



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Testimony before the Montgomery County Council regarding:

White Flint Sector Plan July 2009 Planning Board Draft

By Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
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Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, a regional non-profit organization focused on ensuring transportation and development decisions accommodate growth while revitalizing communities, providing more housing and travel choices, and conserving our natural and historic areas.

Our support for the White Flint Sector Plan and its urban boulevard vision

We would like to express our support for the White Flint Sector Plan and urge the Council and County Executive to support it too. We strongly support the County focusing growth here at a Metro station rather than new areas that require major new public infrastructure investments like the Gaithersburg West Plan, which we oppose in its current form. We need to make the distinction – we should focus growth around our Metro stations and revitalize major commercial corridors like Rockville Pike. Conversely, the great amount of development proposed in the Gaithersburg West Plan fosters sprawl, long distance commuting, increased traffic, air and water pollution. Overzoning Gaithersburg West undermines the redevelopment of Rockville Pike and Metro station areas – the very areas where we should be encouraging sustainable, transit-oriented development and great urban boulevards and streets.

We believe that the White Flint Plan can build on the successes of other major Metro station development plans. We know that with the right attention to the details, great places can be created around Metro stations. Such strategies benefit surrounding single family home neighborhoods, the County and the region. In Arlington County, the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor has built out 17 million square feet of commercial space and nearly 20,000 housing units between 1970-2007. At the same time, there has been only modest or no increase in traffic on the streets serving the area. Surrounding single family home neighborhoods are not only intact, but thriving due to their access to restaurants, stores, active public spaces and transit. Non-driving mode shares in the Crystal City and Rosslyn-Ballston Metro corridors are growing and now exceed 50 percent. Car ownership rates are low, and the proportion of people walking, bicycling and riding transit to work and for errands is high.

We think that the Sector Plan offers the basis for achieving similar success. Guiding new development here rather than elsewhere in the county will help reduce how much people in the county need to drive for work or errands. Creating a walkable place also fosters a wonderful quality of life. The plan's vision to create a great urban place inspires people to walk, bicycle, visit stores, hop on a bus, and relax on a bench in the civic green. Offering this lifestyle provides a carbon footprint about half of that of a typical suburban household.

Specific comments on the White Flint Sector Plan

Streets & street connections: The proposed new street connections are a critically important part of repairing this sparse suburban superblock environment, making it walkable, bikable, and accessible to transit. We support the “transitway option” Glatting-Jackson boulevard design alternative for Rockville Pike (not forwarded by the Planning Board). Remaking Rockville Pike as a boulevard with bicycle lanes, low speed street design, on-street parking, and pedestrian-oriented buildings and public spaces should be the centerpiece of this plan. We recommend that the reconstruction of the Pike be moved up to an earlier phase of the staging plan – currently construction is slated for the third phase.

Jobs/housing balance: While the residential goal of 60 percent sounds good, we are concerned that it isn’t doing enough to improve the jobs/housing imbalance in the I-270 corridor. We’d suggest a higher threshold of 70 percent to compensate for the existing jobs/housing imbalance. The staging plan could also allow for increased residential construction to be built without limits if it is traded for nonresidential space.

Non-driver mode share & parking: We support the effort to share, reduce and cap vehicle parking – these concepts should be further refined. We also support the mode split goal of 39 percent but think it could be more aggressive. Shady Gove Sector Plan and other local plans have committed to 50 percent mode share splits. More aggressive management of vehicle parking for both workers and residents should be implemented, along with positive incentives such as low speed streets, and pedestrian-friendly intersection designs – especially for major roadways, carsharing, employee transit benefits, secure bicycle parking, changing rooms and showers.

Transit: This plan rightfully builds on our existing Metrorail system and adds new supporting surface transit service and a new Metro station entrance. We also recommend planning for new line haul bus or BRT service in the first phase of the staging plan and implementing it in the second. Adding a stronger commitment to east-west bus or BRT service will increase regional connectivity and reduce vehicle trips. We also believe that better transit service on Rockville Pike is important, especially for shorter trips in the corridor between Metrorail stations. We ask that this service be clarified in the staging plan.

Conclusion

Overall, we believe that this plan charts a sustainable future. By focusing growth – especially more housing -- around the White Flint Metro station, supplemented by quality surface transit, the County can reduce future workers’ and households’ carbon footprint. By implementing more aggressive transportation demand management measures, including parking management, ambitious walk, bicycle, and transit mode shares can be achieved. Constructing a finer grid of low speed streets and recreating Rockville Pike as a multimodal boulevard with low and moderate vehicle speeds is essential to achieving this vision. Without commitment by the County to creating truly multimodal streets and establishing a street grid, we will fall short of the vision of a walkable community and relief from traffic congestion. We know that if the area remains largely as it is, residents and workers will continue to be plagued by traffic congestion. This plan offers the blueprint for a great, transit-oriented and sustainable community.

Thank you for your consideration.