

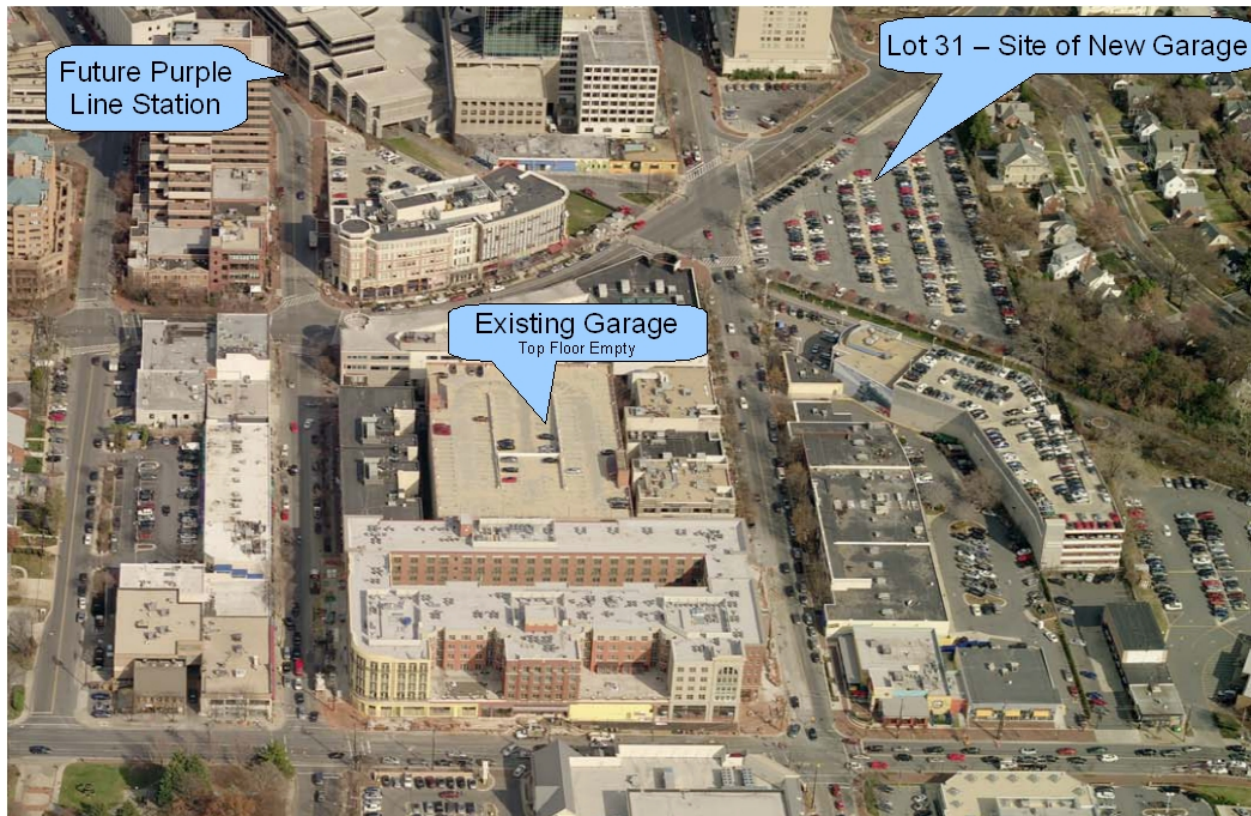
For Immediate Release
Monday Morning, November 30, 2009

Last Chance to Stop \$89 Million Garage Boondoggle

Montgomery County -- in the face of a \$500 million budget gap -- is moving forward with plans to waste some \$80 million on overpriced Bethesda parking spaces, many of them sure to sit empty. The Action Committee for Transit and Montgomery County Group of the Sierra Club joined today in calling for the project to be drastically scaled back.

Under current plans, the county will spend \$89 million to dig seven stories into the earth beneath a planned mixed-use development across the street from Barnes & Noble in Bethesda. The 1100-car public garage, buried under two floors of private parking for the new development, will cost some \$80,000 per parking space. Because it will be so deep, the cost is more than double what is usual for underground parking.

Yet many of these expensive new parking spaces will almost surely sit unused - like the empty lower level of the new public parking garage in Columbia Heights. Although the county Parking Division contended, when it won approval for the project, that the surrounding area was hundreds of spaces short of daytime parking even before the new stores on Bethesda Lane opened last year, the Parking Division's own aerial photo taken late last year shows an empty top floor in the public garage across the street:



To come up with the size of the garage, the Parking Division assumed that 74% of Bethesda employees drive to work and need to park. Currently, this number is less than 70%; under the county Master Plan it is scheduled to decline to less than 63%. And the planned Purple Line station just a few hundred feet from the garage site will reduce demand for parking even more.

Ben Ross, president of the Action Committee for Transit, pointed out another danger -- that the garage could endanger state funding of other transportation projects. The Georgia Avenue & Randolph Road underpass, for example, has about the same price tag. If the state pays for the underpass, and this leaves the county with money to build the garage, other counties will argue that the state in effect is paying for the garage.

Ross observed that just in the city of Cumberland, there are [93 houses for sale](#) for less than the price of one of the planned Bethesda parking spaces. "Cumberland residents will surely wonder why they should pay for parking spaces in Bethesda that cost more than their own house," he said. "What will happen the next time Montgomery County asks for state funding of a transportation project?"

ACT and the county Sierra Club call for the garage to be cut back to a single level of public parking, in addition to the two levels of private parking planned for the new development. Under current plans, the 300 spaces in the existing parking lot would be replaced with 1,100 taxpayer-subsidized parking spaces in a seven-story-deep underground garage, plus 300 more spaces paid for by the developer, for a total of 1,400 spaces.

"When vital public services are being cut, we shouldn't waste millions of dollars to pay for parking that will only be used on Friday and Saturday nights, if it is used at all," commented David Hauck, chair of the county Sierra Club. At a time when county employees are giving up promised salary increases, he said, subsidized parking for luxury restaurants is a frill we can't afford.

Utility relocation to prepare for the project started last week, but actual construction is [not scheduled to begin until the Spring of 2011](#). Once the underground work is completed, stores and condos will be built above the garage. Once they are finished, remarked ACT secretary Tracey Johnstone who lives nearby, the new buildings will be a big improvement over the asphalt that now occupies the lot, but the construction period will be hard for nearby stores and residents. An additional advantage of a smaller garage is that construction will go faster.

The high cost of the garage means that even in the improbable event that the garage fills up, parking fees will not cover the cost of construction and the garage will need subsidies. At 80 cents per hour, the average cost of public parking in Bethesda today, and 80% occupancy between 10 am and 10 pm weekdays, the annual revenue from each parking space would be \$1600. That is not enough even to cover the interest on the construction bonds.

-end-