

Bluemont Civic Association, General Membership Meeting
November 29, 2006, 7:00 pm
Lubber Run Community Center

Call to Order

President Judah Dal Cais called the meeting to order at approximately 7:10 pm.

In attendance were Judah Dal Cais, Carl Drummond, Suzanne Sundburg, Wendy Dean, Sam Ferro, Robert Atkins, Terry Serie, and Lisa Byington. Also in attendance were 14 other Bluemont Civic Association members and 3 Bluemont residents who are not members.

Approval of 10/25/06 Minutes

Secretary Lisa Byington distributed copies of the amended minutes for the general membership meeting held on October 25, 2006. Byington reported that numerous BCA officers and members had provided edits to the minutes, all of which she had made. A motion to approve the minutes was made and seconded. The membership voted unanimously to approve the minutes as amended.

Landscaping Plan for the Constitution Bell

Patrick Wegeng of the Parks and Natural Resources Division described the changes made to the Bicentennial Garden in front of the Constitution Bell on the corner of Wilson Boulevard and George Mason Drive. Wegeng stated that the Parks Division is trying to reduce labor costs and plant costs by replacing annuals with bulbs and with evergreen shrubs. Wegeng also cited the manpower and resources needed to water trees, which takes away resources from planting flowers.

Wegeng also stated that the new signal box situated directly in front of the Bell makes it difficult to justify expending a lot of resources on annual flowers in the Garden. (The Department of Environmental Services (DES) mistakenly placed the signal box in front of the bell during construction of the Arterial Traffic Management (ATM) plan.) Wegeng admitted that the Parks Division was not consulted about the signal box's new location in front of the Bell, but Wegeng didn't think that DES would be willing to move the box because of the cost. Instead, Wegeng is trying to raise the plant bed to bring it up toward the Bell, and to make the plants behind the signal box more noticeable.

A number of members generally supported the Parks Division's plan to plant more evergreen shrubs and less labor-intensive flowers. The members also appreciated the removal of the winter cabbages, which do not survive a hard frost. Nonetheless, everyone agreed that DES should be required to fix their mistake and move the signal box to a less obtrusive location. Wegeng agreed to work with Richard Best (who has been leading the ATM project) on the issue.

At the conclusion of the meeting, President Dal Cais made a motion that BCA draft a letter to be sent to DES and the Parks Division opposing desecration of the Constitution Bell site and demanding that the County correct its error and relocate the signal box away

from the front of the Bell and the plantings. The letter would also reiterate the need for DES and the Parks Division to adopt a process to coordinate among departments to ensure that this type of error does not happen again. The motion was seconded and unanimously approved.

JBG Presentation on Proposed Redevelopment of Peck/Staples Site

Before JBG's presentation, Terry Serie (Information Coordinator for the project) summarized the timeline for the Site Plan Review Committee (SPRC) for JBG's application to redevelop the Peck/Staples Site:

- JBG's application was accepted by the County on 11/1/06
- SPRC I is scheduled for 12/18/06 at 7:00 pm at 3030 Wilson Blvd.
- SPRC II is scheduled for 1/22/06 at 8:30 pm (location to be decided later)
- Possible SPRC III meeting to be held in February
- The Transportation Committee is to meet in March

Serie also described the SPRC process – JBG will summarize its application and the SPRC will ask for residents to ask questions or provide comments on the application. Serie emphasized the need for as many residents as possible to attend the SPRC I meeting on 12/18/06, to ensure that all neighborhood concerns are raised before the SPRC.

JBG's architects generally summarized details of the two office buildings – a 12-story building (300,000 sq. feet) on the Peck's site and an 8-store building (150,000 sq. feet) on the Staples' site, with 32 townhouses behind both buildings along N. Wakefield Street. The architects also presented pictures showing the Peck/Staples site from various angles with the proposed office buildings on the site.

A BCA member asked for details about the LEEDS Silver rating that JBG was requesting (LEEDS is a certification given to buildings that following certain eco-friendly construction criteria) in order to obtain higher density rights for the site. The member stated that LEEDS certification for just the core and shell of the building, but not for the tenants' interiors, should not justify the type of bonus density that JBG was requesting of the County and of the neighborhood. However, another member agreed with JBG that it is not possible to impose LEEDS requirements on tenants and that the interior is a small part of the LEEDS certification (the most important components of LEEDS certification is for the exterior of the building, storm-water retention and treatment, and energy and water usage for the entire building).

A member asked if JBG had considered designing a building that complies with the current 45-foot high density permitted by-right on the site. JBG responded that it would be a big-box store (like Target or Walmart) and that it had not pursued that option.

A number of members expressed concern about traffic. The architects pointed out that the site proposal attempts to internalize as much traffic as possible with internal driveways between the two office buildings and behind the townhouses. One BCA officer pointed out that JBG's own traffic consultants concluded that the intersection at Wilson Blvd. and Glebe Road would be at failure following the proposed redevelopment.

Similarly, access to and from Wakefield, Woodrow, Tazewell and Vermont Streets would be greatly diminished.

In response to a member question, JBG said they were still in discussions with VDOT about possibly providing a pedestrian crosswalk across Glebe Road midway between Wilson Blvd. and Fairfax Drive. Another member asked about the possibility of a raised walkway (akin to what is in Rosslyn) to avoid VDOT's concerns about slowing traffic on Glebe Road; however, JBG stated that Arlington County does not view raised crosswalks favorably, because they take pedestrian traffic away from store-fronts and are not preferred by pedestrians.

The member also pointed out that the western-facing portion of the building is tall, flat and unattractive. Although JBG provided a modest cut-out on the southwestern corner in an attempt to provide a step-down to the height of the proposed new townhouses on Wakefield Street, the cut-out is too small to be worthwhile. JBG responded that the height of the larger office building on the Pecks site is shorter than the Regent (at 950 N. Glebe at Fairfax Drive) and is the same height as the Westin hotel across the street. JBG also promised to continue making improvements to the back façade of the large office building and to the townhouses to break up the architectural line.

While JBG continued to tout the pedestrian access to, and throughout, the proposed site, BCA members pointed out that Wilson Blvd. is so unfriendly to pedestrians that few will reach the Peck/Staples site. JBG promised that its application provides for the placement of all utility lines on the site (to the next utility box on the western corner of N. Wakefield Street) and a contribution to the County's general fund to place utility lines underground. JBG also promised that it would place utilities underground "a little bit beyond the site," but it declined to provide any details on how far down Wilson Blvd. JBG was willing to pay for undergrounding.

A member expressed concern about stormwater run-off negatively impacting the existing houses on the west side of N. Wakefield Street, which has no curb and gutter to help guide stormwater away from basements. JBG stated that its proposal includes curb and gutter on the east side of N. Wakefield Street. JBG also stated that its proposal includes an elaborate system to drain stormwater internally to ensure that it does not flow to the surrounding neighbors.

Another member asked about the sufficiency of parking spaces in the two office buildings. JBG's proposal includes a large underground parking lot beneath the entire Peck/Staples site. On average, there will be 1 parking space for every 580 sq. feet [at 450,000 sq. feet, that totals over 700 parking spaces]. Some members were concerned that this number is too small, and that visitors might be forced to seek parking on nearby residential streets. JBG stated that the County generally tries to discourage parking near Metro stations, in an effort to encourage use of mass transit, but BCA officers noted that the County does not set a maximum limit on the number of parking spaces to be included in site plan applications.

Although BCA officers and members have been meeting with JBG for over a year and have expressed numerous concerns about the proposed redevelopment of the Peck/Staples site, few of those concerns have been addressed by JBG. JBG has stated that it will await the outcome of the SPRC I meeting to begin addressing community and County concerns with the proposal.

NC Funding

Neighborhood Conservation Advisory Committee (NCAC) Representative Wendy Dean reported that the prospects for funding any new NC projects would be highly unlikely over the next 10 years. County voters recently approved the issuance of a new bond, the proceeds of which are to be used to clear out old NC projects. However, DES claims it is short-staffed and cannot undertake significant new projects, such as sidewalks and curbs and gutters. County Board Vice Chairman Paul Ferguson has pledged to extricate NC projects from the current bond funding process.

December Newsletter

Newsletter Designer Sam Ferro reiterated his need to have final advertisements sooner in the layout process. Newsletter Editor Suzanne Sundburg stated that she would need article content by Tuesday December 5th in order to ensure that the newsletter is mailed in sufficient time to announce the SPRC I meeting date and the general membership meeting date.

December General Membership Meeting

A BCA officer proposed that the next general membership meeting include a speaker from the County to explain the County's property tax relief for low-income and elderly residents. Although the December general membership meeting will likely be devoted to discussing SPRC meetings for the Peck/Staples redevelopment, the Executive Board agreed to pursue a speaker for a general membership meeting in early 2007.

New Business

A member suggested that BCA maintain a list of preferred providers for various services (*e.g.*, baby-sitters, home contractors, etc.) to BCA members. Newsletter Designer Ferro reiterated the need to upgrade the BCA website to make something like this work. Ferro agreed to consider the project further and talk with other BCA members who may be able to assist with the website project.

Adjournment

Vice President Drummond adjourned the meeting at approximately 9:05 pm.