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Hans Riemer Comments on Gaithersburg West

Strengthening Montgomery County's position as a global destination for science and biotech companies is a smart strategy to create high-paying jobs for residents and improve our tax base for County services. But cultivating this vision and achieving quality of life and environmental goals are not mutually exclusive, as long as we work together to find common ground.

Our way of life in Montgomery County is at a tipping point. Projections show us slipping behind the region in creating high wage jobs, which will bring our tax base down with it. The downward trend is already clearly evident today, and it could become a spiral. With a cratered revenue base, we are forced to slash our school budget, transit service, environmental programs, and our social services safety net.

We are in a real crisis today and we need to turn the ship around.

A new vision for Gaithersburg West can help achieve the goal of repositioning Montgomery County as a leader in green and biotech job creation, recharging our economy and providing a renewed tax base over the long term.

Montgomery County has previously approved bad development plans around Gaithersburg West. The new Gaithersburg West Draft Plan is nearing a vote. In White Flint, the Council worked together to find a consensus position. With some significant changes, the Council can get there on Gaithersburg West, too.

My principal concern with the plan is how to implement a vision that will rely less on cars and more on transit, walking and biking. Montgomery County should not be planning new auto-oriented cities that are sources of new automobile traffic, carbon emissions and toxic runoff, and Gaithersburg West is no exception. The imbalance between jobs and housing for the new workforce would be a major driver of car commuting, and must be addressed.

Development in the plan should be staged around the Corridor Cities Transitway stops first, following the highest transit-oriented design principles. Requirements for freeway interchanges should be removed. Uncertainty about the CCT should not result in development patterns that foist more cars on the road.

In order to ensure that the plan is truly transit oriented, staging plans should be designed so that mode share goals must be achieved in order to continue to the next development stage. Achieving high levels of transit usage is not simply aspirational. It is a necessity. And if the Federal process for the CCT is going to take decades, county and private funding options should be explored. In White Flint, property owners stepped up to the table to finance crucial infrastructure investments.

The most significant concerns about the plan come with stage four development. At a minimum, density development capacity in stage four should be reduced to so that the total plan capacity is 18 million square feet. The mode share goal at that point should increase to 40%, which would likely require a new strategy for reducing auto usage than what is currently contemplated in the plan. Restriction of the number of parking spaces, as in Silver Spring and White Flint, would provide assurance that mode share goals will be achieved.

Due to significant community concerns about stage four, a Master Plan Amendment should be required to proceed to the stage. This will provide a new opportunity for community input on the plan based on real evidence about progress towards the vision. In White Flint, the community and key partners forged an exciting new model for the County to tackle challenging projects, bringing in key stakeholders and working together on a big vision and the smallest details. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Gaithersburg West. The community should be heard.

Together, these proposals will move the plan significantly towards a new model for development in the County, one that adds fewer cars to the road, promotes a higher quality of life for everyone, engages the community in the process and minimizes environmental damage.

A separate but also critical issue that needs to be addressed at the time of the Gaithersburg West deliberations is the impact of this proposal on job growth and community building around transit areas down-county and east-county. Preliminary projections show a startling decline in economic growth for these areas if Gaithersburg West is approved. This does not have to be the case. We must ask now, what changes will be needed to ensure that all of Montgomery County can thrive even as so much new investment flows to the Gaithersburg West area? This discussion should be had before the vote, not after it, and rather than blithe assurances from planners and elected officials we need real data and specific ideas.

Hans Riemer is a candidate for County Council at-large.

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