

"Federation Corner" column
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Does Johns Hopkins understand Smart Growth?

by Pam Lindstrom

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In the 1980s, audacious and politically active developers planned the so-called Shady Grove West area to suit themselves, with sprawling office/industrial parks of thousands of acres. To give a sense of the land area involved, downtown Bethesda would fit onto some of the larger single parcels. Even then, this car-oriented sprawl violated planning policies, so the long, circuitous Corridor Cities Transitway was mapped through the area. Like Pinocchio's nose, it got longer as each landowner wanted it extended to his property.

A Local Silicon Valley?

The developers promised a local Silicon Valley, spurred by research universities like Johns Hopkins and Univ. of Maryland. Most of the land is developed at low densities. The high tech promise is partially fulfilled: the big, low buildings contain some major biotechnology firms along with architects, developers, medical offices, banks, etc. The universities offer mostly professional evening classes but do no research.

About the only uncommitted parcel is Belward Farm, owned by Johns Hopkins University [JHU], on the western border of Shady Grove West. Hopkins has proposed a plan that returns to the freewheeling days of the 1980s, a plan that far exceeds the development permitted by the master plan, but with a 21st Century twist. They claim it's smart growth. They propose a great urban center with over 12 million square feet of office/industrial buildings and 60,000 new jobs. The scheme includes a large area outside their farm, on which they hope to convince the other landowners to build housing alongside their biotech enterprises. And sure enough they plan to stretch the Corridor Cities Transitway yet again so they can claim transit-oriented development. The scale of development would be comparable to downtown Bethesda plus NIH.

Is This Smart Growth?

But is this smart growth? Sierra Club members recently debated and adopted 10 criteria for smart growth with the first three being the most critical (see the Feb./March Montgomery Sierran for a discussion of these criteria).

Unfortunately, we need look no farther than the top three to declare that Belward Farm is not smart growth.

- Balanced land use: Does the project improve the local balance between jobs and housing? Belward would add up to 60,000 jobs to an area that already has some 30,000. They talk of housing, but the number of units proposed is far less than what is needed.
- Transit-oriented development: To be called 'smart growth,' projects should be located at a station on a major, high capacity transit system that is capable of carrying a significant share of the trips to and from the development. The developer argues that the future Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) meets this requirement. But even if built, the CCT will never be Metro. It would be slower and would follow a curving path to pass by the various spread out developments along its route. It would connect no high density housing areas to the Hopkins project or to the many other employers in the vicinity.
- Density is appropriate for the site: The density proposed is far too high for this location.

A More Sedate Process

Park and Planning is engaged in a more sedate process to amend the master plan for Shady Grove West. Their proposals, including traffic modeling of the Hopkins scheme for Belward Farm as well as much less dense, more balanced development alternatives, will be ready for public presentation soon. We don't need

to sacrifice our principles to grow our technology businesses. The County is planning other places for technology businesses to grow. NIH, a prime biomedical magnet, is expanding and attracting related businesses in North Bethesda. The County is also promoting technology business in the Eastern County, to take advantage of proximity to the new Food and Drug Administration; biomedical businesses are popping up in downtown Silver Spring, all smarter places than the fringe of Gaithersburg.

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In a recent update, Pam Lindstrom writes: "[P]lanners have developed 2 scenarios for growth beyond the current [Gaithersburg Vicinity] master plan for the R&D [Research and Development] Village (the Hopkins proposal being the higher one) and tested them by traffic modeling. The JHU alt[ernative] was in failing territory by the PAMR [Policy Area Mobility Review] test. It showed a non-driver mode share of about 16%, which is just above the County average for AM peak period. So what was the JHU response, when their scenario failed the traffic test? They asked (and [planning] staff agreed) to rerun the traffic model using a non-auto mode share that's twice as high - 32% - as an input!" [This is as good as or better transit usage than in downtown Silver Spring.]

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com