

## Technical Assistance Panel: Camp Springs Prince George's County, Maryland

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## Acknowledgements

The Panel would like to thank Wood Partners for the opportunity to provide technical assistance on its two sites in the Camp Springs Town Center (“Town Center”) area of Prince George’s County, Maryland. Special thanks to Leonard Wood for preparing the briefing materials and organizing the tour, and to Harriett Dietz and Alvin McNeal for helping write the report. ULI Washington hopes that the comments and recommendations provided in this report result in a valuable contribution to the development of this area as a whole. We encourage the Sponsor to inform us of new developments associated with this project and allow us to participate in future panels should the need arise.



# The Panel

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# Statement of the Problem and Questions for Panel

## **BACKGROUND**

Seeing an opportunity for growth and development in Prince George's County, Wood Partners (the developer) placed under contract two sites adjacent to the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station, with the intention of developing luxury Class A multi-family apartments. The sites are referred to as Alta Branch and Alta Branch Camp Springs. As the design process matures, the developer believes an opportunity exists to create an integrated mix of uses with a transit-oriented approach. Synergies between the two sites are believed to produce greater opportunities given their proximity to the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station.

### **Site I – Alta Branch (Town Center at Camp Springs)**

Alta Branch consists of 35 acres inside Capital Gateway Drive (a.k.a. the Loop road) to the north of the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station. Of these 35 acres, the developer has 30 acres under contract, which is to be developed in three phases at 10 acres per phase. The site is currently zoned M-X-T (mixed-use, pedestrian oriented) allowing for a combination of retail, residential and commercial. The developer's intention is to develop 496 multi-family units and 16,000 square feet of retail in Phase I. The cap on residential for the entire 35 acre piece is 1,200 units, which would leave 704 possible units for Phases II & III. In addition, the developer has the ability to build 150,000 s.f. of retail and a limited amount of live/work space. The current proposal for the seller's 5 acre portion is for 250,000 s.f. of office with a ground floor retail component.

The developer has submitted a Detailed Site Plan for Phase I, so the area of focus for the T.A.P. will be Phases II & III and the 5 acre seller portion. The site is currently undeveloped, but is challenging from a topographical and geotechnical standpoint. In addition, the soils are contaminated, so the developer must take this into consideration when deciding how much dirt to move. Brownfield certification process is underway to gain inculcable person status and get a "No Further Requirements" determination. Additionally, all three phases fall into Prince George's County revitalization tax credit district.

### **Site II – Alta Camp Springs**

Alta Camp Springs consists of roughly 8 acres assembled from several single-family home lots. This site is also located adjacent to the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station on the southeastern border with frontage on Auth Road. Alta Camp Springs is currently zoned C-S-C (commercial shopping center), and the developer is in the process of securing a text amendment to allow multi-family development at a density of 48 units per acre.

This property is relatively flat. It is improved with a few residences; therefore minimal demolition of structures is required. The latest scenario advanced by the developer shows a mix of residential condominiums and two 15,000 s.f. retail pads. There are no known environmental or geotechnical issues associated with the development of this site.

## **ISSUE**

### **Alta Branch (Town Center at Camp Springs)**

With Phase I of the Alta Branch Project being submitted for Detailed Site Plan approval, the developer must incorporate a mix of uses into the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> phases. The reason for this is two fold. First, the developer has determined that in order for this project to be a success there needs to be a retail and commercial component to complement the multi-family in the initial phase. Second, community and county interest in the development of this property is high and there are significant expectations for making this a Mixed-Use Transit Oriented Development. However, community and county objectives appear not to be supported by the market. The community is advocating retail--which the developer thinks can be supported in the retail tract shown in the Concept Plan—while the County is calling for significant office development on the site, which is being provided on Peter Schwartz’s office site. This is referenced as Pod C in the Concept Plan. Limited market research indicates that office product would be difficult to support on this site, however the developer is open to studying this further.

### **Alta Assemblage**

As the developer moves through the Text Amendment process, options for development will expand. The latest iteration shows a mix of retail and for-sale residential on this site. The issue that arises here is similar to that of with the development of the Alta Branch site. How can the developer better integrate a mix of uses into this site and to what extent? The community would like to see a retail component on the site, and Prince George’s County advocates for-sale housing.

## **PROPOSED TOPICS FOR PANEL DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

1. Taking into consideration surrounding, approved and proposed land uses, current market conditions in Prince George’s County, the guidelines of the Approved Concept Plan, and the location adjacent to the Metrorail Station, what challenges and opportunities exist for the development of these two sites?
  - a. Will a town center concept work here?
  - b. Is there a market for retail and office uses?
  - c. Can we properly link both sites or should they be thought of separately?
2. The 30-acre piece falls within the Town Center revitalization district and should provide significant tax advantages. Are there any other financial incentives that could benefit the developer?

3. Given the restrictive vehicular and pedestrian flow between the 30-acre site and the Metro station, what is the best way to orient the buildings to create cohesion inside the loop and synergy with the other surrounding land bays? Further, how can the developer improve connectivity between the site and the Metro Station without burdening the development process?
  
4. Given heightened interest by WMATA and Prince George's County to maximize land around transit, what strategies does the panel recommend for working with local government and WMATA to streamline the development process and reach common goals?

## Panel Findings and Recommendations

The Urban Land Institute's Washington District Council convened a Technical Assistance Panel (the "Panel") sponsored by Wood Partners ("Sponsor") to address the topics identified and recommend development strategies for highest and best use of the Alta Branch (30-acres) and Alta Camp Springs (8-acre) sites. On January 22 and 23, the ULI Panel comprised of nine experts in various aspects of land use planning and real estate development convened to tour the site and deliberate over the questions posed by the Sponsor. Prior to meeting, the Panel received extensive briefing materials concerning the Camp Springs sites, their proposed uses, and area plans and demographics affecting the outcome of the Sponsor's project. Additional information was provided during and after the site tour on January 22. The following morning, the Panel reconvened at ULI Headquarters in Washington, D.C. to discuss the Sponsor's questions, formulate recommendations and propose design concepts. The findings and recommendations found within this report were presented to the Sponsor at the conclusion of the panel.



In response to the County's desire, and the Sponsor's willingness, to consider a greater mix of uses near the Branch Avenue Metro Station, the Panel sought to identify viable amounts and concentrations of retail and commercial uses given existing and projected development. The panel concluded that site constraints and market dynamics would make the amounts and types of programmed retail and commercial uses for the Sponsor sites and "Town Center" unsupportable. The Sponsor is encouraged to reduce the amount of proposed commercial and retail development, particularly in Phase I, and focus on creating a stronger Transit Oriented Development with higher residential densities near the Metrorail site, reduced parking, and increased linkages, open space, and amenities. Future phases should incorporate a mix of housing products (for sale, rental, stacked, active adult, live-work, etc.) with the intent of creating a distinguished neighborhood, or address. If included, neighborhood-serving retail and commercial uses should be clustered and placed in close proximity to the Metrorail Station. In addition, the Panel feels strongly that retail and commercial plans for "Town Center" should not compete with redevelopment opportunities for existing commercial centers along Branch Avenue, the more viable location for these uses. Finally, the Panel recommends that the Sponsor take a leadership role in forming an association of land owners/partners to work with Prince George's County and WMATA on a comprehensive vision for "Town Center" and a set of priorities to meet the objectives of all parties.

## SITE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

- ▶ The proximity of the proposed Town Center to the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station, Washington, DC, Branch Avenue, and Interstate 495 are all competitive advantages.
- ▶ Undeveloped land adjacent to the Metrorail Station is advantageous in a region where land near transit is in short supply.
- ▶ Major public service infrastructure serving the Sponsor’s sites appears to be largely in place.
- ▶ State and local funding sources are available for developments located in transit-oriented brownfield sites.
- ▶ “Town Center” is located in somewhat of a peninsula; internally focused and with limited access and visibility to major roads—most notably Branch Avenue, the major north-south corridor in this area; and the Capitol Beltway (Interstate 495).
- ▶ The site’s relative isolation presents challenges in attracting commercial and retail development that is normally reliant on visibility and vehicular traffic to thrive.
- ▶ Access to “Town Center” from Branch Avenue has an uninviting appearance given the Metrorail tracks and the large number of commercial buildings with extensive surface parking (primarily car dealerships).
- ▶ Terminal or end-of-the line Metro stations are usually not designed to become the focal point for a Town Center type of development. As a terminus station, the Branch Avenue Metrorail Station contains a large amount of surface parking spaces and intensive public transportation facilities. Without properly designed pedestrian linkages to surrounding sites, the station is difficult and unfriendly to reach.
- ▶ To the extent that Metro has retail planned for its site, it may detract from the viability of developing retail on the Sponsor’s sites.



- ▶ Contamination problems on the “Metro-facing” portion of the 30-acre site create phasing and design challenges for the developer. Without the opportunity to grade the entire site, the developer must shift development to a less desirable portion of the site, further from the Metrorail Station.
- ▶ The potential to coordinate the large number of projects which are proposed or underway.
- ▶ The topographical features of the site make the creation of pedestrian linkages more difficult.

### **MARKET POTENTIAL**

- ▶ Prince George’s County has solid and improving demographics coupled with undeveloped land near transit stations. While Metro is unquestionably an asset, it does not alone create a market. The consumer profile of patrons using terminus stations in suburban locations is quite different from urban in-line stations, and thus expectations for retail surrounding Branch Avenue should be matched to consumer demand from patrons and local residents. Retail uses (desired by local community) and commercial uses should, with few exceptions, be located adjacent to Metro. WMATA appears to already be considering these uses for its site.



- ▶ Current “parcel by parcel” development is leading, overall, to a disjointed project area with little synergy between uses. Lack of a comprehensive vision for the “Town Center” is compromising market and land use potential.
- ▶ There is a fundamental mismatch between the conventional town center concept and the level and type of development that can be supported in the project area—geography and timing do not support current retail projections by the County.
- ▶ The Panelists agreed that the currently proposed/potential retail space on the Sponsor’s site cannot be supported with the current or future, projected market (two 8,000 square-foot pads in Phase I, two 20,000 square-foot pads at the Alta at Camp Springs location, the potential for 150,000 square-feet of retail space in on Phase 2/3, and additional retail in the optioned five-acre adjacent parcel). The conclusion was based on the anticipated number of residential units in the site area as well as the site issues discussed above such as isolation and lack of visibility.

- ▶ Town centers generally contain 250,000 to 300,000 square feet of retail—the amount planned for “Town Center.” The 4,000+/- residential units currently planned for “Town Center” could, in the panel’s opinion, support, at most, 50,000 to 75,000 square feet of retail. Exceeding this amount would require an anchor retail tenant (grocer or otherwise) and costly structured parking. Location of the site and values in the market area do not support an anchor tenant or structured parking. Additionally, the panel felt there was little market support for the two approved retail pads even with the projected 1.3 million square foot commercial building. Perhaps a 5,000 square foot pad would be viable (daycare center?).
  
- ▶ The panel felt that neighborhood-serving retail (dry cleaners, coffee shop, dentist, etc.) could prosper in the project area if clustered strategically. Approximately 10,000 to 15,000 square feet of retail was considered viable for both sites. Embedding retail within project increases risk of failure.
  
- ▶ Any demand for office space in the project area, including the 250,000 square feet of office space on the optioned 5-acre site, will be entirely market-driven and probably does not have any immediate heavy market demand. Given limited demand for commercial space in the market area, the panel felt that it would be impractical to rely on the attraction of a large commercial tenant to drive retail expectations for the Sponsor’s sites. It is the Panel’s view and experience that GSA employees in the region spend less on retail goods than do private sector employees. Assuming that a 1.3 million square foot GSA tenant would accommodate 5,000 to 8,000 employees, the Panel estimates that this would yield 4,000 to 6,000 square feet of retail.
  
- ▶ A small amount of commercial space dedicated to personal services—housed perhaps in live-work units—was deemed as appropriate for the Sponsor’s sites. This space should be adjacent to the Metrorail Station.
  
- ▶ Redevelopment opportunities for existing commercial and retail centers along Branch Avenue—the more desirable location for these activities—could impact the future market for office/retail in the project area. Retail on the WMATA site could also impact future opportunities. The panel feels strongly that the County should invest in the revitalization of existing commercial and retail corridors and not propose retail schemes that compete with their redevelopment. “Town Center” can support these activities by creating greater consumer demand. The proposed “Town Center” site , in the panel’s opinion, is better suited for residential development.
  
- ▶ The Panel agreed that the aggregate residential units proposed by the Sponsor can be supported by current demand for housing in the area. However, the panel suggests

that should there be confidence in the market for increased residential product (beyond the three-year projections offered by Delta Associates), the Sponsor is urged to consider increasing densities on both sites and adding a mix of products (condominiums, rentals, active adult, and live-work units) in Phases II and III to create a high quality, residential enclave. The Sponsor may want to delay development on Phases II and III until critical mass is formed through Phase I. Though not highly encouraged, one consideration would be to utilize these vacant lots as temporary parking lots for Metro in order to create revenue during the holding period. (Caution must be given that surface parking lots are difficult to remove once in place, and it could pose an additional barrier between Phase I and the Metro station.)

- ▶ While striving to weave the project into the fabric of the community, the Sponsor should consider distinguishing its project through design features and amenities to create an “address” with a sense of quality and place. The Panel feels it is important to attract market-rate residents to the Sponsor’s project.
- ▶ By shifting Phase I further from the Metrorail station, to a less desirable and marketable portion of the site, the Sponsor may be limiting future potential in subsequent phases. Developing the greatest density and mix of uses adjacent to the Metrorail station would improve accessibility to the site for residents and metrorail patrons—potential consumers or commercial tenants. This scenario may not be possible due to the cost of remediating site contamination; however if it were possible, the Panel feels that providing the greatest density and mix of uses adjacent to Metrorail would increase the viability of the project and strengthen the market for future development over time.
- ▶ To truly position this project as a Transit Oriented Development (TOD), strong consideration should be given to limiting the amount of on-site parking and increasing densities. Reduction of parking may result in reduced development costs and greater public support for the project.

### **PLANNING AND DESIGN**

- ▶ Overall, the Sponsor should strive to create a grid that encourages connectivity within the site and to surrounding uses. Retail should be located close to Metro and should be highly visible.
- ▶ The panel emphasizes the notion of “creating an address” for the project. The plan proposed by the panel (see next



page) attempts to establish a community of neighborhoods with a variety of housing types lined by green space, walkways, and shared amenities. As part of a larger district, the development concept provides opportunities for economic development, public enjoyment, and civic identity. Some of the plan highlights include:

- Buildings located along the street defining the edge of the neighborhoods
  - Major green spaces with opportunities for social interaction
  - Diverse housing types offering opportunities for a mix of residents
  - Street grid that creates urban character
  - Urban amenities in the public realm, including street lights, street trees, wide sidewalks, etc.
  - Creating pedestrian connectivity within the site and to adjacent sites
  - Proposed live-work units (approximately six) can be used to “lamine” the facade and transition to residential from the street facing Metro.
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- ▶ Due to topographic and contamination challenges, the panel recommends Sponsor consider applying for Brownfield redevelopment funds to address site contamination and allow for grading of the site. Grading site would, in the panel’s opinion, provide more flexibility in phasing the entire site, maximizing development opportunities, and providing opportunities for greater connectivity.
  
  - ▶ While not in the panel’s questions, greater integration and shared design elements should be considered for the currently planned 1.3 million square foot commercial building adjacent to the Sponsor’s site.

**PLAN PROPOSED BY PANEL**



## **IMPLEMENTATION**

- ▶ There is a need to increase a clear vision and coordinated effort between Prince George's County, WMATA, and the multiple partners/owners involved in the development of the "Town Center" area surrounding the Branch Avenue Metro Station. Without a comprehensive implementation strategy and related leadership, each parcel will be developed in isolation, without regard to planned or existing uses in the area. The result is a disjointed project area with few linkages and diminished synergy to maximize retail and commercial opportunities.
  
- ▶ Recognizing that Prince George's County has placed a high priority on development around transit, a unique opportunity exists for the Sponsor to take a leadership role in forming a partnership among owners to help develop a comprehensive vision for the area, establish priorities that benefit all entities, and implement a coordinated development approach. The Panel identified numerous areas where coordination would be positive:
  - design guidelines and/or a visual identity for the "Town Center" area
  - coordination of amenities and types of development (amount and type of retail to serve anticipated residential build-out, parking, pedestrian access among the individual site areas)
  - schedule for developing the various parcels

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- ▶ The Panel recommends that the Sponsor consider more housing density for Phases I, II and III to allow for more amenities to spur greater demand for future retail, and to increase Metrorail and Metrobus ridership. The Sponsor should consider increasing the number of residential units and decreasing the retail space from Phase I. (The Panel members are aware that the County wants to see a certain mix of retail and residential development on the site.)
  
- ▶ Some retail/commercial space could be converted in Phase I to accommodate a day care center or other similar use.
  
- ▶ Sponsor should consider including a mix of residential units on the 35-acre site (density, height, rental, for sale) to create a more diverse, interesting community and to add value to the overall development. The mix of housing and amenities can help to create an identity and an "address" for the site that will add value.
  
- ▶ Any proposals for retail at "Town Center" should be coordinated with and reinforce existing commercial centers along Branch Avenue.

- ▶ The owner of Town Center at Camp Springs could build good will with the County and create added value for its property by offering to lead the creation of an association of land owners to develop a Master Implementation Plan and coordinated vision for “Town Center”. The association could include adjacent property owners, WMATA and Prince George’s County. This association could start as a rather informal organization and become more formal as development occurs.
  
- ▶ Sponsor should work with Prince George’s County to consider ways to preserve the Phase II and III parcels for higher density development in the future. According to one Panel member, the resource of the Metro station ‘should not be squandered on low-density development.’ Sponsor should explore ways to phase development to match and maximize the potential future increased demand for a variety of uses near the Metrorail Station.
  
- ▶ The current concept for the 8-acre assembled site (Alta Camp Springs) should be revised. The Panel believes that there is too much proposed retail in the current design. Panel members recommended that the Sponsor provide large residential condos (1,800 – 2,000 square feet) on the site along with a free-standing retail facility with about 15,000 square feet of space for uses such as a dry cleaner, carry-out restaurant, etc.). Easy access should be provided to local traffic, with the retail pad screened from the adjacent residential condos.
  
- ▶ Maximize the connection to the Metro station, with a strong pedestrian axis from the station through the Wood 35-acre site.
  
- ▶ Sponsor should be recognized and be rewarded by the County for serving as a catalyst for future development in the area.

