



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Testimony before the Montgomery County Council regarding:

Takoma/Langley Crossroads Sector Plan

By Cheryl Cort, Policy Director
May 24, 2011

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth. We are a regional nonprofit 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. We have worked over the last few years on planning efforts in both Prince George's and Montgomery Counties as the arrival of the Purple Line is anticipated. We've partnered with CASA de Maryland and other groups to shape land use and housing policies to help existing residents remain in their community and benefit from the Purple Line, even as new mixed use redevelopment occurs.

Overall, we want to express our support for this thoughtful plan. It addresses the need for transit-oriented redevelopment around the Purple Line and guides the re-creation of an inner suburban district. It provides policy goals to preserve existing affordable housing, increase MPDUs, and retain small businesses. The plan seeks to create interconnected, walk- and bicycle-friendly streets. We appreciate the plan's aim to create urban parks, green streets, and improved water quality. We support the plan's vision for the redevelopment of outmoded commercial strip shopping centers into moderate to higher density mixed use development focused on University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue. The application of the new CR zone will be helpful for guiding redevelopment and achieving quality, pedestrian-oriented design.

While we support the plan in general, we have a number of specific suggestions for improvement:

1. **Affordable housing preservation & creation** – The plan proposes to increase the number of housing units by over 2,300. Setting aside 12.5 percent of these units, upwards of 300 MPDUs can be created, serving families earning 65 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI). This is very helpful and is a good illustration of the benefits of the County's longstanding MPDU policy. Given that residents in this community earn roughly half of Montgomery County's median family income, we ask the County target more county, state and federal assistance to provide quality housing for these families that fall well below 65 percent of AMI. Though outside this plan area, we note that garden apartment complexes in Long Branch are particularly important housing resources for preservation investments. We note that the "workforce" housing component discussed in the plan, aimed at households earning 70-120 percent AMI, is far above the incomes of the vast majority of families in the area, and likely even above market prices.

2. **Retention of local retail on site** – We appreciate the plan’s goal to retain 30 percent of existing local retail on site. The CR zone does not currently offer the tool for accomplishing this. The proposed revised language for the CR zone removes the goal of retention of small local businesses and replaces it with merely assigning points for offering small, neighborhood-serving retail. We recommend changing the CR language back to retaining existing small businesses. This, however, does not achieve the 30 percent retention goal of the plan. We ask that how the 30 percent of existing businesses will be retained be clarified. We also ask that what is meant by 30 percent also be clarified – is this the number of businesses, or the square footage of small local business space?
3. **Transportation improvements** – We support the helpful recommendations to create complete, interconnected streets where walking and bicycling can be safe and convenient travel choices. We support eliminating free right turns as proposed. We ask that travel lane widths be reconsidered, and that 11’ and 10’ travel lanes be established as standard for arterials. We also ask that the target speed of 35 mph be reduced to 30 mph on University Blvd. and New Hampshire Ave., where large numbers of pedestrians are present. If we want create an environment where walking, bicycling, and motor vehicles can co-exist, we must reduce speeds to 30 mph.
4. **Parking ratios in CR Neighborhood and Town Zones** – We are concerned that the increased parking minimums proposed for CRN and CRT could inhibit feasible redevelopment. We suggest that a TDM program be allowed to reduce parking minimums in these districts as a means to reducing parking demand. We applaud the CR zone’s encouragement of shared parking, carsharing spaces, and bicycle parking requirements.
5. **Larger housing preservation strategy** – Given that Langley Park is one community, split between two counties, we suggest that the counties convene a housing preservation working group. This group can bring together the housing and planning agencies for each jurisdiction, along with the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development and the Maryland Department of Transportation, to comprehensively address the need for housing preservation along the Long Branch-Langley Park Purple Line corridor. A stronger preservation strategy can be crafted by pooling the resources and expertise of these local and state government entities, rather than leaving the job to the individual jurisdictions. Given the large number of very low income residents along this part of the Purple Line and the area’s proximity to higher value areas, a high quality transit connection can push up housing values and displace longtime residents. A coordinated and collaborative response is needed to ensure that everyone can share in the benefits of the Purple Line.

Overall, we want to reiterate our support for the plan. We look forward to working with the County to implement the changes we have suggested here.

Thank you for your consideration.