



June 14, 2012

The Honorable Mary Hynes
Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Subject: Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan

Dear Madame Chair:

At its meeting of April 26, 2012, the Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) was briefed on the Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan and reviewed the April 6, 2012, draft of the plan. The Commission is pleased to see the emphasis on green space and trees in the plan. There are references to “tree-lined streetscapes,” trees are identified as an element of “complete streets,” and they are featured prominently in illustrations of streetscapes and public areas. Our specific comments on the Plan follow.

Page 1.8: Please add a reference to providing the five-lane street section of Columbia Pike with a double row of trees, where feasible, as shown in the illustrations.

Page 1.9: In the section on Neighborhood Plan Goals and Objectives, under the heading Tree Canopy, goals are:

d) Identify “specimen” or “significant” trees and seek to preserve them during redevelopment and/or renovation projects.

e) Preserve and expand the existing tree canopy, with particular attention given to cultivating a diverse species mix.

The UFC endorses these goals. We note, however, that preserving and expanding tree canopy will require optimal planting conditions for street trees and increased efforts to promote tree planting on private property to compensate for trees lost to future development.

Page 1.9: One of the goals under the heading Open Space is:

i) Preserve existing parks, woodland areas, and public space within the Columbia Pike study area and identify opportunities for expansion.

The plan should mention that a survey conducted by the contractor AECOM indicated that area residents attach a high priority to the preservation of existing natural areas.

Page 3.17: Please add language that describes the character of the proposed park such as, “Achieve a natural woodland character with native species.”

Page 3.27: We urge you to delete Figure 5. This detail showing the placement of a street tree in front of the curb face is not acceptable, because the tree would be damaged routinely by vehicles. The County might also face liability issues from placing an obstacle in the roadway. Alternatively, a replacement figure with reconfigured tree cells with a greater soil volume could be placed here.

Page 3.28: We urge you to delete the present text of Note D and replace it with the following: “Those trees would act as visual obstacles to drivers, slowing cars and making the streets safer for pedestrians and cyclists.”

Page 4.34: Under the heading “Appropriate Urban Sustainable Practices,” several green techniques are listed, including: “Canopy shade trees (deciduous) along Pike neighborhood streets, squares, greens and parks to provide seasonally appropriate shade.” We recommend adding some specifics on tree planting: “Trees should be planted 30 feet apart to provide continuous shade. In addition, soil volume should be adequate to promote vigorous tree growth and longevity. In tight urban conditions, there are competing needs for space, and soil volume for trees is often compromised. Current County planting standards result in approximately 450 cubic feet of soil per tree when a continuous soil panel is used. Trees would benefit from increased soil volume.” In this connection, we recommend revising landscape standards to require soil volume compatible with vigorous growth and longevity of street trees and use of a soil-based planting mix, not a gravel-based, structural soil mix. We also recommend a specific statement that plazas and squares that are predominantly hardscape, with little or no shade, should be avoided.

Page 4.35: The UFC is pleased to see that statement T.2. under Transportation Policy Directives includes street trees as part of the “complete streets” definition. It is important to recognize that trees make major contributions to achieving complete streets.

Page 4.36: The Columbia Pike street section shows a double row of trees, but without sufficient space for the second row. With only 10 feet of dooryard space, a row of trees would be planted about 5 feet from the building face. The section should provide 15 feet of dooryard space instead. That would allow the second row of trees to be planted 10 feet from the building and 5 feet from the sidewalk, framing the sidewalk. If the dooryard cannot be expanded beyond 10 feet, it should be made clear that only smaller species should be planted closest to buildings. The section should also indicate the width of the tree-planted median, which should be 8-10 feet. In addition, the street section shows a width of 8 feet for the tree panel closer to the street. This would be an optimal situation for urban trees. An 8-foot tree panel would result in significant soil volume (about 720 cubic feet of soil-based planting mix per tree), sufficient to promote vigorous growth and to achieve the mature tree canopy effect.

Page 5.5: In Table 5.1, Street Element Dimensions, we urge you to show the dooryard space at 15 feet, so that the second row of trees is at least 10 feet from the building.

We commend the County staff and citizens who have developed the Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan. While we have made some suggestions for changes that could improve conditions for trees along the Pike, overall the plan does a fine job of recognizing the important role street trees play in developing vibrant streetscapes and neighborhoods.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jean F. Amel".

Dean Amel, Chair

From: <jvsnyder54@comcast.net>

Date: June 15, 2012 8:10:41 AM EDT

To: <countyboard@arlingtonva.us>

Subject: WEBSITE COMMENT: Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan -- ATTN: countyboard

The following comment has been submitted from the Arlington County Website:

Name : John Snyder

Submitter's E-Mail Address : jvsnyder54@comcast.net

Subject : WEBSITE COMMENT: Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan -- ATTN: countyboard

Comments : Dear County Board,

Please consider these comments on the Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Plan

Transportation -- 12th Street from George Mason to Glebe Road

The Douglas Park community is adamant that 12 th Street not connect through Doctors Run Park from George Mason to Quincy. It would pose to safety of children walking to school on Quincy, destroy parts of the park and woodlands, and increase traffic on 12th Street and the rest of the neighborhood. The current plan indicates that an alternative connection of 11th Street to George Mason, continuing with the planned new 11th Street will be proposed. If 11th Street is to be connected through, consideration still needs to be given to the dangers of encouraging cut through traffic by that route. Quebec, Westmont and Oakland apartments are full of families, and presumably would be in the future. 11th Street should not be allowed to become a Pike bypass.

12th Street at Glebe Road needs to be carefully considered before any plan is made to connect through to Monroe Street adjacent to the post office. There has not been any approved plan to make the connection. Concerns are impacts on 12th Street, more traffic on Monroe and Quincy (near the school), and encouraging cut-through traffic on the very narrow section of 12th Street east of Glebe Road. All the impacts of such a connection must be considered and addressed before a policy decision is made. (Connecting the new 11th Street to Monroe as shown in the Form Based Code would provide additional circulation for the frontage block on the Pike, without pushing traffic deeper into the neighborhood.) In addition, it should be noted that not making the connection of 12th to Monroe was an important commitment to the neighbors west of the post office during the post office site plan process.

Streetcar Line

This plan, and all discussions surrounding it, assume that the streetcar line will be built. Without it, the Pike and the neighborhoods simply cannot accommodate the additional

transportation needs of residents of 6000 additional apartments on the Pike projected by this plan, in addition to increased traffic from other sources outside this plan. The streetcar alternatives analysis projects that when it opens, the streetcar line will attract about 10,000 more riders per day than the current bus service. The rider and transit demand projections go up from there, but do not include the residents of the 6000 new apartments in this plan. Without high quality, high capacity transit that people will actually choose, the Pike and surrounding neighborhoods cannot add thousands more people, and thousands more cars.

Parking Ratio

The proposed parking ratio of 0.8125 per unit (0.7 per unit, plus 0.125 for visitors) for affordable apartments (instead of the typical requirement of 1.125 per unit) is inadequate. It will apply when a new project exceeds the ratio of affordable units to receive bonus density, but the plan does not say by how much the project must exceed the ratio. That must be clarified. The premise that affordable apartment complexes on Columbia Pike are over-parked and have unused capacity is flatly wrong, based on the experience in Douglas Park—including some very unpleasant experience—where we currently have more than 2000 units of affordable housing. Douglas Park and most adjacent neighborhoods already have permit parking, or are in the process of applying for it, due to overflow parking from the apartments and businesses along the Pike today. If the parking demand decreases when transit upgrades are actually built, the ratio can be re-considered. But it won't be possible to add more parking to new buildings that have already been built with too little.

The cost savings for a new project by reducing the parking ratio would be about three percent overall, assuming a parking space (underground) would be about 10% of the overall cost of an apartment unit, and no space would be required for 30% of the units. That is a small savings compared to the potential impact on the neighborhood.

Public Land

The policy statement regarding sites owned by the county should be applied county wide, if it is to be adopted. Note, however, that there is no publicly owned property on the Pike that should be converted to housing. We need our parks to be parks, and we already lack a plan to deal with school capacity issues. Converting needed land to other uses would be counterproductive. (The element of this directive regarding faith-based institutions should be dropped, as development is no more or less appropriate because the land was once owned by a faith-based institution. They should be treated like any other property owner.)

Schools

The policy statement regarding schools (UF.8 on page 4.5) is appropriate to ensure that there will be schools for the children of the families in up to 6000 new homes. But the actual plan for dealing with school capacity is missing. The NP draft states the problem—

1100 new students on the Pike over and above all other growth in student population—but does not identify any solutions. Land needs to be set aside for schools for the student population growth. School population growth on the Pike needs to be part of the APS capital budget considerations—it is not now. Presently, Arlington Public Schools is considering some sort of magnet program for one of the only open sites near the Pike (adjacent to Carlin Springs Elementary). This would not only take away one of the only open sites near the Pike, APS can also be expected to establish admission policies to restrict Pike residents from attending, instead favoring residents from more affluent neighborhoods (as it does now with several other magnet schools). All magnet schools must be available to Pike residents on an equal basis as residents of the rest of the county.

New Density and Affordability Preservation Ratio

This plan proposes major changes in density in exchange for preservation of affordable housing along the Pike. Density is not desired for its own sake, but brings rental income that can make other uses, like ground floor retail, viable. While many people along the Pike oppose additional density regardless of benefits that can come with it, the community has shown openness to density if it also brings benefits, and preservation of affordable housing is generally considered beneficial by Pike residents.

Let's be clear. Most Arlington residents oppose increasing density in their neighborhoods. Most Arlington residents oppose affordable housing in their neighborhoods. But the Pike community is generally open to the idea of adding density in their own neighborhoods for the benefit of keeping affordable housing in their own neighborhoods—and large amounts of both. If we are to add density, the payoff has to be worth it. The payoff in this draft plan—20% affordable units within the newly allowed development rights—seems too small. Requiring 20% of the units overall, both within the new and the existing development rights, seems more appropriate.

Proposed Re-Development Sites -- Quebec Apartments

Quebec Apartments were redeveloped not long ago, dedicating committed affordable units. The Douglas Park community supported that re-development, including additional density in the form of expanded apartment sizes, and the preservation of affordable housing it entailed. There is no compelling reason to change the status quo on this site. It is pleasant, historical, a good neighbor and already preserves affordable housing. The neighborhood sought not just preservation of affordable housing, but preservation of the buildings and the setting. On this site, we have already achieved the goals of the plan, so we should stop. Quebec apartments should be preserved; incentives to re-develop should be removed from the plan.

Historic Preservation

Barcroft Apartments are shown in this plan as essential for historic preservation. The community did not participate in this designation and to my knowledge, no one in the neighborhood sought it. While parts of the complex would be open for redevelopment,

consistent with affordable housing preservation, other areas could not be re-developed, meaning the housing would either continue to deteriorate with age, or be refurbished in the same configuration, driving out affordability, without addressing inadequate parking, lack of amenities or community benefits, and other issues. Development rights are an important community asset. Preservation policy that restricts redevelopment rights can actually add risk of losing the housing we are trying to preserve, without any benefit flowing to the community.

Transfer of Development Rights

Other sites, not on Columbia Pike should also be identified for transfer of development rights. The rights for areas like the Barcroft Apartments would be huge, and just can't fit on the Pike alone. Nor should they—affordable housing preservation is an Arlington issue--Columbia Pike should not be the only solution.

Policy Directives

The policy directives stated on page 4.3 should in most cases be applied to the county generally. While many elements of the plan are site specific, affordable housing policy should be consistent across the county, unless the goal is to discourage preservation in parts of the county other than Columbia Pike, and encourage preservation only on the Pike. Directives regarding increased density and infill development should be county-wide, with focus on site-specific issues, as in the NP draft. Some say these policies are intended to be county wide. The document should say so expressly.

Affordable Housing Only on the Pike

There is a widely held view in Arlington (among those who do not live in 22204) favoring “affordable housing only on the Pike.” In their view, only affordable housing should be allowed on the Pike, and affordable housing should be allowed on the Pike only. This document does not contain such a statement, but it should not be an underlying assumption that the future of the Columbia Pike area should be dedicated solely to affordable housing preservation, and affordable housing preservation should be dedicated solely to the Columbia Pike area. The Pike needs many things, not just affordable housing, to be a more viable, thriving, livable community. And affordable housing should be promoted in all of Arlington, not just Columbia Pike, according to the same criteria. Density, transportation, public space, financing tools (and their cost) are issues everywhere. The answer to those questions should not change because the land is on the Pike.

We Live Here

In considering this plan, please understand that we live here. This is not an abstract exercise; it has to work for the current and future residents as a great place to live, not just as a site for implementing abstract policy objectives.

John Snyder
Douglas Park

Thank you.