



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

May 8, 2003

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: John A. Carter, Chief, Community-Based Planning Division *JAC*

FROM: Glenn R. Kreger, Team Leader, Silver Spring/Takoma Park *GK*
Miguel Iraola, Planner Coordinator *MI*

SUBJECT: South Silver Spring Pedestrian Pathway Study

Ms. Elizabeth Davison, Director of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA), has provided the enclosed report ("Creating the New Neighborhood: South Silver Spring") and requested an opportunity to present it to the Planning Board. On May 15, Ms. Davison and her staff will brief the Board and answer questions concerning the proposed concept for a secondary pathway system in South Silver Spring.

Project Summary

DHCA proposes to divide the large blocks in South Silver Spring into smaller urban blocks through the creation of new mid-block pedestrian pathways. These linkages are intended to improve the livability and attractiveness of the area and create a new neighborhood south of the railroad tracks. A number of new developments are located in this revitalization area. Residential projects include the Silver Spring Metro Center/NOAA Phase V (under construction); Canada Dry (approved); Newell Condos (partially approved); and renovation of the vacant Gramax building. Non-residential developments include the Discovery Creative Technology Center in the former Caldor's building (complete); the Montgomery College Health Sciences Building (under construction); and the County's Silver Spring Innovation Center (approved).

DHCA's pathway system would be implemented in a minimum of four phases, starting with the block between East-West Highway and the portion of Blair Mill Road that is proposed for abandonment. Each block presents various issues that need to be resolved in order for the strategy to be implemented. DHCA anticipates that some segments would be acquired through easements and others through the amenity requirements for future optional method projects. Total public costs are estimated by DHCA to be approximately \$3.9 million. At DHCA's request, the County Council approved Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding in the amount of \$780,000 for FY 04. In the following years, DHCA anticipates additional funding from CDBG and other Federal and State sources.

Sector Plan Guidance

The *Approved and Adopted February 2000 Silver Spring Central Business District Sector Plan* has six major themes, including the creation of a Pedestrian-Friendly Downtown. The Plan specifically “encourages active streets and sidewalks, busy with people walking to shop, commute, or for pleasure. . . The feel of a community is created on its streets and paths, and Silver Spring’s sidewalks should be bustling and active.”

The Sector Plan recognizes that the physical definition within the CBD comes from its street pattern and pedestrian environment. “Street definition is formed by the harmonious proportions of buildings edging the street and sidewalk, and the activity created by that arrangement. . . The street pattern should make easy pedestrian connections between downtown activities and provide the structure of a pedestrian-friendly downtown.”

The Sector Plan includes Concept Plans for the major revitalization areas within the CBD (i.e., the Core, Fenton Village, Ripley and South Silver Spring) which indicate the need for several new pedestrian/bike links, two in the Core and one each in Fenton Village and South Silver Spring. The Sector Plan recognized that South Silver Spring “is composed of large blocks that, while they offer redevelopment opportunities, also make it difficult to get through and around the district.” New off-street links were minimized in order to focus pedestrian traffic along the streets as much as possible.

Analysis

In *Designing the Successful Downtown*, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) notes that through-block connectors (i.e., pedestrian pathways located at street level but off the street) provide short cuts through development blocks. “Where the existing development pattern creates long blocks, through-block connectors can become especially important features of the pedestrian system by adding to the convenience of movement within the core. They also function as linkages between parking and the major retail streets.”

At this point in its evolution, South Silver Spring is not characterized by the intensity of Silver Spring’s Core and its streets are not major retail streets. Sufficient development is not likely to occur to both activate the streets and justify an extensive system of through-block pedestrian connectors. “When they are designed to complement the level of pedestrian activity on downtown streets, through block connectors add texture, richness, and diversity to the downtown experience.” (ULI)

The DHCA proposal includes a variety of linkages that serve different functions. Some are truly through block connectors while others are essentially improved paths to a public parking garage. Some of the blocks in South Silver Spring do need to be broken up, while others may not. Where large blocks need to be broken up, staff supports the implementation of mixed streets—allowing for pedestrians and low-speed vehicular traffic—to form additional city blocks, rather than the implementation of purely pedestrian paths.

The following summarizes staff's view of the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed pathway system.

Advantages

- The proposed pathway system increases interconnectivity (as recommended in the Sector Plan) by creating short blocks.
- Improved access will support new arts and entertainment operations in the area.
- The proposed alley behind Mayorga Coffee and the proposed Izzora nightclub may present an opportunity to create viable retail space.

Disadvantages

- The top priority in the CBD, including South Silver Spring, is activating the streets. A system of secondary pathways would dilute pedestrian traffic that should first be focused on the sidewalks.
- Even if all of the proposed projects in South Silver Spring are built, there may be insufficient pedestrian volumes to support significant components of the proposed pathway system. (This is particularly true for Phase III and beyond.) Without sufficient volumes on a 24-hour basis, safety and security in the alleys becomes a concern. Implementing public mixed streets in Phase II could help to mitigate this concern in the block between Kennett Street and East-West Highway.
- Some of the proposed paths bring pedestrians out to unsignalized mid-block locations along major roadways where they will be tempted to make unsafe crossings. All of these intersections are likely to not be signalized. In addition, all of these mid-block locations will probably not be striped or have additional safety enhancements. Establishment of mid-block crosswalks is most critical in the Core where there will be sufficient pedestrian volumes to support them and where we can demonstrate their safety and utility.
- Concerns about specific links are included in the April 2003 technical staff comments included as Attachment 2.