

Good morning, Planning Board Chair, Vice Chair and Commissioners.

My name is Irene Lane, and I am the Mayor of the Town of Chevy Chase.

The development of the *Bethesda Downtown Plan* has been hailed as a resounding success, and our community shares this sentiment. It is a testament its extensive collaboration, including robust community engagement, professional studies on traffic, schools, green infrastructure, and park development as well as a willingness to compromise for the greater good. We recognized early on that increased density could bring immense benefits not only to our local communities but to the County in the form of additional tax revenue.

Over the past six years, the underpinnings of the Plan have yielded some moderately priced dwelling units (MPDUs), additional office, retail, residential buildings, and some bike lanes. One of the Plan's innovative features was the concept of developers being able to "purchase" additional density through a Park Impact Payment (PIP). Funds from this program were to be used to pay for the expansion of needed urban green space in Bethesda.

With approved development having passed the soft cap, we have the opportunity to closely assess what is working and what isn't with the Plan, and then decide the best way forward to support Bethesda's future development.

The Town Council advocates for a careful examination of the current situation before any decisions are made. The Planning Department, public officials, and the former Planning Board Chair all agree that it is highly unlikely that proposed development will reach the hard cap soon, given the current economic conditions. Therefore, taking the time to conduct the various studies promised in the Plan, discussing the results openly, and determining what changes may be necessary is not only a more transparent approach to urban planning but also a way to maintain County Council oversight and bolster public trust in the Plan's promises.

While further details will be presented by other speakers and through written testimonials, let me summarize our six concerns and questions:

1. Funding Discrepancy & Diverse Funding Sources: Planning staff has stated that private development is needed to fund amenities, but the numbers do not align unless substantial resources are committed by other parties, including the County. This is particularly relevant when it comes to park development where initial estimates to acquire and develop potential park properties came to \$117 million. Thus far, only \$21.7 million in PIPs have been or will be collected under the 7 million square feet of currently approved cap density. Also, while the Plan called for additional, stable funding sources for parks *beyond* monies paid to the PIP, those have not been identified. Therefore, we ask without an examination of the PIP assessment formula or the identification of alternative funding sources, including the re-consideration of a special taxing district, how will this park funding gap be resolved?
2. Incomplete Density Impact: Thus far, only 33% of the allowable nine million square feet under the BOZ has been developed and completed projects are not at full capacity. Hence, despite the Annual Monitoring Report results, we have a long way to go before being able to assess the full impact of realizing the current plan on traffic and schools. Isn't it premature to conclude now that we have excess infrastructure capacity?

3. Tools to Replace the Hard Cap: Planning staff asserts that they now have “tools” to address strains in infrastructure in a timely manner, and so no longer need a hard cap. However, we do not understand what data these tools will collect, whether projects now will be assessed cumulatively, how they substitute for having a hard cap nor how far in advance trends will emerge to stem unintended consequences. What are these tools that will assure us that infrastructure will be developed in tandem with increased density?
4. Traffic Concerns: The 2022 Non-Auto Drive Mode Share (NADMS) numbers show a snapshot of current work and driving patterns; however, we are still experiencing post-COVID reactionary behavior. That said, even with high remote work numbers, there are already substantial delays at intersections such as the one at Wisconsin Avenue and Bradley Lane that need to be addressed right now. How can our community be assured that, as density increases, timely traffic solutions for state and County roads will be undertaken?
5. Promised Infrastructure & Unfulfilled Studies: To date, we have not seen any new parks delivered or a significant increase in affordable housing stock. In addition, studies on *Urban Loading & Delivery Management* or the feasible location of a new County Recreation Center have not materialized. Lastly, there are unbuilt bikeways identified in the *1994 Bethesda Master Plan* and an underdelivered tree canopy cover. How will an eliminated hard cap fulfill the goals for multi-modal traffic flow, amenity, and green infrastructure metrics? Also, why not have Planning investigate why incentives, such as the waiver of PIP payments if a residential project encompassed at least 25% MPDUs, did not yield favorable outcomes for affordable housing stock?
6. Growth & Infrastructure Policy (GIP) Undertaking: Concerns persist about the impact of increased density on schools, with class overcrowding already an issue, and transportation solutions. Presently, the GIP 2024-2028 is undergoing a separate planning effort and will be adopted by November 2024. Why eliminate the hard cap before examining the GIP?

Residents and developers alike have expressed frustration over promises unfulfilled. Good infrastructure and amenities are needed to attract buyers, renters, employers, and employees to Bethesda.

In summary, the *Bethesda Downtown Plan's* success hinges on community engagement and ongoing studies that further illuminate a potential adjustment of a hard cap. We should continue this approach by asking and answering the tough questions. Together, this strategy will further drive economic growth and smart development for Bethesda and the County.

Thank you for your time.

Irene N. Lane
Mayor, Town of Chevy Chase
Submitted on October 12, 2023