

Action Committee for Transit

PO BOX 7074, SILVER SPRING MD 20910

October 28, 2007

Mrs. Marilyn Praisner
President, Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave.
Rockville, MD 20850

Subject: Glenmont Metrocenter, Amendment Nos. G-862 and G-863

Dear Mrs. Praisner:

The Action Committee for Transit reiterates its support of the proposed Glenmont Metrocenter mixed-use development. We urge the Council to approve zoning applications G-862 and G-863 without further delay. If the Council schedules oral argument on this matter, we request the right to participate, and ask to present oral testimony if a hearing is held.

The Hearing Examiner concluded on pp. 82-83 that the zoning applications satisfy the LATR requirements of the county's growth policy, but recommended that the applications be remanded to allow for additional evidence about traffic. The premise of this recommendation is that allowable increase in the amount of traffic on nearby roads should be less than what is specified in the county's LATR criteria; the Planning Board and its staff had found that the application satisfied the requirements for a traffic study and met the LATR criteria.

Acceptance of the Examiner's recommendations would shift the county's growth policy away from smart growth and toward sprawl. The transportation test in the growth policy does not exist in a vacuum. The county's Growth Policy reflects difficult trade-offs. Wider intersections are more convenient for cars but less so for pedestrians. Traffic congestion in the immediate vicinity is reduced, but it is worsened in the rest of the county because commuters' incentives shift away from transit and toward driving. The Council has struggled with these trade-offs over the years, and it continues to struggle with them this year in its Growth Policy debate. Our organization indeed feels that change is needed in our Growth Policy, but in the opposite direction from what the Hearing Examiner has recommended — toward roads that meet the needs of pedestrians and not just automobiles, and toward smart growth rather than sprawl. In any case, policy changes should be made when the rules are changed, not in the context of a single zoning case.

The text of the decision shows that the Hearing Examiner failed to consider the needs of all elements of the community. She writes on p. 81 that

[Non-roadway] improvements are important, and would undoubtedly be beneficial to pedestrians and transit users... but nonetheless, the question of whether the net result for the community would be a benefit or an adverse impact has not been explored. It may be that non-roadway improvements would draw people out of their cars and onto transit, taking enough trips off the roads to offset the traffic impact of the new units, but the Applicant did not submit any evidence to that effect.

The Examiner here excludes pedestrians and transit users from the community for whose benefit the county's land-use regulation system operates. She considers pedestrian and transit improvements to be a benefit only to the extent that they remove cars from the road and thus help drivers to move faster. This premise violates the most basic principles of fairness and is utterly unacceptable to the county's transit riders.

It was for the purpose of creating a balanced transportation system rather than relying exclusively on automobile commuting that the Council allowed developers to take credit for non-roadway improvements in LATR analyses. The Examiner's driver-only analysis would reverse this policy decision. And the Examiner goes further by denying the applicant credit for those transit and pedestrian improvements that do not lead to individually quantifiable traffic reductions. Altering the hostile pedestrian environment that currently exists in areas like Glenmont is essential to increasing transit ridership, but the direct impact of individual changes like sidewalk widenings is impossible to assess.

Whether the letter of the law is to be followed, or broader transportation issues deserve consideration, the Glenmont Metrocenter project deserves approval. Under current rules, the Hearing Examiner states that the project meets all requirements. In the broader view, traffic congestion is not limited to a few isolated intersections; it is a county-wide and regional problem that can only be solved with more Smart Growth projects like this one.

The Hearing Examiner's report reflects outdated automobile-centric thinking of the kind that has gotten us into the current traffic mess. The Council and our Growth Policy have moved beyond this thinking long ago. We believe the Council should approve Glenmont Metrocenter now and make the changes that are indeed needed in how we link transportation and development by altering the rules rather than in the context of an individual project approval.

Sincerely,

Ben Ross
Vice President