



Reston Citizens Association

April 24, 2013

The Honorable Sharon Bulova, Chairman
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
12000 Government Center Parkway, Suite 530
Fairfax, Virginia 22035

Dear Chairman Bulova,

“Gross square feet per office worker” is not a topic one would normally raise with a political leader, but it has become a pivotal issue in the planning of Reston’s future. It may also affect the planning outcomes in other emerging urban centers across the county. Put simply, our research indicates the County is making unrealistic estimates of office space per worker requirements, and the result will be increased traffic congestion and an undesirable balance in planned development. I have not been able to garner a satisfactory explanation from the Department of Planning and Zoning and I know that a significant error in this assumption will have wide ranging impacts in development planning well beyond Reston. As a result, I find myself forced to turn to you to explain why the Reston Master Plan Task Force or any other similar Fairfax County planning body should use 300 gross square feet (GSF) per office worker as a baseline assumption for office development in a 21st Century workplace characterized by teleworking, office hoteling, client-based employee siting, etc.

The specific issue is how many gross square feet (GSF) per office worker the County should assume in developing Reston’s plan for its Silver Line transit station areas. At the outset of the Reston Task Force’s efforts, the assigned value was 250 GSF. At the same time, the GSF value assigned to urban dwelling units (DUs) was 1,000 GSF with a resulting 4:1 jobs-to-housing (J:HH) ratio. The task force subsequently recognized that urban DUs may become larger and, therefore, moved the assigned value to 1,200 GSF per DU. In the process—and for no explained reason—it moved the office worker allocation to 300 GSF/office worker to sustain the 4:1 J:HH ratio relationship.

The accuracy of this small technical assumption is vital in achieving the desired mix of uses and balance in planning for workers and residents in a transit station area, be it in Reston, Tysons, or other County transit-focused development areas. Its importance was highlighted most recently in the County’s

report, [Jobs-Housing Ratio: National Perspectives and Regional and Local Benchmarks](#), December 2012. It is also instrumental in achieving the goal of a “mix of land uses” in transit-oriented development areas as laid out in [the County’s transit-oriented development amendment to the Comprehensive Plan](#). In short, the greater the error in assigning space allocations for employees or dwelling units, the greater the adverse impact on the jobs:housing balance outcome and the reduced likelihood of achieving the desired mix of uses.

Recent research by the RCA Reston 2020 Committee has found no academic research, industry-wide assessment, or journalistic reporting that suggests the average GSF for office workers is or will be anywhere near 300 GSF/office worker. **All agree that office planners are now planning for 200 GSF/office worker or less, and all of them state that the space per office worker is declining, some say as low as 100 GSF/office worker.** For example:

- In the most comprehensive contemporary study of office space planning entitled [Changing Trends in Office Space Requirements: Implications for Future Office Demand](#), Dr. Norm Miller, Professor of Real Estate, Burnham-Moores Center for Real Estate, University of San Diego, concluded in March 2013:

“Moving forward, we will see some firms achieve square feet per worker of less than 100 square feet, but given the cultural impediments and the challenges of predicting growth rates, we are more likely to see figures average 150 to 185 square feet per worker phasing slowly towards even lower figures at the end of the decade. This is a significant reduction in space per worker, but it parallels a need to retrofit much of the existing space to provide more collaborative team space and healthier more productive environments. (p. 27)”

- [Survey results from 465 corporate real estate managers](#) conducted last year by CoreNet Global, the world's leading association for corporate real estate professionals and service providers, showed,

“. . . the average allocation of office space per person in North America will fall to 100 square feet or below within the next five years. By 2017, at least 40% of the companies responding indicated they will reach this all-time low benchmark of individual space utilization, which has been the case in Europe for the past several years but is now heading for the Americas. The average for all companies for square feet per worker in 2017 will be 151 square feet, compared to 176 square feet today, and 225 square feet in 2010.”

- A major article by Eliot Brown in the [Wall Street Journal](#) entitled "[Corporate Cram Bedevils Office Market](#)," February 29, 2012, highlights the long-term downward sizing of corporate office space:

“Employers gradually have been taking up less space for decades, but real-estate professionals say the drive to use less space has picked up since the economic downturn, as companies look to trim costs where they can across their budgets. Workstations are shrinking and private offices

are disappearing, replaced by cubicles with low walls, and more employees are working remotely.

“Companies today are taking space with an average of about 200 square feet per employee, down about 20% from a decade ago, said Alan Nager, an executive managing director at brokerage Newmark Knight Frank who advises companies on their real estate. The amount of space is continuing to shrink, he says.”

In addition to these national trends, a discussion among Reston Task Force members drafting the task force’s report reinforced the general view that current office worker space is about 200 GSF and falling:

- A developer representative said that office space per worker has been declining for some time and his company currently plans for office workers to occupy 200 GSF per person. He acknowledged that the office space per worker trend is downward.
- A county planner noted that, while employment is on the upswing in his county, companies are not adding space to their leases.
- No one suggested that office space per worker is increasing or that it should be 300GSF/worker.

In a presentation to the Reston Task Force last spring, regional representatives from commercial real estate firm Jones/Lang/LaSalle acknowledged that office workspace is shrinking in the Washington area market. They stated that GSA is downsizing its office space requirements to between 110-180 GSF/office worker and, “downsizing to 80-120 square feet per employee is not uncommon.”

Local business newspaper The Washington Business Journal also picked up on this theme, noting in an article about former Reston office building client Accenture, “[Accenture’s virtual nature allows real estate downsize](#),” that:

“Because of the virtual nature of our office environment, we no longer need the amount of space we have in Reston,” said Accenture spokesperson Kate Shenk.

Accenture has been “office hoteling” for the last several years, meaning workers don’t have assigned office space anymore. Instead, employees, many of whom spend much of their time off- site with clients or working from home, share space in Reston, using a reservation-based system for use of office space.

When asked how many employees will move into the new office space, Shenk said, “At this point, what we can tell you is that out of the 4,000 people aligned to Accenture Metro D.C., only a fraction of those employees are expected to actually utilize the space at any given moment.”

Yet, here in Reston we increased the assumed level of office workspace and we are continuing to plan for 300 GSF/office worker. When County planning staff was pressed on why, they noted that they had checked with the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA) which said they hadn’t noticed any trends, but they would monitor the situation. This will not help in planning now for development over the next two decades.

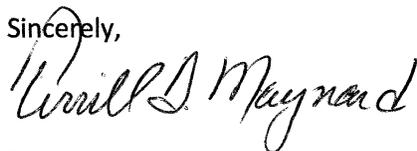
The prospective effects of overstating the allocated space per office worker are devastating for achieving a desired J:HH balance, especially with errors of a magnitude ranging from 50% to as high as 200% reflected in the above authoritative sources. (See attached table of alternative J:HH balances with different GSF/office worker values.)

Most importantly, this error leads to a gross under-statement of the number of vehicles commuting to, from, through, and within Reston, adding to the gridlock the transportation staff has already forecast at Reston's "gateway intersections" near the Dulles Corridor. The County will also need to spend even more tax money on roadways and transit to ease that gridlock, and the environment will suffer all that much more. If the same type of thinking applied county-wide, similar under-estimates of traffic will result in gridlock and Fairfax County will become a less attractive place for businesses and residents to settle. Strictly from a Reston perspective, such gridlock will isolate north from south Reston—and the urban corridor from either—for most of the day because of the massive traffic delays that will be encountered at the gateway intersections.

On behalf of RCA Reston 2020 and the RCA Board of Directors, I challenge the County to find authoritative evidence that supports the use of 300 GSF/office worker for land use planning purposes. We can find no evidence that such a number is anywhere near appropriate. Still, we believe the County should have the chance to show that our assessment is inaccurate before the RCA Board of Directors votes whether to endorse the Reston Task Force report or the staff's Comprehensive Plan language for the Dulles Corridor station areas. We would like the County to explain for the record its assumption that the correct gross square feet per office worker assumption is 300 GSF—or even 250 GSF—in the 21st century office workplace.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to your response on this vital County planning issue.

Sincerely,



Terrill D. Maynard

Reston Citizens Association (RCA) Board of Directors
Co-Chair, RCA Reston 2020 Committee
RCA Representative to the Reston Master Plan Task Force
2217 Wakerobin Lane, Reston, VA 20191

CC:

Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

Fairfax County Planning Commission

Gerald Gordon, President, Fairfax County Economic Development Authority (FCEDA)

Fred Selden, Chief, Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ)

Heidi Merkel, DPZ Project Manager, Reston Master Plan Task Force

Patty Nicoson, Chairman, Reston Master Plan Task Force

The Reston Master Plan Task Force (via DPZ)

Fairfax County Federation of Civic Associations, Board of Directors

The Reston Citizens Association Board of Directors

The RCA Reston 2020 Committee

Sally Horn, President, McLean Citizens Association

Reston Transit Station Area Current and Potential Jobs:Housing Ratios: Alternative GSF for Office Workers

	Current (2010)	Alternative Gross Square Feet per Office Worker				
		@300 GSF	@250 GSF	@200 GSF	@150 GSF	@100 GSF
Office Employees	69,941	98,189	117,827	147,283	196,378	294,567
Other Employees	12,451	16,747	16,747	16,747	16,747	16,747
Total Employees	82,392	114,936	134,574	164,030	213,125	311,314
Dwelling Units	5,860	27,932	27,932	27,932	27,932	27,932
Jobs:Housing (J:HH) Ratio	14.1	4.1	4.8	5.9	7.6	11.1

“Scenario G” proposes 29,456,666 GSF of office space at 300GSF/office worker in the Phase 1 (transit station) study area.