

Achieving Residential – Commercial Balance for Town Center

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For several reasons a great deal of care should be given to achieving an overall balance between residential and commercial development in Reston Town Center. Although precise numbers are not readily available, there are probably well over three jobs in Reston Town Center currently for every dwelling unit. Using the typical ratio for the Washington DC region of about 1.6 persons in the labor force per dwelling unit, this means that there are currently roughly twice as many jobs as residents in the labor force in Town Center.

In order to minimize the motor vehicle congestion in the Town Center over the long term it is critical to move much closer to a 1:1 balance in this jobs-to-residential-labor-force ratio. Every significant step in this direction will increase the proportion of people who (a) walk to work, (b) use transit getting to work, and (c) drive very short distances to work. Of course, not every person will walk to work, but we know from experience that the percent of people who do walk to work goes up as an area moves closer to this balance. This is also true regarding its effect on increasing transit use and increasing the percent of people who make very short auto trips to work.

Based on documented experience in the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor and in other areas around the country, an achievement of this goal can probably result in a slight reduction from current levels of congestion even with a doubling of employment and a quadrupling of residential development in Town Center, which is probably a reasonable target to plan for over the next 40 years. It can also result in the greatest overall increase in a vibrant living and working environment and financial success of the retail market.

Although we know that relatively little development is likely to occur over the next 2 or 3 years, and we know that market conditions will vary from decade to decade, a reasonable target goal would be to reduce the ratio of jobs to resident labor force in Town Center from about 2:1 now to 1:1 in about 40 years at close to the same rate each decade (i.e., to 1.8:1 by 2020; to 1.6:1 by 2030, etc.).

We recommend that Fairfax County refine these and other rough estimates presented below before adopting our recommendations. And, perhaps more importantly, we recommend that the Comprehensive Plan be amended to require mid-course corrections, as Arlington County did for the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor.

These mid-course corrections should be performed each decade to assess the degree to which the target progress has been made in achieving this jobs-resident labor force balance. Each such review should result in whatever changes in land development policy are appropriate to better achieve the target goal for job-resident labor force balance.

The best data on jobs and resident labor force will usually occur about two years after each decennial U. S. Census – i.e., in 2012, 2022, 2032, etc. – so it would be best to plan to start these mid-course correction studies in those years.

One of the key reasons for performing those mid-course corrections every decade is the great deal of uncertainty about all the numbers that are very roughly estimated here.

For example, the regional rule of thumb regarding the ratio of labor force to dwelling units of 1.6 may be a very poor estimate for Town Center for a variety of reasons: (a) the very high percentage of condo units occupied by empty nesters and retired persons, which may have almost no one in the labor force, (b) the very high percentage of all Town Center dwelling units that are condos, for which no current data are available on labor force participation rates, (c) the rapidly changing composition of the market for housing in Town Center, (d) the likely possibility of rapidly changing composition of the market for office development in Town Center, and (e) various proposals and plans to provide specialized types of housing in Town Center. Based on current perceptions of all these factors we judge that a slightly lower ratio (1.5) is appropriate for Town Center at this time

For the above reasons, sufficient time and staff resources are not likely to be available to refine the above estimates very accurately. So we recommend establishing policies designed to guide NTC residential-commercial balance, and those for other parts of Town Center without waiting for 2010 census data and careful analysis of these data, which might require about three years of elapsed time to complete.

For the next decade we recommend setting a target goal in the Comprehensive Plan of achieving a balance of about 4:1 in residential to commercial gross square feet of new development for Town Center as a whole, using the best available rough estimates of all required conversion factors: (a) resident labor force of about 1.5 per dwelling unit, (b) 1 job per 300 gross square feet of commercial development, and (c) gross square feet of residential development per dwelling unit of about 900 (see attached Excel file for the formula used to arrive at this target goal for the coming decade). Incidentally this ratio of 4:1 is the same as was recommended several years ago to achieve the optimal rail transit ridership, considering commonly used goals for ideal Transit-Oriented Development.

We recognize that the application of this recommendation to Town Center as a whole will have to involve many different considerations for the various parts of Town Center such as (a) the current status and character of development of each area, (b) physical and topographical constraints, and (c) visions for each area being developed as part of the Task Force's work.

Finally, some brief explanation should be made about how mid-course corrections might be made each decade, recognizing the importance of respecting the planning efforts that are going to be evolving at the time among the various property owners and tenants. Obviously any changes that might be indicated from these reviews would have to be worked out cooperatively with all stakeholders in a manner similar to what is currently underway through the Task Force's efforts, although hopefully in a much less complicated and smaller effort involving relatively few stakeholders. The usual process has almost always involved developing options in Comprehensive Plan language that would create sufficient incentive for property owners to develop plans that will implement agreed upon new or revised objectives.