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One Community Finds Courage Against NIMBYs

By Marc Fisher

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On one planet, a six-story building with apartments above small shops and sidewalk cafes seems an inviting place to spend an evening. In another universe, such a structure is "excessive," "massive," "a Manhattanization of Montgomery County."

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For three years now, a relative handful of very loud people from that alternate reality have fought against the latest modest expansion of the small-scale busyness of the new downtown Bethesda.

The quotations above are from Jim Humphrey, a leader of the bureaucracy-savvy activists who oppose Federal Realty's plan to extend its stretch of award-winning, mixed-use buildings from the Landmark movie theaters and Barnes & Noble bookstore to the site of a shuttered Giant supermarket on Arlington Road.

Last week, Humphrey and fellow oppositionists watched the county planning board vote 5 to 0 to approve a pedestrian-friendly street of cafes, shops and 180 apartments, including 23 units set aside for moderate-income tenants.

End of the battle? Not a chance: Even though developers, environmentalists, government and many

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residents have joined forces in Bethesda and other places across the region to support this kind of smart growth -- and therefore slow the march of sprawl -- the Not in My Back Yard activists do not take yes for an answer.

The planning board has approved this project five times already. Still, opponents fight on.

Amazingly, the Federal Realty project that so offends them is more than 300 feet from the nearest house and is surrounded by commercial development.

John Freeman, a supporter of the project who lives among its most vociferous opponents, told the board that the NIMBYs could be assuaged only if the county promised them a gated entrance to their community, private rush-hour express lanes on Arlington Road and guaranteed table reservations at local restaurants on weekend evenings. For those who still oppose the project and pine for the days when downtown Bethesda consisted of a cement plant, a lumberyard and vast expanses of surface parking lots, Freeman said, "I have an alternative: Hagerstown."

Sadly, even though ever more residents see the advantages of increasing density in close-in communities, developers and politicians still cave to those who shout the loudest.

Federal Realty agreed to double the number of parking spaces to be built beneath its project, undermining efforts to create a downtown not wholly

dependent on cars. The irony here is that once the project is built, adding 470 cars to downtown streets, the people complaining most angrily about extra traffic will be the very same folks who insisted on the added parking.

"This plan has not been stalled by us, the neighbors," protested one opponent, Carol Beach. Rather, she blamed the county for "wrongheaded zoning."

Too often, zoning is a tool turned into a weapon by those who seek to obstruct. But now some communities are using zoning to defend themselves against niggling NIMBYs of negativism. Along Columbia Pike in Arlington, residents fed up with ugly strip shopping centers, unwalkable retail areas and speeding commuters decided to work with the county to invite developers to create a traditional Main Street featuring shops, apartments, offices and cultural amenities.

Along Columbia Pike, developers can win approval for smart growth projects in

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a stunning 30 days. Contrast that with the living hell Federal Realty has been subjected to in Bethesda, or with the death by a thousand whines that the NIMBYs of Northwest Washington now seek to inflict on Mayor Williams's plan to add desperately needed life to the upper Wisconsin Avenue corridor.

The key to success in Arlington has been to engage neighbors early in the process -- something more and more governments in the region are trying to do -- but also the political courage to stick to smart growth rules even in the face of carping from neighbors who fantasize about locking the gates against newcomers.

Stewart Schwartz, the advocate for smart growth who usually rails against rapacious developers, showed up last week to praise Federal Realty. "We will go to bat for developers with the right projects," he said. "The tide has turned."

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