

BSAP City Council Public Hearing Comments 12 May 2012

SUBMITTED BY: DIANE COSTELLO

5840 LOWELL AVENUE – LINCOLN HILLS – ALEXANDRIA VA

Good Morning:

As a native NYer who is quite familiar with density, I have chosen to speak to you today from the perspective of the neighborhood.

I have never heard City staff or officials express a true vision of what they see for the *entire* West End, or *all* of Alexandria for that matter. Is there a vision? Or are we marking time simply by dealing with one development project at a time, pressed forward by a seemingly relentless desire for growth, hoping at some point, *any* point, something tangible will arise from the dust.

I find the Draft document mired in jargon that is currently in vogue. “Mixed-use” always makes me smile as I recall family photographs over a century old of my relatives outside a building which served as both home and work. Commuting was nothing more than walking down a flight of stairs. We use the word “mixed-use” today and we pat ourselves on the back believing we have invented a novel concept. Twenty to thirty years from now, the terms BRT and Town Center will be quaint and/or obsolete. Where will that leave us?

What I value most about living in the West End is my access to world class museums, and at the same time, the natural environment of my immediate area. I can drive 15 minutes and spend an afternoon viewing magnificent art (for free no less); return home, and see fox and deer, or walk along Holmes Run and hear a kingfisher. Including Queens NY where I grew up, I have called 17 different places “home”. Not even my beloved NY can offer me those pleasures in such close proximity at a price I can afford.

This balance of culture and nature readily available to all West End residents is what defines where we live and why we live here.

In my mind, the current plan will disrupt this relationship. The density will negatively impact the wildlife, the traffic and noise levels will increase, the bulk of the affordable housing that exists today will be gone and thus the human diversity. The result will be a homogenized, sterile, approximation of what a neighborhood should be – epitomized by a Town Center which provides no sense of place, as it is indistinguishable from every other Town Center that inevitably pops up with this type of development.

Kaid Benfield is the Director of Sustainable Communities at NRDC in Washington and has been named one of "the most influential people in sustainable planning and development" by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. From his April 24th article titled “*Smart growth is a start. But it’s not enough*”

“Our communities of the future must not only reduce carbon emissions, save land, and encourage use of transit, walking and bicycling. They must also contain beauty, warmth, places of solitude and reflection. They must be significantly more dense than sprawl, but also sometimes forego additional increments of density in order to maintain light, limit noise, provide privacy, and respect a human scale. They must be conducive to engaging the intellect and the spirit. When we pursue these things, we are out of the realm of smart growth per se, and into the realm of placemaking. I have become convinced that the two overlap but should not be mistaken for the same thing. In other words, sustainability in our built environment requires both smart growth and great placemaking.”

My objection to this Plan is *not about change, but loss; a loss of place.*

I respectfully request that City Council defer your vote and allow the Community with the assistance of a mediator to work through the outstanding issues with Staff and the developers. All at the table, all at the same time.

Thank you.

References:

- 1) Kaid Benfield – from the NRDC Staff Blog - Director, Sustainable Communities, NRDC; co-founder, LEED for Neighborhood Development rating system; co-founder, Smart Growth America coalition; author, *Once There Were Greenfields* (NRDC 1999), *Solving Sprawl* (Island Press 2001), *Smart Growth In a Changing World* (APA Planners Press 2007), *Green Community* (APA Planners Press 2009); voted one of the "top urban thinkers" in poll on Planetizen.com and named one of "the most influential people in sustainable planning and development" by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. Link to his 24 April 2012 blog post – *Smart Growth is a start. But it's not enough.*
http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kbenfield/smart_growth_is_only_a_start_i.html

- 2) With respect to restoration of Holmes Run and the tree canopy issues raised in the Draft Plan - There is a strong professional consensus that if the objective is to restore a plant community to a near wild state, then planting local material is the approach of choice. Local plant material is not easy to come by, but in our area we are most fortunate to have a nursery which propagates from local, wild populations. It is called Earth Sangha. Chris Bright is the co-founder and president; he has worked with the City's naturalist (Rod Simmons).
www.earthsangha.org

- 3) There is mention of Independent Design (inclusive of wheelchair accessibility) to be utilized in a portion of the housing units. This type of housing is an example of an opportunity to be "visionary". (Center for Universal Design, Part of the School of Design at North Carolina State University, Raleigh NC).
www.ncsu.edu/project/design-projects/udi/