



**A Publication of the County of Fairfax, Virginia  
Department of Planning & Zoning**

For additional information about this amendment, call 703-324-1380

To request this information in an alternate format, call 703-324-1334, TTY 711



## **STAFF REPORT 2009-2010 SOUTH COUNTY AREA PLANS REVIEW**

**SUPERVISOR DISTRICT: LEE & MOUNT VERNON APR ITEM: 09-IV-17MV**

---

**NOMINATOR(S):** Patrick Rea, c/o Mount Vernon Council of Civic Associations

**ACREAGE:** N/A

**TAX MAP I.D. NUMBERS:** N/A

**GENERAL LOCATION:** Area generally surrounding Richmond Highway from the City of Alexandria boundary to the Woodlawn Plantation

**PLANNING AREA(S):** IV

**District(s):** Mount Vernon

**Sector:** Huntington (MV1), Greater Belle Haven (MV3), Hybla Valley (MV2), Groveton (MV5), Fort Hunt (MV6), Mount Vernon (MV7), and Woodlawn (MV8)

**Special Area(s):** North Gateway, Penn Daw, Beacon Groveton, Hybla Valley/ Gum Springs, and Woodlawn Community Business Centers (CBCs)

**ADOPTED PLAN MAP:** Variety of Uses

**ADOPTED PLAN TEXT:** Design guidelines for Richmond Highway corridor include general policy text orienting new, commercial buildings toward the roadway, where feasible.

For complete Plan text see <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpz/comprehensiveplan/area4/mtvernon1.pdf>, page 79

**PROPOSED PLAN AMENDMENT:** Modify the Richmond Highway Corridor urban design guideline regarding orienting of new, commercial buildings to the street, where feasible, by adding green building requirements as an exception.

---

### **SUMMARY OF STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

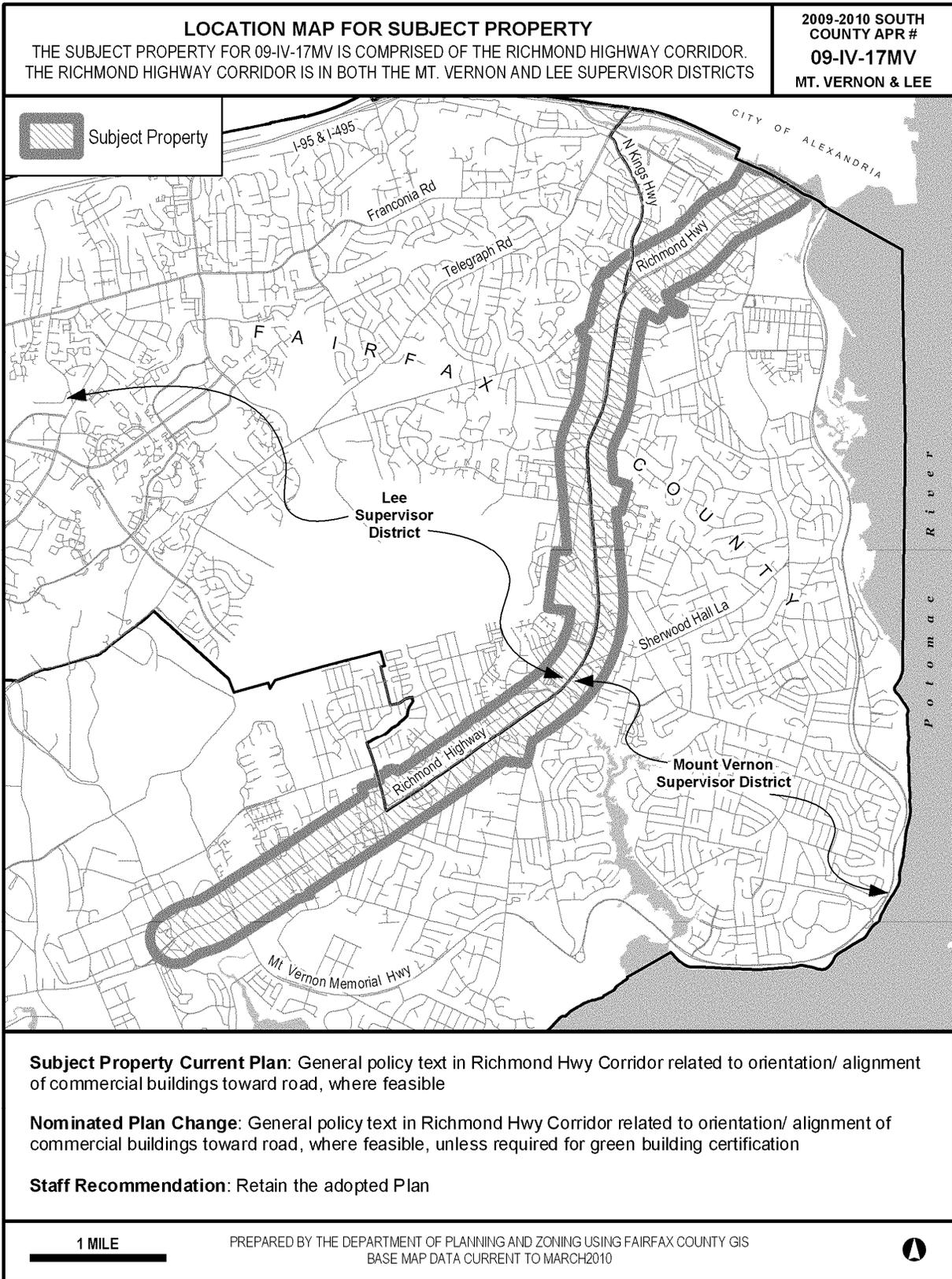
Approve Nomination as Submitted

Approve Staff Alternative

Retain Adopted Plan

---

The proposed language may create unintended conflicts between the green building and urban design objectives in the Plan. As a result, the language could prevent appropriate review of development applications. In addition, the proposed language is likely superfluous given that



building location is not dictated by green building certification systems and could work against the goal of having a pedestrian and transit-friendly environment on Richmond Highway.

## CONTEXT

### **General Location:**

The subject area of APR nomination 09-IV-17MV includes the general area surrounding a seven and one-half mile stretch of the Richmond Highway Corridor, extending from the City of Alexandria boundary to the Woodlawn Plantation.

### **Existing and Planned Land Use and Zoning:**

*Subject property:* The Richmond Highway Corridor primarily is characterized by local-serving retail uses and other commercial uses, located in a number of community and neighborhood shopping centers, and free-standing and strip-commercial uses. The majority of these commercial uses are uncoordinated with large setbacks from the roadway and surface parking. The corridor also contains townhouse-style and mid-rise offices and hotels. A wide variety of residential uses are located along the corridor, as well, from mobile home parks to high-rise residential uses near the Alexandria border.

The Comprehensive Plan recommendations for Richmond Highway Corridor are located in the Mount Vernon Planning District section of the Area IV Plan. The recommendations envision development and redevelopment to be focused in six core areas or Community Business Centers (CBCs) along the roadway: North Gateway, Penn Daw, Beacon/ Groveton, Hybla Valley/ Gum Springs, South County Center, and Woodlawn. These CBCs are separated by less intense areas, identified as Suburban Neighborhoods. The areas surrounding the CBCs and the Suburban Neighborhoods, for the majority, are characterized by low density, residential communities. The Plan provides guidance for buffering and transitions among these areas to protect neighborhoods from commercial encroachment.

The Plan also provides guidance to improve the visual image of the corridor through high-quality urban design and enhanced physical form. To achieve this end, the guidance specifically addresses streetscape, landscape, parking lot, building and site design, and signage elements, which are used as performance criteria in the review of development applications and site plans for properties along the corridor. One of the design recommendations in the Richmond Highway Corridor plan speaks to the siting of new, commercial buildings such that they are oriented toward the highway with parking lots located to the side and rear of the building, where feasible.

At the same time, the Plan also recognizes that site conditions and the uncoordinated nature of existing development may constrain the ability of the development to achieve the criteria. As a result, the Plan prefaces the urban design guidelines by stating that creative approaches to the design elements may be applied. Modifications “will likely be necessary to respond to site conditions or roadway design considerations.” (Page 73, Richmond Highway Corridor section of the Mount Vernon Planning District, Area IV, as amended through August 3, 2009.)

**ADOPTED COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TEXT**

Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan, Area IV, Mount Vernon Planning District, Richmond Highway Corridor Area, page 79, as amended through March 9, 2010:

**“SCALE AND SITING OF NEW BUILDINGS**

Where feasible, incorporate architectural features at the street level that relate to human size and increase the pedestrian comfort level. Incorporate urban design elements, such as trees, benches, special pavement treatments, awnings, setbacks, tapered building heights, browsing areas, lighting and plant materials to visually soften the harder architectural features of the building and create an attractive pedestrian-friendly environment that will reinforce retail activities.

The following guidelines should be used to determine the appropriate scale and site location of new buildings:

1. Where feasible, orient commercial buildings toward the road with parking lots to the side and rear to create an urban atmosphere. Where buildings are oriented to the road, no minimum front yard is required except as needed for the streetscape treatments described above...”

**NOMINATED PLAN AMENDMENT**

APR nomination 09-IV-17MV proposes to modify the recommendation for orienting new, commercial buildings to the street, where feasible, by adding green building requirements as an exception to this standard. The recommendation would read, “Where feasible, unless required for Green Building Certification, orient commercial buildings toward the road...”

**ANALYSIS**Environment

APR nomination 09-IV-17MV proposes to add green building language to the urban design section of the Richmond Highway Corridor Plan. However, policies that encourage green building within activity centers, like Richmond Highway, already have been adopted in the current Policy Plan Environment section. The current development review practice separates the urban design and green building objectives in order for staff to equitably and appropriately consider these guidelines and balance their merits. By bringing a green building recommendation into the urban design section, the proposed text could unintentionally create a conflict between the existing green building policies and the urban design guidelines.

Additionally, green building certification does not, with extremely rare exception, require a specific location of a building. Building location, siting a building to avoid certain landscape or environmental features, or siting a building to take advantage of solar or other resource opportunities is not a requirement for any green building certification system of which staff is aware. More commonly, topography, access, and site design determine building location.

### Land Use

Orientation of buildings toward the roadway is an important aspect of urban design. This orientation improves the visual connection between the building and the roadway through an enhanced understanding of the building's use and the location of the building's entrance. The design results in easier navigation, less confusion, and defined streetscape. If approved, APR nomination 09-IV-17MV would provide a wholesale exception to a condition that generally serves as a benefit to urban design and built environment.

As stated in the Environment section of this staff report, separate policy objectives allows for an equitable review of these objectives. The adopted text recognizes that conflicts may arise between objectives and that flexibility in design and development review should occur. The Plan text, which prefaces the Richmond Highway Corridor design guidelines on page 73 of the Richmond Highway Corridor Plan, states that site constraints could conflict with or prevent the provision of the design guidelines and recognizes that modifications to the guidelines will need to occur. Further, the urban design guidelines that are proposed to be amended also state that the orientation should be toward the roadway where feasible. The adopted Plan and existing review practice allows for staff to fairly weigh the objectives, to determine which objectives should be emphasized, and how best to accommodate the conflicting objectives. If green building policies are determined to take precedence over the building orientation during the existing review process, then the green building policies can be implemented without the need of the proposed, additional language.

### Transportation

Richmond Highway functions with multiple purposes. First, the highway provides a major north-south transportation route that carries commuter traffic between Alexandria and Washington, D.C., and the southern portion of Fairfax County and Fort Belvoir. The roadway also serves a Main Street for the local population who benefit from the community-serving uses located along and nearby the highway. The current Plan recommendation for building orientation promotes this Main Street function and transit and a pedestrian-friendly environment. Orienting the building and front entrance toward the roadway creates a safer and more comfortable environment for the pedestrian. The nomination gives preference to green building certification over building orientation to roadway, which could work against the goal of creating a transit and pedestrian-friendly environment and does not allow for the consideration of development review on an individual basis.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends the retention of the current Plan. The current Plan provides guidance on green buildings and urban design as separate objectives to achieve during development review. The separation allows for flexibility to determine which objectives should be emphasized. The proposed language may create unintended conflicts that do not allow staff to respond to individual development applications. The proposed language also may be superfluous given that green building certification systems provide a great deal of flexibility in how a building owner might attain certification and generally do not require that the building to be placed in a specific location on the site. Rather, the appropriate location is determined by aspects such as topography and site design.