

Written testimony of the
Town of Garrett Park
Before the
Montgomery County Council
Regarding
White Flint Sector Plan

October 20, 2009

Good evening. I am Chris Keller, Mayor of the Town of Garrett Park. With me this evening are members of the Garrett Park Town Council: Hans Wegner, Jack Mandel and Chris Petito. We appreciate the opportunity to offer the views of the Town of Garrett Park on the Planning Board's draft White Flint Sector Plan. The Town is located just east of White Flint, where redevelopment will have far-reaching effects on nearby neighborhoods for years to come. Garrett Park is a 111-year old independent municipality that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. We pride ourselves on our unique sense of community, which residents of Garrett Park work hard to maintain. Town residents are pleased to work in partnership with our neighbors, with school parents, and with many others who strive to establish and sustain the important livable character that distinguishes our neighborhoods, and draws people to Montgomery County

The residents of Garrett Park, in common with our neighbors, *support* the fundamental *goals* of the White Flint Sector Plan – a vibrant mixed-use community that is walkable, environmentally sustainable, and a pleasant place to visit as well as live and work. We fully endorse the broad goals stated in the plan: to “create [a] thriving, diverse mixed use center with highest intensity closest to Metro,” to “promote sustainable development,” and other laudable aims. Local residents have every bit as much interest in the success of a revitalized White Flint as those stakeholders whose interest is financial. If White Flint succeeds, nearby residents have the prospect of an attractive, useful destination, developed with sensitivity to environmental impacts, at our doorstep.

If White Flint is not designed and built carefully – that is, pursuant to a plan that includes, and puts teeth in, requirements that density and infrastructure be kept in balance – then everyone loses. Adjacent communities in particular will feel the effects of added traffic congestion, pollution, and other impacts that tear at the very fabric of neighborhoods. That is why we *support* efforts to provide an innovative, attractive, environmentally sensitive plan for the revitalization of White Flint.

However, we believe that the Planning Board's draft plan does not include adequate guarantees that those goals will be met in the actual build-out. We strongly recommend that the plan balance density (residential and commercial development) with adequate public facilities – roads, public transportation, schools, and public amenities such as a community center and library. We also believe that the plan should include strong affirmative requirements for ecological sustainability and, of most immediate interest to Garrett Park, solutions for adverse effects on traffic. The focus of our testimony is on the need for balance between the density of development and the infrastructure necessary to sustain that density, thus assuring a functioning, inviting community.

Density. We recognize that density in the immediate vicinity of the White Flint Metro station is necessary for the critical mass necessary to draw retail and commercial enterprises that can contribute attractive features to a revitalized White Flint. The same density, plus ease of access for those living outside the Sector, is also essential to the continued economic success of a diverse mix of attractions, such as restaurants, retail stores, and entertainment options. However, density that is spread more broadly than the acknowledged zone of walkability from Metro will undermine the success of the sector's core goals of livability and attractiveness, as well as adversely impact surrounding established communities. We recommend that permitted development be more compact, so that the highest density and the tallest buildings are within ¼ mile of the White Flint Metro Station, with a significant decrease in density and height beyond that core. We recommend consideration of a reduction in the number of residential units and especially the amount of commercial space allowed in the sector (the zoning envelope), to at least the figures actually stated in the plan. Most importantly, it is essential that the density of development not outstrip the ability of the infrastructure to sustain it; incorporating in the Sector Plan effective standards that assure *balance* between density and infrastructure at each stage of development is indispensable for the overall success of White Flint revitalization.

Traffic. Garrett Park is located on either side of Strathmore Avenue, Maryland Route 547, very near White Flint. This puts the Town in a nearly unique position to be affected adversely by development that results in significantly increased traffic. Strathmore Avenue/Rte. 547 continues east from Garrett Park and becomes Knowles Avenue, ending at Connecticut Avenue in Kensington. Although Strathmore Avenue lies just a short distance outside the designated Sector Plan area, it is the *only* east-west route connecting Rockville Pike and Connecticut Avenue between the Beltway and Randolph Road. Strathmore is therefore also the only east-west route that intersects Rockville Pike in the White Flint area and provides access and egress for traffic to the east of the Pike. Strathmore Avenue/Rt. 547 already operates at a borderline-failure traffic volume at many hours of the day. We have considerable concern that, unless channeled by a more pragmatic Sector Plan, development will exacerbate an already-tenuous traffic situation and lead to gridlock.

To minimize continued adverse impact on Strathmore Avenue traffic, the White Flint Sector Plan *must* take greater account of east-west connection traffic. The interior street grid proposed within the Sector reflects principles of the “new urbanism” that have been shown to be quite effective within the area in which they are applied. But the White Flint street grid lies wholly *within* the Sector and does not connect to any outlet to the south with the exception of Rockville Pike. The interior street system takes no account whatsoever of the need for accommodating

east-west traffic approaching or leaving the grid. Even if public transit initiatives succeed in drawing a significant proportion of new residents and commuters to the White Flint sector, there will be an irreducible amount of additional vehicular traffic on the already-overburdened east-west routes of Edson Lane and Strathmore Avenue. Hiding this increased congestion by degrading standards also degrades our quality of life by increasing pollution, noise and safety concerns. The plan should acknowledge this impact on nearby neighborhoods. Don't raise allowed congestion or exempt the sector from traffic impact analyses.

Moreover, we agree with County Executive Leggett that the White Flint Sector Plan needs to be considered in the broader context of what is planned both north and south of the Sector. The traffic impacts of other developments, most notably the BRAC-related changes at Bethesda Naval Medical, cannot be ignored.

Transportation. We recognize that the essence of Smart Growth is mixed use buildings near high quality transit, primarily Metro. The Sector Plan assumes Metro will be running 8 car trains every 2½ minutes, but as yet there is no such funding. Without high quality transit, people will drive. Before density and overcrowding overwhelm us all, receipt of the required Metro cars and upgraded service must be a staging trigger.

We acknowledge that a rebuilt and, most importantly, re-envisioned Rockville Pike is essential to the success of the White Flint Sector Plan. That's why it is necessary that Rockville Pike be developed first, including providing for bus rapid transit or other public transit opportunities, pedestrian safety measures, and attractive bikeways.

We urge that the Sector Plan set a high standard for use of public transit and carpooling ("mode share"). In defining mode share, include trips from the sector by the residential community, and include trips to and from regional retail.

Adding a diverse array of innovative transportation options should figure more prominently in the Sector Plan. We urge, in particular, greater facilitation of bicycle use – incorporation of more bike lanes and shared use paths. We also join in the request that the Council designate the WF sector as a Bike Priority area so that bike lanes and paths can be implemented immediately on existing roads that will not be redeveloped.

Schools. We emphatically agree with the parents and organizations that urge dedicating space *now* for a needed elementary school within the Sector. Even though the demand for additional school capacity may not manifest itself immediately, planning for addition of a school is not an issue that should be deferred.

Community-building amenities. The highest density in the White Flint sector will have buildings towering up to 300 feet immediately around the area for the Civic Green – yet this space is only 1 acre, or 0.2%, of the total sector area. Urban plazas and neighborhood greens would constitute another 5% of the sector. However, under this plan "urban plazas" could include outdoor restaurant seating in commercial development. There is no minimum size and there is no guarantee of public access. Neighborhood greens should be public spaces, but under this plan could be located on top of parking garages. As the original advisory committee did, we urge a

larger Civic Green with a minimum of 2 acres, to be in balance with the building heights and density in the surrounding area, and keeping public space public.

Additional elements that will help the new White Flint coalesce as a true community should also be required in the Sector Plan: a full service library, a community center, a senior center, child care facilities, and an arts district or similar organizing touchstone that would distinguish White Flint.

Sustainability. Although the Sector Plan makes efforts to address environmental issues, the planned density and additional congestion in White Flint will increase the total carbon emissions and pollutants in the sector. We share the County Executive's concern that the White Flint Sector Plan "does not address diminished air quality that will result from intentionally congested roads – congestion that may be significantly understated [in the Plan]." We recommend that the Sector Plan require more aggressive environmental controls and mitigation.

For water quality, even the Sector Plan itself envisions degradation in permitted storm water runoff. We have an opportunity to improve the water in Rock Creek and Cabin John. The plan should require pollution assessments as part of any new development, and mandate significantly better storm water management overall.

Steps to assure greater sustainability overall should not be optional. Make the White Flint Sector a shining example of responsible environmental planning, by requiring or vastly strengthening the incentives for LEED certification of buildings and similar 'green' initiatives. Make White Flint the benchmark by which subsequent development can be gauged rather than settling for a hodge-podge of non-mandatory environmental steps.

Financing. Key issues of financing must be resolved prior to approving the Sector Plan. We share, however, County Executive's concern that a thirty-year plan for land use may not be the appropriate vehicle for resolving choices about public financing of infrastructure.

Additional issues. We agree with community witnesses who urge a Staging Plan for each phase of development. The Staging Plan should establish meaningful conditions that include public facilities requirements and mode share criteria, and it should ensure that these requirements and criteria are met before subsequent development is permitted.

We also join our neighbors in the White Flint Community Coalition in advocating a Sector Plan that focuses on compatibility with adjacent residential communities in terms of density, traffic impact, and line of sight.

In conclusion, we endorse the idea of a lively, attractive, environmentally-responsible community at a revitalized White Flint. We believe that the draft Sector Plan, with appropriate modifications, could set an enviable standard for sensible application of "Smart Growth" principles in an area very much in need of innovative responses to its current condition. But part of that condition is White Flint's proximity to many established neighborhoods. In formulating a final Sector Plan it is essential that increased density not outstrip the ability of infrastructure and public facilities to sustain it, thus destroying the essential character of existing

neighborhoods and schools. The neighbors have every bit as much of a vested interest in the success of carefully-planned growth as other parties. But development must not be purchased at the expense of the very qualities that attract and hold residents to Montgomery County.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Town of Garrett Park.