

Safeway Site Committee Report to BCA

Overview and Timeline

This report relates to the potential redevelopment of the Safeway site at 5101 Wilson Blvd.

In 2013, the Bluemont Civic Association (BCA) membership held a vote expressing strong support for a redeveloped Safeway store and the adoption of the position that the redevelopment of the Safeway site should be kept within the existing C-1 zoning with a 35-foot height limit.

In the fall of 2016, a developer reached out to the BCA President and residents expressing interest in redeveloping the site. This resulted in the charter of the Safeway Site Committee with a committee expiration date of November 2017. The committee was chartered for the following purposes:

- Develop a fuller understanding of the legal and economic redevelopment possibilities for the Safeway site and nearby commercial area within the envelope of the existing “by right” C-1 development rights and within the site review process;
- Identify potential benefits and challenges with redevelopment of the Bluemont Village Center Safeway Site;
- Identify potential updates, additions or modifications to BCA or Bluemont Neighborhood Conservation (NC) Plan positions with respect to the Safeway Site, including a consensus view for recommendation to the BCA membership where possible;
- In an open and transparent manner, if possible, develop and ultimately put before the BCA, one or more possible recommended BCA “visions” for the Safeway site. The work of the task force should focus primarily on the presumed redevelopment of the Safeway site, but it should also explore the possible interrelationship of that redevelopment with an eye to the other commercial properties in the immediate area; and
- Keep the BCA Executive Board and membership apprised of any news in a timely manner with regard to the Safeway site or other redevelopment or development efforts in the Bluemont Village Center commercial area along Wilson Boulevard.
- Work off a basis of the Bluemont NC Plan and the BCA’s official position on the redevelopment of the Safeway site that was adopted in April 2013.
- Report to the BCA by May 2017. It is hoped and intended that this work product of the Committee, in whatever form, will create an important communication and working tool for the BCA in its interactions with the County government, Safeway, and any potential developers.

In October of 2017, the BCA President sent a letter to Safeway requesting to formally establish and maintain an open dialogue between BCA and Safeway.

In April of 2017, the BCA Executive Board met with a representative of Safeway. During this meeting, BCA President read the current position maintaining C-1 zoning. The Safeway representative acknowledged the community’s current position and expressed a desire to accommodate the wishes of the community. During the meeting examples of recently redeveloped Safeway sites were discussed. One example noted was the Arlington Cherrydale Safeway, which was remodeled in place without residential or retail units. Another was the King Street Safeway, which included street level podium parking and added retail units. Each redevelopment increased the number of patrons, and profitability.

Members of the Safeway Site Committee

Co-Chairs - Rich Gibson and George Rovder

Members - Carla Aly, Mary Haynes, Ed Fendley, Chris Healey, Chitra Kumar, Chip Gurkin, David Meagher, Jeff Kosseff, James McMullin, Janelle March, Linda Bryant, Chuck Hall, Bruce Leighton, Nick Pastore, Matt Clinebell, Gerry Procanick, Ellen Armburster, Ann Hilpert, Cybelle Jones, Steve Cole, Allen Norton, Michael Groves, Walter Zaumseil, Stephen Kidd, Kate Matto

Meeting Dates

The committee met on eight separate occasions, all meetings with the exception of one were held at Fire Station #2 on Saturday mornings at 9am. Below is a list of meetings with the corresponding guest speaker and topic:

1. November 19th, 2016 - Steven Cole, former Arlington Planning Commission member - Development Process
2. December 10th, 2016 - No Speaker - formalize thoughts, process of committee
3. January 7th, 2017 - Chris Gordon, KGD Architecture – Placemaking
4. January 28th, 2017 - Brian Harner, Former APC Chair/LAB Architecture - Building Manners
5. February 18th, 2017 - Chris Fornash (Institute for sustainable communities) - Transportation
6. March 11th, 2017 - Begin Drafting Report
7. April 1 - Draft Report
8. April 22 - Finalize Report

Recommendation

Based on the final Safeway Site Committee meeting held on April 22, 2017, the Safeway Site Committee recommends that the BCA change the existing adopted resolution from April 24, 2013 with the following modification to reflect a 2017 position:

Recommend to add the following text to the end of the April 24, 2013 resolution to reflect the 2017 position:

The BCA will evaluate and consider all proposed community benefits that may be achieved from rezoning if those benefits significantly outweigh the adverse impacts imposed on the community resulting from rezoning.

Sample community benefits the BCA seeks to obtain through Safeway site redevelopment include, but are not limited to:

- A modern, full-function grocery store and other retail that serves the needs of the Bluemont community;
- Open, outdoor public space that can serve as a community focal point;
- Sufficient parking for neighborhood retail;
- Bicycle racks and anything that can be done to enhance connectivity to the Bluemont Junction Trail and encourages multi-modal transportation;
- Indoor community meeting space;
- Architectural designs that are consistent with the neighborhood's character and that give Bluemont Village Center (Safeway site and surrounding businesses) a better sense of place.

Sample adverse impacts the BCA seeks to avoid through Safeway site redevelopment include, but are not limited to:

- Increased traffic flows throughout the neighborhood (reduced pedestrian safety, delivery trucks);
- Multi-story building impacts on adjacent homes (building shadows, increased density);
- Reduction in availability of street parking

Appendix A – Meetings Summary

We are fortunate to have a commercial center, something most neighborhoods in Arlington do not have. Compared to other commercial center neighborhoods, Bluemont is less like Shirlington or Old Town (which are final destinations) and more like Westover, Falls Church or Del-Ray, in that it exists on a major transportation route that travelers pass through. Westover, in particular, is frequently cited as an ideal commercial center, often because of the “sense of place” that is experienced on arrival. By contrast, Bluemont’s commercial center is more disjointed and diverse. The more desirable “placemaking” will not happen through development alone, but rather through a clearly articulated preference from the neighborhood.

The current Safeway site already benefits from its central location and access to civil facilities (the school and fire station). A redeveloped Safeway site could potentially include other neighborhood services such health care or insurance. It could also be an opportunity to create a public gathering space, or to help connect the village center to the green space of the Bluemont Junction Trail. To this end, the streetscape would be a vital component, possibly including on street parking (generally required by the county), landscaping, and ADA sidewalks, all of which should follow every step of redevelopment. Visitors should instantly understand they are “entering a place.”

While Safeway is the obvious cornerstone of our commercial center and its continued existence is desirable to Bluemont residents, the large surface parking model that the site is currently based on is outdated and our Safeway has not been updated for some time. Albertsons owns the store and the land outright, which is an unusual situation, in that they control the site completely. However, the current store is inconsistent with Safeway’s desired image. Therefore, the lifespan of the store in its present form is likely limited and there is unlikely to be any significant investment in the store as it exists today.

In Arlington, proffers are not part of the development process. Instead, there is the potential for community benefits, which are negotiated and then recorded as binding site plan conditions. Any redevelopment of the Safeway site that was not by-right would require a change in the General Land Use Plan (GLUP) and a change in zoning. Such a proposal would trigger a Special GLUP Study conducted by the Planning Commission with the involvement of the Bluemont Civic Association. The developer would not be part of the Special GLUP Study process. The process would result in a recommendation and then a county decision on whether to advertise that a GLUP change is in the “realm of possibility.”

The Safeway parking lot currently functions as de facto shared parking for Papatella and other businesses in Bluemont's commercial area. A redeveloped Safeway site could potentially provide an opportunity to formalize this as a community benefit, and provide parking for the village center. A proposed site plan for the county could include availability of public parking, a specific number of spaces per unit or square feet, and/or a number of publicly available spots by the hour. Looking ahead, the Safeway site is likely the only site in the commercial corridor that could support below-ground parking, which is generally favored by county policies. In order to offset the costs of below ground parking, developers commonly require additional development and opportunities for return on investment (more surface units, residential, retail, office units).

The best research shows that good urban development leads to less traffic, not more. Arlington's policies favoring smart growth and transit-oriented development have generally been successful. Commercial and retail development can generate higher levels of traffic but this can be mitigated or even counteracted by pursuing mixed-use, good designs, and by giving people access to transit, walking, and bicycling. That is to say, making the street a place where people want to be, rather than a place they pass through.

While Bluemont should keep in mind how it will be affected by developments and growth in Ballston, even if the Safeway site redevelops, Bluemont will not become like Ballston as this is not a goal of the county leadership. That being said the county has been generally willing to lead the way on redevelopment when there is support from the neighborhood.

Urban planning of Bluemont should start with identifying the sense of neighborhood, both good and bad. The neighborhood should decide what it wants to change and can change and what it does not want to change or is unable to change (What will always stay and what will come and go?). Isolated tall buildings create wind problems on the ground. The mass of the building should be placed to minimize shadows and the creation of a negative environment. The effects of massing can and should be communicated through models and drawings that place development side by side with the current architecture of the neighborhood.