

Action Committee for Transit

www.actfortransit.org

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

April 28, 2009

Mr. Phil Andrews
President, Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave.
Rockville, MD 20850

Subject: Wheaton Library

Dear Mr. Andrews:

The draft Wheaton Sector Plan currently includes provisions to build a new library in downtown Wheaton. The new library would replace the current Wheaton library which, oddly, is not in downtown Wheaton. Rather, it is north of the Wheaton CBD, on the corner of Arcola Avenue and Georgia Avenue. Although the current library is a fifteen minute walk north of the Wheaton Metro, its automobile-oriented configuration and automobile-oriented place discourage walking. Moving the library to a more transit-rich, centrally located site in downtown Wheaton would improve both the accessibility of the library and the social and economic vitality of the existing downtown. It would also be in line with Smart Growth policies of Montgomery County and the state of Maryland. The other pedestrian-oriented downtowns in Montgomery County such as Bethesda, Silver Spring, Rockville, and Takoma Park (whose library is not a part of the county system) have libraries at pedestrian-friendly Metro-accessible locations within their downtowns.

The area around the current Wheaton library is very suburban and hostile to pedestrians. It is located beyond the point where the downtown ends and fades into a single-use car-dependent environment. Cars travel faster on Georgia Avenue there than in Wheaton proper. It's challenging and dangerous to cross Georgia Avenue at Arcola Avenue due to the volume of traffic, lack of pedestrian traffic to warn motorists to be vigilant, and awkward traffic signals that leave too little time to cross streets. The main entrance of the library opens up to the parking lot, which is behind the building, away from the sidewalk. The secondary entrance does not open up to the narrow sidewalk on Georgia Avenue, either. Rather, it is behind some bushes and a drop-off/pick-up driveway for cars. It was constructed in 1962, remodeled in 1985, and designed to be by the car, of the car, and for the car, like most buildings built during those time periods.

The inaccessibility of the current library is illustrated by the experience of one of our active members who lives north of downtown Wheaton, on Dawson Avenue. His home is much closer to the library than to the CBD. He walks frequently into downtown Wheaton where he can run multiple errands, such as trips to the grocery store, coffee shop, cleaners, mall, and the Metro station. Yet he has entered the library in the past six months only to pick up tax forms. He feels safer walking in the CBD than near the

library because the blocks are short and the cars drive at 25 miles per hour.

For Wheaton to live up to its potential as a vibrant economic and cultural center, it needs a mix of uses. Its current zoning allows single story, single-use retail. Earlier this decade, new townhouses were built on the periphery of the downtown. More recently, new apartments opened up on top of the Metro. But downtown Wheaton still lacks a center of public life. A library would create that activity center. Foot traffic would increase, bringing new customers to the small businesses in the downtown, and making the neighborhood safer by putting more "eyes on the street." The more "eyes on the street" the greater the deterrent to would-be troublemakers.

Wheaton is very fortunate to have a Metro station directly underneath it. With great privilege comes great responsibility. An important civic place like a library should be situated in a place where as much of the community as possible can use it and celebrate it. When the very location of the public structure will also breathe more vitality into an already functioning downtown/CBD, it is the responsibility of the community to embrace change for the common good. It is silly that the current Wheaton library serves a certain constituency, motorists, at the expense of everyone else. A library located in downtown Wheaton, rather than in its car-dependent fringes, would better serve all constituencies, including motorists.

Sincerely,

Ben Ross
President