

Proposal for a True Life Sciences R&D Center at Shady Grove West

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There are real concerns whether the Life Sciences Center (LSC) plan and LSC zone as drafted will lead to the dynamic urban biomedical research and service center that the plan and officials envision. Various problems have been identified:

- The zoned capacity of the draft master plan far exceeds the 2030 forecast demand for development in the R&D village policy area. Demand for development in the next 20 + years will be inadequate to build the coherent set of urban centers envisioned by the plan. The forecast growth will tend to produce speculative relatively low density buildings in a sprawl pattern. The force for sprawl is strengthened by the network of wide heavily traveled roads which break up the area into isolated blocks.
- The LSC zone is quite permissive as to the use of property when it is developed. The only legal limitation is a maximum of 50% “general offices”. The zone’s definition of “research, development and related activities” is very broad and includes many activities other than biomedical research, which is the nominal focus of LSC. Hotel, retail and entertainment uses are not restricted.
- The plan does not ensure that housing will be produced. Adequate housing is required to create complete neighborhoods, to reduce car commuting and to promote socioeconomic equity.
- The Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) is inadequate to serve a truly transit-oriented urban place. At best, if operating all the way to Clarksburg it would carry only 13% of work trips. That is lower than the County average of 15.5% transit mode share. The value of the long loop through the LSC is unclear. Though the loop adds riders at the LSC, State MTA officials have expressed concern about the added cost, and reduced ridership north of the LSC. There is concern that the added cost and lower upstream ridership means that the CCT would not get beyond Gaithersburg. In addition, routing the CCT across Belward and Muddy Branch road would add considerable cost to the project and would hamper ingress to and egress from the Mission Hills community. In fact there is a non-negligible possibility that the MTA will decide to keep the current route and not go through the LSC at all.
- The high density, excessive employment, lack of housing, and shortcomings of the CCT mean that if the plan is built out, it will induce large amounts of sprawl housing development .
- Car travel will increase dramatically. Traffic congestion will be extreme even if the CCT runs its full length and road capacity grows as planned.

To sample the congestion impacts forecast by traffic modeling of the plan:

- Compared to development under the current master plan, the LSC would generate about 7000 more transit trips but some 35,000 more car trips; at least 10,000 more trips on I-270.
- These car trips will lead to extreme traffic congestion, far worse than present levels. Daily peak hour vehicle miles traveled increases from 47,000 to 80,000. Despite five new highway interchanges on roads like great Seneca Highway, traffic at seven intersections will exceed the road capacity, up from three at present. Another 14 intersections will nearly reach capacity. Average volume to capacity ratio will rise from 79% to 93%. Average speed at the peak period will decline from 17 mph to 9 mph.

The Reasonable Plan

To avoid the problems inherent in the draft plan, and produce an LSC in sustainable urban form, more change is needed than just reducing the density. A different organizing vision is needed. Residents for Reasonable Development proposes the following goal and overall parameters for such a plan:

To design a plan that meets the County's goals for technology business growth in a mixed use urban setting served by transit. It respects other goals as well: Environmental sustainability, integrity of surrounding neighborhoods, housing for the workforce, and minimizing induced sprawl development.

To meet this goal, the plan needs the following qualities:

- A critical mass of development potential in a concentrated urban form centered on transit stations;
- Sufficient housing to provide a viable residential community and allow a substantial number of employees to live within walking distance of work;
- Major green accessible open space on Belward Farm;
- A higher than average transit mode share. Reasonable level of service on roads without turning the major arterials into freeways.
- Safe walk/bicycle access through the planning area and into it from the neighborhoods.

In pursuit of the goal, the Reasonable Plan would organize the LSC as follows:

- *Assume the CCT remains on the current approved route.* The exact location of the two stations must be optimized; the Danac station should be tested both north and south of Key West Avenue. Development would be oriented to these two stations.
- *The sole urban center would surround the Danac station.* The LSC's downtown would span Key West Avenue which somehow must become a pedestrian accessible urban boulevard in this area. It would encompass the western part of LSC North and the northern part of LSC Central: the Johns Hopkins classroom site, and publicly owned land containing low density medical facilities. Highest density would be FAR 1.5.
- *LSC North would be zoned CR* with a building mix of at least 60% residential and 40 % commercial. Outside the center, density would be FAR 0.75. Property owners would be encouraged work together on a coordinated redevelopment scheme that included the center.
- *LSC Central and Belward would be planned and zoned to give assurance that the desired biomedical uses would emerge.* The LSC zone should specify a minimum percentage of space in biomedical R&D, educational and medical service uses, say 50%; general offices would be limited to 25%. Master plans would be able to specify a higher percentage on individual sites.
- *LC Central would be zoned LSC.* A percentage of development of housing should be specified; it would be concentrated on the publicly owned land in the northwest corner of the area with some on the adjacent part of the Johns Hopkins property. Otherwise, life sciences, educational and medical uses should predominate. LSC Central is a large area with a lot of capacity for further technology business development if additional density is granted.

The Reasonable Plan proposes:

- 1.5 FAR in the southern part of the urban center (dependent on JHU providing some housing)
- 1.0 FAR around the hospital
- 0.75 FAR in the periphery nearer Shady Grove and Darnestown Roads. (See map)
- *A more compelling vision for the development of Belward Farm must be developed*, or this beautiful property will not fill its potential either as a premier research campus or as a Central Park for the LSC. We propose the following: At present, the LSC has no high profile research institution that either generates or attracts scientific and business development. JHU should establish a major research institution using as the Scripps Research Institute (La Jolla CA) as a model. If such an institution were to meet the high scientific research standards of JHU, Baltimore, it would, in time, stimulate the growth of high-quality life sciences businesses in the area. One of the attractions would be the form of development: though the presently approved 1.4 million square feet could be built, the campus would be compact and urban in design. About two thirds of the farm would remain in open space.

The currently developed part of the farm should be redeveloped in a coordinated manner with the JHU property, yielding a potential for about 2 million square feet of space. The LSC zone for this research campus should specify a minimum of 60% life sciences/medical uses and limit the amount of retail/commercial uses.

The JHU research campus would stimulate biotech and other development on other LSC properties including their classroom site.

- *LSC West, the Public Service Training Academy should keep its present residential designation and capacity for about 2000 housing units, since housing is badly needed for the thousands of current and new employees.*
- *The staging plan should give the urban center the opportunity to begin development first (assuming the hospital and housing are exempt from staging rules). An exception could be made if JHU proceeded with the premier research campus.*
- *The location of the two CCT stations, and the route between them should be tweaked to maximize access to the major development areas.* The transit system envisioned is similar to one under consideration by the State MTA: The CCT bus rapid transit runs south from Crown Farm to a station near the intersection of Broschart and Key West Ave, but the ideal route and location of the second station needs study.

These stations would be within walking distance of much of LSC Central and Belward. They would be within a half mile of the residential LSC West. Key West Ave. and Great Seneca must be allowed decent pedestrian crossings where needed to serve the transit stations.

As outlined by MTA, some of the express BRT buses would divert from the exclusive busway and run through the LSC on the arterial roads. This is a flexible, efficient and economical way to serve the LSC with transit. The frequency of bus service could be expanded gradually as the southern and western parts of the LSC develop. Bus routes could be customized to serve certain properties if they develop early.

RRD recommends limiting development within the whole LSC to about 38,000 jobs, which is the capacity of the existing master plan for the area adopted in 1990. This would allow development to nearly double the existing commercial space, as opposed to a more than tripling in the staff draft. Our plan increases housing modestly from the staff draft's 8,000 to about 8,500.