

"Federation Corner" column
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Scale back 'Science City' to a science suburb

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A proposed revision of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan, also known as the 'Science City' plan, was approved by the Montgomery County Planning Board on July 16. It has been submitted to the County Council, which will hold a public hearing on the proposed plan on the evening of September 15.

The plan is, by several standards, unique among master plan nightmares. Not only has the Board proposed burying a large portion of the county in traffic, it also wants to permit Johns Hopkins Real Estate to destroy one of the most beautiful Civil War-era farms left in the county, Belward Farm. In order to create a "Science City", this plan will bring 40,000 more workers plus the residents of 5,000 multi-family housing units to an area that is less than two square miles, is already highly congested, and is located five miles from the nearest Metro station.

To justify these phenomenal numbers, the Board and Johns Hopkins Real Estate announced that our established residential suburban community would become an urban "transit oriented development". To effect this abrupt change, the County has rolled out 45-year-old plans for the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT), a light rail or rapid-bus transit line that will meander through the area. Granted, the CCT would be a nice addition to our transit options, but the County, the developers and the politicians portray it as the magic carpet that will solve all of our transportation problems while allowing huge increases in density.

However, many neighborhoods in the Gaithersburg West area offer special challenges to those who would seek to increase transit ridership. The Planning Board and the developers have spent the past 50 years creating auto-dependant subdivisions filled with cul-de-sacs and limited access to secondary roads. Residents cannot get out of their subdivisions without their cars, so wherever they go they must think about where they will park their cars.

But the Planning Board, in its infinite wisdom, has decided to limit parking near CCT stations. So, if residents cannot get out of their subdivisions without their cars and then must drive to the CCT, where will they put their cars once they get there? My guess is that they will drive to their destination rather than to the CCT.

Another troubling aspect of the proposal for the CCT is that the County has said it will be necessary to add approximately 50,000 people to the "Science City" area in order to secure Federal funding for the transit system. However, the CCT is only expected to carry 15 percent of the added population [workers and residents], leaving 85 percent to use their cars. This means that tens of thousands of additional cars are destined for the already congested roads in Gaithersburg, North Potomac, Rockville and Potomac.

To handle the extra cars, the Planning Board has proposed six- and eight-lane highways around and through the "Science City", complete with multi-level highway interchanges. And the state is examining options for I-270 north of I-370. However, these super highways will do little to mitigate the traffic on the other roads throughout the area. There is no assurance that the two-lane roads and the rural roads won't be hopelessly clogged with traffic. Further, there is no assurance that those who live in the many subdivisions will even be able to get out of their subdivisions given the greatly increased level of traffic on the secondary roads.

To make matters even worse, Johns Hopkins Real Estate is using the “Science City” master plan revision and the CCT to justify building monstrous high-rises for 15,000 workers on the pristine 107-acre Belward Farm despite their promises to the former owner, and despite the deed restrictions they accepted in order to purchase the farm for a fraction of its value. Even though Belward Farm is immediately adjacent to three established residential neighborhoods, JHU’s proposed high-rise commercial complex will have the density of a downtown area near a Metro station complete with 150-foot [tall] buildings.

In a suburban area where it is highly unlikely that most of the residents will be able to stop driving their cars, how can the addition of tens of thousands of cars on six- and eight-lane highways, with multi-level highway interchanges, be called a transit oriented development even if there is access to a rail or rapid-bus transit system? It certainly will not be a safe walkable-bikeable community, which is a stated goal of the plan.

It is easy to get lost in the circular reasoning used to justify the various and seemingly veiled objectives of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan. But it is clear that this plan needs to be rewritten in an honest, straight-forward manner with development that is in scale with our community, infrastructure that is appropriate for a suburban setting, and plans for Belward Farm that will respect and maintain the character of the farm. The opposition to this master plan revision is so widespread that a website--www.scale-it-back.com--has been created by civic and community organizations to voice our objections and offer alternatives.

Finally, to quote Royce Hanson, Chairman of the Planning Board, “Development of great centers need not occur at the expense of existing communities.” If only he and his Planning Board colleagues had followed this advice when drafting their recommendations for revision of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan.

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 theelms518@earthlink.net