

ROB BATES
1406 WOLFTRAP RUN RD., VIENNA, VA 22182
703-356-8937
RWBates@cox.net

Statement to Planning Commission

17 December 2008

Good evening. My name is Rob Bates. I should very much like to thank the members of the Planning Commission (PC) for giving me an opportunity to speak on the important subject you are considering tonight. Your efforts and expertise are greatly valued by the citizens living and working in and around the Tyson's Corner (TC) area. Those efforts will influence our future for many years to come.

I live West of TC along Route 7, near its intersection with Lewinsville Road – little more than a mile away from the proposed Tysons West Metrorail Station. So I have a keen personal interest in the development of TC. I am also on the Board of Directors of the McLean Citizens Association (MCA) and a member of the Greater Tyson's Citizens Coalition (GTCC). I believe that the views I will now express closely reflect the views of both the MCA and the GTCC.

I am largely sympathetic, in qualitative terms, with the broad vision for TC expressed by the Tyson's Land Use Task Force (TLUTF) in the report submitted to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, for example:

- Striking a better balance between residential and commercial uses;
- Applying County policy on TOD in the areas around the new Metro stations;
- Ensuring a proper transition from the central areas of high density to the lower density demanded by established communities around the edges;
- Providing venues for arts, culture, and recreation;
- Introducing a carefully planned street grid within TC;
- Establishing an adequate circulator transit system within TC; and
- Placing much more emphasis on the environment within TC.

The vision of course is long-term, reaching out to 2030 and even beyond. At my age, that does indeed look far-sighted, as it must. But whether we are young or old, I think it is crucial to have a clear idea not only of the vision but also how we get from here to there. Unlike Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, I can't click my heels three times and just do it: there was no Good Witch of the North on the TLUTF to give me a pair of ruby slippers; certainly I don't look like Dorothy; and, as you can hear, I don't even have a Kansas accent.

But I do have a problem and I look to the Plan language:

1. To help us get the transition to the vision right; and
2. To ensure that we like what we see when get there.

In that context, I urge the PC to resist strongly any pressure to rush to judgment on these important matters:

- The TLUTF took 3½ years to do its work;
- The Comprehensive Plan Amendment for TC will be with us for many years to come; and
- It will be impossible to go back in important areas next time around, because many changes which are now privileges to be granted to the developers are likely to be seized upon by those same developers as theirs “by right” if they are enshrined in the Plan language.

I maintain that the TLUTF:

1. Has not given us sufficient rigorous analysis in quantifying the implications of the vision offered; and
2. It provides no real guidance to the PC in putting together the essential specifics of the transition.

I will illustrate my views now mainly from the transportation sector.

The vision is surprisingly vague about what the transportation system will look like when we get there in terms of quantified impacts – and that in itself makes it difficult to plan the transition. Despite much public input, there was very little where it counts. The scenarios debated in many public outreach meetings had densities much lower than the high densities implied by the final vision. The highest was under Prototype B, with 127 million sq. ft., and I had the distinct impression that this was far too high in the eyes of most residents from the surrounding communities. The consultants (PBPlacemaking) suggested 114 million sq. ft. GMU quantified the potential development for Tysons Corner by 2050 at less than 124 million sq. ft. at the high end. Yet the TLUTF in its vision took it upon itself to come up with something approaching 220 million square feet according to the county staff.

Now logically, density should be arrived at from a “bottom up” not a “top down” approach, always keeping a close eye on what the infrastructure will bear. This was patently not done. But whichever way we go at it, we need to end up with a clear view of densities to quantify rigorously the implications of the vision for an already-overloaded transportation infrastructure.

I think the TLUTF Report has failed us badly on the transportation side to help in this task: it does not quantify what the transportation system will look like on our way towards the vision; it does not quantify how bad the traffic will be when we get there; and it gives no clue about whether we can afford the massive costs of the needed transportation improvements.

Let me mention a few deficiencies in the transportation analysis:

- It provides no measurement of the level of service at key intersections in and around TC for the recommended build-out or implied density of the vision;
- The assumptions underlying the traffic modeling that has been done are not clear;
- Despite requests from me and others, including Supervisor Foust, to provide traffic studies for at least one intermediate year, so far nothing has been made available;
- Despite promises to the contrary, we have still not seen any analysis of key intersections in areas surrounding TC – apparently that will only be done, if at all, after TLUTF finalizes its recommendations;
- While an adequate circulator transit system within TC will be vital, it will also be essential to have shuttles fanning out at least 2-3 miles beyond TC to surrounding areas, such as mine, to make the vision work, otherwise residents in those neighborhoods will be stranded or end up adding unneeded congestion by needlessly driving into TC, where parking will in any case be hard to find;
- It does not ask if we can ever hope to afford the substantial capital costs of purchasing the circulators and other transit vehicles and covering the inevitable annual operating subsidies that will be necessary;
- It assumes that the hugely expensive road improvements for the vision will be done (including grade-separated interchanges), even though we know that precious little of the transportation infrastructure posited in the current Comprehensive Plan was ever implemented; and
- Given all of this, should we not go back to a “bottom up” analysis, where we keep our eyes firmly on what density is practical in terms of the funding that can be found?

To conclude, I should like to suggest that, whatever the PC decides to recommend in the Plan language, it should make crystal clear two vital principles:

1. The incremental costs which are created by the developers exploiting the privileges they are given under the new Comprehensive Plan should be paid from the profits or ‘economic rent’ they earn and not be subsidized by the general taxpayers; and
2. Triggers should be established to define what actions must be taken and financed by the developers, in terms of infrastructure in general and transportation in particular, before any further development is allowed and before the developers are permitted to move on to the next trigger.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me.