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Testimony for PB-366

Thank you for granting me the opportunity to speak tonight and for trudging through this entire ordeal. I am here to express my opposition to the proposal before you. Though the Department of Planning and Zoning has recommended approving this plan based on the same criteria you must use, a more careful investigation of these criteria reveals several reasons why it must be denied.

A. The adequacy of the roads serving the proposed development and any proposed mitigation in accordance with the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance.

Instead of overloading you with traffic testimony, I'll leave it to those who have come before me and those who will come after to elaborate in detail on this issue. However, I'd briefly like to say that the traffic study presented by HRD was filled with lots of facts, diagrams and numbers, information that unfortunately means nothing to most of us. We don't need a study to tell us Town Center traffic is close to unbearable during the holidays, or that the spate of residential construction and hodgepodge road redesigns in the last 5 years only contributed to the problem. Town Center is teetering on the brink of inaccessibility, threatening the health of our community's core and the quality of life we all share. This proposal will only make the traffic situation irreversibly worse, so much so, in fact, that it will have spillover affects throughout the Town Center and the surrounding villages. And, along that line, Section B states:

B. The location and adequacy of public utility and community facilities, including recreational uses and school properties, in relation to the density and distribution of population.

"There are a variety of existing community facilities, such as the Columbia Mall, The Howard County Library, Symphony Woods, and Lake Kittamaquidi that are in close proximity to this site and would not be overwhelmed by development of this site, either commercially or residentially.

In this case, the Technical Staff Report got it completely wrong. It's not the library's—or any other facility's—structural capacity that we need to be worried about, rather its capacity to exist in an increasingly hostile context. The Central Library is already stressed, and any new development on the Crescent, regardless of its final manifestation, will only exacerbate the situation. The library's problem—indeed the problem facing other community facilities in Downtown—is not that it is overwhelmed with new patrons; the problem is that it has become inaccessible to current ones. In addition to many of its parking spaces being used illegally, the traffic and frustration of navigating Town Center keep many would-be library visitors away. This may sound like hyperbole, but Branch Manager Ann Gilligan stated these facts publicly at the County Council's hearing on New Town Zoning in September. What type of community have we created when people can't even get to the library?

However, the library is only the beginning. Town Center is a focal point in our county, and accordingly is the location of many of our most precious community

resources. As residents begin to view Town Center as an unwelcoming, stressful environment, those public resources and facilities that we all share and value will fade from significance, a telling indication of the state of our community.

Finally, though I am aware that this proposal does not specifically deal with MPP, one must bear in mind that the pavilion, in whatever shape it ultimately takes, is a community resource and that this proposal will have detrimental effects on its ability to function as such. Considering its role in the community and status among residents, the impact of any adjacent development on Merriweather must be considered. By completely ignoring its presence, this proposal's credibility is significantly diminished. Shouldn't the impacts on all neighboring parcels be considered? If not, we're doing a poor job of stewarding our community.

C. The location, extent and potential use of open space in the form of greenbelts, walkways, parkways, parkland, etc. as it effects the general amenity of the community.

The proposed walkway system in this plan is woefully inadequate, and does nothing to address the larger issues of pedestrian access within Town Center. Regardless of the number of pathways and "safe zones" that are created, how accessible is the property really going to be when pedestrians are left facing the scary proposition of crossing what are, in essence, six-lane divided highways running through town center? Given the current inaccessibility of our downtown for pedestrians, creating more of the same—that is, big buildings separated by a sea of sprawling parking lots—only aggravates the situation. What we really need is a pedestrian study, similar to a traffic study, detailing existing deficiencies in our walkway system and recommending solutions to overcome these problems. The success of Town Center depends on pedestrian access, and thus it should be as important as car access.

D. The impact of the proposed commercial and industrial uses on the residential uses within the New Town District or adjacent thereto.

a. The petitioner has not indicated what the ultimate development uses will be, although the APFO traffic study indicates that the tentative development will be for a mixture of office and retail uses. In that case, the impact of the commercial development on vicinal residential development would be minimal since the closest existing residences are located on the west side of Broken Land Parkway and do not adjoin this site.

I have had tremendous difficulty understanding this one. Surely, a retail/commercial development on the Crescent will affect neighbors, regardless of whether their home is separated from this parcel by a road. Negative spillovers, or externalities, do not know property lines. Lights from the parking lots, noise from increased car and truck traffic, more litter, and possibly an increase in localized air pollution could result from this proposal and all of these would cross Broken Land Parkway into the homes and lives of nearby residents. The cursory analysis on this matter in the Technical Staff Report is misleading and shows a disregard for the myriad problems residents will likely face. For instance, the staff report claims, "the minimal impact of any proposed commercial development/uses on the subject property on nearby residential areas should be viewed as acceptable." Acceptable to whom? The residents?

Have they been asked? Many of them have signed up in opposition to this proposal.

Aside from these residential impacts, this development could have a dramatic impact on the anchors of our neighborhoods, the Village Centers. We have already seen that a failing village center can lead to similar declines in its surrounding neighborhood. However, without more specifics on the potential uses of this site, I cannot say for sure how it will affect our Village Centers, but neither can anyone else. If there is a redundant use in this development, such as a grocery store, we may see people shift their shopping needs away from the Village Centers, starving our local businesses. With the potential for such a grave disruption of the foundation of our community, shouldn't we proceed prudently on this matter, with a greater understanding of its wide reaching impacts?

While I have tried keep my comments germane to the criteria you must use in your decision, I believe that this type of evaluation process is deeply flawed, at least as it relates to this project. By strictly adhering to these guidelines, any attempt at a comprehensive evaluation of this proposal will fall well short of its intended goal. These are artificial distinctions that compartmentalize the impacts of this development, thereby painting a false picture of the overall affects of the Crescent development on the lives and businesses of current Columbians. And though I am fully aware of the legal restrictions this board faces in making its decision, I still believe that a ruling based solely on these guidelines will fail to truly benefit any interested party.

That said, I do not envy the members of this board. Thus far, this case has been a source of frustration for almost everyone involved, and often this frustration seems to have manifested itself as misguided hostility. Yet, despite the entrenched divisions among the many interested parties in this room, the ostensible source of our frustration (or at least mine) is a zoning process that is patently out of touch with the community. Thankfully, the County Council has begun to address this matter, but their effort will likely take more time than this current case will allow. It is unfortunate that such an important decision regarding the fate of our community will be made under such antagonistic conditions, but I trust that this board, which has for the most part shown admirable composure during this case, will make the correct one.

With the County Council considering significant changes to New Town Zoning, the possible creation of a comprehensive Master Plan for Town Center, and the undecided fate of Merriweather, there is simply too much unknown about the future of Columbia and this property to move forward with such a significant project. I understand the desire of General Growth to develop this very valuable property, but they've already waited more than 30 years. What's a couple more months? This is not a zero sum situation. Development of the Crescent can benefit residents and GGP without either group ending up as "losers." Given the vast uncertainties and evolving nature of the Town Center situation, doesn't it make sense to let some of the ancillary issues settle themselves before moving forward with a project that will profoundly alter our county's urban core? I urge you to reject this proposal. Thank you.