

[Is Gaithersburg West a Sleeping Giant? Part Four](#)

The Gaithersburg West Master Plan has become a much more potent political issue than most master plans have been in the past. So is it the sleeping giant of 2010?

To see which way public sentiment is headed, look no further than the City Councils of Gaithersburg and Rockville. Both councils recently sent [critical resolutions](#) on the plan to the County Council. Few politicians are closer to their constituents than municipal officials, and every one of them in the two municipalities has grave doubts about the master plan. That opposition is the product of hundreds of emails sent by opponents, which have hugely outnumbered emails backing the plan. One elected source claims to have not received a single supportive email and states, "I have been surprised by the lack of emails from supporters." Another said the email count ran "95 to 5 against." Yet another said, "Percentage of emails from opponents was virtually 100%." Putting aside the policy arguments – and both sides have legitimate ones – we give the opponents the political edge based on their numbers, intensity and appetite for combat. If a master plan is passed that contains close to the maximum 20 million square feet of commercial space in the current proposal, we believe the opponents will man the barricades and set loose the dogs of war.

That said, the issue's potential electoral impact is limited by circumstance. The plan will have no impact on the Council District 3 race since incumbent Phil Andrews – who is the plan's fiercest opponent – has no challenger. If he does get a rival, we believe he will [win easily](#). Since the plan is not a state issue, it should have little impact on the District 17 or District 39 legislative contests, though some candidates (like Delegate [Saqib Ali](#)) will no doubt try to earn brownie points by taking a position. That leaves the County Council at-large race, in which all four incumbents plus three declared challengers are running.

Incumbent Marc Elrich, who is aligned with Andrews against the plan, will be a clear beneficiary of any opposition movement. Supporters regard incumbents Nancy Floreen, George Leventhal and Duchy Trachtenberg as allies. Floreen and Leventhal are two-time winners with good financing and probable access to MCEA's Apple Ballot. Floreen, one of the county's more tenacious campaigners, has won twice without the Apple. Trachtenberg has [lots of money](#) and no Apple. We believe that no one should take her vote on the master plan for granted. None of the three challengers has taken a public position on Gaithersburg West, but Action Committee for Transit (of which Hans Riemer is Vice-President) is [opposed](#).

Another potential factor in the at-large race is Phil Andrews, who is not inclined to sit idly by and allow the master plan to pass without a fight. Andrews sent us this statement:

If the County Council approves a Gaithersburg West Master Plan that would harm my constituents and many other people in the County by allowing unbearable traffic congestion in Gaithersburg, Rockville, and North Potomac, I will do what is necessary to protect my constituents by working to ensure that the next Council is committed to amending the Plan to prevent intolerable traffic congestion.

Read into that what you will, folks.

What impact could Gaithersburg West have on the at-large race? To answer that question, we turn to data on the [2006 at-large Democratic primary](#). Our goal is to quantify the number of Democratic votes in play near the plan area. We counted actual at-large votes cast in the Life Sciences Center (LSC) precinct itself, within one mile of that precinct and within two miles. Neither the precinct counts nor the total count to which we compare them include absentee votes as the county Board of Elections website does not break out absentee votes by precinct.

In 2006, voters in the LSC precinct cast 456 votes in the at-large primary. Additional voters within one mile cast 12,201 votes. Additional voters within two miles cast 8,028 votes. Those three groups together accounted for 20,685 at-large votes, or seven percent of the county's precinct total of 293,685.

Gaithersburg West Precincts			
LSC Parcel			
		2006 At-Large	% of County
Precinct	Location	Primary Votes	At-Large Votes
09-33	Gaithersburg	456	0.2%
Within one mile of LSC			
		2006 At-Large	% of County
Precincts	Location	Primary Votes	At-Large Votes
04-14	Rockville	1,380	0.5%
04-16	Rockville	1,527	0.5%
04-24	Rockville	935	0.3%
06-04	Gaithersburg	2,038	0.7%
06-08	North Potomac	1,426	0.5%
09-02	Gaithersburg	942	0.3%
09-06	Gaithersburg	1,203	0.4%
09-16	Gaithersburg	684	0.2%
09-31	Gaithersburg	704	0.2%
09-35	Gaithersburg	1,362	0.5%
Total		12,201	4.2%
Within two miles of LSC			
		2006 At-Large	% of County
Precincts	Location	Primary Votes	At-Large Votes
04-03	Rockville	1,999	0.7%
04-20	Rockville	867	0.3%
06-06	North Potomac	864	0.3%
06-12	Rockville	NA	NA
06-13	Gaithersburg	NA	NA
09-01	Gaithersburg	593	0.2%
09-10	Gaithersburg	1,069	0.4%
09-13	Gaithersburg	1,248	0.4%
09-27	Gaithersburg	1,388	0.5%
Total		8,028	2.7%
Total, All Above Categories		20,685	7.0%

The raw vote counts in these precincts vastly overstate the reach of the issue for two reasons. First, the majority of voters in these areas will not vote on this issue alone. Second, at least a few voters may support the master plan, thereby washing out an uncertain percentage of the opponent votes. But if the opponents can rally a net five percent of these primary voters to focus on this issue, they will be able to steer at least a thousand votes. If they can muster a greater intensity and geographic reach, they could influence more than that. And if the 2010 primary has lower turnout than 2006 – and it very well may due to the lack of competitive County Executive and Congressional races – the Gaithersburg West issue will be accordingly magnified.

One thousand votes is a potentially significant amount in a County Council at-large primary. On election night in [1998](#), Steve Silverman edged out Pat Baptiste for the fourth seat by 640 votes. In [2002](#), George Leventhal won the fourth seat over Blair Ewing by 1,140 votes. In [2006](#), Nancy Floreen won the fourth seat over Mike Subin by 5,684 votes, but Subin had been [badly injured in a bicycle accident](#) and did not campaign hard. Based on this history, no one can rule out that the 2010 at-large election could be decided by a couple thousand votes or less. **One large, organized single-interest group could make a difference.**

So, to answer our own question: is Gaithersburg West a sleeping giant in 2010? It's too early to say for sure, but it will certainly be a factor.

Posted by Adam Pagnucco

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