

Howard University Campus Plan Task Force

MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

25 July 2011

Attendees

Mr. Benton Heimsath, Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham's Office
Mr. Patrick Nelson, Pleasant Plains Resident, Georgia Avenue Community Development Task Force
Ms. Sylvia Robinson, Emergence Community Arts Collective, Georgia Avenue Community Development Task Force
Mr. Lawrence Guyot, LeDroit Park Resident
Mr. Tony Norman, ANC 1B10, Chair, ANC 1B Design Review Committee
Mr. Eric Fidler, LeDroit Park Civic Association, Chair, ANC 1B Transportation Committee
Ms. Cheryl Cort, Policy Director, Coalition for Smarter Growth
Mr. Marcus Morgan, President, LeDroit Park Civic Association
Mr. Robert Schiesel, Gorove Slade Transportation Planners and Engineers
Mr. Dan Van Pelt, Gorove Slade Transportation Planners and Engineers
Mr. Michael Harris, Co-Chair, University-wide Campus Master Plan Steering Committee
Ms. Maybelle Taylor Bennett, Co-Chair University-wide Campus Master Plan Steering Committee, Director, Howard University Community Association

Meeting Highlights

This third of four meetings scheduled for late June and the month of July was devoted to a discussion of the transportation plan as it was submitted to the Zoning Commission of the District of Columbia. Discussions with the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT) are ongoing and a second transportation planning consultant firm has been retained to assist the University in developing the plan in a more detailed manner. Hence, as the plan further unfolds, more discussions with community representatives will take place.

Dan Van Pelt of Gorove Slade explained that Gorove Slade is the more technical of the transportation planners, while the newly retained firm of Nelson/Nygaard focuses more on planning elements. Maybelle Bennett explained that Nelson/Nygaard was brought on board to assist the University in identifying the transportation demand management (TDM) measures that would be most successful in reducing the University's demand for parking and encouraging the use of alternative means of transportation to and from the central campus by students, faculty and staff.

Maybelle Bennett prefaced the discussion noting that the University understands the goals and objectives of the city to reduce the population's reliance upon single occupancy vehicular trips to and from places of employment and other destinations. She mentioned that both Gorove Slade and HOK consultants had been explicit in their descriptions of the city's new direction. She also pointed out, however, that none of what is being required of universities has made their way into formally promulgated regulations.

Lawrence Guyot asked how one sells the idea of requirements that have to be met when they are nowhere written down, but are nevertheless mutually agreed upon by the city and the University? He said that the answer need not be proffered right away, but the question should be held in mind as the discussion progressed.

Campus Master Plan Transportation Assessment

Dan Van Pelt made a powerpoint presentation that summarized the highlights of the transportation elements of the campus master plan. The presentation included a discussion of:

- the transportation strategy of the campus plan, including:
 - reducing vehicular demand
 - ensuring safe and efficient pedestrian routes
- the impacts of the campus plan as they affect University and non-University traffic and parking demand;
- the changes to demand resulting from the plan on vehicular and pedestrian movement;
- recommended east-west connections through the super-blocks located between Georgia Avenue and Sherman/Florida Avenues;
- recommended roadway operation improvements;
- recommended future parking locations;
- recommended future transit improvements; and
- recommended pedestrian and bicycle connections.

Parking

Sylvia Robinson asked whether or not the needs of the general neighborhood, and not just the needs of the University and the concerns of the city were considered in the conduct of the transportation study. Robert Schiesel answered in the affirmative and gave the example of the below grade parking structure being considered for the wellness and recreation center. There, consideration was given to the potential for allowing public users of the facility to park on one level, while other levels are accessed by tenants of the building, Howard students and employees. Ms. Robinson noted that Georgia Avenue merchants often find parking at a premium, which hinders the commerce that could take place there.

It was also mentioned that shared parking is an efficient way of making the best use of parking resources. Lawrence Guyot questioned whether given the liability often associated with shared facilities, the University would be amenable to allowing shared parking. Maybelle Bennett cited three instances where parking is shared with other entities in the

neighborhood: Florida Avenue Baptist Church shares the hospital parking lot on Sundays; the 930 Club shares the HUH parking lot behind its facility in the evenings; and Chuck and Billie's Night Club shares the University's parking lot on Georgia Avenue. Each arrangement with the University is different, with some involving formal lease agreements, and others being less formal. Maybelle Bennett also mentioned the fact that the University's current Chief Operating Officer is encouraging the University to view parking resources as assets to be managed, something that has not been the case in the past.

A lengthy discussion of the potential parking lots identified in the campus plan ensued. It was explained that it was never the University's intention to build all of these parking structures, given the exorbitant costs involved in their construction. At Lawrence Guyot's request, the number of parking spaces that would be lost was compared to the number of parking spaces that could be built as various elements of the plan were implemented. The group's attention was turned to the chart in the campus master plan (p. 247) where the number of spaces potentially lost and rebuilt underground are listed. Patrick Nelson examined the chart and noted that if only the three preferred underground structures were constructed, there would be an almost one-to-one replacement of the existing parking spaces. Maybelle Bennett added that in the event the University were successful in implementing its TDM measures, the resulting inventory of spaces (with only the three preferred structures) should amply meet the University's needs. She reiterated that there is no incentive for the University to overbuild underground parking given its cost.

Roadway Operations

Patrick Nelson asked whether Gorove Slade looked at how DDOT might change signaling and crosswalk patterns to improve safety. These are actions that the University would not have control over. Dan Van Pelt responded that the first thing Gorove Slade did was to look at existing conditions, and based on what they understood the plan to call for, they made recommendations to both DDOT and Howard to consider as the plan is implemented. The ongoing discussions with DDOT may result in some of their recommendations making their way into the Great Streets Plan and into the operational decisions that have to be made by DDOT's traffic engineers and their pedestrian safety personnel.

Patrick Nelson expressed concern that when the Great Streets Plan was conceived, the Howard Town Center's program was not fully fleshed out nor was the campus master plan taken into account. He questioned whether or not the public would get to weigh in as the Great Streets plan is modified to accommodate these new developments, or whether the decision-making from here on in will be unilateral. He cited the narrowing of Sherman Avenue as an example, where traffic is already shifting to 11th Street, and was concerned that the narrowing of Georgia Avenue will also have some unintended consequences that the public may want to challenge.

Dan Van Pelt said that the Great Streets process was a planning process, and that it is being vetted now through the other departments within DDOT that will be tasked with making it work.

East-West Connections

Cheryl Cort expressed concern that the prevalence of superblocks in the area is detrimental to the neighborhood. She cited the presence of Howard University, together with the Banneker Park and the square bounded by Barry Place, V Street, Georgia and Sherman/Florida where east-west connections were blocked. She recommended that one of the ways an east-west connection could be made would be to link the proposed walkway through Banneker Park to a vehicular connection that would traverse the site identified for the development of workforce housing. Such a connection would break up that mega block and allow for better circulation.

Maybelle Bennett responded that the site was set aside for workforce housing, and a site plan had not yet been developed for it. Certainly, any plan that envisions setting aside a lot of private property for public roadway usage is one that is not going to be immediately embraced by the University without some measure of negotiation taking place. Cheryl Cort mentioned that the potential for negotiation may lie in the proposed alley closings that are envisioned in the plan. Where there may be an opportunity to convert private land into a public roadway in one area, in another area, there may be an opportunity to convert public space to private use.

The discussion of the University's preference for extending W Street from Georgia to Sherman/Florida Avenue rather than Bryant Street was described as being founded on several observations:

- a) the damage that a Bryant street connection does to the upperclassman community the University is trying to create in that area;
- b) the difficult geometric configuration that exists at the confluence of Florida and Sherman Avenues where Bryant Street would empty into the roadway; and
- c) the manner in which the Bryant Street extension creates an undevelopable parcel of land.

W Street, on the other hand could potentially be extended across land that the University owns from Georgia to Ninth Street, should the city and the University negotiate such an extension. The city would then need to negotiate with JBG to extend W Street from Ninth to Florida Avenue. The connection is a cleaner one through the block, would allow for a traffic signal to be placed at the intersection with Florida Avenue, and facilitates bicycle movements through the area as well.

Patrick Nelson indicated that since the city owns the land it swapped with the University, in lieu of having to pay JBG for the land needed to extend W Street, the city could proffer another swap using the land behind the West Howard Plaza Towers.

Increased Transit Usage

Tony Norman cautioned that before people could be expected to change from using their cars to using mass transit, WMATA needs to improve the quality of its bus service. The air conditioning often does not work and other conditions that the public encounters on the busses need to improve. Maybelle Bennett mentioned that in some instances, the cost of

metro service has risen to levels that currently make it more desirable for people to drive. In addition, at certain peak times, metro is packed and people are not able to board metro trains and busses until several have passed. Cheryl Cort mentioned that the adoption of flex hours could address that issue so that the entire workforce is not expected to arrive at work at the same time. Staggered work hours relieve the pressure on the metro system and the inconvenience caused the transit user as well.

Other Comments

Lawrence Guyot recommended that the neighbors surrounding the University should be informed what the University intends to do with all of the people who will no longer have parking spaces as the parking inventory is reduced. The explicit alternative transportation plans should be spelled out. Likewise, Robert Schiesel said that as new people come to the University, they should have the array of methods for getting to and from the central campus spelled out for them so that they understand the many choices they have.