

Action Committee for Transit

www.actfortransit.org

P.O. Box 7074, Silver Spring, MD 20907

November 10, 2008

Mr. Royce Hanson, Chair
Montgomery County Planning Board
8787 Georgia Ave.
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Subject: Case No. G-877

Dear Mr. Hanson:

The Kensington Heights – Outlot B (Case Number: G-877) project submitted by the Lessard Group, Inc. fulfills two important missions – development of walkable environments around Metro stations and affordable housing – at the same time. The Action Committee for Transit urges the Montgomery County Planning Board to approve this development proposal.

The interaction of supply and demand is the most fundamental relationship that sets prices in any market. One reason why housing prices in Montgomery County remain unaffordable for many middle-income workers is the simple fact that the housing stock has not kept up with job creation and consequently housing demand during the past two decades. At the macroscopic level, the addition of more housing units will meet a part of this latent demand, therefore making housing less scarce, and consequently edging prices downwards towards affordability. Also, under the RT-10 zone the inclusion of Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDU's) in the new community will be required. If the developer is forced to develop fewer units under RT-6 zoning, not only will there be fewer houses added to the housing stock, there will also not be a requirement for the construction of MPDU's.

In addition to adding needed market priced units and MPDU's to the county's housing stock, this project is also appropriate to the current (1990) Wheaton Sector Plan. It follows the precedent set elsewhere in the Wheaton CBD with townhouses located as a transition between the commercial CBD and the areas of single-family house uses. When one emerges from the Metro station and walks north on Grandview Avenue, they see that there are currently townhouses across from the firehouse at the edge of the CBD. Similarly, if one walks east on University Boulevard from Georgia Avenue, one passes a townhouse community before they get to the Wheaton Woods section of single-family houses.

It is important to note that the land of case G-877 is located in a transit-rich environment. University Boulevard between Westfield Wheaton and the Kensington Heights single-family houses is served by both the L7 Metrobus route the 34 RideOn route. The 34 RideOn runs all day long, seven days a week between Wheaton and Friendship Heights, serving the Medical Center and Bethesda Metro station along its route. Most importantly, the project site is approximately a ten minute walk from the Wheaton Metro station. It is hard to find another empty site in the county that enjoys such a transit-rich location. Letting such an opportunity go to waste would be against the Smart Growth initiatives of our county, and our state.

Effective mass transit requires intelligent land use management. Case G-877 proposes to put 36 townhouse units in a location that is already convenient to transit. The future residents of the community will be far more likely to take advantage of the rich transit surrounding them. Also, residents who can conveniently walk to local businesses in the Wheaton CBD are far more likely to support Wheaton's ongoing revitalization with their hard-earned dollars. Each trip on transit or foot means one less car trip. Each car trip not taken means less air pollution, less global warming, less dependence on foreign oil, and less traffic on the county's roads. As time goes on, and gasoline prices resume their stratospheric climb, running errands without using the car will only get more attractive. Being free of rising gasoline prices, and all associated automotive costs only makes the housing even more affordable, in aggregate.

Finally, this proposal addresses concerns related to being able to sell housing in the economy of today, and the expected economy of the next couple of years. Housing values in transit-oriented walkable urban places in the county, such as Bethesda and Silver Spring, have retained their value, despite the popping of the real estate bubble, which led to the current overall sluggish housing sector. Case G-877 will exhibit market behavior similar to Silver Spring and Bethesda. The 2800 block of University Boulevard has a walk score of 94 out of 100 (www.walkscore.com is an online algorithm that approximates walkability by looking for amenities within walking distance of an address. The more things that are in walking distance, the more urban the area, and the more likely a resident elects to walk. Neighborhoods with a score of 90-100 are among the most walkable in the U.S.). For comparison, the 7500 block of Wisconsin Avenue in downtown Bethesda (next to the Metro station) has a walk score of 98 out of 100.

The Action Committee for Transit strongly encourages the Planning Board to approve Case G-877. This proposal meets the county's commitment so Smart Growth, fits the existing character of its environment, encourages mass transit, encourages walking, boosts local businesses, contributes to the county's affordable housing initiatives, and takes into account the practical realities of the economy both simultaneously and effectively.

Sincerely,

Ben Ross
President

cc: Francoise Carrier
Martin Grossman
Martin Klauber