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LONG-AWAITED COLUMBIA DOWNTOWN PLANNED

by Robert Steuteville



While many were involved with the largest new urban charrette in history, in Biloxi, another design effort with historic significance was underway in Columbia, Maryland, in mid-October. The 1960s master-planned town of about 90,000 residents, where the late town founder Jim Rouse is still revered, is looking to transform its downtown. Rouse envisioned a vibrant urban center — albeit with modernist planning — which never materialized. Instead the community got an enclosed shopping mall and office buildings, all very auto-oriented. A six-lane arterial road traverses the town center's 500-acre site.



Design Collective of Baltimore, a new urbanist firm, was hired by Howard County to create a 30-year plan for the town center through a public charrette process. More than a thousand people attended over the course of a week, Matt D'Amico, principal of Design Collective, told *New Urban News*. What came out of the session was remarkable, D'Amico says — a plan for up to 5,500 housing units and over five million square feet of office/retail space. Just two years ago, developer General Growth Properties (GGP) was turned down for 1,600 housing units and 800,000 square feet of office, D'Amico notes. "It's the power of the charrette — you empower the people," he says. "It wasn't about density or square footage, it was about the quality of the plan." D'Amico received a standing ovation from many of the 400 people who attended the final presentation.

The next step is to refine the master plan and create a form-based code to implement the plan, slated to be complete by early December, according to D'Amico. The plan will also require a change of the "New Town" zoning category that currently governs all of Columbia, exempting the town center from a density cap, D'Amico explains. The New Town category places a cap of 2.35 units/acre gross, or about 33,000 units, for the whole town of 22 square miles — these units are currently built out. Furthermore, the physical requirements of the New Town zone will be replaced by the form-based code for the town center, D'Amico says. The existing process for public approvals and hearings is proposed to continue under the changed zoning system. GGP, which bought out the Rouse Company and which owns 90 percent of the town center, was wary of the charrette but is pleased with the outcome and the potentially increased development that will likely come out of the process, D'Amico says.

The plan calls for the suburban arterial to be reduced to four lanes with on-street parking to create a main street. Concerns about traffic were allayed by transportation engineer Walter Kulash of Glatting Jackson, part of the charrette team, who assured citizens that the proposed grid of streets will accommodate the increased traffic, even with the reduced lanes on the main street. The charrette team also included market researcher and economic analyst Don Zuchelli of ZHA, illustrator Eric Hynes of Encore Arts, and photo simulator Steve Price of Urban Advantage.

The plan wraps New Urbanism around the existing, highly successful mall. Surface parking lots are to be transformed into pedestrian-scale blocks with structured parking wrapped by mixed-use development. Two transit stations are planned to accommodate future rail service. New greens, squares, and plazas are located at key intersections and terminating vistas. Important sites are reserved for civic and cultural buildings. A long-range plan envisions demolition of the mall, which would be replaced by the completed urban fabric of streets.

In addition to GGP and the county, the Columbia Association, the homeowners' association for the unincorporated town, holds significant power. Jud Malone, association board member for the town center, was quoted as saying the form-based code offers a lot of advantages. While the code provides a clear set of rules for the developers to follow, "they will have a lot of flexibility in those rules," he told *The Business Monthly*. The rules "will mostly concern the types of buildings, the way the front of the buildings relate to the surroundings ... But, they will still have the flexibility to adopt to market changes."