

Wiehle Avenue Subcommittee Draft Final Report dated Dec. 10, 2010 Comments and Suggestions—Reston 2020

This subcommittee faced the most challenging planning task of the three station areas. Reston-Wiehle is an important gateway to Reston and will be the first to open. Area land ownership is more complicated, making coherent planning more difficult. Most daunting for the Wiehle gateway is the failing road network surrounding it, facing a doubling or tripling of vehicular traffic in the next 20 years, and a public sector unprepared to deliver a transportation system that will enable it to function, much less to thrive. In the face of these and other challenges, we think the Subcommittee has done an excellent job overall, providing a comprehensive report with sound approaches to many issues and providing a positive incentive framework to achieve a thoughtful community vision. We particularly wish to thank the Co-Chairs for doing their work so openly and for encouraging community input throughout.

Surmountable Obstacle?

Because the transportation infrastructure is so problematic as to doom the prospects for future development around this station, we will address it first, leaving discussion of a vision or lesser issues like density and mix of uses for later in this brief discussion. Regrettably, the subcommittee relegated treatment of infrastructure to the level of afterthought—seventh in a list of “Common Challenges”. In fact, the County’s transportation chief told the subcommittee several months ago that the county and the state had nothing planned before 2035 (Soapstone crossing) that would effectively begin to address the problem of already failing intersections next to the station. All of the RMAG recommendations, if implemented 100%, would not raise the intersections grades above the failing level, he said. The current outlook then is for gridlock at Wiehle at a scale we cannot even imagine. The result, unless there is a lot of very creative planning done NOW along with a prompt infusion of several hundred million dollars for implementation, will be a minimum of new development before the gridlock is achieved and developers flee the area for a generation or so.

The record suggests that it will take time for the county and state time to address urgent but most costly remedies. Meanwhile, we strongly encourage the subcommittee and the Task Force to adopt a framework for longer term solutions less dependent on the traditional public sector. In the absence of legislated “adequate public facilities” requirements in Virginia, innovative and imaginative means must be found to assure that essential transportation and other infrastructure needs are met before the next phase of development is begun. The private automobile must be replaced to a significant extent by

pedestrian and bicycle travel and a robust bus service. If this cannot be done, current extremely stressed conditions will get far worse to the point of total breakdown. Some basic development timing and infrastructure funding mechanisms must be established to assure that development does not outpace the community's ability to effectively accommodate it. We suggest that to meet infrastructure **demands** some variation of Dave Edwards' "Reston Core Infrastructure Fund" idea be adopted. This fund would receive developer proffer funds, a set amount of transportation funds each year from the current County non-residential tax district earmarked for transportation funding, a Tax District Five-like fund to which the **entire** community contributes, a percentage of the increased overall Reston property valuation (a form of tax increment financing), and most critically – a set **County** contribution earmarked for Reston. For further detail, we refer the reader to the Implementation, Phasing and Financing section of the Reston 2020 Community Input to the Task Force of June 2010. Without such a major additional revenue stream and the mechanism to administer it in tune with planned development, the advent of rail in Reston—especially at Wiehle Avenue—promises to be a nightmare for the community.

Vision

The draft report is a bit ambivalent about whether Reston-Wiehle is an urban center or more of an active neighborhood with a predominantly residential character. Nor is the mix of residential, non-residential uses resolved. Given the overhang of a failed transportation network, it seems to us that the Task Force should opt for the latter and stress balance in development in part to assure that congestion is not further aggravated. With 28,000 jobs already in this commercial-industrial area today, we recommend that the plan emphasize residential development, at least a 60:40 residential to non-residential ratio for future development, but we certainly would not completely uncap residential and retail development as the subcommittees report now recommends. Densities here should not rival those of the Town Center area. In addition to the pedestrian and bicycle friendly emphasis the subcommittee recommends, it is critical that a strong bus service be an integral part of development from day one providing: frequent internal circulator service; links to the community and the station; and, direct service to the station from the south side to reduce the load on Wiehle in particular. Without a strong bus service, including dedicated lanes during peak hours, gridlock will be guaranteed. We agree with the report's emphasis on incentivizing higher education and technical training centers as well as active community retail along the central east-west spine of the grid of streets to make Wiehle a lively place to be.

Planning Principles and Density

The subcommittee does a good job setting forth sound TOD principles in laying out its plan for development, a “wedding cake” high at the station area, inclining to the north where there is more space out to ½ mile from the station. It has not been easy, with constant developer pressure for exceptions to TOD principles. We believe the densities which are from twice to six times what is currently on the ground or allowed are somewhat excessive. They should only reach these levels based on truly extraordinary and community-serving proffers, including “first movers”, extraordinary infrastructure contributions. Incorporating major space for educational or cultural institutions for the long haul, for example.

We do not agree with eliminating caps altogether on retail, hotels and even residential. Rather, development should be approved within the parameters set in the draft report for each category. Relying on the market for good planning is subject to vagaries which then require a generation to undo. No building heights are established. They should be. A good rule of thumb might be heights just under those recommended for Town Center in designated landbays where they do not impinge on established residential areas. We suggest two additional principles: no waivers of Fairfax County requirements for affordable and workforce housing, and a diversity of housing types should be encouraged including major sections of rental units.

Pedestrian-Bicycle Travel Preferred

The subcommittee report stresses desirability of robust internal pedestrian and bicycle paths and dedicated lanes and connections to external pedestrian and bicycle trails and paths. We strongly support planning and implementing such a system from day one. It is vital to provide extensive and safe alternatives to the private automobile which threatens the viability of the Wiehle area. Safe connections across the major thoroughfares around the station are lacking and should receive priority attention, including several grade separated Wiehle crossings—e.g., between Sunrise Valley and the DTR, between the DTR and Sunset Hills and where the W & OD crosses Wiehle.

Open Space

In general, we endorse the recommendations of the subcommittee, but believe there is one major gap. That is, the report punts on the need to provide athletic fields in an area calling about 50,000 workers and 20,000 new residents. In fact, there are possible areas where such facilities could well be included so as to not foist this burden onto other areas in Reston. Landbays

G-7, I-3 and D-7 (Fannie Mae, adjoining Wiehle study area on the west) surely present opportunities, and developers should be engaged on this issue. Failing to provide such facilities in the area, the Task Force should include language for developers in the Wiehle area to contribute to a fund to underwrite their development outside this study area. We endorse the subcommittee's suggestion for a community recreation center, possibly in G-7, and inclusion of a park with water feature in D-7.

Design Excellence

This phrase is mouthed without much supporting substance by any subcommittee. We believe it has a special relevance for Reston Wiehle station area—the gateway to Reston from the nation's capitol and all points east. Wiehle will be the first massing of buildings travelers see as they arrive in the Reston area. We suggest that this be the test area for some genuine national level design competition—as in fact the Comstock group has initiated for their project at the station. We suggest the plan include encouragement of this elsewhere at Wiehle as well.

Planning Horizon

While County DPZ has instructed subcommittees to use a 20-year planning horizon, the Wiehle Subcommittee, under pressure from developers, has mixed in a 50-year, GMU mid to high development level horizon leading it to higher F.A.R.s than would be the case on a 20-year basis. Especially in the case of already traffic-choked-with-no solutions-for-the-20-year-horizon Wiehle Avenue, such over planning just does not make sense.