

January 4, 2010

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Dear County Council Members,

I am writing in regard to the matter of Belward Farm and Johns Hopkins' proposed development and destruction of this area. As a person who grew up in the Westleigh neighborhood a stone's throw from the farm, I can only seek to impress upon you the feelings of sadness, dismay and outrage which the university's betrayal of its implicit and explicit promises to Mrs. Banks cause me and many in this community.

I am only home to visit my parents now during the Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, but I definitely know I am home when I see the farm. Over the course of my lifetime, I have seen the large tree that stands alone in the fields in all sorts of light, in every season, in every weather. It is so much a part of my psyche, that it appears at times even in my dreams - a source of comfort. During this December's snow storm, the white fields and the frosted tree against the backdrop of the farm's grain silos painted a picture of an American past rooted in the seasons and in the earth. Beautiful and powerful and, one would have hoped, timeless.

Since the mid 1980s, we in this area have seen every swathe of forest, every field, every farm, and even the National Geographic grounds be to some degree paved over and developed. From McMansions to bland and pointless strip malls, to wannabe-skyscrapers. It has been a sad thing to witness; a tragedy in slow and painful motion.

When as a child I would walk leisurely across Route 28 in the summers to swim at the local pool, never in my wildest nightmares did I ever imagine that 25 years later, crossing even in a car would be an ordeal. As an adult, I have spent many years now living and working in major cities: 8 years in New York City, 4 in Mexico City, 3 in Frankfurt, 2 in London - frequent taxi rides to and from airports in other major and minor cities throughout the US, Latin America and Europe have given me perhaps too much perspective on how country turns to city, never to return again. While I can appreciate the charms of a city center, I can also tell you firsthand that urban sprawl is, at its outer edges, an ugly and disdainful thing. You should seek to find your pride in defending against this trend, rather than advocating for it.

Please look through Johns Hopkins self-aggrandizing cloak of "world-changing" scientific endeavor and see the permanent scarring effect of unchecked development.

Please also take a moment to look at footage of Detroit, of Flint, perhaps even some places around Baltimore, or other places in America that were urbanized and industrialized for the sake of an organization's delusions of grandeur, job-creation, tax-base expansion and the development of products that would make everyone's lives better... what do those buildings look like now? Quite simply, they are carcasses, used up and abandoned; shuttered up and left to rot. Nature is not quite so quick to reclaim its territory, and the fields and forests once destroyed do not return as rapidly as they were destroyed.

Belward Farm has been beautiful for over 100 years. If nothing but regular maintenance were done to it, its beauty would last at least 100 years more. I can virtually guarantee that no matter what Johns Hopkins builds, it will not be more beautiful (and it will perhaps even not be more useful in the long run) than the beauty and serenity of the fields, fences, and charming barns and main house of Belward Farm.

In another 30 years, however, there is a very good chance that Science City will look more like a shoddy early '70s Brady Bunch backdrop than we would like to admit to ourselves today. Time has a tendency to mock modern architecture as mercilessly as it does any other fashion. If only buildings were as easy to discard as wardrobes...

Please ask yourselves: are we ever going to stop? Does everything really need to be expanded and paved over? Can we not rejuvenate decaying areas rather than destroy pristine ones? Are there not other areas that have been already partially developed that could be adapted for Johns Hopkins' purposes? Are scientists and students suddenly incapable of using email, videoconferencing, Skype, or even just the telephone to communicate? In this age of non-stop interconnectivity, are we to believe that high-density building is the only way for folks to chat about their work? I lived in New York City for many years - I never got to know any of my neighbors or anyone outside my office, for that matter... but I did spend a lot of time on my BlackBerry, on email and on the phone, and got a lot of good work done. Same in Frankfurt. Same in London. Same in Mexico City. I don't think I'm alone in being able to dispel Johns Hopkins' delusional premise of having to destroy a community in order to will one into existence by stacking folks up on top of one another.

Must we really lay waste to this beautiful farm? Is there really no other way? Are we unable to feel the outrage of the woman who entrusted her family's farm to Johns Hopkins and who is now so obviously being betrayed? Are we unable really to put ourselves in her shoes? Do we have to wait for this to become a movie of the week before we can really empathize? But then it will be too late and we will all be driving by a cookie-cutter set of buildings, all glass and brass ambition and self-absorption. Any kind of overpass structure would only add insult to injury - the inevitable graffiti, a urine-soaked pedestrian underpass perhaps - the thought is just unbearable.

There are strip malls and shopping malls throughout Montgomery County, along major thoroughfares, that are decrepit, underutilized and ripe for repurposed, forward-looking, environmentally-friendly development. It would seem to me that there have to be underutilized and already urbanized areas in Montgomery County that could be re-purposed for use in a Science City - urban areas that could be rejuvenated and invigorated through this kind of development rather than sub-urban and country areas that would be destroyed by it. The development of the Rockville City Center springs to mind as an excellent example of how the County has taken existing urban plots and has created tremendous community and tremendous monetary value from such development.

Have we considered utilizing and improving the infrastructure that already exists, for example, around Lakeforest Mall, Montgomery Mall or even continuing the development of the Rockville City Center on the other side of the Rockville Metro Station. During my Christmas visit to my parents, there seemed to be plenty of recently-built office buildings with "for lease" signs on them, and large mall areas without tenants... does it not make more sense to reinvigorate these areas rather than destroy something that is so naturally beautiful just for the sake of development?

If anything, I hope just the length of this email will somehow encourage you to also take a long-term perspective on the consequences of your actions and decisions. Thirty years goes by in a flash, promises are made and cold-heartedly broken, the power of human beings to rationalize their own destructive behavior turns out to be a major force not to be underestimated... in the end, from the perspective of Johns Hopkins, whether they destroy Belward Farm or build anywhere else will really not matter - they will pursue their own self-aggrandizing growth and development much in the same manner as the organisms they study, and just as heedlessly.

But the destruction of Belward Farm will matter - it will be an irretrievable loss not only to Mrs. Banks and her family (past, present and future), not only to those of us who grew up with the farm in our consciousness, not only to those families who live in the area now, but to the heritage of Montgomery County. If not our sense for the value of parks and nature, for sustainable development, for family-friendly environments, for a little-bit-of-country and some sophisticated northern/southern charm, what will be the distinguishing feature of the County in the future? Will our glass buildings be shinier? Will our ten-lane highways be smoother? Or will we just be indistinguishable from other pre-urban areas along the East Coast of the United States, a Southern Jersey, perhaps?

My vote would be to trade this land for something else that Johns Hopkins can use for their purposes, and turn Belward Farm into a County Park or connect it by bike trail to the C&O Canal, or something else sustainable, natural, wonderful, amazing, well thought-through and innovative. Something to be admired well into the next century.

Take a walk this weekend along the C&O Canal... take your children if you have any. If it weren't for the concern of the citizenry (and, thank God, an enlightened Supreme Court Associate Justice), the canal would be just another road, full of groaning SUV traffic at rush hour. Something so beautiful, so unique, so timeless, was also on the verge of being destroyed and made into a place just like any other place.

Please take a stand to protect the heritage of Montgomery County by preserving the heritage of Belward Farm. Remain committed to the unique blend of sophistication, education and nature-loving, sub-urban country community feeling that is a defining feature of this area. You will be forever right in doing so.

Most sincerely, and with great hope,

Beatriz Malo de Molina Laborde
(graduate of Wootton High School, class of 1990)
(graduate of Georgetown University, class of 1994)