

"Federation Corner" column
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Residents and new sector plan ignored as Wheaton redevelopment proceeds

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It is true that master plans for future development of areas of the county, like the Sector Plan for downtown Wheaton approved by Council in November 2011, include mostly goals and recommendations, and very few actual requirements. Once approved, however, a Sector Plan creates expectations--not of specific architectural styles, perhaps, but about the functions and activities preferred at specific locations within the plan area.

The driver for the fast-tracking of the redevelopment of Parking Lot 13 in Wheaton is not to hurry and get the promised Wheaton Town Center opened and functioning. No. The driver for the proposed Lot 13 project is to speedily permit the construction of the necessary office building in Wheaton so that Park and Planning (P&P) can vacate their current location in Silver Spring, because that is the site that the selected development team is primarily interested in. Redevelopment of Wheaton's Lot 13 is just a means to this end.

The design of the office building and rental apartment complex proposed for the Lot 13 site is non-descript and lacking any element of creativity. The inclusion of a massive housing component on this core site in Wheaton is absolutely the worse possible use of this key space.

This redeveloped site should be the central destination place in Wheaton--a dynamic mix of uses around a 'town center' that is a large flexible open space suitable for the Taste of Wheaton, performances, music events, and the like year round. Instead we are being offered a pseudo town center, with a small portion on one side of Reddie Drive and a larger part on the other side where the Regional Services Center (RSC) is currently located. This is not what stakeholders and area residents were led to expect.

The idea that the RSC site would be redeveloped out of the context of the whole WMATA triangle (Reddie, Veirs Mill, and Georgia) defies logic. And to propose that the town center include Reddie Drive is not acceptable. The resulting 'center' would be less than one-third of the Lot 13 area that was promised to Wheaton many times by our elected officials. And the area would include the square footage of Reddie Drive, which is a major public road that plays a large role in the mobility and connectivity plans recommended by the approved Sector Plan.

Wheaton would not get the promised large flexible space for year round events. There would be no creative features to encourage small group gatherings, or built-in elements for sitting, meeting with friends, playing with kids, etc. Wheaton will get fractured space that is actually the forecourt for the office building, not a town center.

The county Department of Transportation, the project manager, says this redevelopment plan has to be a procurement process rather than a traditional RFP (Request for Proposal) because Lot 13 is in a Parking District, etc. In this case, the county simply offered four publicly owned properties, and invited developers to submit project ideas that could include any or all of the four properties. Yet they provided no other guidance, except the requirement that one component must be an office building to meet P&P needs. No reference was included to achieving the recommended goals and vision of the adopted Wheaton Sector Plan.

In the process used by the Transportation Department, there was no reminder of the fact that the public had been promised a town center equal in size to the square footage of one third of Lot 13, or that mobility and connectivity needs and recommendations can be found in the Plan, or that Lot 13 is the core for creating Wheaton as a dynamic destination place. Wheaton has a right to expect the same influence of our Sector Plan on development projects here as is being shown in Bethesda, where their Plan goals and recommendations were part of the project planning and discussion for redevelopment of Parking Lot 31 on Bethesda Avenue.

Wheaton stakeholders next heard that a potential project and development team had been selected by a panel of government representatives, and negotiations were going to begin. We were told that the selected project was the best of the proposals. It was only later that I learned this was the ONLY viable bid. Wheaton is not getting the better of several alternatives. In the interest of expediting the planning and construction process, we are getting the only acceptable design.

The proposed design for Lot 13 in Wheaton lacks any of the creativity that is being offered for the site Park & Planning is vacating at 8787 Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring. That proposal includes a mix of uses, housing types, activity areas, and public spaces, while Wheaton gets expedited mediocrity in order that the Silver Spring part of the package can go forward.

In response to questions about Sector Plan connectivity and mobility recommendations, county Transportation officials indicate they will do a traffic study based on this proposal. It seems they intend to ignore the traffic study and mobility data produced by the P&P professional design and transportation staffs during the development of the new Sector Plan.

I am angry that this is another example of the "bait and switch" tactic used by our county government-- approving a Sector Plan that sets up expectations of Wheaton's evolution into a destination place containing a vibrant, exciting, mix of uses, people spaces, and activities, and then so easily ignoring these recommendations to accommodate a private development team that has only eyes on the prized 8787 Georgia Avenue property, with Lot 13 being just a means to that end.

If this project goes forward, Wheaton's future is being designed by the special interests of private developers using public land. I am disappointed that public and private voices stronger than mine have not become involved in righting this injustice. Few others seem to care about achieving a collaborative vision rather than accepting a mediocre design for the short term gain.

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 the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com