

Some Thoughts on a Vision and Concept for The Fairfax Center Working Group

The Fairfax Center Area Working Group has been meeting since last year to talk about the future of the Fairfax Center Core area and the surrounding community. Since the area encompasses four Magisterial Districts, it was composed of three representatives from each of them: Springfield, Braddock and Providence and Sully.

The Fairfax Center core area is unique among Suburban Areas in that it is the location of the County Government Center and also the location of the headquarters buildings for other major county activities such as the Department of Family Services, Libraries, and the Police and Fire Departments now under construction and many others. Other than for the Courts, it is the seat of government for Fairfax County.

In addition, because of the presence of the FairOaks Mall, the Fairfax Corner development, and the long range potential for the extension of Metro Rail to it, it has the potential to be a major urban center, perhaps not on the scale of Tyson's Corner but, none the less a major urban town center. It is qualitatively different from the other Suburban Centers in the county and should be treated as such.

Citizen opinions expressed prior to the establishment of this, and the prior working group, envisioned the area being developed as a walkable urban town center with a commercial and residential feel for the Core Area with easy access from the surrounding area and with connectivity to the larger Washington Metropolitan region through enhanced and redeveloped I-66, and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) from the west to the East Falls Church Metro Station and on to Washington, DC. The actual route has not been finalized. Needed is the development of a better internal road and pedestrian system to connect the Mall area to Fairfax Corner and adjacent commercial and residential areas.

Early on, the Working Group adopted 12 Planning Principles to give guidance to its work.

Demographic and Cultural Changes.

There has been a generational shift, not only in our region but throughout the country regarding the kind of communities that newer generations want to live in. Many young people eschew the use of cars and are looking to living where there is good rapid transit services and amenities to which they can walk as part of their daily living. This also holds for older adults as well who want to live in place or need specialized living facilities. A recent Washington Post article reported on home values in neighboring Loudon County stabilizing as such suburban living is not as attractive as it once was thought to be. An other Post articles describe how developers are increasingly focusing on urban centers convenient to rapid transit. As the Core area develops, we need to be cognizant of these changes, not only as it relates to the Core area but to other areas of Fairfax County.

Projections are for both the metropolitan Washington region and Fairfax County will continue to show growth in the coming decades. Jobs and population will continue to expand that will undoubtedly have an impact not only on the Central Area but also elsewhere in the County

Road Patterns

At present there is no easy connectivity between the FairOaks Mall and the Fairfax Corner/Government Center area or the nearby Promenade Mall or other residential and commercial development. The extension of Legato Road on the Mall side to Government Center Parkway was mentioned as being desirable. VDOT plans to rebuild the I-66/Monument Drive interchange to accommodate access from and to the east and west. It is unknown what pedestrian access will be provided on both sides of the bridge.

Fairfax Corner as an Urban/Town Center

The Fairfax Corner area is gradually evolving as a magnet urban/town center on its own. Its town square with its splash fountain and restaurants is well used by, not only those who live in the adjacent apartments but those in the larger community. It is often the location of special events such as street art shows, marathon runs, fund raising events, ethnic festivals, and so forth. The annual Celebrate Fairfax event is nearby at the Government Center. Because of its location in the geographical center of Fairfax County it has the potential to fulfill that role to an even greater extent. The area now boasts a farmers market and, as raised by the members of the working group, perhaps the site of a permanent outdoor performance area for events not unlike those initiated by Chairman Bulova behind the Government Center on its Ellipse during the summer months.

Characteristics of a Vibrant Community

What makes for a walkable, vibrant community? Some ideas the Working Group suggested::

- The fostering of so called "pocket parks"
- Mixed use buildings
- Building to the street line
- Open air markets
- Pedestrian and bike friendly
- A street grid
- Apartment balconies overlooking the street
- 24 hour activity
- Easy access
- An enhanced or additional "town squares"
- A variety of businesses and services
- Promote high quality urban design and streetscape amenities
- Be sensitive to environmentally sensitive areas

- Be a destination

An Opportunity

Although there is still time to do some planning for the Core area, that window is closing. Fairfax Corner developers are constructing a major parking garage along Government Center Parkway adjacent to its shops, and is planning a major office building along side of it. The parcel on the other side of Government Center Parkway is County owned land so there may be an opportunity to shape its development. Given the generational and other changes we are seeing, it is appropriate to plan for and encourage a vibrant town center concept for the Fairfax Center Core area a part of its Comprehensive Plan.

The time is now to provide the vision and infrastructure that will serve the area well in the decades ahead and beyond. We should avoid the lack of long range planning that has sometimes characterized past efforts around Metro stations.

Ways must be found to bind together the north and south sides of the Core area bisected by I-66 if it is to function as an integrated urban town center.

Direction

During its meetings, the Working Group it has been guided by the expertise of the County Planning staff which has provided detailed analyses of specific parcels of land, some vacant and others to be repurposed. Staff projected the impact of these new land uses on schools, parks, recreation, traffic, adjacent properties and the environment. The Working Group heard from both the developers and the staff regarding them.

As a citizen group, the Working Group considered the current land use proposals but, wishes make sure that future development is consistent with an agreed upon concept and vision for the future of the area. Should the Core area be simply a transportation hub with multiple bus bays as exist at the West Falls Church and Vienna stations on the Orange Line or should it be a destination urban center for people to live and work and be a magnet for a unique urban center?

(Added here should be a detailed discussion of the parcels that the Group reviewed and the actions taken)