

White Flint Sector Plan Hearing Testimony  
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Both Montgomery County and Maryland have explicit Smart Growth policies. The updated White Flint Sector Plan is an immediate example of Smart Growth. We have a chance to make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of future Montgomery County residents. The county and state adopted Smart Growth policies because the negative unintended consequences of the development patterns of previous decades were becoming increasingly apparent. Pollution from automobile emissions increased while families had less time together because they spent more and more time in automobile traffic. Precious undeveloped woods and farmland was paved over at increasingly rapid rates. Governments faced larger and larger costs to build and repair roads. Smart Growth addresses all those problems. Montgomery County is blessed to have two Metro lines. These present golden opportunities to build human-scale towns and turn back the tide of traffic, pollution, and loss of undeveloped land. The current landowners surrounding the White Flint Metro have embraced a new vision to create a more environmentally and economically sustainable future for Rockville Pike, Montgomery County, and the state of Maryland. The updated White Flint Sector Plan presents a profound opportunity to embrace Smart Growth through actions rather than just words.

The Rockville Pike corridor in the White Flint Sector Plan is currently an ugly mess of an edge city. Like Tysons Corner in neighboring Fairfax County, Virginia, it has too much density to be truly car friendly, but lacks the human-scale street grid that is intrinsic to pedestrian-friendly places like Bethesda, Silver Spring, Wheaton, and downtown Rockville (Rockville Town Center). The corridor is bisected by a six lane road with speed limits that are too high to be safe for pedestrians. The irony is that unlike Tysons, Rockville Pike already has a Metro line—the busiest line in the Metro system, the Red Line.

In order to have an attractive traditional walkable downtown environment like in Bethesda, the current wide roads with blocks that are too large for walking need to be modified into smaller, human-scaled blocks. The updated White Flint Sector Plan, including the Glatting-Jackson street grid proposal, would turn the road infrastructure into a human-scale walkable grid (although with some curvy blocks). In order to further foster a safe, attractive, and compelling environment for pedestrians, lanes on new streets should be 10 or 11 feet wide. Lanes that are 12 feet encourage excessive speeding because motorists perceive that they are driving on a highway rather than in a town environment. Furthermore, on-street parking is essential at all hours. On-street parking will simultaneously provide a psychological buffer between the pedestrian on the sidewalk and car traffic, and provide additional on-street activity for local storefronts. Motorists would be far more likely to stop at a retail store for an “impulse purchase” if they see a parking spot out front than if they have to rethink the whole scenario and park at an uninviting concrete garage in a less convenient location.

Of course, plans for a walkable place must address concerns from the auto-centric viewpoint of traffic and parking. Traffic studies predict that there will actually be larger

throughput for cars on a decentralized street grid because there will be fewer car trips taken for local needs. For instance, someone who lives in one of the apartments/townhouses will walk to the corner store rather than taking up space on the road. Someone driving from one shopping center to another can take a side street instead of the Pike. And through traffic can take alternate routes around any blockages on the road. Our experience with Bethesda (I'm not counting Silver Spring and Wheaton here because they were both originally built for walkability), and North Arlington has shown there is little net effects on traffic in the long term with suburban-to-walkable retrofits. Neighboring Arlington County, Virginia has experienced no increase in traffic congestion on Wilson Boulevard since the 1970's, despite the existence of human-scale walkable development and a Metro line that did not exist then.

For the property owners, a suburban-to-urban retrofit is an excellent project. They would no longer have to pay taxes on land in their strip malls that is dedicated to large non-revenue generating surface parking lots, and will be able to collect more rent in the denser walkable urban environment.

The land around the White Flint Metro station is incredibly valuable. Even in the current recessionary national economic climate, our region is one of the few in the United States that is still projected to gain jobs in the coming decades. The free fall of housing values in the exurbs implies that the marketplace no longer regards such properties as highly as in previous decades. The fact that housing closer to the Beltway in a transit-proximate location has retained its value while other housing has fallen over the last two years shows that the market currently greatly values the transit-oriented arrangement over the car-dependent subdivision. The only way to make this highly sought-after housing more affordable is to build more of it. The updated White Flint Sector Plan, by allowing more housing units, will address the economic and moral imperatives of affordable housing by increasing the supply.

Since our county will gain jobs, we will need more housing. We can either build it on top of what is currently asphalt next to a Metro station, or we can build it upcounty. The latter will greatly increase car congestion on our roadways. By building housing far away in a car-dependent place, we will force our new residents to burn more fossil fuels and contribute to climate change. The new subdivisions will be built on top of what used to be undeveloped wooded areas. The runoff from the lawn fertilizers and new asphalt will further deteriorate the water quality of the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay. By leveraging its proximity to existing fixed rail infrastructure the updated White Flint Sector Plan will prevent greenhouse emissions, destruction of undeveloped wooded land, and prevent an increase in runoff from new impermeable surfaces.

The Sector Plan also represents a shift in thinking about how to plan for BRAC. While hosting the National Institutes of Health and the Navy Medical Center create planning challenges for the county, they also provide large numbers of jobs. More new residents will move to Montgomery County as those facilities grow. In previous decades, planners would widen the existing roads, build more roads at the rural fringes of the county, then approve more subdivisions. More undeveloped land gets paid over, more impermeable surfaces are created, more animals lose their habitat, and our nation spends even more money on gasoline.

The updated White Flint Sector Plan represents a break from previous decades. Rather than building more roads, the sector plan would support more housing within walking distance of a Metro

station just a few stops from Medical Center. While more tax-paying residents help the County financially, the vision also helps new residents by not requiring the new residents to spend income purchasing, maintaining, and fueling up personal automobiles. Spending a significant chunk of one's hard-earned money on an automobile will be a personal choice rather than a necessity.

Montgomery County is facing similar challenges to those Arlington County faced forty years ago. Arlington fought so hard to use the Orange Line as a planning tool because it was running out of undeveloped land within its borders. If an urbanized jurisdiction can't grow, it can't expand its tax base. If it can't expand its tax base, it faces insolvency in the long term. Since Arlington County couldn't grow out anymore, it had to grow up in selected places. Due to its larger geographic size, it has taken more time for Montgomery County to run out of undeveloped land. It would be prudent for the county to learn the same lesson its smaller neighbor already learned about human-scale walkable traditional town infill development.

Not only would the updated White Flint Sector Plan provide conditions for a more environmentally sustainable living arrangement for thousands of future Montgomery County residents, it will improve the county's fiscal situation in both the short and long term. By establishing a human-scale traditional walkable town environment and planting the seeds it to achieve an economically self-sustaining condition, the county will have an attractive place to focus long-term growth.

Addendum: A Potential Financing Method for Rebuilding of Rockville Pike

1. Add the White Flint MSPA to the territory of the Bethesda Parking District.
2. Resize the planned underground public parking garage in the Lot 31 mixed use development to a single level, sufficient to replace the existing surface parking. This will reduce the garage cost by approximately \$60 to \$70 million.
3. Immediately rebuild Rockville Pike in the White Flint area to the Glatting-Jackson cross-section. Fund construction with Parking District surplus revenues, the excess of the sale price of Lot 31 over the construction cost of a one-level garage, and bonds issued by the Parking District. (Pedestrian and streetscape improvements are a permitted use of Parking District funds under current county ordinances.)
4. Collect a temporary tax on all commercial property in the White Flint MSPA regardless of how much parking they have. This revenue would be paid to the Parking District in addition to the permanent parking tax, which would continue to be imposed on buildings with limited parking in both downtown Bethesda and White Flint MPSA's. In concept, this tax serves the same purpose as a synagogue's building fund assessment or a country club's initiation fee - you are joining a club that has substantial capital assets, and in fairness you have an obligation to match the contributions made over the years by earlier members.
5. Use funds from the temporary tax to repay bonds issued to rebuild Rockville Pike. These funds could potentially be supplemented with either revenue from property tax increments from new development or impact tax revenues. Discontinue temporary tax when aggregate revenues cover cost of Master Plan street improvements paid by the parking district (including interest).
6. Provide public parking in the White Flint area, built and operated by the expanded Parking District on a break-even basis. Reduce parking tax as the White Flint area matures and Parking District revenues grow to cover operations, maintenance, and debt service.