Remarks From Charlie Hall to PC Tysons Committee, 12/12/08

Many speakers have discussed Tysons in detail. I'd like to step back and look at a few broad outlines.

First, the real debate isn't growth vs. anti-growth. The debate is between two competing high-growth visions. For more than a year of public meetings, there were no slow-growth proposals on the table. There were only urban-development proposals, and there was a great deal of public support for building high density around the Metro.

I believe the real terms of the current debate were set last spring, when the task force's consultant submitted a proposal consistent with the public meetings, and with an analysis of what Tysons can accommodate. He called for 114 million square feet, roughly 2½ times what is on the ground today.

If the task force had accepted that proposal, we'd probably just be discussing details now. Instead, the task force rejected the consultant's plan, and in the process discarded all the public discussion and professional modeling on which it was based.

By nearly doubling the consultant's recommended density, and just as importantly, by pushing density farther from the Metro, the task force has created many unanswered questions that you now need to resolve. For instance, I've heard people say that 100,000 new people would be added to Tysons. I'm not sure that's true anymore. That was the figure for the original proposals discussed by the public. I believe the task force's vision would be much higher, but we don't know how many people their new plan would bring. Likewise, the Task Force approved its vision, for 220 million square feet, without any traffic analysis. The truth is, no one has fully studied what their vision calls for. It is based on untested assumptions and unanswered questions.

I believe the Planning Commission must give special attention to three issues in analyzing the Task Force's proposal.

The first, of course, is the infrastructure. I don't have much to add to what was said by Rob Jackson, Susan Turner and Laurie Cole, except that I wholly agree with them. But these concerns have not just been raised by

citizens. Senior county officials have also warned the task force that its vision could overwhelm roads, parks and even sewage systems.

The public supports urban density around the Metro stations, but they want our roads, schools and parks to work. The warnings given to the Task Force were very specific, including the possibility that the Capital Beltway and Dulles Toll Road can't handle the traffic that the Task Force's vision would generate. These are very serious issues, and the county must study them closely before making any final decisions on Tysons.

Second, does the plan meet the county's recently adopted rules on transit-oriented development?

Many people here were part of the process to establish TOD policies for Fairfax, and I was also part of that discussion. The consultant's proposal was clearly conscious of the TOD policy and conforms with it.

I think there are very serious questions as to whether the Task Force's vision—by pushing density so much farther from the Metro and by adding density for a bus circulator system—is in fundamental conflict with the TOD policy. It behooves you to look at this question very closely, and to give a clear public accounting of why you think the Task Force vision does or doesn't comply.

Finally, there's the question of whether the Task Force strategy, of pushing high-density farther away from the Metro stations, is the best way to redevelop Tysons. I was struck by a comment from Brenda Krieger, but my interpretation is almost the opposite of hers. She said it's important to develop up to a half-mile away from the Metro, because that's where the new housing will go first, not near the Metro stations themselves.

Arlington, which is so often cited, never allowed high-density more than a quarter-mile from the rail line. This forced new construction to be built near the Metro.

The Task Force's notion of dispersing new development over a much broader area could actually undermine the key goal of redevelopment in Tysons. Will new tenants really want to build right next to the Metro, where rents are most expensive, if we allow cheaper high-density options half-a-mile or more away? And will people in these outlying areas really use the

Metro, or will they be driving cars? The Task Force vision actually could create a situation where we are starting from the outside, building further from the Metro and not next to it.

I would close by saying that we need an open debate, conducted with an open mind. We all need to admit that we are trying something that has never been done on this scale, in this type of setting. We should all accept that some of our assumptions today might be proven wrong.

Tonight's hearing is a very valuable start on such a debate. But I'm struck that there's a very deep disconnect in tonight's discussion. The community has talked again and again about infrastructure issues, creating a community that works for everyone. The developers have spoken in micro-terms, showing us pictures of their individual projects. I hope they will engage the community's concerns about infrastructure and respond to them.

Likewise, I hope there will be continuing discussion with those in the environmental community. You want to see high density built around the Metro in Tysons, and I want you to know, so do I. You want a Tysons that is environmentally sound. I do, too.

Most of all, we must give the county's professional staff time to analyze the many unanswered questions surrounding Tysons. The Task Force has an awe-inspiring PR machine, but just a week ago, they used the Washington Post to publicly accuse the county planners of "sandbagging." This is not the type of positive debate we need for Tysons, and I urge you to strongly resist any further pressures from the Task Force to pressure the staff.

The next stage should be about planning, not PR. The facts should prevail. The Task Force's vision is built on untested assumptions. If their guesswork is wrong, and over-optimistic by half, let's learn that now, before we do decades worth of damage to our county's future.