



COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

Comments on the Draft Tysons Corner Comprehensive Plan

March 17, 2010

(drafted prior to the proposal by Walter Alcorn)

As is often the case, and with due apologies to the staff, we often focus on recommendations for improvement, rather than citing what we like about their work. So let me first compliment the staff, the Planning Commission, the Task Force, and the citizens for the significant amount of work and also technical analysis that has gone into the Tysons Corner plan. The plan seeks to address the full and complex range of investments that will make a great community. Specific highlights include the grid of streets and circulators; adding significant residential development; affordable housing provisions; and commitments to parks, stormwater management, green buildings, stream restoration and civic amenities.

Fairfax County is in the midst of an evolution, where the focus for future growth will of necessity be transit stations and commercial corridors. Places that will evolve into mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable, bikeable and transit oriented communities. This is the best way to protect suburban neighborhoods, to accommodate population growth and changing demographics (including downsizing empty nesters and retirees), to address traffic, and maximize the energy efficiency and competitiveness of the county. We hope that the experience from the Tysons Corner process will result in new and enhanced public planning processes, and multidisciplinary staff teams for re-planning the commercial corridors of the county.

My experience in trying to reach the Government Center from DC is instructive – taking Route 29 allowed me to see a traffic choked arterial that ran for miles and miles. Fairfax's roads are in gridlock and it is a product of spread out development, separated uses and the lack of dedicated transitways. Fairfax's older suburbs need reinvestment and even Tysons Corner will fail economically under current conditions – due to traffic -- if we don't reinvest in and redesign Tysons Corner and Fairfax's commercial corridors to be mixed-use, transit communities. It would also be the case that the Core jurisdictions of Arlington, Alexandria, and DC will out-compete Tysons by having more transportation options and a sense of place, AND the outer jurisdictions will compete simply based on having cheaper land and, temporarily, less traffic.

So, we commend the Planning Commission, the county staff, the Task Force, and the public for the significant work that has gone into developing the draft Tysons Corner Plan. At the same time, we fear the failure to reach agreement at the 11th hour -- when it is absolutely critical that a strong plan pass. Failure cannot be an option.

The bottom line: We want to ensure that the density levels are adequate to achieve the full range of community benefits, while also ensuring the full and creative use of transportation demand management solutions.

Part I – Comments on the Traffic Modeling and Density

We join others who are concerned that the traffic modeling is driving the density levels, particularly if it turns out that the staff density level is inadequate for achieving the full range of community benefits and investments that are so essential to the plan. We certainly agree that the issue of traffic into and out of Tysons Corner is very important and we have said so from the beginning. At the same time, this is a 40-year plan, and with rising energy prices, changing demographics, transportation demand management, phasing, a regional “network of transit communities,” and other solutions we expect that traffic can and will be managed over the course of the coming decades. The Rosslyn-Ballston corridor has shown that there are accelerating transportation benefits over time as the corridor has built out.

We specifically believe that over-reliance on the traffic modeling will prompt the county to miss the opportunities provided in the Tysons Plan. We commend the staff and Jay Evans of Cambridge-Systematics for modifying the Council of Government’s regional transportation model to better analyze this proposed mixed-use, walkable and transit-oriented center. As we have learned, the COG model is ill-suited for the fine grained analysis needed for mixed-use centers and Cambridge had to apply an extensive set of post-processing steps to the base model. These included the WMATA transit model, the FHWA TDM measures, and the EPA Smart Growth Index. Yet, even with these modifications, we believe that there are other factors which would provide additional transportation performance gains. Even if some of these cannot be modeled now, they offer strong potential for further vehicle trip reductions and shifts to transit, walking and bicycling. These include:

- 1) First, if regional planners used an integrated “bottom-up” model that could test a network of transit-oriented, mixed-use centers in the region. The transit, walking, and biking assignments and the effects of the four “D’s” (Density, Diversity, Design, and Design Index) would be integrated earlier in the modeling steps rather than as post-processing. For example, bottom-up sketch planning for the recent COG “What Would it Take” greenhouse gas emissions scenario showed better results than the earlier scenarios done with the COG regional model.
- 2) Reliance on the Round 7.2 land use forecast fails to capture the potential for future non-auto regional trips. The allocations of development in the regional forecasts are based in part on negotiation among jurisdictions to allocate top down regional econometric growth projections into comprehensive plans that collectively have too much land set aside for development compared to the regional total forecast – resulting in more scattered development patterns. Many of those plans, and probably many of the allocations, do not focus on building-out transit oriented centers on the Metrorail network or on future rail and BRT corridors. Does the model presume full buildout of the Dulles Rail stations west of Tysons? Of future transit stations along I-66? Of Seven Corners and Bailey’s Crossroads along with new LRT or BRT? With more people living and working within convenient distance of transit stations and linear transit corridors (and allocated as such in the regional forecasts), the mode share for transit trips into and out of Tysons would be further improved.
- 3) Dedicated transit corridors are not included until later years in the plan (per Table 8), yet should be adopted in the early years along with a full suite of TDM policies to ensure early adoption of alternative modes of commuting to and from Tysons Corner and the ability to establish less parking at an earlier date. These measures may result in better modeling results over time.

- 4) The parking pricing was based on the FHWA model and national estimates and are set at a more suburban rate. The pricing was not set at the higher rates that could send cost signals to commuters and residents, improving the mode share for transit, walking, biking and carpooling. While Mr. Evans said he did not see much change in performance when he tested higher pricing (because of the comparatively large effects of wait times for transit), we believe that there can be significant reductions in vehicle trips, especially when combined with higher gas prices and by maintaining transit fares at a competitive level and ensuring efficient time transfers between transit lines.
- 5) The COG model is undergoing a significant update this year. Furthermore, it is calibrated to the extremely old, 1994 travel survey, not the 2008 survey, and thus fails to capture the dramatic changes in demographics and market demand – changes that will accelerate in coming years. The 2008 survey documents the boom in bicycle and pedestrian trips in DC, Arlington, and Alexandria as a result of mixed-use, transit-oriented development and demographic shifts.
- 6) The modeling for Tysons may not fully account for the impact on driving due to rising energy prices and the combined effect of higher energy prices and higher parking prices set to manage demand.

We believe that the accelerating and synergistic benefits of the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor show that we should not limit development merely based on the current modeling forecasts for Tysons Corner. We also believe that the combination of higher energy prices, changing demographics and a region-wide commitment to implementing and network of transit-oriented centers will result in better transportation performance than the model is estimating today. Finally, we believe that no one, including the developers and corporate tenants in Tysons Corner, will let traffic gridlock endanger the investments that they will be making – resulting in strong commitment to transportation demand management solutions, including parking pricing.

Therefore, we urge the Planning Commission not to set the density threshold simply based on the traffic modeling to date, but to set the levels that will achieve the full set of community benefits across Tysons Corner, while putting in place the measures necessary to maximize non-auto mode shares and the phased evaluations to ensure that transportation demand management is being implemented and is achieving the desired and necessary results.

Part II – Additional Transportation, Land Use and Urban Design Comments

Density:

- 1) Total density must be sufficient to fund the full range of community benefits including affordable housing, stormwater, parks, street grid, circulators, stream restoration, and civic institutions.
- 2) Density along circulator routes should be increased to a level sufficient to ensure full realization of community benefits outside the rail station zones, although it can be phased to trigger higher density options following achievement of a certain level of development in the TOD areas.
- 3) We join others in concern that the incentives to build residential are not adequate. If the PRM 3:1 conversion ratio is no longer going to be applicable, we need to be sure that there is enough incentive to build higher density residential to achieve the balance sought by the plan.

Transportation:

- 1) Dedicated transit corridors into Tysons Corner should be provided much earlier than proposed in Table 8 (and described on pages 44-45). The region has already won its first federal grant for bus priority corridors, so we can certainly implement dedicated bus corridors earlier in the process. These corridors will be essential for establishing transit use into and out of Tysons Corner, for managing traffic, and for allowing the density levels sought by the private sector. Particular corridors of note include Route 7 from Loudoun County and Alexandria/Baileys Crossroads/Seven Corners/Falls Church, Route 123 from NW DC and McLean and potentially through Vienna, and along Gallows Road from Merrifield/Dunn Loring.
- 2) The Circulators (p 42) should be designed to operate in dedicated lanes – at least during rush hour in the early years. They should not only have real time information, but also timed-transfer with Metrorail.
- 3) Parking policies and parking pricing should be more prominent components of the transportation demand management plan (p 42).
- 4) The grid of streets is essential and should be a base requirement of the plan (p 51 says “should” as is the case in comprehensive planning, but this grid is critical).
- 5) The block sizes are good (p 52).
- 6) The cross-sections for local streets, connectors, and avenues are very good and include on-street parking. The collector street median may be too wide at 20 feet.
- 7) The cross-sections for the “boulevards” fall far short. This has been a problem since we first complained to VDOT and Fairfax DOT a few years ago. The eight-lane Route 7 proposed by VDOT and the plan will create a barrier through the middle of the TOD zones and depress transit ridership and walking trips. The 8 lane cross-section is proposed for Route 7, Route 123 and International Drive and should be changed. Note that the Dulles Rail project proposes a 60-90 foot median – larger than that shown in the plan, which will magnify the barrier to pedestrian access across these roadways.
- 8) The plan should maximize bike access from nearby communities surrounding Tysons Corner and we believe additional connections can be included. Confirm that Route 7, 123, Gallows, Spring Hill and other access points include good bike facilities.
- 9) Additional bike parking should be provided – at rates higher than that shown in Table 5.
- 10) The support for bike/pedestrian levels of service is good (p 67-68). Add a pedestrian level of service photo chart – available from Dan Burden and others.
- 11) We disagree that TDM will not be necessary in the early years. It should be adopted early and broadly to set the right habit patterns.
- 12) Parking policies (p 71-74) – parking pricing should be a more prominent policy and applied earlier in time. In terms of county supervision of parking, the county should move parking approval from DPW to DOT, and make the review and approval process more efficient.

- 13) In lieu of the Beltway and Dulles Toll Road widening (p 77, Table 8), bus priority corridors and Purple Line should be advanced along with a full range of TDM.
- 14) The monitoring system should not just measure vehicle trips and delay but also transit, bike and walk trips, car ownership rates, parking occupancy rates, numbers of employees granted transit benefits, etc.
- 15) Remedial steps shown include more TDM and congestion pricing, but not parking pricing (p. 80). Add parking pricing.

Environment:

- 1) There should be an Environmental Monitoring Committee, probably as a committee within the implementation entity.
- 2) Stormwater – discuss integrated stormwater management that interconnects green roofs, pervious pavers, pocket parks, green streets, and community parks in order to hold and slow stormwater on a community wide basis.

Urban Design:

- 1) The urban design guidelines are very general and the detailed design guidelines are pushed back to the area plans. While the general guidelines are fine, the failure to provide more form-based guidance is disappointing. The plan should at a minimum identify preferred building build-to lines in conjunction with the street cross-sections.
- 2) The tendency toward second story elevated walkways and plazas already seen in the Tyson I approved plan, should be discouraged. Street level pedestrian, retail and social activity should be the priority.
- 3) International Drive should not be shown as an 8 lane roadway because of its key location in the heart of Tysons Corner. It should not be a barrier in the center of Tysons.
- 4) The street cross-sections for all but the Boulevard are good, but should also illustrate “green streets.” Green streets include green sidewalk catch-basins that can be tied into area parks to assist with stormwater management.

Affordable Housing:

- 1) The commitment to the full range of affordable housing is commendable.
- 2) The density bonuses are appropriate and will help with workforce housing at the 80-120% AMI levels.
- 3) For AMI levels between zero and 60 and 80%, density bonuses may not be adequate given the high cost of steel and concrete construction. Buying and preserving existing units of housing in and near Tysons Corner could provide one alternative for meeting the need for housing at lower percentages of AMI. New four story stick built (or five story over concrete podium) built along circulator routes in the non-TOD areas may also offer an option for more units of affordable housing for below 80% AMI.
- 4) The contributions from commercial development to affordable housing to meet the housing needs for the growing workforce are also appropriate.

Implementation:

- 1) It is critical to establish an implementation entity that will report to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. This entity should include landowners, residents and businesses (small and large), employees, surrounding civic associations, and representatives of the housing, conservation, ped/bike, transit, disability, and arts communities, with a range of ages and ethnic diversity. It should be given staff and should have the power for first phase review of projects, oversee transportation demand management programs, and monitor the community benefit funds and implementation.
- 2) County staffs should be organized into multidisciplinary teams for transit center communities and revitalization areas and corridors, including one team focused just on Tysons Corner.
- 3) The county should have its own financial consultant to run it's own project and areawide "proformas" to measure the net economic gains, compare to the cost of infrastructure, and to ensure the right balance in landowner and public contributions to the full range of community benefits.
- 4) It is important to recognize that many of the transportation costs should not be assigned just to Tysons Corner, but are instead part of overall northern Virginia and regional transportation investments – such as the Purple Line and Orange Line.

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Coalition for Smarter Growth