

The A. J. Advisor



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On Odenton

WINER



Land Use in
Odenton Town Center

"You've got To Have Heart!"

Lots of people seem to have a hard time grasping where the Odenton Town Center actually is located. It's true it has many parts, some old and many new. It's the largest of the three Town Centers in Anne Arundel County, yet most drivers get to the intersection of Piney Orchard Parkway and Route 175 and still wonder "where is everything?" Lots of new development has sprung up as the County has planned and the community has hoped for many, many years. Yet these projects are spread throughout the 1600 acre Town Center area. They are interspersed between older homes, some sporadic shopping areas, the Marc Train station and a few office buildings. The "heart" of the town center is yet to be developed in what's called the Town Center Core.

This is where most of the urban scale, higher density housing, office and particularly retail and service uses are planned around an expanded commuter station with multi-story parking garages. Most of what is currently under construction is housing when the greatest need is for expanded retail services for the substantial existing and growing population. Not that we don't need more apartments to house projected BRAC induced growth. But where will everyone go for services and close-to-home shopping? Unfortunately, without substantial change to the OTC plan retracting the requirement for all development to contain mixed uses and more aggressive policies of the County to incentivize commercial development, I fear we will be going the way of just another bedroom community. Does this growing community intend on depending on the centers of gravity at Arundel

A SIGNAGE of the Times

One important, but often misunderstood aspect of retail & office development and leasing is signage. If it were up to the tenant, signs would be everywhere: on the storefront, the building and on the street. The developer, owner and often times the broker, is left with determining county code for allowable signage sizes and location. These codes as well as enforcement vary widely across jurisdictions in the city and counties.

Typically, a project, complex or building location is allowed a major pylon sign at the closest public street entrance to the property. In some instances in major commercial projects, "trailblazer" signs are allowed to announce the upcoming complex and provide simple "turn ahead" directions. These signs are often controlled by the State Highway Administration if on a State Road and various programs do exist to allow for them. If a project has multiple buildings, it is not uncommon for on-site pylon signs announcing the address, location and direction to the particular building and sometimes these signs can include the names of the occupants of the building. If the store front or building faces the street, code will usually determine the number and size of signs allowed.

Most tenants clamor for their name on a pylon sign at the road. However, more often than not, the size of print is so small in order to accommodate all tenants in a retail center for example, it's almost impossible for drivers to have enough time at the posted speed to see each listing on the sign. Retailers will certainly want signage at their store front and the specification for these signs' size and make-up are usually prescribed by lease provisions, as well as code. They typically require separate permits and fees at the county level. Again though, larger retailers with greatest brand recognition are often able to negotiate their own particular sign design with the landlord. Sometimes, but not often, they can even negotiate the cost of the sign in their lease deal. Office tenants also vie for building locations and usually are required to rent a sizable portion of the building in order to obtain signage on the building façade. Naming rights to the building are possible if the tenant is leasing 50% or more of the building.

One type of signage growing in popularity and affordability is High Definition, LED boards. These can be as large as an entire free standing pylon sign, down to a tenant directory. The big advantage to these signs is flexibility to give more tenant or activity information on one larger screen. These signs have already been regulated when facing public streets so that no screen can appear for more than 6-8 seconds, depending on jurisdiction. Their impact is impressive for the property and gives even the smallest tenant an opportunity for individual attention. A downside is the attention to the software necessary to run and manage the signage and must be figured into the cost.

Regardless of static pylon or animated LED, signage is an important marketing tool for your business. When considering cost per thousand (of viewers), signs are usually considered to be the least expensive form of advertising & capture the most attention.

**DID
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KNOW?**

\$1,193,391,944

Estimated new revenue to Anne Arundel County
from full build out of the Odenton Town Center.
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Mills and the Village at Waugh Chapel for all of its future shopping needs? My hope is that it's not a conscious choice by land use planners and our government officials. In the rush to derive tax revenue in regions around what is supposed to be the heart of the Odenton town center, many centers have been encouraged and even incentivized by the County and have developed beautifully. But they have sucked the life and potential out of what uses were envisioned in the Odenton Town Center.

The County and Odenton Town Plan Oversight Committee have held on to a desired but now unrealistic vision that retailers will fill in spaces in every building constructed in the town center and that retail in total, will draw regional shopping in addition to serving new residents. The unsubstantiated and unsupported requirement in the OTC Plan that every development include at least a small percentage of retail is extremely counterproductive. It restricts the available space to "mom and pop" retail on the first floor of new projects, certainly not the kind of mass needed to serve the needs in the heart of the town center and almost impossible to get financed. These "lifestyle" centers are overdeveloped as it is and will not work here in the heart of town any more. With good judgment, the County can easily allow more significant retail development in the few areas with enough land to do so, while surrounding it with residential and office uses that would frequent these services. It is the very definition of the "heart" or center of town, from which the residences and office areas feed. The OTC Plan was recently updated and the cautions against continuing these requirements went unheeded. Even though the Plan is broken down into defined sub areas where the mix of uses could be designed to better fit, we wind up instead with a won't-work one-size-fits-all requirement.

I believe many of the residents are beginning to see the error of the stringent interpretation of the Plan as it stands. The County, for its part needs to incentivize larger parcels for more intensive service and retail uses and buildings using tax deferrals and other methods available to it. We need to show we have our "heart" in making ALL aspects of the town center come to fruition. Retailers go where they can get the space and reach the greatest number of customers. If we are not thoughtful enough about how to keep commercial development local, we face the prospect of housing, fast food and gas stations and not much else in our town center. What's a Town Center without a heart?

A. J. Properties attended the West County Chamber Celebrate Community Awards in March. A great event!



We also sponsored the door prize for the March Mixer of the West County Chamber held at the Greene Turtle.



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8373 Finney Orchard Parkway
Odenton, MD 21113
410-551-9116
www.ajprop.net
info@ajprop.net

