



City of Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society  
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January 30, 2008

Ms. Maureen Budetti, Chair and Planning Commissioners  
City of Falls Church  
300 Park Avenue  
Falls Church, VA 22046

**RE: Opposition to City Center Special Exception Application as Submitted**

Dear Chair Budetti:

The Village Preservation and Improvement Society (VPIS) has actively participated in the recent revisions to the City Comprehensive Plan concerning a new City Center and has commented extensively on the proposal for development of the City Center south of Broad Street. Throughout this process, VPIS has advocated building a revitalized downtown center based on the goals of the Comprehensive Plan that:

- builds community by providing places to gather, anchored by shops, restaurants, entertainment and cultural venues;
- creates a lively, walkable, environment; and
- is sensitive to concerns of adjacent neighborhoods.

Despite some improvements from earlier proposals, the “special exception” application for development of the City Center south of Broad Street now before you has significant problems and does not meet the City’s own expectations. Five major objections to the project are identified below and described in greater detail in an attachment. **We strongly urge the Planning Commission to oppose the application as currently drafted unless the key concerns are addressed.**

- **Failure to Foster “Special Place” Feel of Falls Church:** Cherry Hill Farm, the Falls Church, City Hall, the public library, and numerous residential structures give Falls Church a distinctive sense of “place” lacking in neighboring jurisdictions. The Design Guidelines, Street Works plan, and the Comprehensive Plan all call for architectural design compatible with the historic context of Falls Church. Unfortunately, the height, mass, and modern design elements of the proposed project all act to undermine the distinctive feel of Falls Church as a special place. The City should ask the applicant to identify architectural design elements for the project that

The Village Preservation and Improvement Society, founded in 1885, is a nonprofit citizen volunteer organization in the City of Falls Church, Virginia. The Society is comprised of concerned citizens who address many important issues that face our community. The Society works to preserve our natural and built environment, historic structures and landmarks, and promotes cultural activities. Members are primarily residents of the City of Falls Church and former residents or neighbors who have an interest in Falls Church City. Members are of all political persuasions and are bonded by their interest in and a commitment to improving the City of Falls Church.

will complement the special qualities of the built environment of Falls Church and then carry these design features into buildings that are right-sized for the architecture and right-sized for the site.

- **Great Place: Sale of Public Land Without a “Public Commons”:** The City Center design element most strongly supported by the public is a “public square” or “commons.” Yet, the City has thrown in all the land it now owns, and is buying additional land, without getting a “public square” or open space. The City should use the land it now owns in the City Center for a “public square” or “commons.” Failing that, it should reserve funds from the sale of this land for purchase of land in the City Center area north of Broad Street. By adopting this “no net loss” of City-owned land in City Center approach, the City would be taking a concrete step toward realizing a widely held goal for the new City Center.
- **Lack of Parking and Transit: City Residents “Uninvited” to City Center:** The limitation of public parking (most new parking is limited to new building residents) and the lack of energy-wise transit access create the impression of a “gated community” where the current residents and visitors are unwelcome. City investment in a six story private parking structure exacerbates this problem.
- **Putting School Growth Ahead of School Planning:** New information in this year’s Capital Improvement Program funds a comprehensive assessment of school enrollment growth and future construction needs. The City should avoid a “leap before you look” approach that “locks in” student enrollment increases of up to 100 new students just prior to an assessment of school growth options and costs.
- **Lack of Open Space:** The pending application ignores key City Center design features called for in the Comprehensive Plan (e.g., a “promenade to the Falls Church”) and does not provide for needed improvements in existing public spaces affected by the project (e.g., Big Chimneys Park). The application needs to be revised to reflect these improvements.

We look forward to working with you on this important project.

Sincerely,



Jeff Peterson, President, VPIS

ATTACHMENT-- Objections to Special Exemption Application for Falls Church City Center

cc:

Falls Church City Council  
Falls Church Planning Director  
Falls Church Economic Development Office  
Boards and Commissions reviewing City Center

# OBJECTIONS TO THE SPECIAL EXCEPTION APPLICATION

## FALLS CHURCH CITY CENTER

January 30, 2008

1) **Failure to Foster “Special Place” Feel of Falls Church:** Falls Church residents, whether long-standing or new, appreciate that the built environment of Falls Church stands out from the rest of Northern Virginia. Cherry Hill Farm, the Falls Church, City Hall, the public library, and numerous residential structures give Falls Church a distinctive sense of “place” that is lacking in neighboring jurisdictions. Recent projects, such as the community center, have been designed to enhance this sense of a special place.

The proposed project is located in the midst of key “defining” buildings that give Falls Church a special sense of place. Unfortunately, the height, mass, and modern design elements proposed for the project all act to undermine, rather than enhance, the distinctive feel of Falls Church. The scale of buildings is greater than what would be allowed in Washington, D.C. and conveys an urbanity that will be jarringly out of place in Falls Church. The location of these large, urban structures adjacent to one and two story residential neighborhoods and a City park is inappropriate for the City and disrespectful to City residents being asked to live next to these oversized, generic buildings.

Despite repeated requests, the applicant has not defined an architectural theme that supports and enhances the distinctive architecture of Falls Church. Instead, the applicant has pressed for large buildings to meet square footage goals and then adopted an architectural style that supports these large structures. An architectural style that really complements and maintains continuity with the rest of the City would most likely be more modest in scale. While these large, bland buildings have the allure of tax dollars, they are “penny wise and pound foolish” in that they degrade the special sense of place that generations of City residents have worked so hard to achieve.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The City should ask the applicant to work with City residents and architects to identify architectural design elements for the City Center that will complement the special qualities of the built environment of Falls Church and then carry these design features into buildings that are right-sized for the architecture and right-sized for the site.

2) **Sale of Public Land Without a “Public Commons”:** The City Center design element most strongly supported by the public is a “public square” or “commons.” The City maintains that this essential design element can’t be included in the Atlantic project but is selling a parcel of City owned land of 1.2 acres next to the Post Office and acquiring other parcels by condemnation. The City agrees that a “public square” is essential to City Center but prefers to locate it across Broad Street on land that is unlikely to be available to purchase in the foreseeable future. In addition, the City is allowing the applicant to purchase the City-owned land in exchange for in-kind development services (e.g. the applicant will do site and street work) at a time when other City Center parcels that could contribute to City Center development north of Broad Street are on the market for more (e.g., RV Association lot).

**RECOMMENDATION:** If the City will not insist on the applicant including a “public square” in the project using the land the City now owns next to the Post Office, the City should at least insist on the market value of its land and reserve revenue from the sale of City property

to purchase land that can be aggregated to make the City Center north of Broad Street, and a “public commons,” a reality in the future.

**3) Lack of Parking and Transit: Current City Residents “Uninvited” to City Center:** A major concern of many citizens is that the City Center will serve only those new residents that move into the buildings while being unavailable to other City residents. This problem is symbolized by the proposal to limit newly constructed parking to specific buildings (i.e. two floors of parking at the bowling alley are only available to bowlers). This problem increased with the recent proposal to construct a new six story parking garage serving only the new hotel and George Mason Square, allowing others to park only on nights and weekends. The parking limitations and the lack of transit facilities effectively “uninvite” current City residents from the new City Center and give it a “gated community” feel. Under these circumstances, it is regrettable that the City is proposing to pay half the cost (up to \$6 million) for the new six story parking structure, asking City residents to pay \$400,000 per year in debt financing (assuming an additional \$200,000 per year in grant funding) for parking they can only use nights and weekends.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The City should assure that the new City Center will be accessible to everyone by insisting on adequate transit and parking features that are not limited to people moving into the new City Center buildings. Any City investment in transit or parking structures should be limited to facilities that serve everyone in the City without restriction and should be designed from the ground up to support alternative forms of energy-wise transportation including bike spaces and spaces for zip cars or related loaner cars. The developer should pay the full costs of parking that is restricted to use by those within the development.

**4) Putting School Growth Ahead of School Planning:** It has been argued that Falls Church has no choice but to “develop” in order to pay the growing costs of schools. It could also be said that reckless development can add more students than dollars and that growth can be a double-edged sword for a school system that has used its small size to foster excellence.

This year, the City CIP funds a comprehensive assessment of school growth and future construction needs. This study will be a chance to review the unavoidable impacts of several recent large developments that have yet to impact the schools and to look at options for growth and financing in the future. During this process, City residents can be part of a deliberative process to consider the many trade-offs for the schools that are posed by additional, major new developments and enrollment growth. This assessment process can help sort out the arguments for and against major residential developments as a means of financing schools.

The pending City Center application, however, asks the City to endorse another major increase in school enrollment (about 100 new students from the residential building and the new affordable housing building) prior to this schools planning study. This “leap before you look” approach that “locks in” student enrollment increases at a time when we are investing in a new planning study and should be pausing to consider the still incomplete impacts of four major developments. In addition, the applicant is asking for approval now of Phase 2 of the project (which most affects the schools) even though the project would not break ground for another three years.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The City should defer any action on Phase 2 of the project until the complex issues associated with increasing the size of the schools through continued residential development projects can be carefully considered in the newly funded school planning and design process.

5) **Open Space/Consistency with Comprehensive Plan:** The applicant has consistently pressed for a “full build out” of the project site, including the City owned land within the project area, and has mostly rejected requests to include or enhance open space. Key elements of the project where improvements related to open space are needed include:

-- **Promenade to the Falls Church:** The recently adopted amendments to the City Comprehensive Plan provide for a tree-lined “promenade” from the proposed roundabout to the Falls Church. This element of the Comprehensive Plan will encourage “walkability” within City Center, offer sight lines from the axis of the project area to one on of the City’s best known historic structures, improve architectural continuity, and increase the number of significant shade trees (rather than small street trees) in the project area. The pending application ignores this important feature of the City Comprehensive Plan, blocking the pathway with the new six story parking garage.

-- **Big Chimneys Park:** The application and drawings consistently include the existing Big Chimneys Park within the project area, suggesting that this space is part of the project. Unfortunately, the Park will be negatively impacted by the project as a result of reduced sunlight, the addition of a new street carrying trucks along the side of the Park, and the removal of large trees to the east of the Park. The application provides for \$200,000 to support improvements to the Park and the triangle space (see below) as well as for “public art”. This amount would allow only minor and cosmetic improvements to the Park.

-- **Triangle Space:** The applicant proposes to increase open space in only one location, a small triangle of space south of the roundabout. The City Comprehensive Plan makes no mention of this space, the space is difficult to access, and its use is unclear. The space is paved and upgrading it to anything close to the manicured park with fountain pictured in the application will be very costly. Neither the City nor the applicant has proposed a financial plan for upgrading this space.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The City should insist that the applicant: redesign the parking structure to provide for the “promenade to the Falls Church”; include significantly increased, dedicated funding adequate to upgrade Big Chimneys Park to complement the final design of the project and enhance buffering for residential neighborhoods; and provide a meaningful design and financial plan for the triangle space.