

Statement by Walter Alcorn

Chairman of the Fairfax County Planning Commission Tysons Corner Committee

March 17, 2010

Over the past weeks and months this committee has heard from many, many people about the proposed replanning and transformation of Tysons Corner. We have heard from numerous landowners that the proposed density levels in draft plan text published by County staff are too low to facilitate this transformation. And we have heard from citizens who are concerned about that proposed density levels would result in development beyond the capacity of the local infrastructure to absorb it – especially the local and regional transportation infrastructure.

I would note that nearly all of what we have heard so far is a question of how to transform Tysons, not whether. But that doesn't make our challenge any easier.

To date we have looked at this challenge as a question of what site-specific maximum FARs should be written into the Comprehensive Plan. Site-specific FARs are a Comp Plan tool that we use in most, but not all, places in Fairfax County. Done correctly it provides a means to ensure the balance between development and public infrastructure. It is a useful tool, but it is not the only tool at our disposal.

For Tysons our current dilemma is that landowners are telling us that they require density levels that – if applied to all equally situated properties – would far overwhelm the most ambitious transportation plan developed to date. Other stakeholders – including this stakeholder – have noted that once maximum FARs go into the plan they are reduced only under the most extraordinary circumstances and are effectively a “one way street.” Once site-specific density goes into the Comprehensive Plan we expect them to be in the Comp Plan in perpetuity.

Today I am introducing into the discussion a different type of tool that might be useful in replanning the transformation of Tysons Corner. What if an overall development cap were planned in Tysons Corner to allow for transit-oriented development without maximum FARs written into the Comprehensive Plan? What if this overall development cap could only be raised once an updated transportation plan and transportation financing plan were developed and approved?

Here is one way to proceed: keep base level FARs in the current Comprehensive Plan. But in the new redevelopment option in the revised Comprehensive Plan do not include maximum FARs. These Comprehensive Plan amendments would be designed for the next 20 years of development, and after that target was reached the Plan would call for an automatic replanning taking into consideration actual and projected transportation and public facility performance – and financing.

Landowners would seek entitlement to redevelop at a density they propose, and would have to defend their proposal through the rezoning process regarding transportation, other public facility systems impacts – in effect all non-FAR guidance in the Comprehensive Plan. Drawing a page from the Arlington

process, perhaps applicants would also process phase one site plans concurrently with rezoning. Again, applications would have to be in harmony with all the elements in the Comprehensive Plan only there would be no Comprehensive Plan guidance on maximum FARs for transit-oriented development. Height limits in the Comprehensive Plan would remain in place, as would urban design guidelines – and the 527 process. In effect this would be a Fairfax County version of “Form Based Planning.”

This approach **could** provide the basis for landowners ready to redevelop their property into the transformed, transit-oriented vision developed by the most recent iteration of the Tysons Task Force. And it would not be the government deciding who goes first – it would be a self-selection process for landowners in concert with market forces that would propose the ultimate FARs on specific sites for consideration in the rezoning process.

Once all development in the 20 year planning horizon is approved, or perhaps based on other triggers, another replanning process would be required before additional density could be added in the Comprehensive Plan. This replanning process could be incorporated into the new Comprehensive Plan to require that going beyond this amount would require funded transportation plan, and with that a real incentive is created to see that such a financing plan is put into place. Note that we expect to have some form of a financing plan in place to get us to 84 million square feet and this will be a major focus of discussion at next week’s Planning Commission workshop.

For many months I have been saying that the two toughest issues facing us are phasing and financing – and transportation is the elephant in the room for both of these issues. I still believe this, and this alternative approach I’m describing does not solve either of those problems. But this alternative could help a bit with both of those issues and deserves a full public airing before we send up our recommendation on revisions to the Comprehensive Plan.

Without objection I would ask staff to analyze this alternative and come back with feedback next week at the Planning Commission’s workshop. Also as the advertisement for the change to the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance will be finalized in the near future I would ask that staff incorporate flexibility into these advertisements to allow its full consideration during the upcoming public hearing processes.