

PHED Committee #1
February 3, 2014

MEMORANDUM

January 30, 2014

TO: Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee

FROM: Marlene Michaelson, Senior Legislative Analyst 

SUBJECT: Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment

This is the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee's second worksession on the Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment. The Committee considered transportation issues at a previous meeting. This memorandum covers zoning, staging, and open space/park issues.

Councilmembers should bring their copy of the Plan to the meeting.

The Committee has already heard about the benefits of demolishing the existing building related to the Purple Line station, the Metro station, the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT), Woodmont Plaza and bike storage. These benefits are described on page 4 of the Amendment and not addressed further here in this memorandum.

The Council heard testimony about the potential need for cost sharing arrangements or financial incentives. This issue was addressed in a report prepared by Bolan Smart and attached as an appendix to the Minor Master Plan Amendment. Staff recognizes that there are significant financial issues that impact the viability of demolishing and reconstructing an existing building; however, these are topics that should not be addressed in the Master Plan. The Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee or Council may be interested in following County efforts outside the Master Plan process to help facilitate this project.

Land Use and Zoning

The existing zoning for the area covered by the Minor Master Plan is Central Business District (CBD) – 2, which has a maximum floor area ratio (FAR) of 5.0 and height of 143 feet. The existing development, on the property at 8282 Wisconsin owned by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (known as the Apex building), is less than 2 FAR. The Plan recommends changing the zoning on the Apex building property to Commercial/Residential (CR) 8.0, Commercial (C) 7.5, Residential (R) 7.5, Height (H) 250. **This is comparable to the zoning at the current Metro entrance north of the site on Wisconsin, which is CBD-3 (FAR 8.0, height 200 feet).** The additional 50 feet in height is recommended for the Apex site to accommodate the numerous elements of the improved station and trail and is only recommended if the property develops before the Purple Line. Otherwise, the height is limited to 200 feet.

The Plan recommends rezoning the remainder of the block to CR 5, C 5, R 5, H 145, which is comparable to the existing zoning. If not via this Minor Master Plan Amendment, the zoning for these properties would be converted as part of the District Map Amendment that will follow the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite.

Staff supports the Minor Master Plan Amendment recommendations for height and density. The Council previously determined that an 8.0 FAR and 200 foot height limit were appropriate for the existing Metro Entrance and they are appropriate for a site that will house both Metro and Purple Line Stations. Staff notes that there are some who believe that this density and height would be inappropriate if the construction of the Purple Line proceeds before the property owner makes a decision to tear down the existing building and the opportunity for the public benefits associated with reconstruction are lost. However, Staff understands that it may not be possible to reconstruct the building after the Purple Line is built. Even if some additional FAR is possible – it will be virtually impossible to achieve an 8.0 FAR without being able to change the building foundation, which will not be feasible after construction of the Purple Line.

Staging

The Council received testimony asking that the Minor Master Plan include staging that would prohibit the property owners from developing under the new zone until the Purple Line is funded. The County is asking the property owner to - in an extraordinarily short amount of time - make a decision about demolishing their existing building and relocating. In Staff's view, it would be completely inappropriate for the Council to ask the property owner to begin this process without assurance of the zoning. Moreover, unlike other master plans where the additional density would not be feasible without the new transit (which did not exist at the locations being rezoned in other plans), Bethesda already has transit. Staff does not recommend staging in this Minor Master Plan.

Open Space/Parks

The Council received testimony regarding an existing park (Elm Street Local Park) and proposed open space (Woodmont Plaza). The Minor Master Plan only briefly references these two spaces. It indicates that the Capital Crescent Trail will cross the edge of Elm Street Park. The testimony expressed concern regarding decreasing the size of the park and shadows from a taller building. As the map on page 8 shows, the trail will run along the edge of the park. The Plan should state the intent of keeping the rest of the park operational and recommend no further decrease in parkland. Staff does not believe that the possibility of a shadow should prevent the Council from adding height along Wisconsin Avenue. Moreover, since the building is to the west of the park, it should not impede sunlight most of the day.

The Plan describes Woodmont Plaza (at the intersection of Bethesda and Woodmont Avenues) as the location of a station entrance, but does not say anything further about the plaza. Woodmont Plaza is an open space that was required as part of the Woodmont East development.¹ The property owner would not be exempt from the requirement to build the plaza without amending the approved regulatory plans that require the plaza. Staff believes the Plan should indicate that the plaza (or an alternative public open space which serves the same function) is an important part of any future redevelopment of the block.

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¹ The plaza is approximately 60-90 feet x 140 feet and comprises approximately 2700 square feet of lawn panels and 2,150 square feet of landscaped cover. The sidewalks are a minimum 20 feet wide with a mix of shade trees, seating, way-finding, and pedestrian/cyclist amenities. The mews (between the buildings) is over 14,000 square feet in easements to accommodate the Purple Line and Capital Crescent Trail and contains an approximate 50 x 75 foot area for seating and café areas.