

Testimony of

JOHN BICKERMAN
VICE-MAYOR OF THE TOWN OF CHEVY CHASE

Before the
Montgomery County Planning Board

February 11, 2016, 2 pm

Thank you for providing me an opportunity to share my views on behalf of the Town of Chevy Chase. I am the Vice-Mayor of the Town.

No community is more affected by the planned increase in density of the Central Business District than the Town of Chevy Chase. Others from my Town have already testified and I know that you are familiar with many of our concerns. Today, I'd like to highlight a few issues specific to the rezoning of the Apex Building that is now before you. It presents special challenges and a few opportunities that the Town would like to bring to your attention.

I need not remind you of how much the original vision of the staff report, as set forth in the May 15 plan, has expanded. Densities are so far above what the staff envisioned that the existing infrastructure will not support the plan as it now exists -- more on that later.

The piecemeal approach of building-by-building consideration of individual property owners is inconsistent with developing a coherent, unified plan for the Central Business District, and the impacts will come crashing down on my Town. The Apex building issue exemplifies this misguided approach. A 30-story building, where the Regal Building now stands, will cast an ominous shadow on the sunlight that reaches Elm Street Park. It will also become the target that all other developers will strive to achieve, causing a cascade of further increases in density. This is bad for the Bethesda Sector Plan and it is bad for the Town of Chevy Chase.

While we welcome the creative approach of building a second tunnel to allow trail users to cross Wisconsin Avenue, without the danger of traversing heavily trafficked streets, it comes with a price – the loss of valuable green space at the park. If the Planning Board moves forward with the second tunnel, we ask that it find compensatory green space as well. There is already far too little green space in Bethesda and even less in the Bethesda Sector Plan. A livable plan requires open green space that allows the sun to shine in.

The Apex building plan demonstrates the deficiencies in the piecemeal approach that threatens the viability of Bethesda Chevy Chase as a place to live and work. Let me expand on this point:

- **Traffic Congestion** – Wisconsin Avenue will always be a thoroughfare for commuters and the broader Montgomery County neighborhoods moving along the north to south corridor, whether or not Bethesda is their destination. Rush hour traffic, daily, is already at a standstill. Town residents avoid driving their cars during rush hour, especially the evening rush, because what should be a 5-minute trip can become a 45-minute odyssey as a result of gridlock. Now imagine what happens when for the next several decades, there is constant construction along Wisconsin Avenue, as the newly planned skyscrapers are built. A lane of traffic along Wisconsin Avenue will be closed to accommodate construction for each building. On Martin Luther King's Birthday last month, I ventured out on foot. When I got to Wisconsin Avenue at 3 pm, I could see traffic backed up from Bradley Blvd to East West Highway and beyond to Jones Bridge Road. You don't need a traffic engineer to advise you on what constant construction will do to this crucial transit artery. Come with me

on Monday during President's Day and see for yourself the havoc that will be wreaked on Bethesda if the kind of density you now seem willing to adopt comes to pass.

- **Public Safety** – Traffic congestion is not merely an inconvenience, it is a threat to public safety. Most mornings I have coffee at a coffee shop in Bethesda. My good friend, the local sergeant, has commented frequently to me that traffic has become so congested that emergency vehicles can't move either. Last month, I observed an ambulance trying to go east on Bradley Lane at rush hour. The only problem was that Bradley Lane was entirely blocked from Wisconsin Avenue to Connecticut Avenue. There was no place for traffic to get out of the way of the ambulance, so it just sat there as cars tried to climb the sidewalk to allow it through. It is only a matter of time before life and property are lost because of the poor planning decisions that are being made now.
- **Infrastructure** – The Planning Board's plan seems to assume that by denying adequate parking in Bethesda to meet the anticipated influx of workers and new residents that it will force greater use of mass transit. That might work for an urban center that is at the

hub of multiple mass transit options. But, Bethesda is not a hub. There are relatively few options for commuters coming from the west and Metro does not serve a significant portion of the population of Montgomery County, let alone commuters that come from farther away. Ridership estimates of the Purple Line have been decreased and it has been tacitly acknowledged by the State that the Purple line, if it is ever built, will not take any cars off the road. Whether we like it or not, Montgomery County, like so many suburban counties, is a car culture and efforts to engineer a change in that culture are not likely to succeed. If they fail and car volume expands with the population, you will have created an utterly unlivable environment, gridlocked by traffic. Our current infrastructure of roads cannot handle the type of increased congestion that the Apex building typifies. Moreover, we lack the public safety – police and fire protection that’s needed for the much greater numbers of people that would live and work in the Bethesda envisioned by the Planning Board.

- **Property Values and Destruction of Neighborhood Character**

While this may seem like an entirely parochial issue relevant to my Town’s residents, it’s not. While increased density and

property values of commercial real estate will rise under the revised Bethesda Sector Plan, property values in my Town have stagnated. I know of several residents who have fled the Town for downtown DC, where there is lower density due to height restrictions there, adequate infrastructure to support no cars and a more livable environment. As Bethesda becomes a choke point for the rest of the county because of clogged traffic, the value of living north and west of Bethesda will greatly diminish. As the Washington Post reported recently, property values in the outlying suburbs are not increasing. As property values fall, so will property tax income, which is an important source of revenue to the County.

Lastly, I'd like to reference the original staff report of December 9, 2015. Unfortunately, the public can no longer find that report because it has been withdrawn and revised. When I read the report by the staff after it was initially published on December 9th, I was struck by its welcomed candor. The report explicitly acknowledged that the density that had been approved, as of that date, that was so far in excess of what the staff had suggested in its May 15 draft, that it would swamp the

infrastructure. The comments in that report were essentially, “we know we’re recommending way too much density for the infrastructure that we have and have no way to address the infrastructure issues now, but we’ll figure it out later.”

I ask that I be provided with a copy of the original December 9th staff report that the Planning Board published and is a public document. I further ask that that report be appended to my testimony. I’d be hard pressed to cite the problems with the increased density now envisioned any better than the staff did in that initial report of December 9th.

Again, thank you for providing me this opportunity to testify.