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Loudoun Board of Supervisors puts Metrorail-area housing and commercial development issues on slower track



Aerial view and map of Metrorail Silver Line Phase 2 extension under construction to Dulles International Airport and two stations in Loudoun County (Loudoun Gateway and Ashburn), from Reston and Herndon in Fairfax County

After years of intensive County planning for large-scale development around the future Loudoun County, Virginia, Metrorail (commuter rail) stations, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) deferred a decision on the development issues generally, in the current proceedings. Rather, the Board voted at its June 22, 2017, meeting to move the residential and non-residential development issues generally from the current “Silver Line Small Area Plan” track to the slower, County-wide Comprehensive Plan (CP) revision track (termed the “Envision Loudoun” process).

Loudoun’s plans for development near its Metrorail Silver Line commuter rail stations (Loudoun Gateway and Ashburn), which are scheduled to open by 2020, will have an important impact on housing costs and supply for Loudoun residents. They also will have a significant impact on people living elsewhere in the Washington, DC, region. EHI started providing input to the County on that planning more than two years ago (see, e.g., [LOUDOUN METRORAIL-AREA PLANNING UPDATE--JUNE 2016](#)).

At the June 22 meeting, several Supervisors said that more input on the Metrorail-area planning should be obtained from Loudoun residents. Supervisor Ron Meyer (R-Broad Run District), whose district includes the future Ashburn Station—near which the bulk of the new housing was being planned—said the plan does not reflect the will of the people in his district. They “would say this is shocking.” He added: “If people knew that signing up for thousands and thousands and thousands . . . of residential units” would be necessary to bring Metrorail to Loudoun, “people would have wanted to say no to Metro.”¹

Supervisor Letourneau (R-Dulles District), who made the motions passed at the meeting, and whose district includes the other future Metrorail station (Dulles Gateway), stated that the plan was too similar to a zoning ordinance in its specificity as to the types of development that would be permitted on different lots. Several other Supervisors echoed that sentiment.

Supervisor Letourneau also argued that the Envision Loudoun process affords a better opportunity for the public to focus on density, housing affordability, transit-oriented development, and related issues. Dept. of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) Director Ricky Barker said that folding the Silver Line planning into the Envision Loudoun process—both of which are DPZ projects—would not prevent landowners and developers from applying now for rezoning.

However, Barker noted that under that scenario, no updated land use plan that takes the Silver Line into account would be in place to help guide zoning decisions, for the indefinite future. The County’s last Comprehensive Plan revision was completed in 2001.

As to the Envision Loudoun process, it would not reach the BOS until at least March 2018—and when it does, the BOS would refer that massive, draft comprehensive plan revision to the Planning Commission (PC) for its full review process. Only after the PC issues its recommendations would the BOS be ready to make decisions on that revision. Thus, the Envision Loudoun process might not be concluded until at least 2019—even if it concludes successfully.

The only CPAM-related issues the BOS decided on June 22 were to approve certain roadway projects in the Silver Line area and attempt a full-fledged (and probably lengthy) new airplane noise study with MWAA, to try and be more precise about current

¹ Sydney Kashiwagi, *Loudoun supervisors put Metro area plan on hold, send it to Envision Loudoun process for work*, Loudoun Times-Mirror, Jun. 23, 2017.

noise levels throughout the Silver Line area.² (The latest MWAAs study was done in 2005, and the last full-fledged study was completed in the early 1990's.)

Public input on Metrorail-area planning to date

The Metrorail-area planning effort actually has invited and received a good deal of public input at each stage, for more than two years.

Public input on Scenario Planning Study (2015)

As we have reported,³ DPZ held two public workshops, one in May and one in August 2015 (both attended by EHI's President), concerning Loudoun residents' development preferences for that area (the Scenario Planning Study). Each of those well-publicized workshops was attended by about 75 people and were held near the future Ashburn Station—where most of the new housing is expected to be built.

Stantec Consulting Group, the planning consultants hired by the Supervisors to conduct the development scenario planning, led those two-hour workshops. They included comprehensive information on the background of the project, the significant factors affecting development in the study area (such as airport noise, roads and transportation factors, and the BOS's goals). Stantec provided participants with a comprehensive set of pictures, graphs and charts regarding various development options.

The participants then engaged in a live, keypad polling survey to determine their development preferences for the area. There also were a series of workstations in the room, focused on different aspects of development. Participants provided feedback regarding the development issues most important to them. Polling at the May meeting indicated that more than 75% of the participants lived in Loudoun County (about 13% lived in the Study Area).⁴

Overwhelmingly, the workshop participants favored high-density, mixed-use, transit-oriented development for the study area. Stantec also maintained a public website that gave all Loudoun residents access to all the documents it created for the process, and it included an easy, online form for any resident to provide their full input on the process. For more on those public workshops, *See, e.g.*, EHI Update #1-2015, pp. 4-7, posted at: <https://www.equitablehousing.org/images/PDFs/Updates/Update.1-2015.website.pdf>

² *See, e.g.*, Sydney Kashiwagi, *Loudoun supervisors put Metro area plan on hold, send it to Envision Loudoun process for work*, Loudoun Times-Mirror, Jun. 23, 2017.

³ *See, e.g.*, EHI Update #1-2015, pp. 4-7, posted at: <https://www.equitablehousing.org/images/PDFs/Updates/Update.1-2015.website.pdf>

⁴ Stantec, *Electronic Voting Results from May 28, 2015 Public Workshop*, posted at: <https://www.loudoun.gov/DocumentCenter/View/120988>

Public input on other Silver Line CPAM proceedings (2015-2017)

Since Stantec’s final report on the Scenario Planning Study was presented to the BOS (on Jan. 21, 2016), there have been two public workshops held by DPZ as part of its preparation of a draft Silver Line CPAM. There also have been two public hearings held by the County Planning Commission on it, and another public hearing held by the BOS. All those opportunities for public input were well-attended and included voluminous information on the draft CPAM under consideration.

In addition, the Silver Line CPAM has been discussed in great detail in many meetings of the BOS, its Transportation and Land Use Committee (TLUC), and the PC. All of those meetings were televised on Loudoun County’s cable channel, and they were available through the County’s webcast service (both live and archived). Comments by members of the public are permitted at the outset of all such meetings. Thus, there actually seem to have been at least the normal number of opportunities for members of the public to provide input during the Silver Line CPAM process.

The future of housing in Loudoun’s Silver Line-area planning

Some Supervisors have indicated they feel constrained, in passing on applications to build new housing, by the comfort level of existing Loudoun residents with new development and associated traffic. As Supervisor Tony Buffington (R-Blue Ridge District) put it, in reviewing the new Housing Needs Assessment, “one reality that we as Board members have to keep in mind as we’re moving forward is that we are constrained by the will of the people who already live here.”⁵

A basis for his remark is the 2016 survey by the University of Virginia’s Center for Survey Research, which found that the biggest concerns of Loudoun residents were development and traffic.⁶ Residents’ concerns over growth and development eclipsed concerns over traffic for the first time in at least 10 years, according to that biennial survey.

However, almost all the Loudoun residents polled (94 percent) felt that the quality of life in Loudoun is “excellent” or “good” overall—and the percentage who consider Loudoun’s quality of life “excellent” has increased from about 36 percent in 2007 to about 52 percent in 2016.⁷

Failure to permit enough new housing near Metrorail, in order to balance the number of workers to those who are expected to join Loudoun’s workforce, would seem to us to

⁵ Sydney Kashiwagi, *Loudoun housing report met with skepticism from supervisors*, Loudoun Times-Mirror, March 1, 2017.

⁶ The wide-ranging survey, commissioned by the county, involved interviews with 1,003 Loudoun residents and has a sampling error of +/- 3.8 percentage points.

⁷ *Id.*

be “penny foolish” as well as “pound foolish.” The Loudoun County Dept. of Management and Budget continues to reaffirm that net County tax revenues will increase greatly if ample housing is permitted in the Metrorail areas.⁸

And the advisable place for those housing units generally is as close as reasonable to those jobs. A contrary approach would seriously aggravate the many problems inevitably posed by increasing the workforce—such as increased traffic congestion, loss of open space, higher and more volatile housing prices, increased poverty and homelessness, and lost economic development in the County. For more, *see, e.g.*, EHI, [Loudoun County’s Metrorail-Related Housing Needs](#) (2015).

⁸ *E.g.*, Loudoun County Dept. of Management and Budget (DMB), *Illustrative Fiscal Impacts [of Silver Line study area development]*, April 13, 2017 (net positive fiscal impact of \$ 3.9 million if favored Scenario 1 for Silver Line study area development is adopted, with smaller multi-family units). (Those *Illustrative Fiscal Impacts* are Attachment 5 to the DPZ *Presentation* to the PC of April 13, 2017.) *E.g. also*, DMB, *Potential Fiscal Impacts of the Land Use Changes Proposed in the Silver Line Plan report*, Jan. 4, 2017 (Attachment 6 to DPZ *Staff Report to PC on Silver Line CPAM*, Jan. 24, 2017).