

April 19, 2023

Karen Burditt



Montgomery County Council  
Werner Council Office Building  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, MD 20850

Re: Planning Board Draft Amendment to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation for Weller's Dry-Cleaning.

Dear Council President Glass and Members of the Montgomery County Council:

I am writing as a 24 year resident of East Silver Spring and as a Weller's Dry Cleaning customer until it closed in 2022. I knew Charlie Weller, his son Brian, and the other Weller's workers like Isaac and Mr. Mohammed. I saw them every week and listened to their stories about their families and they listened to mine. I am also writing as a long time supporter of Fenton Village, a founding member of the Fenton Village Inc. Board, and the creator of the annual "Best Of Fenton Village" contest that ran 2012-2017. Finally, I am writing as an Architect and Preservationist, who is actively involved in Montgomery County preservation issues.

I am writing in support of the designation of Weller's Dry Cleaning to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation.

Fenton Village has always been a unique and 'funky' place. A small business district that is very different from the pre-planned town centers and cookie cutter mixed use developments. Fenton Village is 'real', a mix of old and new, a small business incubator, and one of the most diverse small business districts in Montgomery County. Fenton Village is so unique that the County spent considerable time and effort towards marketing it as a nighttime destination area. Fenton village has thrived while newer parts of the area have kept reinventing their look in an attempt to attract clientele. Part of Fenton Village's charm has been the varied building types that encompass more than 120 years of Silver Spring's history. Downtown Silver Spring has one of the best surviving collections of Mid Century commercial architecture left in the county. A visible link to a past when Silver Spring was the commercial center of the county. Weller's Dry Cleaner is the most identifiable building left in Fenton Village and downtown Silver Spring. There is not another building like Wellers left in the region.

Given the uniqueness of Fenton Village now, and the history of Downtown Silver Spring, the entire Fenton Village and Downtown Silver Spring areas should be a prized historic district. Sadly, the reality is far different. There has not been a building designated in Fenton Village and Downtown Silver Spring in over twenty years. Since those previous County Councils had the vision to designate a handful of buildings in the 1990's and early 2000's, no subsequent County Council has voted to designate a single building in the area. Reactive short term gain has been the focus of the Council, not a far sighted vision of how Silver Spring could be on the forefront of preservation of Mid Century Modern Architecture in the region.

My interest in preservation goes back to my childhood in Rockville. My family moved there just as the new Rockville Mall was finished in the early 1970's. The charming historic downtown of Rockville had been bulldozed and replaced with the concrete bunker of Rockville Mall, a forbidding dark place that was bankrupt within a decade. Now Rockville has a faux downtown, instead of a revitalized historic downtown. Downtown Silver Spring has more authentic character than downtown Rockville, or the Pike & Rose, or the Rio. And yet all the new developments depend on tearing down that authentic character to build generic new buildings that all look alike. Why would anyone come to Silver Spring when it looks just like The Pike & Rose, the Rio, or any of the new developments in the DMV?

It takes courage to advocate for preservation, the developers don't like you, the property owners don't like you, politicians avoid you. Yet, everyone loves a selfie in front of a unique preserved building. Residents and visitors alike seek out those unique places that are different from the one size fits all cookie cutter developments. The American Film Institute made the restored Art Deco Silver Theater its home because it understood the value of preservation. It takes courage to vote for designation, because as Council Members, you must rely on the expertise of the County's own Historic Preservation staff, the Planning staff, and those experts in the field who come to testify. It takes courage to explain to a Property Owner or a Developer that they need to think outside of their proposed box, to include a designated building in their project. To make Adaptive Reuse their goal.

I ask you to avoid the bunkerlike mentality that built Rockville Mall. Follow the lead of other urban areas in the Mid-Atlantic and adaptively reuse the unique historic buildings in Fenton Village and Downtown Silver Spring. If Baltimore, Richmond, DC, and Frederick, can successfully do it, then Montgomery County should be able to save their significant buildings while adding new residential space. It will take courage on your part, like the courage of those earlier Council members who saved the Silver Theater, the Hecht Building, The Dry Cleaning Institute, and the Canada Dry Building, all successful examples of adaptive reuse.

As an HPC Commissioner, I was at both HPC meetings related to Wellers, and there was no bias against the current owners of Wellers. There was a great deal of respect for these small business Owners who have made a success like so many others I have known in Fenton Village, like Charlie Weller. We tried to explain that their project could be successful with a designated Weller's and its tax credits.

I ask that you set aside the recommendation of a Planning Board vote and its procedural irregularities, and the troubling conduct of those Planning Board Commissioners. That Planning Board Meeting reflected poorly on the Planning Board and their understanding of the designation criteria and procedures.

I ask for your courage to vote to designate Weller's, so in the future, your term on the Council will be remembered as one that saved the history of Montgomery County for future generations.

Respectfully,

Karen Burditt, AIA, APT, NCARB  
HPC, MPI