

Submitted @ public
hearing by Joe Stowers

Testimony of Joe Stowers for Board January 28, 2014 Hearing

Fairfax County Staff Comprehensive Plan Amendment for Reston Transit Station Areas

I support the draft Comprehensive Plan language for the Reston metrorail station areas in general. With few exceptions, the staff and Planning Commission have done an excellent job, and have done very well in reflecting community values as expressed by the Reston Master Plan Special Study Task Force.

In the process of reviewing the various drafts, I have offered dozens of recommendations, which have been dutifully recorded in appendices of earlier drafts and are referenced in detail in the pages which follow prepared before the Planning Commission's hearing.

Because of time limits, however, I want to focus my remarks to the most serious problem with the draft Plan language – the lack of clarity in the goal for balancing of commercial and residential uses, particularly in the areas within ¼ mile of the stations – a problem which creates a major risk of allowing far too much office development and could cause far more serious peak period congestion than we have experienced in Reston up to now. Depending on future market trends, this congestion could result in severe constraints on future growth in the 3 Reston station areas and beyond in the community.

The goal for balancing of uses should be restated in the Plan language as moving gradually toward more exact balancing of jobs and resident labor force in the station areas. This recommendation is based on the known fact that jobs and resident labor force must be close to being equal within a small area like the station areas in order to reduce congestion to a minimum.

The specific wording I recommend is (to be added to the Land Use section starting on page 14 of the November 13, 2013 draft Plan text):

“One of the goals of this Plan is to achieve a better balance within Reston between jobs and the resident labor force near those jobs. A specific long-term goal of approximately 1.6 jobs per household measured across each of the 3 Reston station areas as well as the entire Reston community is established with this Plan amendment... , based on the assumption that there will be approximately 1.6 persons in the resident labor force per household.”

“It is unlikely that this long-term goal can be achieved by 2030, but there should be gradual progress toward that goal in order to steadily reduce congestion and increase mobility by promoting walk-to-work trips and shorter trips to work. The County should carefully measure Reston station area densities of persons per households, resident labor force per household, and jobs per square foot of commercial space periodically in order to keep reasonably accurate estimates of these values which are essential to achievement of this long-term goal.”

“This goal should guide the application of the specific ratios of square footage in this section. These other ‘goals’ should be subsidiary.”

Other comments

**Testimony of Joe Stowers for both Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors
Hearings**

**Draft Fairfax County Staff Comprehensive Plan Amendment for
Reston Transit Station Areas
Joe Stowers November 21, 2013**

Identification:

Residence: 11448 Waterview Cluster, Reston since March 1965 and office tenant 27 years on Washington Plaza

Professional Transportation and Urban Planner with M.S. and Ph.D.

Chair of Reston's Planning and Zoning Committee for 17 years during most of Reston's development

Overall Recommendation:

Overall the draft Comprehensive Plan language is quite well done, reflecting fairly accurately the work of the Reston Master Plan Special Study Task Force for Phase 1 and the community goals and planning vision for the three station areas.

I am hopeful that the final report of the Task Force for Phase 1 will improve on the staff draft Comprehensive Plan recommendations, and provide the Board of Supervisors with additional recommendations for improving the draft from both the perspective of the community and the larger public interest.

However, I have an important set of changes that should be made. Therefore I recommend that the draft be approved with three sets revisions that should be made: (1) my specific revision recommended below, (2) revisions that may be recommended by the Task Force in its final report which should be completed very soon, and (3) selected recommendations which are not in conflict with (1) and (2) above which have not yet been used to make improvements in the final County staff draft language. These recommendations have been made by more than a dozen others, and their recommendations are included in the November 1 staff document on pages 115 through 180.

Background for My Most Important Specific Recommended Revision:

For many years Fairfax County has had a policy of creating more office and related commercial development as opposed to residential and related development, primarily because of a desire to increase net revenue, based on its understanding that commercial office and related development produces more revenue than costs to the County to provide public services compared to residential and related development.

The extreme example of this policy was the decision of the County to force the original developer of Reston to create the Reston Center for Industry and Government (RCIG) when the original master

plan for Reston was approved in July 1962. This decision resulted in covenants imposed on all the land within the RCIG area, which included the majority of the area on both sides of the Dulles Access Highway for ¼ mile and more for about 3 miles through Reston. These covenants prohibited any residential, hotel, and most retail development.

The resulting impact of this is that after the Dulles Toll Road was completed an average of about one million square feet of office campus and a small amount of related allowable retail were built each year during the 1980s in Reston. This occurred at a time when Reston's residential development was gradually being reduced as the amount of available undeveloped land outside the RCIG area was decreasing except for the Town Center area, which was being planned and rezoned during the 1980s.

During this period Reston's Planning and Zoning Committee (I was its chair), and its then-parent organization, the Reston Community Association, lobbied as hard as they could with the Board of Supervisors, the County Executive, and the County's Deputy Executive for Planning and Development to change this policy or at least to mitigate its negative impacts. We began to realize that it was creating a serious imbalance between jobs and housing, ultimately resulting in about twice as many jobs as the number of Reston residents in the labor force.

The resulting peak-period congestion is most notable in the major intersections on either side of the Toll Road and on the difference between inbound and outbound morning and evening peak-periods on major and minor arterials entering Reston.

Incidentally, national research over the last generation has revealed that our major stakeholders who believe that their best return will come from office development are mistaken — this research shows that greater return on investment can be achieved through balanced mix-use development, particularly in rail-oriented transit-oriented areas.

Another major consequence of this is that most of the landowners in the three Reston station areas are primarily office developers. These principal stakeholders and their attorneys, many of whom are members of the Task Force, have successfully joined with County staff (the senior members of whom may be strongly influenced by the old County policy bias in favor of office and other related commercial development) to create the current draft Comprehensive Plan language that is likely to result in further reservation of more land for commercial office and related commercial development than desired based on the impact that this is likely to have on worsening the existing peak-period traffic operation.

As a prime example of this rather extreme policy, the recommendation in the current draft Plan language is that the areas within ¼ mile of each of the 3 Reston Metrorail stations be developed at equal amounts of commercial and residential square feet, which is likely to result in a ratio of about 2.67 jobs per resident labor force person. The goal should be to have at least as many residents in the labor force as jobs within these areas in order not to exacerbate the negative effect of the existing serious imbalance that Reston has of about twice as many jobs as resident labor force.

A consequence of this is that, because of current and likely near-term unfavorable market for office development, this misguided Plan language is likely to result in unbuilt commercial land near the station areas and a negative impact on the currently strong market for residential development in areas nearest to the stations.

Unfortunately it is probably not likely that the County is going to reverse the recommendation of the Reston Task Force, as should be done in the public interest of Reston, as argued in the preceding paragraph. Even some of the Reston residents on the Task Force have not resisted the strong desires of the principal stakeholders to put this imbalance of target uses in the Plan language.

Incidentally the draft Plan language for the areas from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the stations is for a target ratio of 3 to 1 residential to commercial square footage, which will likely result in a ratio of about 2 jobs for every 3 residents in the labor force (RLF). However, it is highly unlikely that this will come close to resulting in a balance of jobs and RLF in the station areas overall.

Additional Recommendations:

The long-term goals as stated in the current staff draft Plan language for ratios of mixed-uses in square footage terms should be changed to be stated instead in terms of steadily reducing the current gross imbalance of having far more jobs than resident labor force. To reduce my argument for why this change should be made to the draft plan language to the simplest of terms, the current wording would have a long-term goal that is likely to result in what almost no Restonian wants to have happen -- i.e., increasing peak-period congestion due to an increasing ratio of jobs to resident labor force. The primary reason why this is likely to happen is because most knowledgeable people think that employment density (jobs per square foot of commercial square footage) is increasing and may continue to increase in the long term.

We should start as soon as possible to begin increasing the ratio of resident labor force to jobs and to continue doing so in the long term in order decrease peak-period congestion. In order to do this the monitoring that is advocated in the Transportation section on page 52 should be restated to require the County staff to accurately monitor the 3 ratios defined in my recommendations on page 13 of the 41 pages of comments made by Task Force members which are in Attachment 11: "...there should be gradual progress toward that goal in order to steadily reduce congestion and increase mobility by promoting walk-to-work trips and shorter trips to work. The County should carefully measure Reston densities of persons per households, resident labor force per household, and jobs per square foot of commercial space periodically in order to define reasonably accurate estimates of these values which are essential to achievement of this long-term goal."

It is well-known among transportation planners, both in terms of well-understood theory, and tested empirical measurement, particularly in a rail-oriented TOD that an approximate balance between jobs and resident labor force results in the highest use of transit, the maximum amount of walk-to-work trips, and the lowest peak-period motor vehicle congestion.

The results of this monitoring should then be used ASAP to revise the square footage targets for balancing residential and commercial uses that are in the current draft Plan language, and steps should then be taken to assure a path to actually balancing uses more accurately and beginning to reduce peak-period congestion.

All of my other 9 principal recommendations listed on pages 12 and 13 of Attachment 11 should also be used to improve the staff draft Plan language as described in detail on the pages that follow my list of my most important recommendations (pages 13 through 20). I will provide within the next few days more detailed descriptions of how each of these other most important recommendations apply to specific paragraphs in the current staff draft of recommended Plan amendments, in ample time for the Board of Supervisors hearing.