

Criticisms and Proposals

for the 26th Street / Old Dominion Drive Master Planning Task Force



Sketch of Proposals for 26th/Old Dominion Site

My name is David Taylor Reich. I am a resident of Arlington. I grew up in the county and attended HB Woodlawn, so as a high-schooler I walked in this area frequently. Now, as a recent college graduate living in Cherrydale, I often drive and bicycle, and occasionally still walk, on these streets. I have a strong interest in urban planning and design and an even stronger dedication to Arlington County, and so I propose these comments to the Planning Task Force hoping that they will help shape a better future for Arlington.

I will put forward, first, a criticism of the process being used by Arlington County and the Planning Task Force, and, second, two of my own proposals for the site. I criticize the exclusion of the Marymount student and staff communities, and I propose prioritization of a high-quality sidewalk along the Old Dominion frontage of the properties and implementation of some kind of commercial use in at least one of the properties. These criticisms and proposals are humble, reasonable, and entirely compatible with most other visions for the site.

Exclusion of Marymount Students and Staff in Planning

The Planning Task Force is engaging the wrong communities in the planning process. Of the fifteen members of the Task Force, four directly represent local communities close to the site in question. Those are the representatives of the Civic Associations, and they each represent an average of 2,850 individuals. Notably, neither the Donaldson Run nor the Rock Spring civic associations even border the site in question, though they are close. The population that is both

closest and that will be most heavily affected by the results of the planning process, a population of over 4,000 individuals, is barely represented at all: Marymount University students, faculty, and staff.

The Planning Task Force must significantly increase its engagement with the Marymount community. These individuals, more than someone living a mile away in a residential neighborhood, will be directly and heavily affected by any changes to the land on their doorstep, and yet they are barely represented.

There is a representative of Marymount University on the Task Force, and while I mean absolutely no disrespect to the person filling that complex and challenging role, it would be impossible for anybody to represent both Marymount as an institution, with its long history and unique character, and to represent the populations of students and staff who inhabit it on a daily basis. I agree that there should indeed be a representative of the institution of Marymount, but there should be an additional representative - ideally two - for the student and staff communities.

It is difficult to compare neighborhood residents, who are often homeowners with a vested, decades-long interest in the area, and students, who are by nature transient. Certainly, the desires of any given student or group of students are temporary. But the desires of students as a group, as a population, as a community, will remain - and will likely become all the more pressing with the passage of time. Future students cannot yet speak for themselves. But they must be spoken for, and nobody is more equipped to speak for them than current students.

What's more, the faculty of Marymount also have desires separate from the institution, and these desires are often also on the scale of decades, particularly in the case of tenured professors.

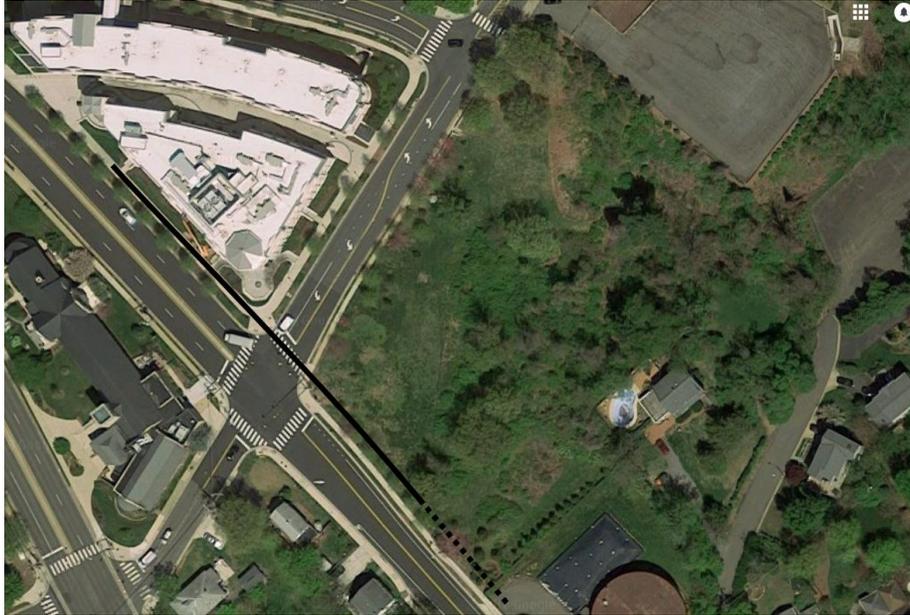
Tomorrow's meeting is being held a forty-minute walk away from the site and away from Marymount dormitories and is being held days before the beginning of the semester. Students, almost none of whom have returned from their winter breaks, are being systematically excluded from the planning process. This is unjust, and must not continue.

Furthermore, Marymount's student and staff body is more nationally and ethnically diverse than the population of Arlington as a whole ([41%](#) white rather than [64%](#)). This means that, although unintentional, a bias against Marymount's community is a bias against people of color.

A student representative must be added to the Task Force, and planning events must be held in a charette-like process on the campus itself.

High-Quality Pedestrian Environment Along Old Dominion Drive

The first of my own two proposals for the site is an improved sidewalk along the Old Dominion Drive frontage.



The sidewalk on the north side of Old Dominion, across 26th Street from the county properties, is a beautiful work of urban design (black solid line, above figure). More than most sidewalks in the County, it provides a strong sense of place, enclosure, and architectural harmony, creating a feeling of both ease and of destination while walking along it. This sense is due in large part to the trees that provide cover from both the elements and from the cars that often pass by at over 35mph, but is also due to the sidewalk's width and the well-proportioned 3-story architectural wall to its north.

This beautiful sidewalk terminates abruptly at the intersection with 26th Street. Southbound pedestrians must cross a wide, hot expanse of asphalt before continuing along a narrow, exposed, uncomfortable sidewalk. Though these pedestrians are scarcely a ten-minute walk from the popular destination of Lee Heights, the unfriendly sidewalks along this stretch of road might convince them to make this trip by car instead - or more likely, prevent them from ever realizing the walk is even possible.

This pedestrian-unfriendly design, by diverting many short trips from foot to private car, contributes to road congestion in the busy area between Glebe Road, 26th Street, and Old Dominion. This is particularly true of trips made by the 200 new residents, Marymount students who arrived after the completion of the new dormitories. It is also true of trips made by many of the area's carless young adults, high-schoolers living in neighborhoods farther north on Old Dominion or 26th Street.

This Planning Task Force has a unique opportunity to fix the problem. When the parcels in question are eventually redeveloped, no matter what the use may be, it is important that the Task Force require a high-quality sidewalk extending to or beyond the 25th Street intersection (black dotted line, above figure).

This new sidewalk should be required to architecturally cohere with the Marymount sidewalk, through plantings and through a facade wall of comparable height and setback. It should involve narrowing the 26th Street intersection, possibly with minor bumpouts or at least by squaring the corners. It would also have public benches. Although the sightline should be straight along the sidewalk across 26th Street, the path could curve slightly after that crossing to accommodate the offset property lines. Optimally, Marymount would construct steps connecting the sidewalk corner with their recessed sitting area.

The sidewalk development should include an improvement to the bicycle lane between 25th and 26th, hopefully in combination with conversion of one car lane to a bicycle lane between 26th and Glebe Road (see the Bicycle Network [MTP's](#) prioritization of that block). It should also include some wayfinding elements that indicate the nearby presence of the Metrobus 23 route that provides rapid access to Ballston, Shirlington, and Tysons.

Commercial Uses, Especially For Student Body

When the Carruthers and Ostapenko Halls of Marymount University opened in 2013, their dormitory beds brought a new population of 200 students to this busy intersection. Marymount University has a total student population of over 3,400, many of whom reside on-campus. The neighborhood has not yet changed in any way to accommodate this densification. These students, living the busy lives of students, have no options for nearby retail, food, or community gathering spaces. For the most part, they have to drive in order to do their grocery shopping or to eat a meal out, which adds yet more cars to these busy streets. The addition of some commercial space on the corner of 26th Street and Old Dominion would significantly alleviate this issue and improve the quality of life for both residential and non-residential Marymount students as well as citizens of the nearby neighborhoods.

Although Arlington County would not have the power to specify the exact retail that might appear, an ideal use might look something like La Union Grocery at the corner of Lee Highway and Taylor Street. La Union is also located at the interstice of a traditional single-family-home neighborhood and a more densely-used area. It provides something of a community gathering space, as customers chat with the shopkeeper or relax at the picnic tables outside. It serves delicious hot food that is affordable on a student's budget. It is also in an R-6 zone. Clearly, such development has successful precedent in Arlington.

A sidewalk cafe, even as small as a coffee/newspaper kiosk, would also be an improvement to the neighborhood and synergize well with the improved sidewalk described above. It would also synergize well with any improvements to the Donaldson Run Trail Park in the north of the site, as people will be able to bring a cup of coffee along on their stroll down the beautiful path. This location could easily become a destination for residents of the densifying area around Lee Highway only a few minutes' walk south.

Additional parking for the commercial uses should not be necessary, considering that the primary customer base will be Marymount University's 3,400 students and correspondingly numerous staff. If parking is absolutely required, it could be combined with parking for the nearby park and located behind the building(s).

The land in question is zoned R-6, which does not permit commercial use. I believe that such a restriction is fundamentally inappropriate, that small retail and foodservice is entirely natural and healthy in a residential neighborhood. Many Arlingtonians agree, especially those who, because they are young or busy or do not speak good English, rarely attend community meetings. However, even given the current zoning, the area immediately across Old Dominion is under the same zoning but is obviously a commercial area. Similarly, La Union, mentioned above, is in an R-6 zone. Clearly this zoning is not absolute, and clearly there is already an expectation that this area will host commercial activity.

Another obstacle may be presented by Arlington County's ownership of the land in question. The County would be foolish to sell the land and relinquish a powerful asset and an increasingly-valuable property, but it is also legally prohibited from acting as landlord. Probably the best solution would be a form of long-term, permissive lease to the private sector.



The 26th Street / Old Dominion intersection as it stands, and as it might be envisioned.

Conclusion

These two ideas, an improved sidewalk and some commercial zoning, are the most important and cost-effective means of improving the health, beauty, and sustainability of the area. They are straightforward, compatible with a wide range of other interests and visions, and adaptable to unforeseen future changes. They embrace Arlington's vision of sustainability, diversity, and innovation, and will be one more step to a better future for our county.

I have a number of other thoughts on important future directions for this land, though they are less necessary than the two proposals above.

First, a much better bicycle connection is needed on the short block of 26th Street between Old Dominion and Yorktown, a 'missing link' for bicyclists traveling between Lee Highway and the Yorktown neighborhood.

Second, this land has a strong transit connection. The Metrobus 23 and the new ART 72, with very low combined headways, link the area to Tysons, Ballston, and Shirlington. This means that the area would be appropriate for car-free housing (perhaps Affordable housing) in keeping with Arlington's [car-free diet](#). It also means, particularly since the opening of the ART 72, that Arlington and Marymount should discuss a plan to consolidate Marymount's shuttle into the ART system, given that the two run nearly identical routes and appeal to the same demographics.

Third, because of the presence of the nearby park trail leading to Donaldson Run, it is not particularly important to retain this land in its natural state: 'plaza,' rather than 'park,' should be the vision for any public space.

Fourth, this area is very close to Lee Highway and very tied to the Lee Heights neighborhood and the Glebe/Lee intersection. Because the Plan Lee Highway effort is proceeding simultaneously, the two planning efforts should be more closely linked to ensure that decisions are strategically made as they influence both areas.