



# COALITION FOR SMARTER GROWTH

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## Testimony on the East Falls Church Plan

April 14, 2011

The Coalition for Smarter Growth endorses the East Falls Church Plan while making recommendations for enhancement and implementation of the plan. We commend the extensive process that has gone into the development of a sustainable, walkable vision for the future -- including a citizen task force that included representatives of neighborhood associations and other stakeholders, as well as additional analysis and refinement by county staff based on feedback from the community.

Today, too much of the environment around the East Falls Church Metro station is dominated by wide roads and fast traffic which makes walking and bicycling and access to the station difficult and unsafe. I-66 has divided the neighborhoods and the area lacks the neighborhood services and activity that are possible in a Metro station community. This plan represents a modest level of development. This level of development -- 600,000 square feet -- is essential for the community to gain a range of benefits including neighborhood retail services and redesign of the streets to be safer for all users, pedestrians, bicyclists, transit-users, drivers and people of all abilities. Additional development capacity may be needed to meet the county's affordable housing goals, and could be provided without undermining the plan or detracting from the community.

We particularly commend the following aspects of the plan:

- 1) Street designs which balance use by bicycles, pedestrians, transit, retail, and local and through traffic.
- 2) The proposed platform extension with connection to a park and bicycle/pedestrian access to the Falls Church side of the station. Combined with the pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements to Washington Boulevard, Lee Highway and Sycamore Street, the two sides of the community will be knitted back together.
- 3) Redevelopment of the Metro Station parcel with a mix of uses, and with heights that are appropriate and step back to the highest heights next to the highway.
- 4) The overall mix of residential, retail and office uses.
- 5) The analysis of the transportation performance which shows that this approach to development will not add measurably to future traffic and will in fact offer more non-auto options for local and regional travel.

We hope you will ensure a focus on the steps necessary to ensure that the plan and its implementation meet the county's affordable housing goals, including:

- 1) Identifying opportunities to partner with non-profit housing groups and developers to preserve existing affordable housing and add new housing.
- 2) Taking full advantage of the public land at the Metro station in order to require a higher percentage of affordable units for households at or below 60 percent of area median income.
- 3) Ensuring that the building forms will allow for more affordable housing.
- 4) Using density bonuses and parking reductions to increase the number of affordable units.
- 5) Particular consideration should be given to the Verizon site, which should be a multifamily site rather than an optional town-house site -- in order to maximize the opportunities for affordable housing.

Again, the plan sets a modest level of development and could provide additional development rights as incentives for affordable housing.

We recommend that careful consideration be given to the design of the Metro station parcel to ensure that retail is located on the right frontages and that the public green is in the best place to ensure active use and its potential role as a center of the community.

Two issues besides the level of development appear to be the primary concerns of some residents in the surrounding neighborhoods: traffic and parking. It is important to view both issues in the context of the region's future. If we are to add one to two million more people to the region and not have a complete traffic meltdown, then we need to maximize transit usage, particularly through those who would live and work near transit.

Changing demographics are already leading to significant increases in demand to live near transit and in walkable/bikeable neighborhoods with convenient access to services. Downsizing empty nesters and retirees and young professionals are looking for these options. Rising energy prices are adding to the demand.

With the coming of the Silver Line to Tysons Corner and beyond we have the opportunity to expand our region's network of transit-oriented communities and the transportation performance must be seen in this light. With more and more people living and working near an expanded set of transit stations, we will reduce future driving and traffic. When we combine housing and jobs on the transit network with walkable/bikeable communities, bus service, and Zipcar, more and more future households will own just one car or no car – and if they own a car they might not use it for most trips.

We support the proposed number of parking spaces and the parking policies in the plan. These include:

- 1) A significant amount of new on-street parking supply which will support the retailers, slow traffic and make the area safer for pedestrians.
- 2) Reduction in parking for residential development because of the combination of transit and services in close proximity.
- 3) Shared parking, where the different uses with their differences in time of day use allow for fewer structured spaces and save money which can be invested in more affordable housing and other community amenities. Shared parking will allow for weekend and mid-day use by local suburban neighborhood residents.
- 4) Enhanced bus, bike and pedestrian facilities will improve access to the stations for the vast majority of Metro users who live within two miles of the station.
- 5) A neighborhood parking permit program will ensure that on-street spaces in the surrounding neighborhoods remain available for residents.

In summary, we strongly support the East Falls Church Plan and urge the strong commitment of county staff time and investment to making this a great neighborhood center. The plan offers the opportunity to make the streets and access to Metro safer, to reduce medium and long-term traffic, provide convenient neighborhood services, and to enhance the desirability of surrounding neighborhoods.

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