

SEMINARY HILL ASSOCIATION, INC.
4009 North Garland Street
Alexandria, VA 22304

April 21, 2008

The Honorable William D. Euille, Mayor
City Hall, Room 2300
301 King Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Dear Mayor Euille:

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Landmark/Van Dorn Advisory Group, but I have concerns with how the activities of this group are proceeding. I have already discussed some of my concerns informally with Faroll Hamer, who was eager to hear my thoughts, and some positive changes appear to be in place for tonight's meeting. However, as I have been sharing my concerns with citizens at various meetings throughout the City over the past few months, people have encouraged me to officially express my concerns to the City. Therefore, I have documented my thoughts in the attached summary.

Sincerely,

Joanne Lepanto
President, Seminary Hill Association, Inc.

attachment

cc: Vice Mayor Pepper and Members of City Council
Faroll Hamer, Director of Planning and Zoning
Kathleen Beeton, Department of Planning and Zoning
Patrick Mann, Department of Planning and Zoning
Seminary Hill Association, Inc. Board of Directors
Seminary Hill Association, Inc. Landmark/Van Dorn Task Force Members
Michael Hobbs, Co-Chair, Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations
Geoffrey Goodale, Co-Chair, Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations

Landmark/Van Dorn (L/VD) Advisory Group
Comments, Concerns and Questions
prepared by
Joanne Lepanto
President, Seminary Hill Association, Inc.
L/VD Advisory Group Member (representing Seminary Hill Association, Inc.)
April 21, 2008

L/VD Advisory Group Makeup

- Why isn't there a member of the City Planning Commission in the L/VD Advisory Group?
- Why is only one owner of Landmark Mall represented? Were the other two owners invited to participate but declined, or were they not invited to participate? If they were not invited, why not? How will their lack of involvement affect the redevelopment of Landmark?
- Who is the "chair" of the Advisory Group? The consultant seems to be in charge—why aren't the discussions being led by someone from the City (e.g., a member of the Planning Commission)?
- What is the significance of our being an "advisory group" as opposed to a "task force," "committee," etc.? What are the distinctions among these in terms of the weight/impact that our recommendations will have?

Advisory Group Meetings

- The physical layout of tables and chairs for the Advisory Group is not conducive to discussion, nor getting to know our fellow Group members. The layout used by the Infill Task Force, along with their use of large name cards, seems to work well.
- There are too many presentations at each meeting. The topics are relevant, important and interesting, but the presentations proceed at lightning speed, with no opportunity to read slides and graphs, ask questions, or absorb much information.
- Everyone needs to be able to see the slides.
- Opportunities for discussion and exchange of ideas among Advisory Group members are too limited.

City Decisions Already Made?

It was my understanding at the outset that the Advisory Group was starting with a blank canvas, but it seems that certain parameters have been predetermined by the City and/or the consultant. I feel that we are being steered in a particular direction by the consultant, with very little input from Group members. I hope that this is not the case, and I hope that the answers to the following questions are "no."

- Has it been decided that a traditional mall at the Landmark site will not be considered? If so, by whom?

- Has it been decided that high-density, high-rise residential development will be included in any plan for the Landmark site? If so, by whom?
- Has it been decided that densities throughout the study area will increase from present levels? If so, by whom?
- Are there any (other) parameters that have been predetermined by the City and/or the consultant?

My Feedback on the Bus Tour

General:

- I was surprised that we were not encouraged to record our thoughts and reactions as we visited each site. This would have been useful documentation, especially for the consultant as he prepared his summary presentation.
- None of the sites visited has both the interstate visibility and access that Landmark does.
- Landmark’s visibility from and access via the interstate is a feature that should be capitalized on as an opportunity to be a regional draw, especially given that Landmark does not have a Metro station.

Fairfax Corner:

- Pleasant, but not much of a retail draw for repeat shopping trips
- Plow and Hearth is an initial draw, but ultimately a “been-there-done-that” kind of store
- Ordinary, chain restaurants

Reston Town Center:

- Not enough green space
- Too much hardscape, too little permeable area—all brick and concrete, little grass
- Buildings way too tall
- Too much density
- Fountain and immediate surrounding area is attractive
- There is not enough retail here to be a regional shopping draw
- Discussion of Reston as a potential model for Landmark should take into consideration citizen reaction to the level of development there
- Note: based on personal experience separate from the tour, the parking garage is poorly designed—it takes way too long to get in and out when you have to park on an upper level

Downtown Silver Spring:

- Good example of what *not* to do—there is nothing here that I want to emulate
- Unattractive overall
- Tacky signage
- The center of this town center gives a feeling of being closed in and trapped
- Lots of traffic on perimeter streets, very noisy

- The only green space is a playing field of artificial turf, which is so brightly-colored and fake-looking that it is unattractive

Bethesda Row:

- Attractive storefronts
- Nice mix of shops, not all chains
- Too much density

Chevy Chase, MD:

- Of all of the centers visited, this model has the greatest potential to be a regional shopping draw
- Has the benefit of a Metro station, but lacks interstate access and visibility

Clarendon:

- The Container Store and possibly Crate & Barrel are potential draws for repeat shoppers
- Since there is not a Metro station at Landmark, this model is largely irrelevant to the Landmark site (unless we move the Metro station to Landmark, or move Landmark to the Metro station)
- The park area in the center is an attractive and inviting space

Connecticut Avenue (DC):

- Since there is not a Metro station at Landmark, nor a series of Metro stations running through the L/VD study area, this model is largely irrelevant.

My Comments on the Consultant’s Summary of the Bus Tour

The consultant’s March 17, 2008 presentation entitled “Learning from the Town Centers Tour,” is largely a summary of his own views and assertions, and leaves out comments by Group members. A few examples follow.

- With regard to Reston, two Group members commented that the buildings are too tall and there is not enough green space, but these comments are not included.
- With regard to Silver Spring, the presentation describes open space quality as “good”—does this reflect comments by members of the Group? (I found the open space to be undesirable.)
- There is a page of “Lessons Learned” for Ballston, but we did not visit Ballston or even drive through it.
- Chevy Chase is the only site visited which is a dominant retail shopping center bearing any resemblance to a traditional mall. Why was Chevy Chase omitted from the presentation?
- Regarding the “Summary (DRAFT)” on pages 25-26, how were these points arrived at? I do not recall the Group discussing or reaching consensus on these points. Has it already been decided that Landmark will have a “street grid”? If so, by whom? Has it already been decided that Landmark will have “tall buildings on narrow streets”? If so, by whom?