

TESTIMONY BEFORE PLANNING BOARD ON ZRA 113  
(on behalf of the Alliance for a Better Columbia)

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My name is Joel Yesley, and I will be speaking on behalf of the Alliance For a Better Columbia. I reside at 11604 Lakewater Lane in Columbia. The Alliance For a Better Columbia strongly supports the testimony offered by the Howard County Citizens Association and the Coalition for Columbia's Downtown. Rather than reiterate the specific criticisms and recommendations made by these organizations, ABC will focus its remarks on the huge gap between many of the General Growth Properties (GGP) Plan's stated objectives and their likelihood of attainment as well as some inconsistencies or conflicts among these objectives that have resulted from the plan's attempt to garner support from all elements of the community.

We have been assured by GGP that the implementation of the plan will be costless for the Columbia Association (CA) and the county because the projected revenues will exceed its costs, yet there is little documentation of the expected magnitude of the infrastructure costs and only some vague references to the proposed financing mechanism, which includes a special tax district and a "downtown partnership" comprised of the county, CA, and GGP. GGP's openly admitted precarious financial situation casts further doubt on the company's ability to implement its plan without massive public subsidies.

The addition of 5,500 housing units and substantial increases in retail and office space (totaling nearly 6 million sq. ft.) called for in the plan will require the construction of several 10 to 20 story residential and office buildings that will need to be serviced by multi-storied parking garages (at a cost of \$30,000 or more per space) if its goal of environmental sustainability is to be preserved. The county will also need to finance several offsite road improvements, including a new access road to Route 29, in order to prevent gridlocked traffic that could result from the greatly increased density of Town Center. The plan also includes the possibility of a new fire station, a new Columbia Association headquarters building, and a re-located library,

notwithstanding the fact that the present library building was substantially renovated within the past 8 years.

The downtown plan seems to be based on the premise that 5,500 additional housing units will be required in order to create the critical mass needed to support the proposed commercial development. The plan should be scaled back considerably so that its success is geared more toward its ability to satisfy the needs and desires of the existing residents rather than its ability to establish a thriving self-contained 24-hour community in the manner of a Maple Lawn or mini-Bethesda, minus the transit connections. We've heard a lot from the plan's sponsors about the need to create vibrancy and excitement but relatively little about the competing need to preserve existing open spaces and to create residential neighborhoods offering a wide variety of housing choice that originally attracted people of broadly diverse backgrounds to Columbia. There are currently enough residents within an easy drive of the downtown to ensure the success of a more modest scale of commercial development.

Both GGP's original and amended affordable housing proposals fall considerably short of satisfying the county's professed goal of creating "full spectrum" housing in the downtown. Even the greater 15 % set-aside for those earning below 80 % of median income that was proposed by DPZ and accepted by GGP would not exceed the existing requirement of the county's Moderate Income Housing Unit (MIHU) Program, notwithstanding the massive increase in allowable residential density in Town Center that GGP is requesting. Other developers in the county are forced to satisfy this 15 % requirement without gaining any increased density, let alone a windfall. A major weakness of the county's MIHU Program is that developers can satisfy its requirements by targeting households at the top end of the mandated range (i.e., 80 % level), thereby ignoring the needs of substantial numbers of the county's public servants (teachers, police, firemen, etc.) as well as large numbers of retail clerks, nurses, and service employees who work in the county but can't afford to live here. Neither the original nor the amended GGP Plans would do anything to alleviate this shortcoming. If the set-aside was raised to a more reasonable level as proposed by both HCCA and the Full Spectrum Housing Coalition, the plan would not require such a massive population increase to offer housing affordable to many workers currently employed at the nearby hospital and community college as well as the staff required by the planned new retail development.

We have also been assured by GGP that their Master Plan will provide a human-scaled environment that will offer several amenities, including public meeting places and beautiful parks, 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 would be cut down to make way for the planned new civic buildings. If GGP were truly serious about achieving its goal of creating a human-scale environment, it would have offered to accommodate these buildings on built-up land it owns and intends to clear rather than on CA-owned mature forest land in Symphony Woods. GGP would also have scaled back the massive increases in density it is proposing. The expected increase in automobile traffic will not only pose a safety danger, with its proposal for two at-grade crossings over a relatively busy arterial road, but also disturb the tranquility of the residential neighborhoods adjacent to the commercial areas.

The Alliance For a Better Columbia fears that implementation of the Master Plan could also seriously burden CA finances, especially if the current weak real estate market persists over an extended period as now appears likely. 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 possibility that CA will assume additional responsibilities, such as the maintenance of additional well-manicured open space/park land, could necessitate increases in the already burdensome annual charge. Residents shouldn't be expected to bail out CA if it assumes financial commitments that are premised on the return of a booming real estate market, a very unlikely prospect in the foreseeable future. The general community will be the loser if the plan falls short of its expectations, which would likely result in increased county taxes and annual CA assessment charges and/or the possibility of seriously compromised public services, while the developer can cut its losses by selling out.

The county's taxpayers as well as Columbia's "lien-payers" should not be forced to pay the price of their political leaders' short-sightedness if they decide to approve such a grandiose plan. Our political leaders should have the fortitude to resist the impulse to join the development bandwagon and instead adopt a more conservative incremental type approach toward renewing our downtown, especially in view of the lack of certainty regarding the necessary infrastructure improvements.

Given GGP's well-advertised financial plight, one would think that the county might have the upper hand in holding GGP accountable for achieving the goals enunciated in the Community Vision framework document. The lack of clarity and detail in the financial commitments GGP is prepared to make to ensure the plan's success along with the plan's failure to preserve Symphony Woods and promote affordable housing as envisioned in this document, however, raise serious concerns regarding the company's willingness, let alone ability, to make the vision a reality. The company's uncompromising response to DPZ's recommendation that the moderate income housing requirement be increased from 10 % to 15 % of the total number of units further reinforces our doubts. GGP's counter-proposal would extract a very high price for accepting this change, involving the total elimination of the 10 % set-aside for middle income families in its original proposal as well as a substantially reduced financial commitment, which would have the effect of making a total mockery of its professed commitment to "full spectrum" housing.

ABC strongly recommends that the county stand its ground in insisting on full compliance with all elements of the vision framework. Any backing off will likely be interpreted by the community as a desire on the part of its leaders to elevate expediency over principle. It would be easier for the county to relax its development goals and award a big financial windfall to GGP. Such an expedient course of action could avoid protracted negotiations and the possibility of an impasse. Alternatively, the county could use its strong bargaining leverage to extract reasonable concessions from GGP. The ultimate costs of a more conciliatory strategy to the general community, in terms of the increased potential for higher taxes and/or greater traffic congestion, may not be apparent for many years. If the county instead decides to set the bar higher, assuming a greater risk that GGP may elect to withdraw from the project and take an immediate financial gain by selling its properties in Columbia, the redevelopment of the downtown would be delayed again. The latter course of action could well be more beneficial to the long-term interests of the community, however, than tying the fate of the downtown to the fortunes of an overly-leveraged developer whose financial viability is hanging by a thread.

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