

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

SUPERVISOR DISTRICT: MOUNT VERNON & LEE

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: Add green building requirements as exception to design guidelines for Richmond Highway corridor that recommend orienting new, commercial buildings toward the roadway, where feasible.

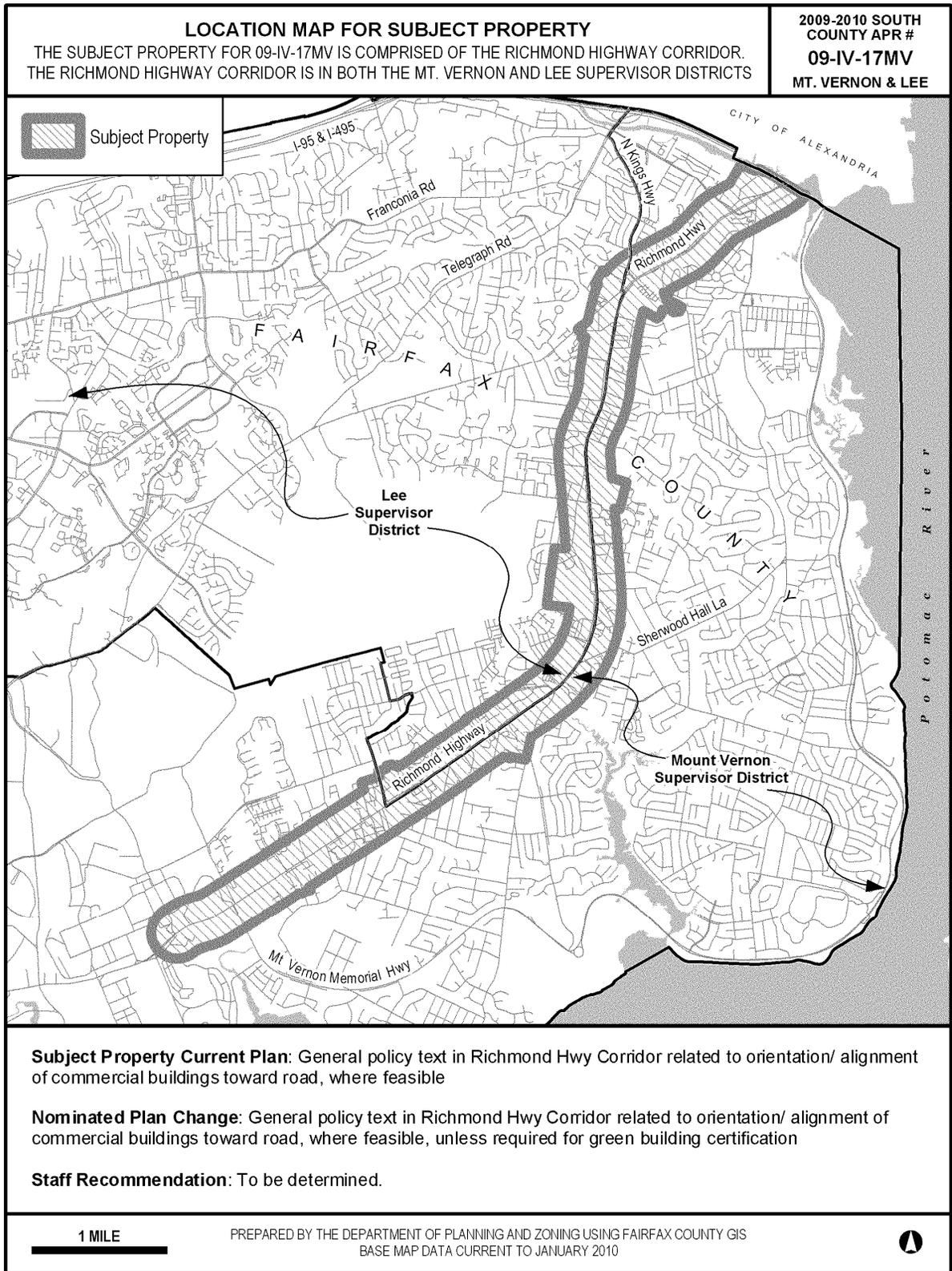
SUMMARY OF STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve Nomination as submitted

Approve Staff Alternative

Retain Adopted Plan

The current Plan provides guidance on green buildings and urban design as separate objectives to achieve during development review. The separation of this guidance allows for flexibility to determine which objectives should be emphasized. The proposed language may create unintentional 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 generally do not require a 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.



BACKGROUND

- The subject area 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. The area primarily contains commercial uses, such as local-serving retail uses, which are 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 and characterized by large setbacks from the roadway that contain 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 majority of the area surrounding the CBCs and the Suburban Neighborhoods is characterized by low density, residential communities.
- The identification of the CBCs encourages concentrated, community-serving redevelopment that contains a variety of uses. The Plan provides guidance for buffering and transitions from the CBCs to the adjacent suburban neighborhoods and residential neighborhoods and protects these 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.
- 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 has general recommendations that preface the urban design guidelines and state that creative approaches to the design elements may be applied and that 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.)
- 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.

CRITICAL ISSUESLand Use:

- 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...”
- In the existing Plan, orientation of the buildings toward the roadway provides an improved, visual connection to the roadway and greater understanding of the land use and the location of the building’s entrance from the roadway. This orientation results in the creation of an urban atmosphere and a more welcoming site design than an alternative, such as orientation towards the rear of the property.
- Similar to the general text on page 69, which recognizes that site constraints could conflict with or prevent the provision of these design guidelines, this text provides flexibility for site design to accommodate such a need. This flexibility is derived from the phrase, “where feasible.”
- If approved, this nomination would provide a wholesale exception to a condition that already allows for flexibility to review development on a fair and individual basis. The existing review practice determines which objectives should be emphasized and how best to accommodate the conflicting objectives. If green building policies are determined, during the existing review process, to take precedence over the building orientation, then the green building policies can be implemented without the need of the proposed, additional language.

Environment

- The county already has a green building policy in the Environment section of the Policy Plan that provides guidance for activity centers like Richmond Highway. By bringing a green building recommendation into the urban design section, the proposed could unintentionally create a conflict between the existing green building policies and the urban design guidelines. During existing development review practice, staff has the ability to take both of these recommendations into consideration and balance their merits.
- Additionally, green building certification does not, with extremely rare exception, require a specific location of a building. Building location, for example, 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.

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.