Remarks of Laurie Genevro Cole, Vienna Town Council Member
To the Fairfax County Planning Commission Tysons Corner Committee
January 27, 2010

Chairman Alcorn and Committee Members:

I am speaking tonight on behalf of the 15,000 Fairfax County residents and taxpayers who live in the Town of Vienna, part of the Hunter Mill District of the County. The future of Tysons Corner affects us directly and deeply.

The Draft Plan before us tonight represents a huge amount of work, over a long period of time, by many people. It is so big that it seems difficult to comment on it—there are the page- and line-specific items, and the overarching philosophical points. I hope that both serve to guide your work and improve the outcome for Tysons.

On the specifics:

Implementation Entity: Please expressly include citizens, and residents of surrounding communities, as part of the constituency of this Entity (p. 17). We have an ongoing stake in the development, performance and success of Tysons Corner.

Circulator System Alignments: Do not permit increased density along the route of the Circulator System. Unlike rail installations, bus routes change. They are changing constantly around the County now, in response to a variety of factors. It is inconsistent with the County TOD policies to increase density along bus routes. Please remove any reference to this being a possibility (p. 16).

Bonus Density for LEED: Please do not permit increased density for LEED Gold and Platinum buildings (pp. 23, 29). These standards are relatively new and long-term performance and benefits are not proven. The text language says tax abatements are not currently available—then let's wait until they are and offer them, or let's come up with something else. But density bonuses are permanent, and these goals are transient. And, frankly, it seems like the environmental benefits of an efficient building are undermined, if you just get a bigger building for it.

Compounding Bonuses: Please do not allow compounding density bonuses (p. 29). This is an ill-advised change from the previous draft. As Commissioner Lawrence rightly pointed out at last week's meeting, the density projections are "to the brim." Compounding bonuses is really testing the surface tension of what fits in the cup.

Measuring Distance to Transit: Retain the requirement that the distances be measured as "walking distance", not straight-line distance. This was changed in the Old Courthouse District language (p. 195). There can be a big difference between the two and it can mean the difference between a walking trip and driving trip.

Moving slightly broader in scope:

Traffic Impact on Surrounding Communities: The draft states that "To insure that the impacts on the areas surrounding Tysons were taken into consideration, a Neighborhood Traffic Impact Study was conducted." (p. 43). Exactly how did the results of this Study influence the Draft Plan? We in Vienna are very interested in this because the results of the study have not yet been presented to us. While the Draft Plan touts the "mode shift" of transportation use, the hard numbers indicate that the growth of Tysons will result in MORE CARS on the road network. Let's be upfront about this, and address how we are going to deal with it. This is another reason why the surrounding communities need to be a part of Tysons 'Implementation'.

Parks: I am struck by the irony of how, when it comes to Vienna and McLean asking for information on traffic impacts from Tysons we are told that our streets are too far away from Tysons to fairly measure this. Yet, when it comes to using parks and ball fields in our communities, we are suddenly "nearby" (pp.88-94). Mr. Zook's remarks that the Planning Department is "hopeful" that the land will be provided for the needed facilities within the boundaries of Tysons is not adequate. This must be provided for as development occurs.

Bigger Picture:

At a previous Committee meeting, I heard the sentiment expressed that there is resistance to tying development to having transportation improvements in place because the developers "don't want to be limited by matters beyond their control."

This is a spurious argument against an effective Phasing strategy for Tysons. These improvements are not beyond their control—their influence and lobbying effectiveness is well-demonstrated. In fact, they are better positioned to get these things done than any other party. Those who are really left with circumstances beyond our control are the citizens and taxpayers, who will be living with the consequences of an inadequate infrastructure at Tysons for generations to come. We do pay our fair share for services in this County, have for decades past and will continue to do so. The windfall of the location of Metro near these landowners interests is the one "circumstance beyond their control" that they seem perfectly willing to take advantage of.

As you commit to this Plan, please consider how tenuous all the assumptions made can be. This entire project is built on the premise that Metro can deliver rail service to Tysons in a manner that makes it an attractive alternative to vehicle travel. That premise is far from certain.

Please make sure there are enough safeguards in this plan to protect us from all the density and none of the benefits.

Finally, I would like to share a few thoughts from the perspective of a former planning commissioner. I have great respect for the professional planning staff. They work very hard, knowing that whatever they do will make someone unhappy. But their professional judgment is just part of the process necessary to producing a good plan. The "citizen planners" – you, the Planning Commissioners – have a critical role to play. You are here to reflect the community's values, to take that professional opinion of the staff and inform it with the over-arching considerations of the public will and the best interests of our community. Please keep that in mind as you weigh all the factors at work here.

Thank you.