

Good evening, members of the council, and thank you for the opportunity to address you this evening. I represent Save Merriweather, a grassroots organization comprised simply of music lovers who wish to ensure the vitality and longevity of Merriweather Post Pavilion. Our initial concern when we first began the organization was to, as the name suggests, save Merriweather. However, as we have uncovered more details and layers of the proposed increase in residential density, we as a group have become concerned with the proposal as a whole, beyond its impact on Merriweather Post Pavilion.

My group and I are deeply concerned about the vagueness and ambiguity of this proposal and the materials submitted to support it. We believe HRD's petition relies on dubious justifications for the 1600 proposed downtown units, and the recently submitted Economic Impact Study did little to clarify or even reasonably support HRD's proposal. The study, performed by Tischler & Associates, has numerous flaws in its methodology and relies upon assumptions that severely diminish its credibility.

First, the study is based on economic assumptions and projections provided by HRD, which seems to be a conflict of interest. By his own admission, Mr. Tischler did not seek to verify the projections and estimates provided by HRD, except in a few isolated cases where he stated that the county "validated" his methodology – a process, I might add, that is unclear in itself. Without independent verification of the base data, the entire study is suspect.

The assumption of a pupil generation rate of .0826 students per proposed unit is far too low. While Mr. Tischler testified that he obtained validation on this rate from the public school system, in fact all that the school system validated was the rate for the existing properties HRD claimed were comparable to the proposed units. All this establishes is a base reference; a forecasted rate needs to be based on more factors, especially since the cited properties do not, in fact, fairly represent the actual composition of residents that would exist as a result of HRD's proposed development.

The bottom line is that many of the most important assumptions in the Tischler study, such as those related to number of students generated, amount of tax revenue forecasted, and supposed insignificance of social and infrastructural impact are skewed and do not paint an accurate picture of what will happen to Columbia if HRD's petition in its current form is granted. The costs will be much higher, the revenues will be lower and the quality of life for Columbia's residents will be negatively impacted forever.

Many of the justifications used in the HRD petition to establish the need for and benefits of increased density are weak at best. For instance, the purported need for more downtown residents to support development of cultural amenities is simply nonexistent. The original vision for a vibrant downtown district describes a community where residents seeking an urban setting can live, work and enjoy cultural activities within walking distance of their homes. The General Plan often suggests utilizing mixed use developments with retail and commercial spaces below apartments or condominiums. However, the proposed development will not utilize such mixed use guidelines, and instead we are to assume will likely resemble the new non-distinct, cookie cutter type housing already in place throughout Columbia's town center.

Additionally, the contention that Columbia needs more residents to support a downtown cultural center is also flawed. Columbia, if incorporated, would be the second largest city in the state of Maryland, at almost 100,000 residents. If a community of this size is not large enough to support cultural and retail amenities in its town center, adding a few thousand more residents is unlikely, as HRD claims in the proposal, to result in the "critical mass necessary to fully utilize existing retail, restaurants and cultural offerings." On that same note, we would be interested in studying the economic research upon which HRD bases the claim that these offerings are currently underutilized. To the perhaps untrained eye, it appears that the crowds at the mall, restaurants and other commercial offerings in downtown are growing ever larger.

HRD's assertion, on page 5 of the petition, that "such additional residential housing will provide more opportunity for Columbians to live

close to their employment, thus reducing vehicular trips” is incorrect; history and common sense tell us that more people means more traffic and more congestion. Despite James Rouse’s best intentions, Columbia has never evolved into a pedestrian community and it is highly unlikely that the addition of 1,600 new residential units in Town Center will change our “car” culture. What’s more, the area of proposed development is quite a distance from the actual “downtown,” lakefront portion of Town Center and it is unlikely many residents will wish to make the long walk along or across major roads, or on wooded paths especially at night.

As to proximity of employment, the bulk of the new residents intended to occupy the proposed market rate and senior units will likely not work in the adjacent retail or restaurant spaces as market rate residents will require much more lucrative employment to afford their housing. After all, not many people working restaurant or retail jobs can afford \$322,000 the cost for the average Howard County home. What’s more, those living in senior housing will be retired and thus unemployed.

Under the Economic Impact Study’s Scenario 3, which provides for the most affordable housing, only 278 residents (those living in the 10% allocated affordable units), would be likely to seek employment within walking distance of the proposed space. Even if all 278 walk to work, the net result is still an increase in traffic, pollution, and hassle as a result of the proposed increase in residential density. Claiming otherwise and citing a reduction in vehicle trips with the additional housing units is absurd.

While there are elements of the General Plan that do lend support to an increase in available residential units in downtown Columbia, there are also elements of the plan that run contrary to this request and its likely outcomes. For instance, in Chapter 5 of the General Plan, which discusses redevelopment and revitalization within existing communities, Vision 4 states, “our communities will be livable, safe and distinctive.” Yet another collection of mid- to high-rise residential units hardly moves Columbia toward realization of this vision.

As The Rouse Company website states, “From its inception, Columbia was seen in terms of human values, **not just in terms of economics and engineering**. But even more, Columbia was built on the premise that a community could foster a true coming together for all of its residents.” We would like to hear how HRD finds congruence between this vision and the petition at issue.

Understanding that the fate of Merriweather Post Pavilion is not technically the issue at hand here, I will briefly say only that **the inevitable closure of Merriweather Post Pavilion would certainly run counter to this and other aspects of the General Plan, Zoning regulations, and original vision of Columbia, as it would be taking a cultural attraction and local historical landmark away from the community.**

Moreover, we are not at all pleased with having to take HRD on their “good word” that MPP will be “transformed” into some type of year round venue for cultural and arts usage. Mr. Miller’s shifty public comments on the topic of Merriweather alone indicate his intent to deflect attention and deceive the public on this issue. He publicly stated here in July HRDs commitment to transform MPP into a smaller, enclosed theater, but by Mr. Miller’s own admission there are no plans in process for this. We fear that TRC & HRD will not keep this promise, and instead will plead poverty and close the venue entirely.

After all it was Mr. Miller’s assertion that if a venture is not financially viable, then TRC would be uninterested in pursuing it as it would not make good financial sense. His testimony that operating MPP is akin to trying to sell ice-cubes in the winter clearly illustrates HRD’s opinion of MPP’s current viability.

In closing, we urge the Zoning Board to reject the HRD petition. The remaining undeveloped land in Town Center, especially the crescent surrounding MPP, is the final and most important piece in the Columbia puzzle. The petition’s ambiguity and lack of firm planning leaves far too much open to HRD’s own interpretation. If passed, it will remove a significant amount of control and input from the community and place it

in the hands of developers uninterested in Rouse's original vision of making Columbia a better place to work and live. While we agree that some measure of flexibility must be provided for in any long-range development and planning process, the carte blanche HRD is requesting goes beyond standard business and development practice and gives little or no opportunity for input from the people affected most by HRD's proposal. We, as residents, should be an integral part of determining the future of Columbia.

Finally, Save MPP would like to note its strong disagreement with HRD's assertion that the NT Zoning process is still a good fit for Columbia in its now nearly mature state. We recognize the benefits NT zoning has brought to Howard County; the latitude the process provided TRC and HRD was necessary to develop this area when there was little more here than corn fields. Now that development is nearly completed, the rules and regulations that govern NT zoning need to be revisited and adjusted to achieve harmony with Columbia as it approaches completion. We hope that, as Mr. Rakes suggested, the Zoning Council will re examine the entire zoning process currently governing the NT district and make the changes needed to limit the control it places in the hands of developers who it seems are more interested in cashing in than in bettering Columbia and Howard county.