

# TOWN CENTER SUBCOMMITTEE MINORITY REPORT

Joe Stowers, RMPSSTF Alternate, August 2, 2010

## Overview

I support the draft Final Report of the Town Center Subcommittee in general and believe that it contains many valuable contributions to the Reston Master Plan Special Study Task Force Task Force's recommendations. I think in many ways it should be seen as a model for the other subcommittees and for the first phase final report of the Task Force.

However, I would like to offer very different recommendations regarding residential - commercial balance and support for air rights development, and to add a few general suggestions to the subcommittee's report regarding general planning and urban design considerations.

In submitting this minority report, I want to express appreciation for the opportunities that the subcommittee gave me and everyone else to express our views and have them fully considered and voted upon in the process of attempting to reach consensus. I particularly appreciate the extraordinary efforts of co-chair Robert Goudie who made special efforts to give me these opportunities, even to the extent of taking considerable time to talk to me and leave long detailed telephone update reports on the final work of the subcommittee in drafting its report while I was on the West Coast over the last 2 weeks!

## Residential – Commercial Balance

I strongly disagree with the subcommittee's recommendation in this area. For several reasons a great deal more 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 about 4 jobs in Reston Town Center currently for every Town Center resident in the labor force, based on data provided to the subcommittee by Mark Looney in a June 3 email (1).

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 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.

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(1) This estimate is based on Mark Looney's tabulations of 4,512,010 square feet of office, 852,883 square feet of retail, and 2,966 dwelling units, plus my assumptions for Town Center of 1.5 persons in the labor force per dwelling unit and 1.0 jobs per 300 square feet of combined office and retail space.

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 4:1 now to close to 1:1 in about 40 years at roughly the same rate each decade (i.e., to 3:1 by 2020; to 2:1 by 2030, and close to 1:1 by 2040).

I recommend that Fairfax County refine these and other rough estimates presented below before adopting any recommendation regarding balance of uses. And, perhaps more importantly, I 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 and reducing auto commuting to work in Town Center. 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.

For the next decade I recommend setting a target goal in the Comprehensive Plan of achieving a balance of about 4:1 in residential - commercial gross square feet for new development for Town Center as a whole.

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.

The above recommendation is a sharp contrast with the recommendation of the Town Center subcommittee on this subject. To risk oversimplification, that recommendation is a goal of achieving a residential to commercial ratio of 1:1 for gross square feet for new development with modest incentives for exceeding this goal. This translates into a continuing imbalance in the ratio of new jobs to new labor force of about 2:1.

On first blush the Town Center subcommittee's recommendation may seem reasonable because the continuing imbalance of 2:1 in the most important metric of balance for new development is below the existing ratio of about 4:1 and would gradually lower that.

However, this is far from being a reasonable recommendation. In terms of impact on congestion, it is the TOTAL imbalance between jobs and resident labor force that counts, not the ratio. If this goal were to be implemented, every 1000 more jobs will result in

many more auto commuters to Town Center (probably more than 500) and will reduce the proportion of new jobs that are accessed by transit, walking, or bicycling.

This is not a minor problem. Approaches to Town Center are already congested (probably more so than any TOD in the Rosslyn – Ballston corridor). This trend simply could not continue. Extreme congestion would result and investment in at least office development in Town Center would decrease at a steady rate until it ceased.

The only way for Reston Town Center to grow over the next generation and beyond is for it to continue to gain more residents in the labor force than jobs and thus more walk-to-work trips!

How did this Town Center subcommittee recommendation come about? It certainly does not reflect the community's interests.

The Town Center subcommittee was originally organized representing only Town Center's stakeholders, and its work program consisted largely of a series of dialogs with the principal commercial property owners in the larger Town Center core area -- mostly property owners of office campuses and one property owner of a large retail center. None were residential developers and only one very brief dialog with a major mixed-use developer occurred, and even this dialog did not include any discussion related to this subject.

At no time in this process did anyone bring up the history of Reston's emphasis on balanced mixed-use development, which was fundamental to Reston's original Master Plan. Few if any others on the subcommittee understood how important Town Center's success can be traced to a Mobil Oil Vice President's directive that Reston Land had to form a major partnership with a nationally accomplished mixed-use developer before it could proceed with the planning of Town Center. Few if any others understood how much the transition from the first phase of Town Center's development, which was purely commercial, to gradually becoming a truly balanced mixed-use center was a largely the result of community pressure to humanize Town Center – i.e., to use residential development to make it more lively, safer, and more successful.

At no time in the Town Center subcommittee's work program did anyone point out that experience all over the country, as in Reston Town Center, demonstrates that true balanced mixed-use development is more profitable than either single use or dominant use office development, or pure residential development, or pure retail development. This is true not only because of the ability of developers to take advantage of changes in the market, but much more importantly because everyone benefits. Homebuyers and renters are willing to pay more to live where they can save money by owning fewer cars and using them much less often. Employers are willing to pay more because their employees are more able to get to work on time and work a little later because they don't have to drop everything to catch their car pool. And retailers and restaurants have a great built-in around-the-clock and weekend market.

As the leaders of the subcommittee were finalizing the definition of what the goal should be for residential - commercial balance the decision was apparently based on primarily on what the principal property owners were willing to accept.

In my opinion the RMPSS Task Force decision on what to recommend for the goal for Town Center's balance of uses should be based on a the perspectives of both the community and property owners with primary attention to the perspectives of residential and experienced, successful mixed-use developers.

During our recent 2-week trip to the Northwest, we spent a busman's holiday touring TODs in the Portland metropolitan area (where I had played a significant role in the early planning of the transit and land use development program in the 1970s). What I found is that most of that development conforms with my recommendations on balanced uses. In the newly redeveloping large historic Pearl District along a new light rail line near Union Station, about 75 percent of the new development, *including significant amounts of current construction*, is residential, mostly with ground floor retail and related services. We found the area so attractive we made time to return to enjoy a few more hours there again after a trip to the mouth of the Columbia and the beaches.

Observing this current construction I'm inclined to think that residential and other TOD can now be successful in an area that has a good track record of planning, coordinating, and implementing transit and TOD policies -- developers, banks, and the market will all respond. This may soon be possible in our Town Center.

Metro South was recognized about 15 year ago in a well-attended charrette as being a great future place for a successful urban village. I believe North Town Center also got some recognition in that regard at the time as well. They deserve to be even more recognized as such today.

### **Air Rights**

I disagree with the tone of the draft report of the Town Center subcommittee's characterization of the community's interest in air rights development.

I believe that it is in the interest of the community to strongly support immediate investment in completion of design work and construction of foundations for future air rights development around both the Town Center rail station and the Herndon-Monroe rail station. Furthermore, I believe it is in the interest of the community to encourage developers and all concerned public bodies to plan, design, and build Transit Oriented Development (TOD) on air rights as soon as economic conditions favor such development.

Regarding the first issue (designing and building air rights foundations now), there are two points that need to be made:

- (1) Our efforts to encourage such air rights development over the last dozen years have been frustrated until recently by lack of sufficiently strong community support to get public officials to take any concrete steps toward making such air rights development possible at any time in the future. I believe that Reston is now on the verge of having sufficient community support to achieve success with regard to this immediate challenge. However, we could easily fail to gain sufficient support to obtain public commitment to spend several million dollars to design and build these foundations now. I believe that an expression of strong support from the RMPSS Task Force is likely to be

necessary to obtain that support. I'm afraid that the draft Town Center report fails to offer any contribution toward that objective.

- (2) I am convinced that it is now essential to go well beyond immediate design and construction of future air rights foundations. At least two additional things need to be done: (a) sufficient engineering design work should be done now to convince both the community, potentially interested developers, and concerned officials that there is a practical, safe, and economically feasible way to build future air rights development above the highway and rail system without great interference with highway and rail operations, and (b) sufficient study of all major legal and administrative impediments to building air rights development should be done as soon as possible to assure both the community, potentially interested developers, and concerned officials that there is a feasible path for a good developer to acquire an air rights lease that will facilitate development without great additional cost compared with the approval process of development on private property.

It is important to note that for the first time there may be the possibility for open competition of air rights development if public funds are used to achieve (1) and (2) above. Prior to this, all of the planning, design, and engineering work on the feasibility of air rights development has been done by interested developers and their associated architects and engineers, with the implicit assumption that this work would lead to air rights lease negotiations directly with those who undertook all that work.

Regarding the second issue (encouraging air rights development as soon as economically feasible, there are three points that need to be made:

- (3) I totally disagree with the draft report of the TC subcommittee regarding the prospects for air rights development around the TC rail station within the next couple of decades. I think this judgment is almost entirely based on the current lack of interest of property owners in Town Center and Metro South whose obvious first priority lies in their existing and past investments in their property. They apparently believe that they do not stand to gain much, if anything, from the potential interest of other developers in future air rights development around the Town Center rail station.
- (4) Recent history demonstrates that competent and successful developers have had an interest in Reston rail station area air rights development. Reston Land and Terrabrook were quite interested in the potential for Town Center rail station air rights development when the market was strong during the late 1990s, and worked closely with Doug Carter and his engineering colleagues on a detailed plan that demonstrated market feasibility with an FAR of about 6 while providing for essentially the full costs of developing the rail station and its required access facilities. More recently, Monument Realty, Comstock, and Jorge Kfoury have demonstrated serious interest in the 2000s in investing in air rights development at the Wiehle Avenue rail station (now a dead issue because foundations have not been put in place prior to construction, making the current and future costs of building on air rights prohibitively costly).

- (5) The possibility for future air rights development around the two Reston stations remaining to have their design completed prior to construction have now received so much community support that it now appears unlikely that there will be any opposition. The entire community planning process leading up to, and including the RMPSS process has led most interested Restonians to appreciate the potential of this air rights development. They now recognized the many benefits including (a) housing and jobs for people who may be able to lead a life with little or no dependence on the automobile, (b) enormous energy savings and pollution reduction, (c) the introduction of completely free movement by all modes of transportation, especially for pedestrians and bicyclists, across the Great Reston Barrier Trench, at least within the length of the air rights development area, (d) lack of any threat to established neighborhoods, (e) support and connectivity for adjoining TOD around the rail stations, (f) the possibility of creating additional small urban open spaces in the most densely portions of Reston, and (g) additional County revenue with little up-front costs.

### **General Planning and Urban Design Suggestions**

The subcommittee's report could be improved by adding options that have been put forward by members and non-members. Examples include (a) the addition of strong incentives for achieving consolidated plans for major sub-areas of Town Center such as Metro North, Metro South, and Town Center North; (b) the addition of strong incentives for moving further and faster toward residential - commercial balance; (c) different configurations of open space in Town Center North, such as the proposal of having 4 Savannah style small parks -- one in each quadrant of the area -- to bring usable open space closer to most parcels; provide traffic calming by blocking several of the possible straight line cut-through routes; and giving greater identity to small neighborhoods; and (d) adding alleys where appropriate to provide a better fine grain to the street grid and provide additional pedestrian shortcuts.

Additional design guidelines should be added, such as those provided to supplement the Comprehensive Plan language adopted recently for the revitalization of Lake Anne Village Center. A primary example is language discouraging bulky mid-rise buildings in favor of both taller and shorter heights. The strongest guideline option might be that suggested by Reston's original master planner Bill Conklin in the guidelines for Lake Anne revitalization -- no building should be built between 4 stories and 14 stories. Another example might be specific suggestions for different design features that would create a sense of place where most appropriate in each major sub-area of Town Center, such as dimensions for open space of different kinds and arrangements of prominent buildings along secondary "Market Streets" in each major sub-area and at the ends of important streets such as Stratford House at the east end of Market Street. Other examples are a listing of features that create a sense of place and suggestions for the placement of art in public places.

Finally the maps that have been prepared to supplement the subcommittee's text report should be augmented to show selected examples of the above recommended additions to the report including the Savannah-style small parks described in (c) two paragraphs above and secondary "Market Streets" extending directly south of the Town Center rail station into the center of Metro South and another extending along either Explorer or Library streets from Metro North through the Urban Core into Town Center North.