



White Oak Master Plan

Proposal is on a fast track. Residents should speak up to request a more balanced and desirable future for Eastern Montgomery County

On Tuesday, July 29th, the Montgomery County Council may approve the White Oak Science Gateway (WSOG) Master Plan that could have one of the most significant impacts on eastern Montgomery County since I-95 was built. The Plan area boundaries are Northwest Branch, Colesville Road, Cherry Hill Road and the Prince Georges County line.

Since the Council only began its review of the Plan on July 1, they and the Planning Board have been moving at an unprecedented pace to approve this evolving Plan. There has been insufficient time for a thorough consideration of the complex issues that this document involves and the affected communities deserve.

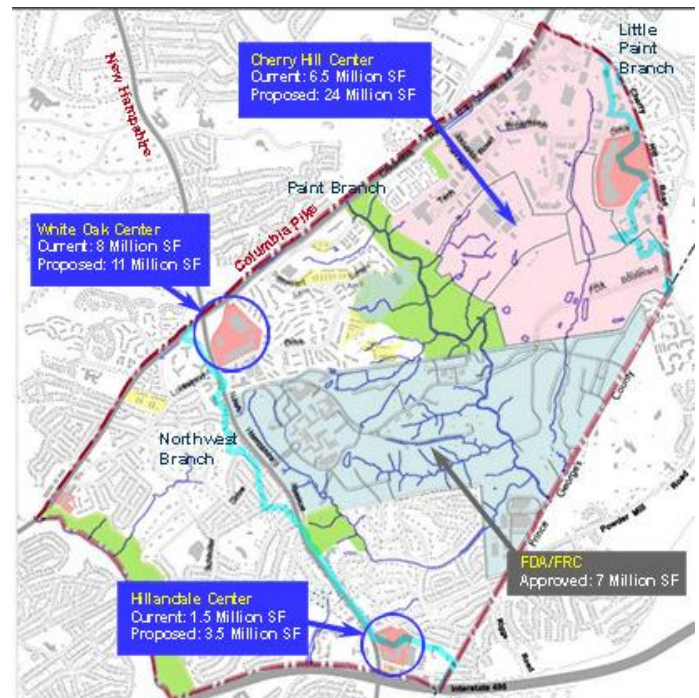
Among other things, the WOSG Master Plan would allow the addition of 25 million sq. ft. -- the equivalent of 20 Wheaton Malls -- of new mixed use development, including 8,600 residential units, to the existing 20 million sq. ft. in the plan area. The additional development would create a city twice the size of Downtown Silver Spring and would be equivalent to Tysons Corner which is about to get four Metrorail stations. But the White Oak area, which is six miles from the nearest Metro station, will never have a Metro station according to local officials. Downtown Silver Spring has Metrorail, MARC rail, 100 buses per hour and future light rail stations. Much of the new development (13 million sq. ft.) would be located on the 300-acre Percontee/County site near Cherry Hill and Powder Mill Roads. The rest of the redeveloped sites would be in the areas of the White Oak and Hillandale Shopping Centers and the former National Labor College.

The question facing Montgomery County is whether this massive proposal is sustainable and can be done in an open and planned approach that 1) coordinates economic development with public infrastructure needs, 2) provides that new job creation actually benefits area residents, and 3) assures that planning goals and commitments are met. The answer from the Percontee developers' lobbyists is, "no".

County planning and elected officials assert that a managed approach to growth will deter possible financing of new development, even though this is what has been done in other master plans in the County.

What does this mean for East Montgomery County residents and what precedents are being set for other future master plans elsewhere?

- **More traffic congestion** - The total potential development would make White Oak the equivalent of Tysons Corner, but without the transit services and roadway capacity to serve this demand. The Council so far has removed staging requirements that would coordinate new development with transportation infrastructure capacity. Even with their recommended transportation improvements including BRT, the Council staff estimated that the White Oak Master Plan will lengthen the travel time between Stewart Lane and the Beltway (2.7 miles) with delays anywhere from 39 to 79 minutes during the morning rush hours, and 35 to 73 minutes during evening rush hours. The Council has tentatively adopted changes to the Subdivision Staging Policy (Growth Policy) that changes the acceptable standards for congestion in order to allow greater development.
- **More demand for all public facilities and services** - The Plan calls for 8,600 new residential units, but it could be more since the new zoning applied will be the very flexible Commercial Residential zone that allows owners to decide



whether they want to build all commercial or all residential or some combination. The most recent US Census estimate reports 6,877 housing units in the White Oak area. Except for one or two more elementary schools, a library, and a fire station, the Plan doesn't expect that any additional middle or high schools, police, and public facilities/services will be needed.

- **Higher property taxes** - State legislation has been proposed that would allow exceeding charter limits on property taxes to pay for transportation projects' construction and operating costs. In the White Flint area, businesses had originally committed to pay for transportation improvements needed due to new development. However, County taxpayers are instead picking up the \$300 million construction costs for now.
- **Less retail services available** - Since zoning for the major commercial areas of the plan would allow developers the option of building either commercial or residential projects, there is a possibility that the White Oak or Hillandale Shopping Centers could be replaced by residential development. Since Downtown Silver Spring has a 25% commercial vacancy rate and the larger commercial real estate market is considered stagnant as the Federal government reduces its needs for renting office space, there isn't much to support a belief that there is substantial unmet demand for commercial space in White Oak. Despite claims that the FDA's presence in White Oak creates a magnet for a booming biotech industry, the actual evidence shows the opposite. In the 10 years that the FDA has been in White Oak, Federal economic statistics actually report a decline in the number of biotech companies in both of the Zip Code areas there. Even though mixed use developments (involving both large commercial and residential uses) were promised by the White Flint Master Plan, in reality the result has been largely construction of residential high rises (such as the five towers recently announced) with convenience stores on their first floors.

- Background submitted by Conservation
Montgomery Members

What can you do?

Contact the County Executive and Council and request that:

- The densities in the WOSG Master Plan should be reduced to uniformly appropriate levels and that the focus be on employment, not more residential development. The East County already has an imbalance of residential to commercial. The Council has disregarded their staffs' recommendation of a 25% reduction of the increase in density. This reduction should be shared equally among all the property owners in the Plan area. The complete transportation infrastructure identified by the Council and Planning staffs as needed in response to the increased development should be fully financed before the entire planned development is allowed to proceed.
- A thorough analysis of the planned development's environmental impact on the area's water, tree canopy, and air quality must be done. The massive scale of the proposed commercial and residential development requires a systematic understanding of the costs to the public if these projects are allowed. The plan needs to contain specific goals and mechanisms for improving water quality and tree canopy.

Contact them at:

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