

GREAT SENECA SCIENCE CORRIDOR IMPLEMENTATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

June 3, 2013

Montgomery County Planning Board of the M-NCPPC
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3760

Re: Biennial Report: Great Seneca Science Corridor Master Plan Implementation Status

Dear Montgomery County Planning Board:

Per the GSSC Master Plan of 2010, the GSSC Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) was chartered by the Planning Board to monitor and recommend action on the GSSC Master Plan implementation including CIP, growth policy, transit, community impacts and design, and public facilities and open space. In support of this mission, the Committee is submitting this letter to accompany the Planning Board staff's biennial report on the implementation. The IAC is pleased to report the high quality of cooperation and support for its mission provided by the Planning Board staff. As such, this letter will reaffirm and reinforce the observations and recommendations from the staff's report and elaborate on areas of specific and unanimous concern among the members of the committee.

The GSSC IAC endorses the key observations and accompanying recommendations (summarized below) provided by the Planning Board staff in its biennial report on GSSC implementation status.

Observations:

1. Land Use / Mixed Use: During the Stage 1 plan review process, it is clear that developers are shying away from mixed use in their developments due to a combination of perceived market factors (lack of demand for even small scale retail development) and a perception that the Crown Farm will draw people away from smaller commercial uses. The result is that new developments tend to be single-use focused. The apparent reinforcement of car-oriented development and absence of placemaking is an area of specific concern for the IAC and will be further discussed later in this letter.
2. Form: The lower and more massive buildings being proposed by developers due to prevailing market conditions are occupying more of the available site and leaving less usable open space. This contributes to the committee's concerns about placemaking and lack of attractive public spaces and streetscapes being created in the GSSC.
3. Pedestrian and bicycle connectivity and safety: The Plan aspires to re-create the Life Sciences Center as a walkable, bikeable community. The existence of busy arterial roads dissecting the plan area works against efforts to knit the LSC districts together. In particular, the lack of pedestrian-friendly connectivity across Key West Highway and the lack of pedestrian streetscape are among the factors that have deterred more extensive retail and open space uses in the Stage 1 development plans.
4. Staging: Two prerequisites for opening Stage 2 of the Master Plan will require significant effort to meet:
 - a. Fully funding the CCT from the Shady Grove Metro Station to Metropolitan Grove. The CCT is competing with many other important transit projects for a shrinking pot of money.
 - b. Achieving an 18% NADMS. This will require almost doubling the baseline NADMS of 9.6%. Reaching 18% in an area created as an auto-centric suburban office park with abundant free parking before the CCT is constructed will be difficult. The task is made harder by the obstacles to creating a walkable, bikeable community as discussed in item 3 above. Challenges to creating a true mixed-use development as discussed in item 1 above further complicates the effort to achieve an 18% NADMS.

Recommendations:

1. CIP –
 - a. Fund the CCT from the Shady Grove Metro Station to Metropolitan Grove (alternatively this may be funded in the State CTP).
 - b. Ensure funding is adequate to complete relocation of the PSTA by 2015.
 - c. Fund construction of the LSC Loop. This will require a preliminary assessment of portions of the trail not likely to be provided through the development approval process.
 - d. Fund a facility planning study for potential improvements to the intersections of Great Seneca Highway with Sam Eig Highway and with Muddy Branch Road.
2. Coordinate a combined effort by MCDOT, Maryland SHA, and the Montgomery County Planning Department to create a plan to improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between the five districts of the Life Sciences Center. This plan should comprehensively examine the proposed road system and make recommendations to create an efficient multi-modal transportation system throughout the LSC.
3. Coordinate a study of existing transit service and create a plan to increase non-auto driver mode share and reduce headways to acceptable levels prior to completion of the CCT. Continue to work with applicants to bring mixed uses into LSC developments through the development review process.
4. Coordinate a comprehensive study of parking needs and strategies for the Life Sciences Center.

Recommendations for LSC Central and LSC West Mixed-Use Town Centers

The Great Seneca Science Corridor (GSSC) Master Plan “Key Recommendations” on page 9 states: “Transform the LSC into a dynamic live/work community while ensuring growth opportunities for research, medical, and bioscience interests.” To date in Stage 1, the market has responded with low-density, single use car centric suburban type development. Should development continue in this manner, the LSC will continue to develop in a more suburban fashion and not become what the Plan envisions. Of particular concern are the development plans for the two GSSC town centers envisioned by the Master Plan: the LSC Central CCT Station town center and the LSC West CCT Station (i.e. PSTA) town center.

The IAC recognizes the both the PSTA site and the LSC Central CCT Station town centers as a unique opportunities due to their geographic location and county, non-profit and private property ownership. The PSTA abuts the development around the Shady Grove Adventist Hospital and the expansion of the Universities at Shady Grove across Darnestown Road. Affordable workforce housing at the PSTA would be a significant draw for hospital and life sciences professionals as well as graduate and professional students attending the USG. In addition, a Town Center that enables walkable and robust entertainment, nightlife, and the development of other community centric amenities should be part of the development planning. The LSC Central town Center is adjacent to the Adventist Hospital Campus, the National Cancer Institute Campus, the Johns Hopkins University Campus and the biotech properties owned by Alexandria Real Estate Equities. Each of these property owners has potential demand generators to support a high density mixed use town center at the LSC Central CCT Station.

The IAC recommends that the County fund and engage the Urban Land Institute to assist in the study and evaluation of best practices to ensure development in accord with the Master Plan, with a particular focus on the LSC Central and LSC West Mixed-Use Town Centers. The study would involve key stakeholders, help develop a shared vision, and examine challenges and solutions in achieving the great places envisioned in the Master Plan. The study would examine issues such as:

- successful mixed use high density transit oriented development within the surrounding region,
- best practices in achieving the placemaking, and mixed-use goals of the Master Plan,
- market challenges and solutions in achieving mixed-use transit oriented development, and
- the level of need, and best practices for public parking as envisioned in the Master Plan

Finally, the study team would propose specific County policies, programs, and approaches to ensure achievement of the dynamic, higher density mixed-use town centers as set forth in the Master Plan.

Recommendations for Transit and Non-auto Driver Mode Share

An area of significant concern to the GSSC IAC is the increasing evidence that reaching plan goals regarding non-automobile mode share will be extremely difficult in the near term, and perhaps for even longer. In last year's survey of employers (for which there was a very low response rate), the non-automobile mode share was estimated to be 9% of all commuter trips. The GSSC plan requires, in its Staging plan, that mode to reach 18% in order to "open up" additional development. Considering the single-use development that is taking place in the early stages of plan implementation, and the likelihood that the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT) will not be running until the next decade, it is unclear at this point what will impel such a large shift in mode share to take place in advance of the CCT.

There are at least two negative impacts of this problem. First, the level of traffic both in and near the plan area will increase dramatically as new development projects are completed and populated, placing stress on an already overburdened system and on the communities that surround the planning area. Second, plan implementation will be stalled, as development reliant on reaching this Staging goal will be blocked.

The GSSC urges Montgomery County to take the following actions:

- 1) Conduct a study of transit service and potential demand, for the GSSC Planning Area and its surrounding areas, to determine what near-term and mid-term improvements/enhancements can be made that will increase transit usage, especially in advance of the CCT beginning operations; and then implement those improvements.
- 2) Actively and aggressively pursue Transportation Demand Management (TDM) strategies for the plan area and the surrounding areas.

The GSSC IAC also strongly encourages Montgomery County to improve its methodology for estimating the travel mode shares. We are concerned that the estimates are based only on low-response-rate surveys of the employers who chose to participate; and that estimates of mode share do not include the travel patterns of residents of the plan area. We therefore have a low level of confidence that the estimates reflect the actual travel patterns. We urge Montgomery County to explore methods to 1) get higher response rates from employers and/or employees; and 2) incorporate travel of residents into the overall estimate of mode share, especially considering the expected dramatic increase in population in the GSSC.

Thank you for your consideration,

Members of the Great Seneca Science Corridor Implementation of Advisory Committee

Marilyn Balcombe and Phil Usatine

Co-Chairs, Great Seneca Science Corridor Implementation Advisory Committee