO YEARS OF PUBLIC DIALOG, WE

ARE LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING A PROPOSED MASTER PLAN WHICH GENERAL GROWTH PROPERTIES WILL BE ANNOUNCING NEXT MONTH.

THE COUNTY'S FRAMEWORK FOR DOWNTOWN HIGHLIGHTED THE CRITICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN AND THE REVITALIZATION OF THE TWO CLOSEST VILLAGE CENTERS—OAKLAND MILLS AND WILDE LAKE.

WHILE VILLAGE CENTERS CERTAINLY REQUIRE A UNIQUE FOCUS BEYOND THE DOWNTOWN PLANNING PROCESS, WE MUST CONSIDER DOWNTOWN AND THE VILLAGE CENTERS COMPREHENSIVELY RATHER THAN IN ISOLATION OF EACH OTHER.

INDEED, IT IS CRITICAL THAT THE DOWNTOWN PLAN WILL MIRROR WHAT WE HOPE TO SEE IN VILLAGE CENTERS: WALKABILITY, CONNECTIVITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND LIVABILITY.

OUR CHALLENGE, THEREFORE, IS TO STRENGTHEN THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS, VILLAGE CENTERS AND DOWNTOWN AND ENSURE THAT THESE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF OUR COMMUNITY ARE COMPLEMENTING AND SUPPORTING EACH OTHER.

WE HAVE A TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY BEFORE US.

AS JIM ROUSE SAID IN 1964, "WE HAVE IN OUR HANDS THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE OUR CITY—IN OUR GENERATION—THE MOST LIVABLE, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL, AND THE MOST EFFECTIVE CITY IN AMERICA."

THESE WORDS ARE JUST AS RELEVANT TODAY AS THEY WERE 44 YEARS AGO, PERHAPS EVEN MORE SO BECAUSE WE HAVE SEEN THEM COME TRUE.

WHEN JIM ROUSE FIRST SAID THESE WORDS, COLUMBIA DID NOT EXIST...IT WAS STILL A DREAM. BUT TODAY, COLUMBIA IS LIVING PROOF THAT BOLD VISION AND THOUGHTFUL PLANNING CAN CREATE A DIFFERENT AND BETTER KIND OF CITY.

A BETTER CITY, CANNOT ALLOW ITSELF TO GROW STAGNANT. IT MUST CONTINUALLY SEEK TO IMPROVE ITSELF, TO REINVENT ITSELF, TO EVOLVE.

TOGETHER, LET'S EMBRACE THE FUTURE IN A SPIRIT OF INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY, OF HOPE AND OPTIMISM, REMEMBERING AGAIN THAT WHAT OUGHT TO BE, CAN BE.

BY STAYING GROUNDED IN COLUMBIA'S FOUNDING VALUES, THE SHARED VALUES THAT BROUGHT SO MANY OF US TOGETHER, WE WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE COLUMBIA THE MOST LIVABLE, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL, AND THE MOST EFFECTIVE CITY IN AMERICA.

Additional text

(not included as part of the announcement)

To share your thoughts with County Executive Ken Ulman or to ask questions about this issue please e-mail us at villagecenters@howardcountymd.gov