Sumner Citizens Association

Bethesda, MD 20816

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Regency Site Plan for Westwood I: Comments and

Suggestions on Traffic Congestion, Access, Safety, and Parking

PREFACE: MANY OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS HEREIN FOR CHANGES IN REGENCY’S TWO PHASED WESTWOOD I AND II PLANS WHICH CREATE SERIOUS SAFETY AND FUNCTIONALITY PROGBLEMS CALL FOR MAJOR REDUCTIONS IN PROPOSED NEW BUILDING.

THESE COMMENTS DO NOT ADDRESS IN DETAIL SERIOUS CROWDING AND DENSITY PROBLEMS IN THE P0STPONED WESTWOOD II PROJECT, FOR WHICH ONLY A PRELIMINARY SITE PLAN HAS BEEN SUBMITED. THE COUNTY MUST PURSUE AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO BOTH PHASES OF WESTBARD REDEVELOPMENT.

MUCH MORE MODEST PLANS ARE NEEDED, ABSENT ADEQUATE TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE, EVEN IF THIS MEANS REVISITING THE 2016 WESTBARD SECTOR PLAN.

1. Introduction

The Sumner Citizens Association, represents a very large number of households in the Sumner and Massachusetts Avenue Hills subdivisions in Bethesda, Maryland. We oppose the current Site Plan for Westwood I and the yet to be elaborated Westwood II for these reasons.

* The multiplication of residents and cars would substantially increase traffic congestion and compromise safety and quality of life in Westbard and beyond.
* It would produce additional cut through traffic across Sumner and other nearby neighborhoods.
* The Westwood I Plan is too dense and crowded. It is too heavily weighted with residential vs commercial, and lacks promised amenities, including an adequate common green space.
* These problems would be exacerbated by new traffic generated by the much-expanded Intelligence Community Campus Bethesda, directly adjacent to Sumner on the northwest side of Sangamore Rd.
* The problems created by the crowded Site Plan for Westwood I would be multiplied if Regency is also authorized to implements its grandiose Phase II plans for even greater high-density development in Westwood II calling for 1350 new residential units south of Westbard Ave.

* Sumner residents support renovation and modernization of the Westwood shopping center, but support a more modestly scaled development in Westbard that is compatible with the larger neighborhood, that existing transport infrastructure could support, and that does not stress already crowded neighborhood schools. Westbard lies amidst a largely residential, suburban area two miles from the nearest Metro. It lacks infrastructure needed for the large increase in population and vehicle density proposed in the Westwood I Plan and even more so in the massive density in Regency’s contemplated Phase II Westwood II plan.

*We urge the County to require modification in the Westwood I Site Plan to reduce density at the site. It is also essential that the County apply a holistic planning approach to Regency’s Westwood I plan and its postponed Westwood II plan, which is now only preliminary, for massive high rise, high density urban development south of Westbard Avenue.*

1. External Traffic Impact of Westwood Plans; Need for Study

Westbard Ave., Goldsboro Rd, Little Falls Parkway and Western Ave. move major traffic from Connecticut Ave., Wisconsin Avenue, River Road, Massachusetts Avenue, Macarthur Blvd. and Canal Road. These roads, in turn, feed into north-south County and DC traffic arteries, all of which are already heavily travelled, especially at rush hours.

A major multiplication of residents and vehicles in the Westbard area, unless the scales of both the Phase I and anticipated Phase II Plan are reduced, will create potential gridlock whose impact will be felt well beyond Westbard.

*The County should conduct its own traffic study before approving a site plan for Westwood I. It is essential that this study consider the additional traffic that would be produced by the high density, high rise plan for the future contemplated in Westwood II across Westbard Ave.*

1. Metro Won’t Accommodate Traffic Problems

County policy encourages high density development adjacent to metro corridors. Yet the Friendship Heights Metro is almost two miles from Westbard – too far for most walkers, and biking is not an option for many. Also, RideOn bus service is limited, there are no plans for shuttles, and parking at Friendship Heights is very limited. Most new residents of Westbard who commute would therefore drive, adding to congestion in Westbard and on major arteries.

*A new site plan for Westbard should require adequate public transportation to the Friendship Heights Metro via RideOn busses or shuttles.*

*The Plan must also include an off- street depot within the site with space for additional RideOn busses, shuttles, and school buses on space now assigned to residential or commercial use.*

1. Needed: A Three-Dimensional Site Model

*An accurate assessment of the Westwood I Site Plan and future development planned in Westwood II requires a three-dimensional table-top scale model of both plans. The County should require this and arrange for public viewing of the model before approving any site plan.*

1. Green Space in Site Plan is Inadequate

The central, public one-half acre of green space in the Plan for recreation and social activities would not begin to serve the needs of 600 residents as well as shoppers and visitors.

Regency proposes that the Westwood I civic green will also serve 1300 or so new residents of the future Westwood II. This is entirely unrealistic

Also, the proposed civic green located right next to a heavily trafficked central entry and exit road endangers safety and undermines its supposed function as an attractive focal point for a new “neighborhood.” (County guidance prescribes 1.5 acres as the ideal size of a civic green.) A larger green space could also alleviate the lack of adequate storm water facilities in the Plan.

*A civic green for Westwood I should be at least 1.5 acres. It should be moved to a more protected place, or otherwise shielded from traffic.*

*Another option to help solve safety and gridlock issues at the central entry next to the green space and to ease traffic flow would preserve the existing entry near Giant’s left front loading dock and link it to the transverse road across the site and a restored perimeter road.*

*The notion that the half acre green space should serve Westwood II as well is ludicrous. A Willett Branch Park should be the focus of green space in Westwood II.*

1. Excessive Residential Density vs. Adequate Retail/Commercial

Regency, its predecessor Equity I, and some ex-County Council members promoted Westbard redevelopment as a way of offering a greater mix of amenities, shops and restaurants. But the current mix in the Westwood I Site Plan and the preliminary Westwood II plan offer few benefits to local communities and create big traffic and environmental problems. The numbers are dismaying:

* Residential square footage in Westwood I and II would be 647,378 square feet, an increase of about 1,500%
* Commercial square footage would increase only by 176,232 or only 6%! 9,934 s.f. of this would be a new pharmacy in the Giant building.
* The number of residential units along Westbard Ave. would be greater than all the residences in Sumner, Springfield and Woodacres combined!

1. Crowding, Inadequate Access, Safety, and Parking Problems

The Westwood I site Plan proposes 262 new residential units: 72 town houses and 190 in multi-family apartments. Regency assumes, incorrectly that these units will attract only 485 residents because most will be singles or empty-nest couples. Families with children will also buy these homes because of the location and strong reputation of local schools. More likely, there would be well be well over 650 new residents. Many units would bring two or more cars, requiring about 400 new residential parking spaces.

Westwood I covers less than five acres to accommodate an estimated 650 new residents and hundreds of their cars. When combined with a rough average of 400 visiting shopper and employee vehicles using the current site, and new shoppers using the larger Giant and other improved retail facilities, the result will be serious crowding and access problems. For example:

Access from Westbard: Easy access into and out of the semi-circular Plan area is problematic, since entry and exit routes exist only on Westbard Ave. where the existing two four-lane access routes are located, one on each end of the Giant complex. The Site Plan proposes closing the south entrance and replacing it with a central main entrance We understand, Regency contemplates a third entry from Westbard through the underground Giant parking lot. This would require additional space in the lot to enable safe cut through passage for residential users.

The Site Plan eliminates the existing perimeter road that merges into the two present exits onto Westbard This perimeter road allows quick entry and exit above the open parking lot. Without this, some condo owners will have to work their way through traffic within the site.

Also, the condos appear to be stacked closely together, limiting light and air and reducing their desirability.

*The option mentioned above of preserving at least part of the perimeter road and keeping open the current left side entry point on Westbard Ave. should be considered to ease access and traffic flow, especially for condo residents.*

*More space should be provided between the condos by reducing the number of units.*

Sidewalks for Pedestrian Safety: *There should be sidewalks within the Westwood I site to enhance safety in a busy, confined area. None are shown on the Site Plan graphic.*

7. New Traffic Lights on Westbard

Traffic lights at access points could help smooth access to and from Westwood 1, enable safe pedestrian crossing, and slow traffic. Lights would help, especially, if Westbard Ave. is realigned and the light is removed at Ridgefield Rd. A realigned Westbard without lights could create a speedway effect without any lights

*Lights would improve off street access and enhance safety on Westbard. But lights could also create congestion and delay, with or without realignment. This could divert Westbard transit traffic to already crowded and busy River Road, Little Falls Parkway, Western Ave. and Goldsboro Rd.*

*The bottom line is that congestion cannot be eliminated if development planning allows excessive residential and vehicular density without improved transportation infrastructure.*

Parking : The Site Plan provides an estimated 650 parking spaces in the present Giant compound, compared to 1,000 at present, i.e. 446 spaces in the planned Giant garage, and an estimated 200 more for the proposed new190 unit apartment/retail building.

(Parking places across the street at the proposed new retail building included in Site I should not be counted since they are too far from the Giant area for convenient use.)

650 public spaces is inadequate. It does not contemplate expanded use of the new, enlarged Giant, and the new retail/commercial facilities and apartments next door. It probably underestimates the number of cars for residents of 190 new apartment units and for visitors to apartments and condos. And it appears to include 45 parking spaces to which residents of adjacent Kenwood Place Condo owners are entitled.

Amazingly, the preliminary Regency plan for 1330 new residences in the postponed phase 2 Westwood II redevelopment across Westbard Ave. provides no new parking spaces. It assumes that the Westbard I space could somehow provide new parking for Westwood II, an obvious impossibility!

One explanation is that Regency has adopted Equity 1’s old plan to allow parking in the curbside lanes on Westbard Ave. except during rush hours to provide extra parking. This is a bad idea. It would not begin to solve the parking deficit. It would clog through traffic and back up cars waiting to exit Westbard from Westwood I and Westwood II in either direction and traffic waiting to enter Westbard from either side.

*Regency must go back to the drawing board with enough off street Westbard parking places for all users of Westwood I and II. This will almost certainly require much reduced new development and density.*

*No parking on Westbard should be allowed at any hour.*

1. Lack of Classrooms for Westbard expansion, Protecting Historic Black Cemetery, and Willett Branch Park.

*These issues are not treated in this paper, but are no less important for a comprehensive review by the County of proposed Westbard redevelopment plans.*

July 13, 2018