



MCPB  
ITEM NO. 5  
4-28-05

April 22, 2005

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Montgomery County Planning Board

**VIA:** Jeffrey Zyontz, Chief  
Countywide Planning Division

Richard Hawthorne, Chief  
Transportation Planning

**FROM:** Alex Hekimian: 301-495-4525, for the Department of Park and Planning

**SUBJECT:** Mandatory Referral No. 05801-DPW&T-1: White Oak Transit Center Lockwood Drive at New Hampshire Avenue (CIP No. 509337)

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On April 14, 2005, the Planning Board deferred action on the Mandatory Referral for the proposed White Oak Transit Center until Planning staff could meet with staff of the Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT), the manager of the White Oak Shopping Center, and some members of the project's Citizens Advisory Committee to see if a consensus could be achieved on the most appropriate design and operation for the proposed Transit Center. This meeting was held at the White Oak Shopping Center on April 19, 2005. While a complete consensus was not achieved at that meeting, there was general agreement that the Transit Center would need a "sense of place," that safety was very important, and that the needs of bus operators and customers should be accommodated. As a result of that meeting, our staff has amended its recommendation, as presented in this revised version of the staff's original memorandum to the Board.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS**

Approve transmittal of the following recommendations to the Montgomery County Council and the Montgomery County Department of Public Works and Transportation:

1. The eastern set of bus shelters would be better located away from an area of dumpsters at the rear of the White Oak Shopping Center to an area east of the eastern shopping center driveway and adjacent to existing multi-family residential development. However, if DPWT chooses to keep those shelters at the rear of the shopping center, shelters and a raised bus pad to calm traffic should also be installed as part of this project on Lockwood Drive at the existing bus stop next to the apartment buildings just east of the shopping center.
2. Begin discussions with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority regarding the possibility of re-routing the Metrobus K6 route so that it serves a much larger residential community in the Stewart Lane/Lockwood Drive area.
3. Make room for increasing the width of the sidewalks to eight feet by eliminating the proposed four-foot-wide median islands and reducing the Lockwood Drive curb-to-curb width by the same amount.
3. Reconstruct the sidewalk on Lockwood Drive for a distance of about 100 feet west of the shopping center driveway at the east end of the project, so that it is offset a minimum of six feet from the curb and reconstruct the sidewalk immediately east of the driveway to match it. On the opposite side of the street, reconstruct the sidewalk to have a similar offset from the curb.
4. Implement the following related improvements.
  - a) Ensure that the light levels along Lockwood Drive will meet the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America standards.
  - b) Provide advance signing to alert drivers that they are entering the transit center.
  - c) Provide a surface treatment for the proposed retaining walls that matches the treatment recently used by State Highway Administration for the New Hampshire Avenue highway improvement project. Provide a similar treatment for the median islands if they are kept in the plan. Use conifers and other plantings on the reconstructed slope behind the sidewalk on Lockwood Drive to screen the rear of the shopping center from view.
  - d) If the eastern set of bus shelters is not relocated, provide a sidewalk connection from Lockwood Drive to the shopping center along the western edge of the driveway that leads into the eastern end of the shopping center.

## **BACKGROUND**

One of the recommendations in the 1997 White Oak Master Plan is to investigate the feasibility of a transit center at the White Oak Shopping Center, which is located at the intersection of New Hampshire Avenue (MD 650) and Lockwood Drive. In response to that recommendation, DPWT performed a planning study, which was completed in August 2002.

The planning study produced concept designs that DPWT subsequently utilized to advance the project to the current 30% preliminary design level. At this stage, the proposed project would be a candidate for County funding as an FY 2006 Capital Improvement Project. Therefore, comments from the Planning Board to the County Council regarding this project would be timely in terms of the upcoming County FY 2006 budget discussions. **The County Council's Transportation and Environment Committee is scheduled to review this project on April 29, 2005.**

## DISCUSSION

Staff agrees that an improved center for bus passengers is needed in the vicinity of the intersection of Lockwood Drive and New Hampshire Avenue in the White Oak area. Staff of the Community-Based Planning Division supports this project, which is consistent with the recommendations in the 1997 White Oak Master Plan. Environmental Planning staff also supports this project and has approved this project's Natural Resource Inventory/Forest Stand Delineation application. A Forest Conservation Plan exemption has been issued for this site because the proposal modifies an existing developed property. This property is not subject to a Tree Save Plan because no specimen or significant trees are affected by the proposal, and the proposal satisfies environmental guidelines and water quality considerations.

DPWT studied the feasibility of a transit center in the White Oak area, as recommended in the Master Plan. Since DPWT found in its planning study that it would not be feasible to place the transit center within the White Oak Shopping Center, the alternative was to place it along Lockwood Drive. DPWT's proposal includes new bus shelters on Lockwood Drive, with streetlights, landscaping and three-inch raised roadway sections where the bus pads are located to help slow vehicular traffic. DPWT's description of the project is shown in Exhibit 1, and a plan view is shown in Exhibit 2. In Exhibit 3, the location of the western set of shelters is shown as red square "A" and the eastern set of shelters as red square "B."

In the spirit of improving the proposed plan for the center, staff is making a number of recommendations. These recommendations are described in additional detail below.

The most substantial staff recommendation is to move the eastern set of bus shelters and associated raised bus pads in the project about 400 feet, from west of the driveway at the east end of the shopping center to just east of that driveway, shown as red square "C" in Exhibit 3. DPWT's current proposal locates the eastern set of shelters only about a half-block away from the western set of shelters on Lockwood Drive. Since all buses would stop at both sets of shelters, it appears to be inefficient and unnecessary for buses to stop at locations so close to each other.

More important, though, is that the proposed eastern bus shelter location is adjacent to the rear of the shopping center -- an inconvenient location for people who want access to the shops in the center and the residences in the area. Also, its location away from intersecting streets or major driveways provides an invitation for pedestrians to cross mid-block. This bus stop location is inconsistent with a major recommendation in the County's Bus Stop Database-Inventory,

Passenger Safety, Accessibility, and Amenities Improvement Program: **“Relocate inconveniently placed and mid-block bus stops closer to intersections to encourage transit-using pedestrians to use crosswalks.”**

Having bus shelters adjacent to the rear of the shopping center also means that passengers waiting for buses will be subjected to a very unattractive view, noise, and possible odors from the many dumpsters that are used near the loading areas of the shopping center (see Exhibit 4). The rear of the shopping center property also suffers from pools of stagnant, standing water, a narrow sidewalk that is at the curb line with no buffer from the road, and multiple worn paths from the bus stop area to the east end of the shopping center.

According to DPWT, about half of the people that use the bus stops at this location are shoppers while the other half are residents of nearby communities. Staff believes that moving the eastern set of shelters closer to the nearby residential complexes would place the bus stop at a much more convenient location for the residents, as well as for shoppers. As seen in Exhibit 5, this area is much more attractive and the sidewalk is well offset from the road. There is a landscape panel that could easily accept more street trees, and there is a green area behind the sidewalk that could accept additional landscaping to screen the bus stops from the adjacent apartments and screen the apartment parking lot from the road. Also, moving the bus stop to this location could make it safer by channeling people to a crosswalk at an intersection of major driveways. An added benefit is that moving the bus stop would make the project less expensive by avoiding the substantial costs of additional right-of-way and two of the three proposed retaining walls in the plan.

Based on discussions thus far, DPWT is leaning toward retaining the eastern set of bus shelters, notwithstanding the inhospitable location and the apparent inconsistency with the County’s Bus Stop Database-Inventory, Passenger Safety, Accessibility, and Amenities Improvement Program. DPWT’s continuing position follows:

“The Department of Public Works and Transportation, Transit Division, would like the two designated bus shelters to remain at the specified location. The common (Routes Z6, Z8, K6, Ride On 10) transit focal point should be in close proximity to the commercial activity. We acknowledge that the existing location has aesthetic deficiencies; however, rather than relocate the bus shelter, we see an opportunity to improve this location. We would, however, recommend an additional stop/shelter placed in front of the apartments on Lockwood for the Z6, Z8, and Route 10. Our existing contractor, Clear Channel, would install the additional shelter.

We understand that the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission alternative proposal does not address the aesthetic deficiencies and does not provide transferring between all routes. To relocate the bus shelters in front of the apartments located on Lockwood Drive would change travel patterns and force passengers using the Metrobus K6 to create an undesirable bus stop location at the rear entrance of the White Oak Shopping Center. This would involve significant improvements to private property.”

Our staff appreciates DPWT's willingness to add a third set of bus shelters closer to the apartments at the east end of the project; however, DPWT's proposal to keep the project's proposed eastern set of bus shelters at the rear of the shopping center does not solve the previously cited pedestrian access, comfort, and safety problems associated with that location. We disagree with DPWT's perceived problem with transfers among bus routes because the bus stop at the western set of bus shelters could easily serve that purpose. We also disagree with DPWT's comment that our staff's proposal does not address the aesthetic deficiencies, because we do believe that the poor aesthetics along the rear of the shopping center should be corrected whether or not the bus stops are improved at that location.

We also note that DPWT wants the Metrobus K6 route to continue to start at the current bus stop at the rear of the shopping center rather than at a bus stop within the shopping center or at some other point along Stewart Lane or Lockwood Drive. Our staff agrees with one of the comments from a member of the Citizens Advisory Committee at the April 19, 2005, meeting that the Metrobus K6 should run along the entire length of the Stewart Lane/Lockwood Drive loop because of the large concentration of residents in that area. If that were to happen, people would have access to the Metrobus K6 at multiple stops along the route and would diminish DPWT's perceived need to have a stop at the eastern end of the shopping center.

If DPWT is determined to retain the eastern set of bus shelters and to not pursue extending the routing of the Metrobus K6, then our staff recommends, at the very least, that DPWT improve the quality of the existing heavily-used bus stop near the apartments just east of the eastern driveway to the shopping center. This location is shown as red square "D" in Exhibit 3. It is especially important to have bus shelters, crosswalks, and a raised bus pad to calm traffic at that location. At the time of the writing of this memorandum, DPWT was willing to install bus shelters, but not a raised bus pad at that location.

Regarding other aspects of DPWT's proposal, the minor widening of the sidewalks to six feet and attaching them to the curb barely meets American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) minimums for any type of roadway. Given that Lockwood Drive is classified as an arterial, however, the recommended pedestrian accommodation is greater. While landscaped buffers to separate the sidewalk from the roadway are preferred, the *AASHTO Guide for the Planning, Design, and Operation of Pedestrian Facilities (2004)* recommends that eight to ten-foot sidewalks be provided along arterials where they must be flush against the curb.

Our staff recommends eliminating the proposed four-foot-wide median islands in favor of reducing Lockwood Drive's roadway width by the same amount and increasing the width of the sidewalks to eight feet. Four-foot medians are uncomfortable refuges for pedestrians, and would be especially so in this case since the proposed median would be mountable by large trucks turning into driveways across from the bus shelters. Since much of the existing curbing in this area appears to be in poor condition and require replacement, widening the sidewalks to eight feet and replacing the curbs would be a welcome improvement. By so doing, the curb-to-curb distance of Lockwood Drive would be 44 feet instead of 48 feet and a bit easier for people to cross at one time. In staff's judgment, narrowing Lockwood Drive by four feet rather than installing a four-foot median mountable by trucks would best serve pedestrian safety at this location.

Our staff also recommends that DPWT reconstruct the existing sidewalk on Lockwood Drive for a distance of about 100 feet west of the shopping center driveway at the east end of the project, so that it is offset a minimum of six feet from the curb, and reconstruct the sidewalk immediately east of the driveway to match it. Likewise, on the opposite side of the street, the sidewalk should be reconstructed to have a similar offset from the curb.

The AASHTO Guide referenced above recommends that five to six-foot buffers be provided between the sidewalks and the street along an arterial. Because of the space constraints in this area, this is difficult to meet for much of the project length along Lockwood Drive, however this can be accomplished at the eastern shopping center driveway, taking advantage of the opportunity to improve the safety and comfort of pedestrians by offsetting the sidewalks from the street.

Offsetting the sidewalk from the curb would allow the sidewalk to meet Americans with Disabilities Act Best Practices since it would allow wheelchair users to travel outside the driveway slope. A striped crosswalk or concrete apron should be provided between the sidewalks on either side of Lockwood Drive to channel pedestrian movements and give drivers the best notice as to where they can expect to see pedestrians crossing the roadway.

The remaining staff's recommendations are meant to assure that the project's design elements provide proper lighting and signing, safe and convenient pedestrian access, and an attractive facility for bus customers and the surrounding neighborhood.

AH:gw  
Attachments

memo to mcpb re white oak TC.doc