



## SITE PLAN REVIEW COMMITTEE MEETING SUMMARY

**Ballston Quarter (SP #193)**  
**SPRC Meeting #1**  
**July 20, 2015**

**Planning Commissioners in Attendance: Steve Cole, Chris Forinash, Nancy Iacomini, Ginger Brown, Rosemary Ciotti, Eric Gutshall, James Schroll, Jane Siegel, Steve Sockwell**

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### MEETING AGENDA

This was the first SPRC meeting to review three site plan amendment applications associated with the redevelopment of Ballston Common Mall, Ballston Quarter. Following a walking tour of the project site, the meeting began with an introduction by the SPRC Chair, Steve Cole, followed by informational presentations by the applicant and staff. The focus of the SPRC discussion for the meeting included:

- a) Special Topic: Wilson Boulevard Pedestrian Bridge
- b) Issues Related to General Land Use Plan
- c) Issues Related to Zoning Ordinance
- d) Special Topic: Height & Density

There were periods for public comment as part of the SPRC discussion on the above topics, as well. Following the SPRC discussion the meeting concluded with wrap up by committee members and a summary of the discussion points by the SPRC Chair.

*Note on Informational Presentation - Applicant: The applicant(s) presented their proposals to construct a 22-story residential building with two-story retail at the base, renovate the Ballston Common Shopping Mall and renovate the office building above the Macy's Department Store. The applicant included their rationale and thought regarding what was being proposed and specifically including their proposal to remove the pedestrian bridge over Wilson Boulevard. The applicant acknowledged however the concerns expressed by the community in removing the bridge and indicated that they were committed to working with the community to develop a proposal that includes a pedestrian bridge. They noted that such a proposal would slightly shift the location of a new bridge east of the location of the existing bridge.*

### SPRC DISCUSSION

### Clarifying Questions and Comments:

After applicant and staff presentations, the SPRC Chair opened the discussion by allowing for committee and audience members to ask clarifying questions and make general comments on what had been presented. Clarifying questions and comments are summarized below.

- It was asked of the applicant why the lack of focus on the Glebe Road frontage.
  - The applicant noted that the nature of Wilson Boulevard and the current design and layout of the mall provides for a different environment than Glebe Road. While there will be some tenant improvements at the ground floor of Glebe Road it would never arise to the level of Wilson Boulevard.
- The applicant provided a clarification and explanation regarding site grade.
- A comment was made that all presentations should be posted on the web.
  - Presentations are posted on the web on the SPRC Schedule page prior to the meeting. After the meeting they are also posted on the project web page.
- A comment was made to avoid blank walls, specifically Macy's with reference back to the *Ballston Sector Plan* urban design guidelines.
- There was a question about the plaza design and its use and specifically what will attract people to sit and gather there.
  - The applicant described the nature and design of the plaza and how it may be programmed.
- A question was asked as to whether the Public Private Partnership (PPP) is part of this (SPRC) process.
  - The SPRC Chair clarified that the PPP was not part of the SPRC process.
- Clarification was requested regarding the change from 390 residential units included in the original proposal to 405 units in the current proposal.
  - The applicant replied that the change in the unit count was due to a change in the geometry of the building design.
- It was noted that we should reassess the current understanding for the vision of Ballston.
- A question was asked regarding the technical calculation of density as units per acre and whether with fewer units there would be an issue with density or the parking ratio. It was further stated that the issue was one of the number of units and not bulk.
  - Staff confirmed that in the C-O-2.5 zoning district, residential density is calculated as units per acre and therefore, if there were fewer units there would not be an issue with density and parking technically speaking.
- Clarification was requested regarding the number of family sized units proposed and the types of residents that are anticipated to be attracted to the development – Is the millennial outreach a long-term expectation?
  - The applicant provided information based on its market studies and noted that there is the opportunity should the market dictate to provide for larger units.
- It was asked whether there were any permanent improvements anticipated to the County Board owned parcels at Randolph and Glebe.
  - Staff indicated they were not aware of any planned permanent improvements, but would research and provide additional information.

- A follow on comment was made that the applicant should consider wrapping the parking garage and activating the corner.
- It was noted that the County garage presents an opportunity for a bike parking facility and that we will need to better understand the possibilities and limitations.
- It was also noted that Wilson Boulevard streetscape should be shown sooner rather than later, with a specific request that it would be shown at the next meeting.
- A question was asked regarding how the project retail functions and how it will be accessed with the current proposal to remove the bridge.
  - The applicant provided an explanation of access to the mall with the proposed plan.
- A question was asked about whether millennials are truly the target market.
  - The applicant further discussed marketing and indicated the project was not specifically targeting a single demographic.

### **Special Topic: Pedestrian Bridge**

The special topic of the pedestrian bridge discussion began with the opportunity for community members to comment as summarized below.

#### *Public Comments*

- A citizen noted that they were encouraged by the applicant's decision to provide a proposal with a bridge noting that it was good news that turns things around on the issue.
- One citizen noted that there was no focus on necessarily retaining the existing bridge.
- A comment was made that the bridge is as important to Ballston as the Iwo Jima is to Arlington County.
- It was asked that the County confirm that they were not in favor of keeping/retaining the bridge.
  - Staff indicated that it is evaluating the existing proposal that does not include a bridge and that should a proposal with a bridge be provided, additional comments and evaluation would be provided upon review.
- A citizen noted that new residents would mean more residents would be crossing the bridge.
- It was noted that the bridge is heavily used when going to the Metro. Removing it takes away an option.
- A comment was made that the bridge is an important architectural feature (both bridges). It's a bridge system that is covered and safe, taking pedestrians into the mall. Redesign needs to consider the most direct route into the middle of the mall to minimize distance. It's an important feature for access and design.
- A citizen noted their appreciation of the applicant's willingness to work with the community; the community needs to see an alternate bridge location to put people's minds at ease.

- A comment was made that the link to the Metro is important. The number of drivers will increase without the bridge. Mobility challenged and disabled need it. It was further stated that the applicant should retain the art deco charm. It was noted that the County had not said it would support bridge retention.

#### *SPRC Member Comments*

- It was noted more than once the art work on the bridge is important. A question was posed as to what happens to it (the art) physically. And with respect to the art being considered as a community benefit, it was asked whether we could just get rid of it. It was further noted that the art work should be retained and better lighting provided.
  - The SPRC Chair noted that the applicant needs to address public art improvements at the next meeting.
- It was noted that additional bridge information should be provided at the next meeting.
- It was asked how long the bridge would be out of commission and whether or not the bridge would go to the same place and in the same way?
  - The applicant replied that it would not.
- A question was raised about the history of the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and what happened to it?
  - Staff will follow up and provide additional information on the 9<sup>th</sup> Street bridge.
- One committee member expressed strong interest in maintaining the existing bridge. Another asked that the applicant show a design retaining the bridge in its current location. It was asked whether the applicant could provide drawings to keep and meld it into the new concept for Ballston Quarter; keep the bridge as is but creatively integrate it into the proposal. It was reiterated that it was a community benefit and public art.
- Staff was asked to clarify ownership related to the bridge.
  - Staff clarified the entities who are party to the bridge and referred to a summary document prepared as a handout with additional information.
- A committee member noted that there is value to the surface network of streets and the viability of the mall. Further it was noted, that the fact that pedestrian bridge is connected to a dead mall is an issue. Another committee member agreed with this point and further noted that we need to understand that a new bridge is at a cost; what would we be giving up for this?

#### **Special Topic: Height and Density**

- A committee member expressed concerns with the height of the residential building noting that 16 stories (not 22 proposed) seems right. The member noted that the building should not be higher than the Founders Square building. Density was also noted as a concern, not just visually but in terms of the traffic impact. The member noted that

the proposal was not well thought out and that Randolph Street will be in trouble with all the load proposed.

- Several comments were made and interest expressed in the unit mix of the residential building:
  - Empty nesters are not looking for studios and one bedrooms. It was requested that the applicant share its market studies as a lack of confidence was expressed with the profile of millennials and empty nesters.
  - It was noted that the demographic appears to be different than the target market based on citizen attendees.
  - It was noted that seniors are one of the fastest growing populations in the County.
  - The question was asked whether a reduction in the number of units therefore reduces the density. A request was further made to identify what's being added to the supply in the area in terms of the number of dwelling units and further noting that there should be flexibility in unit sizes in the building. It was requested that more information be provided on this.
    - Staff/the applicant will provide data on surrounding residential development and additional information on unit mix and show the flexibility of unit sizes proposed for the building.
- A question was asked regarding the mechanism the applicant would like to consider for bonus density and height and how does the project as a whole relate to benefits to the community overall and project need.
  - The applicant responded that this is still under consideration.
- Several members noted that height was appropriate in this location. It was further noted by one committee member that this is an appropriate place for the density and height proposed given that it is not an edge area or adjacent to single family.
- Some questions were raised related to the density and the justification for an additional six floors. Concern was expressed about the impact of increased residents on parking and pedestrian safety as well as traffic and it was requested that there be an analysis of the impact on traffic with the adjacent development of Founders Square.
  - The SPRC Chair asked whether the applicant's TIA covered the addition of the Founder's Square office building.
- It was asked that staff clarify the GLUP designation related to the surrounding area with questions as to why the site is not zoned COA and what was behind the intent in not changing the GLUP for this site to coordinated mixed use.
  - Staff will provide additional information on the surrounding GLUP and Zoning and why it was not considered for this site.
- It was asked that an explanation be provided regarding the overall reduction in site plan density for retail.
  - Staff/The applicant responded that with the change in opening up some parts of the currently enclosed mall areas and removing the home furniture, that even with the addition of retail with the proposed residential building there would be an overall net less in retail gross floor area.

- It was requested that a break out of density proposed for exclusion be provided, including the mews and spaces proposed to be open to the sky.
  - Staff/The applicant will provide this summary.
- A question was raised about whether any of the density exclusions were precedent setting.
- A question was also asked whether the applicant is considering bonus density for the spaces that will now be opened to the sky.
  - The applicant noted that the spaces that are proposed to be open to the sky were spaces previously counted as gross floor area by definition of the Zoning Ordinance. Now that they are open to the sky they would not count as density and so bonus was not being requested.

### Public Comment

- A question was raised as to what was received by the developer in exchange for the bridge and would we be taking it back.
- A question was asked as to whether there could be modifications to the bridge adding an elevator at the plaza.
- Concern was expressed regarding decreasing parking in Ballston as well as the bridge process noting that it should not be this onerous or difficult to participate.
- It was noted that the Wilson Boulevard bridge is part of a system and they work together and need to be clearly understood. It was further noted that the County's views need to be understood.
- Concern was expressed that Ballston is homogenous. The question was raised regarding inclusion of children. It was noted that there needs to be more diversity and it needs to be a real community.
- A comment was made that the County is a party to the bridge because of site plan conditions and that it is only coming down because of the plaza. It was noted that it won't look like the rendering, there's not enough space, and it's an imaginary benefit.
- It was stated that the area was appealing because of the bridge – pedestrian safety and weather benefits. It was questioned as to why it is not a major benefit to keep the bridge; it's a selling point for renting units.

### SPRC Wrap Up

- It was stated that there were many issues affecting all but it is a worthwhile endeavor. Concern was expressed about reinvestment in apartments and where we are going.
- A request was made for more information to be provided on interior spaces being outdoor spaces. How do we address them in bad weather and what about green roofs?
- A question was raised as to whether our design choices are pushing people out to Tysons. Also in opening up to the elements, what are the ramifications?
- It was noted that height is okay here, but how do we get to the height with community benefits?
- The paradox of a covered bridge but opening up part of the mall was noted. Overall, the shopping mall revitalization was seen as important. Concern was expressed about

chasing the current fad and a fear of calling back community benefits and additional cost as we consider overall public contribution to the project. Support was expressed for looking at options before dismissing the idea of preserving the existing structure and location of the bridge.

- It was noted that the residential building should be discussed on its own merits and not as part of the public private partnership.
- A desire was expressed to better understand the cost of the bridge, possible re-design and impact of the bridge on the streetscape and the impact on community benefits.
- It was noted that the project scope is encouraging and that there is a need to flesh out how the mall opening works.
- Mall repositioning was noted as important and it was stated that it was a viable project. It was noted that we need to follow the current trend because it will attract tenants, etc.
- Concern was expressed about the utility of the plaza.
- It was noted that we should keep in mind nearby open spaces for contributions and impact. It was also noted that it is becoming less mall and more residential. Again it was noted that the residential building should be evaluated separately.
- It was noted that the applicant should innovate with a variety of all age groups and provide for the opportunity to do more than shop. It was questioned as to what will be offered to retirees.
- It was stated that walkability is beyond street level for various people. The bridge is a system that connects others in the community. It is an asset because it keeps the community connected.
- It was noted that the Ballston Virginia Square demographic is largely 55+. The quality of the mall was applauded but it was noted that we want to do this right and not in a hurry.
- It was noted that a growing population in the County is families and that this project appeals to that demographic too.
- It was noted that the Glebe Road frontage should be confronted and that we need to see more of what will greet them.

### **SPRC Chair Summary**

- Everyone wants a better mall.
- Glebe Road is important.
- Keep the bridge; can it remain in its current location?
- There is interest in maintaining the accessibility of the bridge.
- Residential building:
  - Is the unit mix right?
  - How does it relate to demographics and demand?
  - Height is generally acceptable
  - There is interest and concern in the nature of community benefits.

### **NEXT STEPS**

- The next SPRC meeting is scheduled for Thursday, July 30, 2015 where the applicant will respond to questions and comments raised at the July 20, 2015 SRPC meeting. The

committee will review and discuss site design and characteristics and building architecture.