

The following is a response to the Sun's editorial in favor of a mixed use town center in Lutherville

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Lutherville Station not appropriate for a town center | READER COMMENTARY

“That practically the entire area or land is low, wet and swampy and therefore undesirable, if not wholly unsuited for residential development...” That statement, issued by the Baltimore County Zoning Commissioner in the 1950s to justify changing the land that constitutes part of the Lutherville Station Transit Oriented Development and the adjoining Yorkridge Shopping Center to commercial zoning, was as objectively unbelievable back then as the Sunpapers’ call to make this area a mixed-use town center is today. (Will Baltimore County embrace a new generation of mixed-use town centers?, editorial Dec. 13, 2022) <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-1213-lutherville-station-future-20221212-3o7g2evhjjcianiagpw4ugtcnjy-story.html>

You see, Lutherville has never been deemed a town center by Baltimore County’s Master Plan documents that are published every ten years. From the 1980 Master Plan through the Master Plan 2010, Lutherville was never called a town center, a growth area or even a revitalization district. By the Master Plan 2010 the central light rail line became operational, and the shopping center now known as Lutherville Station lost its’ last anchor tenant, Caldor, without any impact on the master plan documents.

Master Plan 2020 does make mention of Transit Oriented Development, but only in general terms and certainly not with any direct reference to Lutherville. What this master plan does enunciate in detail are areas termed Community Enhancement Areas (CEAs). The document states that “the ideal locations for CEAs are sites that exist within or can extend traditional town centers. Other viable alternatives include underused or undervalued areas.” A map of the CEAs in this vicinity extends to the north side of Ridgely Road, but the Master Plan specified that “criteria used to determine potential CEAs include the following: strong local support, good multi-modal access ... sustainable design, ability to complement adjacent land uses, existing adequate public services and facilities and limited environmental constraints.” The plan also states that development of CEAs must be in accordance with current zoning, and that what may work on one parcel might be totally inappropriate for another site.

Finally, the Master Plan cautions that not all CEAs should be developed in the same manner. “Areas suitable for CEAs...should ...meet the specific needs of the community. ... existing staff from Baltimore County will facilitate the design of CEAs through a charrette or similar process...” that would include all stakeholders.

So, what about the mixed-use town center at Lutherville that the Sunpaper supports? For starters, the community did not learn about this Transit Oriented Development application from the Planning Department or the County Executive’s office. We learned about it from a You Tube video, wherein the Secretary of MDOT made an off-hand comment about working with the

County staff on the application. That reference was made well after the application had been submitted, and just days before County agencies reviewed the application. To say that transparency was opaque would be an understatement. Did a charrette process take place as stipulated by the current Master Plan? No.

The concerns over this TOD proposal from the community residents are manifold. For starters, the four hundred apartments proposed in Lutherville are larger in number than the Avalon Bay apartments in Hunt Valley or even the Avalon project in the Towson town center. Secondly, the developer at Lutherville is proposing 2.5 acres, more or less, of open space for the project. Yet County regulations call for approximately 9 acres of open space. This disparity reinforces the belief that the project is overly ambitious given the size of the property. The amount of on-site parking is also less than the County's standard requirements, and the sister Yorkridge Shopping Center has received a number of variances for parking requirements in the past. School overcrowding from this project is also a warranted concern given that Lutherville Elementary is near the state-rated capacity, while Ridgely Middle and Towson High are at or over capacity. Parents have long complained that the County's school impact analysis for new development is seriously broken, but the problem has not been fixed. Finally, the project only fronts on Ridgely Road and via a right of way that accesses Aylesbury Road. Avalon at Hunt Valley fronts on a much wider road, Shawan Road, with greater traffic capacity than Ridgely. Residents are concerned that the feeder streets to Ridgely Road will see increased volumes if the project comes to fruition.

The four hundred apartment units, 200,000 square feet of office space and 15-17,000 square feet of retail space will no doubt change the character of the immediate area, if approved. What we have found thus far is that only our Councilman, Wade Kach, has been willing to listen to our concerns.