

ASHTON HEIGHTS CIVIC ASSOCIATION
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON THE CLARENDON SECTOR PLAN UPDATE
RESPONSE TO THE COUNTY PRESENTATIONS OF FEBRUARY 2021

TO: ARLINGTON COUNTY BOARD

On behalf of its members, and the residents of Ashton Heights, the Civic Association (AHCA) is submitting its comments below on the update review of the 2006 Clarendon Sector Plan. Our input responds to the County's request for online and community feedback by February 23rd, as part of its year-long review process led by the Long-range Planning Committee.

The AHCA actively participated in the preparation of the 2006 Clarendon Sector Plan and our members continue to support its stated vision. The Plan provides the framework for a series of policies, including design elements for buildings such as height, density, tapering, appearance (including step-backs and setbacks), streetscape, and public open space. It also provides for exceptions to the zoning guidelines for developers in return for community benefits. Further, it set out guidelines for the preservation of historic buildings, and for affordable housing, as part of the preservation and enhancement of the "urban village" concept integral to the overall vision for Clarendon.

In the following paragraphs we would like to briefly summarize details of developers' proposals of greatest concern to our members and then summarize our policy positions.

Height and Density.

The sector plan set a maximum height at 110 ft in exchange for developer provision of community benefits, as well as maximum heights on street frontages. The plan (page 59) also allowed for exceptional height limits (128 feet) at the discretion of the County Board on certain central lots in exchange for *exceptional* community benefits. In this context under the current developers' proposals a hotel project on Wilson Boulevard calls for a height exceeding 110 feet by adding a roof terrace entertainment space, and another project (on Wells Fargo site) proposes to use density transfers to add floors. Some developers are also asking for exceptions such as higher frontages (e.g., on 10th street along the Ashton Heights residential neighborhood). We oppose the requests for higher frontages on 10th Street and are concerned that additional height requests should be considered only in clearly exceptional cases and that the *exceptional benefits* requirement is strictly complied with.

The exceptional height increases allowed under the 2006 plan also provided scope for a large increase in building density (F.A.Rs) which, if not carefully monitored, could result in lopsided development with relatively massive buildings located adjacent to other smaller structures or to open spaces. This risk is increased in current proposals. The project (on the Wells Fargo site) that is requiring additional height to 128 feet would make use of a density swap, allowing further possibly lopsided massing (exacerbated by a lack of step-backs along North Irving Street). Massing of buildings is not explicitly addressed in the County's presentation and should be part of the strategic planning going forward.

Tapering, transitions, step-backs and set-backs.

The form or profile of the buildings proposed (i.e., setbacks, step-backs, tapers) is critical in preserving light and perceived space, and 'softening' the profile of buildings to avoid a canyon effect that is inconsistent with the urban village concept. Step-backs, cutbacks and tapering can act to neutralize to some degree the effect of height. As such they are a critical element of the urban village concept. Some of the developer's plans are calling for exceptions for step-backs, setbacks and tapers.

One example is the Hotel project which involves a continuous high wall along Irving Street without the step-backs intended under the 2006 plan. The hotel would also have frontage on Washington Blvd with shallow setbacks, and in combination with the 'Wells Fargo' project could create a canyon effect around the intersection of Irving and Washington while towering over the small public space at that location. While the 'Wells Fargo' project has sculpting through a deep step-back on the front elevation, it fails to conform with other requisite step-backs, most notably along Irving St. A project on 10th street (Joyce Motors site) asks for tapering to be modified for a different starting point and an adjusted incline allowing greater massing that may negatively affect the transition from the adjoining residential area of Ashton Heights. Better transition may also be needed, beyond tapering, to avoid major height discontinuities such as that between the Wells Fargo site project, which may have the effect of towering over the 'central park' space and the post office. A similar discontinuity applies to the hotel which may tower over low-rise historic buildings on the North side of Wilson marked for preservation.

Street Frontage and streetscape

Well-designed street frontages are also critical elements of the urban village concept. If heights of buildings are a problem for the community then attractive streetscapes and wide sidewalks are also a way to help neutralize the effect of height. This means that setbacks and public spaces for pedestrian access, entertainment or rest, different entrance designs, ground floor retail space, ornamentation, high quality differentiated construction materials, trees, vegetation, etc., are critical. We particularly would like to see differentiated first/second floor frontages and improvement of facilities such as bus stops, street lighting, public seating. Some of the developers' proposals would create setbacks that are narrower than code and therefore not easily usable as pedestrian space or access, such as the example above of the public space at Washington Blvd/ Irving. Proposed setbacks are also an issue along North Irving (both sides), which is a major pedestrian way from Ashton Heights to Clarendon. Breaking up the facade along the street would make this a more pedestrian-friendly block.

Public space, green space, historic buildings

A key priority for our membership is to fulfill the Plan's vision of numerous small and larger public spaces, using building setbacks, spaces within building complexes, and spaces above-ground level including roofs, to be included in developers' plans along with the recreational use of county-owned sites. At the same time, sharp discontinuities between heights and green spaces or low-rise buildings (including historic buildings) should be avoided. This is a problem that applies to the developments on the Wells Fargo site and the hotel/apartments on the South side of Wilson and Washington Blvd. Enhancing the proposed public space ('triangle park' and extensions) along Fairfax Drive takes on greater significance if the park intended for the 'Fire Station' site is no longer proposed. It is important to achieve the open space on the Verizon site, and utmost efforts should be made to find public space to replace it possibly at an extended 'triangle park' on Fairfax. Finally it is necessary to reactivate implementation of the 'greenway' featured in the General Land Use Plan (GLUP), which is partially in place along the northern boundary of Ashton

Heights into Clarendon as a buffer between the urban and suburban neighborhood. As a part of the GLUP, the Greenway should be included in the Sector Plan Update maps.

Developer bonuses and community benefits.

Bonuses are a major part of the incentive system for new developments, offered in exchange for community contributions such as, inter alia, affordable housing (usually funding), LEED energy, or public spaces. The code variances requested in proposals for re-development that we are considering all rely to some degree on developer bonuses. The bonus conditions need to be enforced and additional types of benefits introduced. An example may be provision of free public parking in private commercial spaces at non-peak parking times, to alleviate the scarcity of parking space and to allow for other projects such as the proposed 'linear park' to be a recreation rather than parking area. While the 2006 sector plan lays out some guidelines for the rate of exchange of developer bonuses for community benefits the actual formulae used for awarding bonuses in actual transactions is not always clear. This is a potential source of loose code compliance in the development process that requires monitoring. We are also concerned that bonuses awarded to one developer to not constitute a precedent for others, thereby avoiding potential 'lock in.'

Conclusion.

While re-development has proceeded at a steady pace in Clarendon, the current Sector Plan Update focuses on an area that has not yet received attention. A number of redevelopment proposals are now moving ahead. While welcoming these important initiatives, our Association members retain strong support for policies enshrined in the 2006 plan. There is a spread of views on the specific details, between those who want to retain the policies of the 2006 plan with as little change as possible, and those who favor more variance on these policies with proportionate developer provision of public benefits. However, the community remains unanimous in its support for the policy principles of the urban village, meaning, inter alia, a walkable, user-friendly neighborhood with attractive structures, streetscapes, and shopping, cultural and recreational facilities. The developers' proposals contain variances against 2006 sector plan guidelines in many of the above elements of building and street design which will require special exceptions. Accordingly, we would support a program containing, among other things, the following key elements:

- continue and strengthen the policy of retaining low-rise small business units (and historic buildings) in a harmonious relationship with taller commercial and office buildings.
- promote effective limitation on height according to the 2006 sector plan, with only rare exceptions
- avoid mismatching of high density and adjacent low density buildings (monitor impact of density swaps)
- avoid excessive discontinuities in height and massing between buildings, and between buildings and open spaces, by ensuring that existing rules are adequately enforced.
- promote attractive differentiated building forms which include significant 'sculpting' through step-backs and cut-backs at appropriate heights
- promote appropriate and well-controlled tapering down from the commercial center to surrounding residential zones, including Ashton Heights
- strive to expand the number and area of public open spaces and parks, both for recreational use and for improving the street environment

Attractive streetscapes can to some degree neutralize the effect of height. This calls for the following key elements of design:

- small-scale, low rise commercial/retail premises accessible at street level.
- differentiated first/second floor frontages incl. entrances, ornamentation, construction materials.
- landscaping and vegetation plantings at street level and above.
- improved/attractive design of facilities such as bus stops, street lighting, public seating.
- wide side-walks and numerous small and larger public spaces, using street corners, building setbacks, spaces within building complexes, and spaces above ground to be included in developers' plans
- use of county-owned sites and small spaces to provide resting and recreational areas
- reactivate implementation of the 'greenway' along the northern boundary of Ashton Heights into Clarendon as a buffer between the urban and suburban neighborhood.

While it is not reasonable to legislate a priori guidelines for specific projects there needs to be room for case-by-case assessment. Within a spirit of constructive dialogue our posture will be to increase our vigilance in relation to the implementation of agreed policy and to seek to prevent initiatives that result in serious non-compliances, to achieve more transparency in transactions between the community, County and developers, for example vis-à-vis developer bonuses, and to monitor projects that are questionable in terms of compliance with codes or in conflict with the 2006 Sector Plan.

Acknowledgement

Finally, we would like to commend the high quality and helpful presentation made by County officials to underpin this public engagement discussion.

Respectfully, Scott Sklar, President
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