

ABC TESTIMONY BEFORE CA BOARD ON 7/24/08

Good evening. My name is Joel Yesley, and I am speaking for the Alliance For A Better Columbia. ABC supports the Guiding Principles for CA discussions with GGP related to Symphony Woods. In addition, ABC opposes several other elements of the Master Plan for Downtown Columbia, which is more reminiscent of a feel-good wish list than a realistic plan. A good plan would present a reasonable picture of how the goals expressed by the general community can be achieved, taking account of the existing economic and political constraints as well as the social needs. The proposed plan is instead characterized by conflicting goals in attempting to be all things to all people and bases the economic and financial feasibility of the overall plan on self-serving assumptions that downplay the extent of the needed supporting physical infrastructure and ignore current economic realities that would limit the extent of any financial support from the county and the state. We have been reassured by GGP that the implementation of the plan won't cost CA or the county anything because the projected revenues will exceed its costs, yet there is little or no documentation of the magnitude of the expected infrastructure costs or the proposed financing mechanism, other than some vague references to a special tax district and to a "downtown partnership" comprised of the county, CA, and GGP.

We have been assured by GGP that their Master Plan will provide a human-scaled place that will offer several amenities, including public meeting places as well as natural places conducive to private contemplation, where pedestrians will not come in conflict with vehicular traffic, which should move freely. Although GGP deserves praise for its ambitious plan to promote forest restoration, the fact remains that about 40 % of the existing trees in Symphony Woods will be cut down. A large part of this tree removal will result from plans to locate several cultural amenities, including a small cities institute and possibly a relocated library, on CA-owned land in Symphony Woods. In addition, a new road is to be cut through the woods to improve access to Meriweather Pavilion as well as several high-rise office and residential towers to be located in the Crescent District with the goal of recreating a Manhattan style Central Park environment surrounded by high density development. These plans are contrary to the Guiding Principles for Symphony Woods, which call for maintaining the natural setting.

If GGP were truly serious about creating the type of environment it is claiming as its goal, it would have made available for the cultural facilities some of the presently built-up land it owns and intends to clear, instead of building high-rise offices on this land, as called for in the Master Plan. Fewer high-rise buildings would also be consistent with its professed belief in human-scale development. Furthermore, GGP would not have opted for two at-grade crossings over a relatively busy minor arterial road instead of the more expensive solution of a tunnel or overpass. Any slowing of traffic on LPP should encourage motorists to use the local streets, thereby reducing the appeal of the residential neighborhoods.

The Master Plan seems to be based on the premise that 5,500 additional housing units will be needed in order to create the critical mass needed to support the proposed commercial development. If the existing population of the entire Columbia community is not thought to be sufficient to support the addition of 1 million sq. ft. of retail space (which would amount to another regional mall), wouldn't it make more sense to scale back the retail component instead of cramming more and more people into 4 to 6 story condo buildings with the hope they will patronize the local establishments, notwithstanding the current very unstable economic environment. The fact that the county is facing a serious shortage of affordable housing should not be used by GGP to justify such a massive expansion of residential units. The county would be wiser to disperse any new affordable housing over a wider area, focusing on the older sections with presently underutilized infrastructure capacity and well-developed transit systems such as the Route 1 Corridor. Concentrating it in an area whose existing road system is already operating near capacity levels and in a community which prizes its open land does not make economic or social sense.

Implementation of the Master Plan could also seriously burden CA finances, especially if the real estate market is unable to stage a quick recovery. The cost of providing new facilities to service the recreational needs of so many new residents without compromising the quality of services for the existing residents as well as the additional cost of maintaining carefully manicured new open spaces that will require more care than natural woodlands could necessitate increases in the already burdensome annual charge. Neither GGP nor the county will be in much of a position to help out if the expectations of success are defeated by reality, partnership or no partnership. The CA Board should not expect residents to

accept responsibility for financial commitments that their leaders may have committed them to satisfying without carefully balancing the downside risk against the potential rewards, especially if the negotiations are closed to the public. If the plan falls short of its expectations, the general community will be left holding the bag, so to speak, while the developer can cut its losses by selling out, and the county officials who approved the plan as it now stands may have moved on before being forced to deal with the consequences of their negligence. Isn't this an argument for resisting the impulse to join the development bandwagon and instead adopt a more conservative incremental type approach toward renewing our downtown?