

April 18, 2023

Steve Knight

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

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

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

I am writing in support of adding the Weller's Dry-Cleaning Building to the County Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The Planning Board's February vote against inclusion of this little midcentury modern building at the corner of Fenton Street and Thayer Avenue in Fenton Village was poorly considered, and went against the recommendations of the approved Silver Spring Downtown and Adjacent Communities Plan, Planning Staff, Historic Preservation Staff, and the Historic Preservation Commission, all of whom have worked with a great deal of professional care and community input for quite some time to put forth a solid case for protecting this building, the standout example of its era in the roughly 20 blocks comprising Fenton Village.

The February Planning Board hearing included some troubling irregularities (assuming you did not attend, here is [a link to the recording](#) of the hearing; the Wellers portion starts at about 1 hour, 10 minutes). Most notable among irregularities for me was the lack of focus on the redevelopment potential of the property that would include adaptive reuse of the Weller's building. Planning staff knowledgeable about the matter was on hand to elaborate, but no questions were ever asked of them.

For some background, the current owner has assembled the Wellers site along with the two adjacent parcels to the south. They have found a new tenant for the building (Silver Spring Beauty Supply), and their aim is to ultimately redevelop the assembled site, a laudable goal on the face of it. The current owner is representative of Fenton Village: they are Ethiopian immigrants and businesspeople who have worked hard and overcome challenges to attain their success.

I am a practicing architect, and I know the Weller's building and my East Silver Spring community well. I have studied the matter, and it is clear that a redevelopment scenario that includes adaptive reuse of the Weller's property yields only about 10% less total building area than a scenario that does not include adaptive reuse of Weller's. To help illustrate the difference in this particular case, this translates to about 9 fewer residential units, a particularly small sum for a community that has shown a great deal of sophistication and receptivity to growth and development over the last 10 years, absorbing somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 residential units in its 20-block area.

The above said, I appreciate that 10% of buildable area is significant to the current owner. The Planning Staff and Board have many tools at their disposal to help the owner realize the full buildable area potential if they were to retain the Weller's building as part of their redevelopment plans (e.g., adding a partial set back story above the currently allowable building height set forth in the Fenton Village Overlay Zone). I have looked into the matter further, and I have developed the attached study using relatively simple diagrams to illustrate 2 redevelopment scenarios for the assembled site: one that retains the Wellers Building (labeled Typical Redevelopment Scenario), and the other that does not (labeled Adaptive Reuse Redevelopment Scenario). With a little bit of creative thinking and possibly a variance that I think would be quite reasonable to grant, I am confident a redevelopment scenario that retains the Wellers Building can yield nearly the same amount of development yield. I have already shared these observations and the attached study with staff with Council President Glass's office and with Elsa HizeL-McCoy with Planning Staff.

There was one additional point to mention, as it was (inappropriately) raised as a potential barrier to adaptive reuse during the Planning Board hearing: namely that the original use of the building was a dry cleaner. As such, there may be concerns about soil contaminants from its previous use. In my experience, managing potential soil contamination in these situations is very routine, and should not be an impediment to adaptive reuse of the Weller's Building. In fact, the active years of Wellers in its original use coincided with relatively harmless methods of dry cleaning developed after World War II. More information about this can be found in the Preservation Staff's report.

My suggestion as described herein and as illustrated in the attached diagrams is, at its core, about enhancing value for the owner, the community, and the County. The County has not designated anything of significance for the Master Plan for Historic Preservation in any of our developed urban areas in at least a generation. Cases continue to be debated along familiar lines: maintaining property values and development rights vs. preserving some of our past. We have now added to that a need for more housing in those areas. What I am suggesting is a way for us to have them both by thinking a little more broadly about the development allowances of this site. For what it is worth, I have had the opportunity to engage with colleagues internationally who have successfully balanced preservation with development: if my friends in Mumbai and Tel Aviv can do, I am confident we can do it here in Montgomery County too.

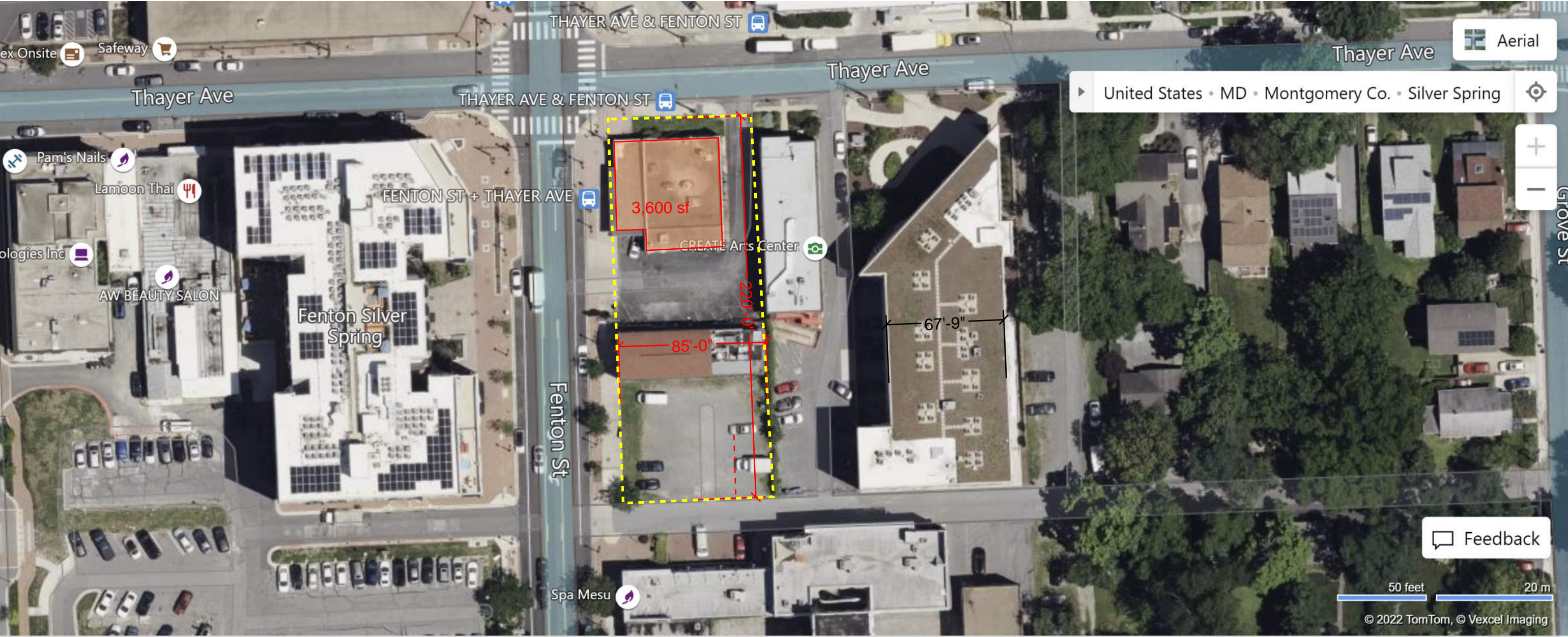
I ask that you that you and your fellow Council Members reconsider the poorly reached conclusions of the Planning Board and reassess this matter. I (and many others!) care deeply about this building, the community, and the building's owner. I have tried to briefly outlay what I believe is a simple solution to a problem that has generated a great deal of unnecessary controversy. I hope that you will contact Planning Staff to learn more, I am available at your convenience to discuss the matter further if that would be helpful. I am confident that there is a win-win solution to this matter, and I have full faith in the building's owner to realize it.

Sincerely,



Steve Knight, SARA, AIA, NCARB

attachments (3)



Existing Site

Assembled Parcels at Southeast Corner of
Fenton Street & Thayer Avenue



Typical Redevelopment Scenario

New Adjacent 6-Story Development: 73,000 sf



Adaptive Reuse Redevelopment Scenario

Existing Building: 3,600 sf
+ New Adjacent 6-Story Development: 60,400 sf
64,000 sf

+ Additional One-Story Bonus for Retaining Existing Building: 9,000 sf
73,000 sf