

Alan M. Wright
17710 Meeting House Road
Sandy Spring, Maryland 20860
Ph: 301-774-8560
Fx: 301-774-8565
AWrightEsq@aol.com

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Planning Staff
c/o Elsabett Tesfaye
via e-mail: Elsabett.Tesfaye@mncppc-mc.org

Re: Thomas Building, DPA 08-2, Nichols Development LLC

Dear Ms. Tesfaye:

I am writing in opposition to the requested development plan amendment referenced above. Please consider the following when making your recommendation to the Planning Board in the above-referenced case.

Although I have not yet had an opportunity to review the file, it is my understanding that the current site plan was the basis for a 1989 rezoning of the site which allowed construction of the existing building by Montgomery Mutual Insurance Company. The site plan for that development included the lot upon which the new building is proposed to be built in order to construct some sixty parking spaces required for the Insurance Company building.

The existing parking on the lot has caused the developer to propose a scale and design of development that is completely out of scale for this site. As Mr. Nichols explains it, the anchor tenant for the proposed new building is the Goddard School, which requires 12,000 sf of space on the ground floor for approximately 200 children, aged six weeks through elementary school. Because the school requires its facility to be located completely on the ground level, the footprint of the building must be 12,000 sf. This leaves no room for additional parking on the already-limited space available. The proposed solution to this is to build a two-tiered parking garage (77 spaces above ground, 120 below). The expense of building a parking garage means that the proposed building needs to be three stories in order to bring in additional tenants to help bear the significantly increased cost of the parking garage.

All this is offered by the developer to explain the scale of the proposed development and the reason why it cannot be reduced. This does not alter the fact that the scale of the building, and especially the parking garage, is inappropriate for the zoning and historic district in which this site is located.

1. The underlying zoning is OM, which § 59-C-18.1 of the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance states is intended to “be located in areas where high-intensity uses are not appropriate, but where moderate intensity office buildings will not have an adverse impact on the adjoining neighborhood. (emphasis added)
2. On top of that, the Sandy Spring/Ashton Rural Village Overlay Zone is intended to “preserve and enhance the rural village character of the Sandy Spring and Ashton Village Centers . . .” and to “encourage a compatible relationship between new or expanded houses or businesses and traditional neighboring structures that reflects the best of local village character, particularly in terms of scale, siting, design features, and orientation on the site. Zoning Ordinance, § 59-C-18.18 (Emphasis added)
3. This is reinforced by the requirement in §§ 59-C-18.184 and 18.185 that the site plan conform to the recommendations of the Ashton/Sandy Spring Master Plan, the paramount goal of which is to preserve the rural character of the area. The entire Master Plan revolves around this purpose. (cf p. 1, Overview; p. 10, Rural Character; p. 12, Transportation; p. 17 *et seq.*, Elements of Rural Character; p. 23, Chapter 4, generally; p. 59, Chapter 5, generally.)
4. Finally, the site is located in a historic district. While the proposed building and parking garage are not themselves in the historic district, the site is mostly within the historic district (containing the Sandy Spring Bank, historic insurance company building, Quaker Meeting House and Community House (Lyceum), and an amendment of site plan must surely comply with historic district requirements.

Query: how is a parking garage consistent with the historic rural village character of Sandy Spring?

The parking garage and the bulk of the building are directly in conflict with the intent of the zoning and master plan. When one imagines a historic “rural village”, a parking garage in the middle, adjacent to some of the most historic buildings in that village, is clearly not part of the picture. And, if the parking garage were not, by its very nature, incompatible with the neighboring properties, its dimensions and location will cause it to stick out like a sore thumb in the middle of this rural village. The parking garage in this case and the proposed building extend unbroken from the road through to the rear of the lot, obstructing the view through the lot and the sense of openness that exists throughout the Sandy Spring community. In this sense it is typical of a cityscape, where one’s view is blocked by buildings, and pedestrian thoroughfare is restricted to narrowly-defined pathways between them, rather than a country feel of openness, trees and vegetation.

I realize that design is not a consideration at this point; however the proposed amendment should not be approved as presented because, regardless of design elements that might be added to soften the impact of the proposed development, it will remain in conflict with the intent of the Zoning Ordinance, Master Plan and historic district. Thank you for your attention to these considerations.

Sincerely,

-S-
Alan Wright

cc: Fred Nichols