

From: Michael Gelb, Chairman Planning Commission
To: Vienna Town Council
Meeting Date: March 27 and April 10
Re: Public Hearings and Planning Commission Action on Proposed MAC Rezoning 380 Maple

Overview

The Planning Commission held two public hearings regarding the proposed MAC rezoning at 380 Maple where applicant proposes to replace an existing office building with a four-story mixed used development. The proposed development would provide 7,500 square feet of retail space on the first floor and approximately 39 condominium residences on the upper three floors.

The Commission heard approximately 50 pieces of oral testimony at the two hearings, primarily from neighbors of the development site on Roland St., Wade Hampton Drive, Glen Avenue, Mendon Lane, Millwood Court, and Ceret Court. Roughly a dozen individuals spoke at both hearings. In addition, the Commission received roughly 20 email communications from citizens regarding the application. These emails generally opposed the development and suggested a number of changes, including a reduction in the number of floors and/or units and reorienting the building so that an open court yard proposed on the side facing Tysons Corner would be moved to the Glen Avenue side and face the residential neighborhood.

The Commission closed the public hearing on April 10 and then voted 5-2 to recommend that Council approve the rezoning request. Commissioner Meren was absent but indicated by email that he supported the application and would have voted to recommend Council approval. By a vote of 5-2, the Commission also recommended that Council approve the applicant's modification request to allow a larger awning on the front of the building. The six-foot awning would encroach three feet further into the front yard than allowed by the MAC code.

Public Concerns and Discussion

Although two members of the public said they supported the development, all others who spoke raised objections.

In general, citizens said that the proposed development was not in keeping with the "small town" character of Vienna and was not compatible with the neighborhood. They also were concerned that, in combination with a development approved for 444 Maple Ave, the proposed building would generate substantial new traffic in the neighboring residential area. There also were concerns that traffic on Wade Hampton would be disrupted by trucks delivering goods to retail establishments in the proposed building. Although a number of citizens said they would welcome replacement of the building now on the site, they argued that the proposed new building was too massive and covered too much of the lot.

The applicant had initially put up two options for consideration by the Planning Commission, one of which envisioned additional parking inside the building. That option would have divided the rear of the first floor into two levels. Per the Fairfax County building code, that second level would have counted as an additional

or fifth floor, although it would not have made a visual impression of five stories from the outside of the building.

The applicant said the proposal for a second parking level was intended to address concerns voiced at other hearings that spillover traffic would clog the neighborhood with cars. However, eliminating the additional parking enabled the applicant to reduce the building height by [six] feet (to 48 feet at its lowest point) and to significantly widen the sidewalk in the front, which the visual preference survey revealed to be a widespread wish from the general public. Neighborhood residents commenting on that option at the March 27 hearing generally opposed the additional parking and preferred a lower building. Some indicated that overflow parking from other buildings on Maple Avenue were already using on street parking in the neighborhood, especially on Wade Hampton and Millwood Court so that extra parking in a new building would not make much difference.

Based on earlier experience, several planning commissioners said they believed that the extra parking would have benefitted neighboring residents. But some of these/commissioners indicated that they would support the neighbors' preference and the applicant subsequently dropped withdrew his proposal to create additional parking.

Applicant Response

Although the applicant declined neighbors' request to move the open courtyard to the Glen Avenue side of the building or to significantly reduce the number of units in the building, he responded positively to a number of other suggestions. To limit cut-through traffic as residents and commercial patrons in the proposed building, the applicant agreed to post no-left turn signs at building exits and install a pork chop to direct exiting traffic to the right. In accord with the Public Works Department, he also proposed establishment of separate right turn only and left turn/go straight lanes at Wade Hampton and Maple to limit auto queuing and to enable right turn traffic to move more quickly.

In response to the first public hearing on March 27, he also agreed to:

- Widen sidewalks on Maple Avenue to 8 feet in front to the building.
- Reduce the number of units from 40 to 39.
- Mute exterior colors on the building.
- Provide additional recesses on the fourth floor of the building facing Wade Hampton Drive.
- Change roof design on portions of the Glen Avenue side.
- Fully enclose the garage walls along Glen Avenue, dropping a proposal for a living wall that would have been partly open. Neighbors worried about garage noise in the original design.
- Change some window design/size and removed windows in a stair wall because of neighbors concern about light from the building.
- Add trees on the other side of Glen Avenue for additional screening
- Erect a solid six-foot high masonry wall at the rear of the property along Glen Avenue – the wall had been in and out of various drawings throughout public discussions and work sessions.
- Add additional public seating on the corner of Glen Ave and Wade Hampton Drive.

Commission Discussion and Remaining Concerns

Although moving this application to Town Council, commissioners raised a number of remaining issues for consideration when council considers the application. Commissioner Kenney suggested a number of architectural changes to further address building mass and add further visual interest on the outside of the building (see attached comments from Commissioner Kenney).

Chairman Gelb and Commissioner Kenney noted neighbor concerns about traffic, but said it was impossible to support specific traffic calming measures at this time because there is no way to know now the actual impact on traffic if the application is approved. However, they also suggested that because MAC projects have the potential to create a traffic impact on neighborhoods, the MAC process should include some form of automatic traffic review by “The Town” to assess actual impact and whether mitigation/traffic calming is necessary – without requiring neighbors to initiate a petition process.

Commissioner McCullough asked if the applicant was still considering an extension of the planned sidewalk on Glen Avenue beyond the property line at 380 Maple to the turn on Glen Avenue, so that a new sidewalk would provide a safe walkable area from Wade Hampton to the longer and slightly wider portion of Glen. Otherwise, pedestrians would be forced to make an undesirable and unsafe choice between walking in a low area/ditch or walking on the street. Commissioner Gelb concurred.

Commissioner McCullough asked the applicant if they would consider changing the wall design at the corner of Wade Hampton and Glen to replace the April 10, 2019 option 2 design with the concaved seating/gathering space depicted in the March 27, 2019 design drawing.

Commissioner McCullough and Commissioner Kenney both suggested some form of enhancement to blank white walls at the lower level of the buildings’ rear, possibly including some type of public art, visually pleasing building materials, wall sculpture, trellises and/or vegetation. They asked the applicant to include suggestions in his submission to Council.

Commissioners generally noted that applicant has not yet committed to undergrounding utilities in the project area. Applicant said he is in discussion on pricing and would consider undergrounding utilities. Commissioners also said that unless applicant commits to undergrounding utilities that architectural renderings for the project should clearly show power lines.

Several commissioners shared their personal preference for the serpentine masonry wall on Glen Avenue as depicted in earlier submissions. Commissioners observed that this and other aesthetic details would benefit from review from BAR as part of the site plan review process if the application is ultimately approved.

Commissioner Baum, explaining her vote against the application, voiced concerns about building height. She was concerned that the building will block neighbors’ view of the skyline and noted her longstanding belief that a fourth floor on MAC buildings should be recessed significantly on all sides so that the top floor is generally unseen from residential neighborhoods.

The Vote

Ayes – Basnight, Couchman, Gelb, Kenney, McCullough. Nays – Baum, Miller. Absent and not voting – Meren.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FROM COMMISSIONER KENNEY

1. Trucks. Since the building was designed to accommodate only 30' trucks this should be a requirement of the project, in perpetuity. No 18-wheelers or larger trucks allowed for making deliveries, as the applicant has not designed for that condition.
2. Rear wall. I personally like not having the rear wall so that one can see and experience the rear landscaping, but the neighbors seem insistent on it. I'd rather have a wall with a more interesting shape (serpentine or similar). My thought is that neighbors are worried about the condition in the future as appears to be the case with the Wawa where a wall should be installed, but was waived long ago. I'm wondering if a wall can be required, in perpetuity, on the project. I think the current garage screening is sufficient for now so long as the wall is extended from the East side of the building to the existing wall. Then, if there is ever a change to the building the 6 foot masonry wall could then be required to be installed.
3. Traffic and street closures. I would like the Town to be a little more proactive on these particular projects. I'd like to get at least a preliminary traffic study on the impacted streets – Roland St, Glen Ave, Wade Hampton Dr, so we have a baseline to see where we are now, and then follow up with a second traffic study once a project is completed and mostly occupied (I'm suggesting 70% occupied). This will help to see if there is in fact a noticeable change in the traffic upon completion. I think we then see what needs to be done, as a town, for traffic mitigation. I don't think residents should have to complete a traffic calming request (reactive) to such a condition. Only then would I entertain potentially shutting down Wade Hampton at Glen as suggested by some neighbors. I view that as a last resort.
4. Building mass. I feel the project would be much improved with more aggressive stepping in the building mass along Wade Hampton. The 4th floor level above the dock area should be one continuous recess, at least double what is in the current drawings. I also think perhaps the applicant could drop some of the mass of the rear wall, such as at the gabled areas. Specifically, applicant might remove the 3rd floor projection below the gables.
5. Blank wall infill. I like the idea of using the sound block for noise and visual control of the garage. I do think applicant should put something of substance within the recesses – either trellis with or without vines, or, in some locations, some public art or even just graphics. Nothing garish or intense, just stenciled pattern on the brick or, if brick, an interesting pattern may be sufficient.