

MONTGOMERY MALL CITIZENS ADVISORY PANEL

February 21, 2007

The Montgomery Mall Citizens Advisory Panel (MMCAP) is a coalition of communities in North Bethesda. When the commercial zone at the site of what is now Westfield Montgomery Mall was first conceived, some of MMCAP's member communities consented to the rezoning in exchange for site design limitations, set forth in 1958 covenants of record. Other MMCAP member communities were built afterwards, but are now part of the same community.

MMCAP's members consider Westfield Montgomery Mall to be a community asset and do not take issue with the plan to expand the mall in principle. They are, however, deeply concerned about the configuration of the proposed expansion, which directs additional traffic to Westlake Drive, displaces community resources, is visually incompatible with the surrounding neighborhood, fails to address pedestrian safety, and makes the community less viable as a walkable, transit-friendly mixed-use area as it was meant to be. MMCAP members further believe that appropriate design changes can resolve these concerns while allowing Westfield to expand its commercial space to the magnitude the current plan envisions.

MMCAP sees the solution as follows:

1. Shift the majority of new parking away from Westlake Drive and towards I-270.

Westfield proposes to place a 1/3-mile long, 4-5 level new parking structure along Westlake Drive where it will face the community and draw more traffic onto Westlake Drive, the ring road notwithstanding. The structure must be reduced in size to something more in scale with the community by reducing its height and length and setting more of its space below grade. Additional new parking should be provided on the I-270 side of the mall, drawing traffic away from Westlake Drive and reducing visual impact to the area. This can be accomplished through replacing or augmenting existing garages on the I-270 side.

2. Retain community shopping along Westlake Drive.

The Westlake Crossing shopping center is an important community resource that should be retained in some form along Westlake Drive. Many seniors and disabled persons live west of the mall and depend on the presence of convenient local shopping close by (in fact Lakeview House is subsidized housing for seniors and the disabled). Westlake Crossing should be retained or something like it should be incorporated into the Westlake frontage just as street-facing retail is featured in the new downtown Silver Spring, Washingtonian Center (Rio) and the proposed White Flint Crossing. This has the incidental benefit of breaking up a proposed monolithic structure along Westlake Drive and it creates a more inviting community street.

3. Move the transit center closer to the community, not further away.

Many residents living near the mall depend on bus service, and for many of them walking distance is a critical factor due to age or disability. Many buses stop at the transit center but not along Westlake Drive. The transit center has been moved to the furthest possible point from any local community access. It should be relocated to the corner of Westlake Drive and Westlake Crossing.

4. Remake Westlake Drive as a safe, inviting, pedestrian-friendly street

High car speeds and roadway design flaws have combined to make Westlake Drive a pedestrian-hostile street. It accounts for less than 1/1,000 of the county road stock and 4% of all county pedestrian fatalities since 2000. Failing to address this crisis while drawing yet more traffic is unacceptable. Westlake Drive must be re-engineered to:

- Feature speed tables and raised crosswalks to calm traffic without limiting capacity.
- Reduce the radius of the right turn from WB Democracy Blvd. to NB Westlake Drive.
- Provide a median refuge for pedestrians and eliminate the continuous center turn lane (retaining left turn lanes where appropriate).
- Move sidewalks 4' from the roadway curb (rather than the proposed 0' to 2'), and widen the west-side sidewalk to 6' (from 5') to support disabled users.
- Add 3' shoulders which would serve the quadruple purpose of supporting road cyclists, allowing wide or turning vehicles a "slop" area, creating extra separation between drivers and pedestrians, and allowing drivers to avoid (and avoid creating) potholes near the roadway edge.

These changes which foster a pedestrian-friendly environment can be accomplished by dedicating an additional 6' of right-of-way (possibly 10' in some locations) on the east side.

5. Modify the existing I-270/Democracy Blvd. ramp to provide a direct exit onto the mall's ring road.

Westfield's professed plan is to channel mall traffic onto the site as quickly as possible, but its reliance on the awkward I-270 HOV exit to the north is not realistic. Westfield and the State must coordinate to provide a direct connection from the I-270/Democracy Blvd. ramp to the ring road, in order to funnel traffic bound for the busy north side of the mall away from Democracy Boulevard and Westlake Drive, and to encourage mallgoers to park on the I-270 side of the mall property.

6. Security and Other Issues

Westfield must reduce incidents of loitering, drug use, vandalism and more serious acts committed by people after they visit the mall. This can be accomplished through funding of additional police resources per county policy and other security measures, such as cameras, lighting and signs on the mall property and in adjacent communities.

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