

Tysons Land Use Task Force

Compiled Comments on the July 2007 Citizen Input Meeting

Introduction

- The following compiled comments are from residents of the greater McLean area who attended the July 17 session at Spring Hill Elementary School. The comments were combined to provide a single and, hopefully, more usable document for the Task Force members and county staff.
- It must be noted that, while many of the commenting parties are members of the McLean Citizens Association, these compiled comments are those of individuals and **not** the Association. The Association has addressed Tysons Corner-related issues in resolutions dated July 2005, March 2007 and July 2007.

General Comments on the Spring Hill Meeting, including Presentations and the Overall Process

- There was wide-scale displeasure among many attendees that the questions and related discussion were not tied to the Base Case and the Test Scenarios. It was felt that this process failed to obtain adequate citizen input for this stage of the planning process.
- The presentation was biased towards development. Since this is a comprehensive review of the Tysons Corner plan, it should have included a low-growth option. The desires of Tysons Corner landowners and their contractors should not necessarily be viewed as the optimum result in the public interest. Many people feel that Tysons Corner has already been developed well beyond the capacity of existing public facilities. Under these circumstances, a low- or even no-growth Test Scenario should have been included.
- The process isn't working. We were asked to answer a set of questions in a vacuum, divorced from reality, and had no opportunity to discuss the scenarios that will play a crucial role in the next phase of the Task Force's work.
- How realistic is the Base Case? We are told that, unless changes are made to the Comprehensive Plan, we will see development at the Base Case level. Along these same lines, some of us have been told that, given the high cost of land at Tysons Corner and the ever-escalating costs of construction, it is not economically feasible in all cases (many/most cases) for Tysons landowners to build to currently allowed densities. Rather, they need higher densities (i.e., amendments to the Comprehensive Plan) to enable profitable development. Real estate professionals have indicated that there are good reasons why, absent a Plan modification, much of Tysons Corner would not be built out to current Plan levels. Tenants/owners can't afford the higher numbers especially when there are lower cost alternatives to the west of Tysons Corner. The market is there, but it's limited. This would seem especially true given the westward movement of jobs. What evidence does the county have that the Base Case would be built?

- One of the county’s goals is to add housing to Tysons Corner so that more people would live and work in the area, reducing commuting traffic. What is the current match of residents both living and working in Tysons Corner? What evidence does the Task Force have that developers and builders can construct affordable and desirable work force housing at Tysons? From what I know about construction, most of the new residences at Tysons Corner are expected to be expensive condos in high-rises. That type of housing certainly meets some people’s needs. But this suggests that: 1) most of the new housing at Tysons Corner will not be workforce housing, as it would be too expensive for many workers; and 2) many workers simply are not interested in living in a condo in an urban area. According to Census Bureau and a recent think tank study, most people still want single family homes with an “affordable” mortgage payment. Does the county expect this trend to continue here? If not, why not?

General Comments on the Questionnaire

- Several attendees felt that the questions asked by the Task Force were patronizing and designed to elicit certain answers, rather than obtain unvarnished views on issues raised by the Base Case and the three Test Scenarios.
- From a reading of the questionnaire, one could infer that it was designed to elicit a response that would permit the Tysons Task Force to conclude, and state publicly, that: 1) citizens clearly want high density in Tysons and, 2) citizens are OK with higher taxes, if necessary, to make it happen. This public workshop, sponsored by the Tysons task force, was not helpful in gauging citizens’ judgments and opinions.
- The questions are not relevant. They often presented the participants with artificial, simplistic, meaningless and incorrect choices or trade-offs.

Examples of questions over which there was concern follow:

“High rise building in Tysons should not block significant views from or be located adjacent to neighborhoods at the edge of Tysons”.

- This is already current Fairfax County policy and words to this effect can be found in the second paragraph of the Tysons Corner Comprehensive Plan text. Therefore, why ask the question? Would the county Department of Planning and Zoning actually recommend buildings be constructed to block the view of the peripheral neighborhoods?

“I support adding parks and open space throughout Tysons even if this may require development to be concentrated on smaller sites, resulting in taller buildings.”

- Fairfax County already has policies and standards in place for parks and open space. County staff routinely solicits proffers from developers for this very purpose and no site plan, Special Exception or Special Permit are to be approved without the proposal meeting the open space requirement. It goes without saying that structures are specifically sited or increased in height to accommodate this.

“The four new Metrorail stations will provide enough access to transit to serve Tysons’ needs -- no additional transit is needed to get around within Tysons.”

- As the task force and consultants undoubtedly know, bus service is an integral part of both heavy rail transit and urban centers, most especially when they do not provide commuter parking. If all respondees had answered in the affirmative, would the task force recommend that no bus service be established? This question bordered on absurdness.

“Growth in Tysons should be focused near transit stations even if this will require taller buildings being built within walking distance of transit.”

- This is known as Transit Oriented Development and it is already county policy. See Fairfax County Policy Plan under Land Use Compatibility and Appendix 11 of the Comprehensive Plan. There already exist FAR targets for the concentric areas around the Tysons’ Metro stations and it is generally assumed this increased density will result in taller buildings. This question is deficient because the term ‘walking distance’ was not defined, as it should have been defined. TOD works only when added density is within normal walking distance of transit stations, generally regarded to be between 1000 and 1600 feet. There is a fear that, absent a clear definition of walking distance, the Task Force, which seems to be looking for ways to maximize density, will take considerable license interpreting the response to this general question.

“If you had \$100 to spend on transportation in and around Tysons Corner, how would you allocate it? (Please distribute dollars in the five spaces to the right so that the total equals \$100)” and (b) “If you had \$100 to spend on other community needs at Tysons, how would you allocate it? (Please distribute dollars in the seven spaces to the right so that the total equals \$100)”.

- These questions are particularly meaningless because they are asked in a complete vacuum. It is elementary in economic analysis that to make trade-offs you need to weigh incremental benefits against incremental costs. Even assuming we are in a position to attach some value to the incremental benefits associated with the 12 questions here (which is a pretty tall order in itself, since the questions are qualitative with no orders of magnitude), does the Task Force really believe that we can attach values to the associated incremental costs? Because if we can’t, then the whole notion of making an informed trade-off becomes puerile!

Comments compiled by Rob Jackson