

Odenton's Master Plan Reviewed: Thumb's Up for Version 3

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SEPTEMBER 1, 2015

Posted in: NEWS

The Odenton Town Center Master Plan Review Task Force — a group of a dozen stakeholders, ranging from local officials to members of the business community — has completed its exhaustive and sometimes tedious effort to create an approach that is intended to more easily facilitate development in what is considered its growth hub.

Now, as they say in the (old school) publishing business, the plan is “off to the printer”; in this case, that means the 300-page tome is in the hands of Anne Arundel County Executive Steve Schuh and Department of Planning and Zoning Director Larry Tom, and will soon be, those involved hope, approved.

And that, they also hope, will finally spur the Odenton Town Center plan toward greater heights, those that have been imagined for the suburb, which has already seen some impressive projects — like The Flats at Academy Yard and the Village at Odenton Station — rise in recent years.

“Many developers have found that the intricacies of the master plan, in its most recent form, resulted in conflicts with other county and state agencies, and that led to project approval delays,” said Claire Louder, president and CEO of the West County Chamber (WCC).

“The proposed revisions, developed by a team of developers, engineers, attorney and county officials,” Louder said, “are designed to correct that issue.”

More Voices

“Anne Arundel County began to float its plans [for an update] several months ago,” said Jay Winer, president of Odenton-based A.J. Properties, who has been involved in the town center process since the early '70s. “Based on past history, we were concerned the plan might get more complex, rather than the other way around.”

The idea of updating the plan “from the beginning was to incentivize the process, not make it harder, which is generally what has happened in recent years,” said Winer. “But when we got together with the group, the point was made to Steve [Schuh] that we had to make this easier, not harder, if West County is to be the growth hub that his administration envisions it being.”

The good news, Winer said, is that, “We feel that the few voices with past concerns are no longer alone in the wilderness, because so many well-prepared people with varied backgrounds are aware of the frustrations of getting projects cleared with the county's planning and zoning department. They have applied their expertise to make the suggested changes to the plan.”

So, Winer feels that the mission to simplify the plan has been accomplished. “There are substantial changes to much of the terminology to make that happen, but without losing the original vision,” he said.

For proof, Winer pointed to a recent investment from the county's budget: an approximately \$19 million infusion for a new garage at the Odenton MARC station. "The Anne Arundel Economic Development Corp. is really leading that effort," he said, "and we've needed that."

It's Complicated

Linda Shuett, a partner with the Annapolis law firm of Blumenthal, Delavan, Palmer & Powers, was part of the task force and commented on the keenly focused effort to simplify the plan.

"We went through the book, chapter by chapter, and it has all kinds of 'pie-in-the-sky' requirements, like 75 spaces for bikes within 50 feet of the door of an office building, with very wide sidewalks, for instance," she said.

"And one of my pet peeves is that, here and there throughout the plan, there are sentences that say if the plan goes against the existing county law, what the plan says goes," said Shuett. "For instance, the Department of Public Works has a design manual with many rules for typical county suburban development — but the town center is intended to be much more dense, so those rules may not apply. We needed to make that change across the board, not just applicable in certain spots."

Another issue she had was with redevelopment of certain areas. "If you have a car repair place, for instance, that wants to remodel under the existing zoning and perhaps expand, they might have to comply with all of the requirements of the master plan — like adding trees and sidewalks that may not really be needed for what they want to accomplish," she said. "That not only confuses people, but might prove very expensive."

Shuett, who attended the Aug. 16 meeting, said that, "The county executive being there is almost unheard of. We left with a good feeling, because all three of them seemed to agree with what we had to say."

So, she is feeling "very optimistic about the update. I was the county attorney when the first plan came out 20 years ago, and I never read past page 10. Reading it made me cringe," she said, "and it was way too late in the process for me to do anything with it. The next revision made the plan better, and I am hopeful that this update makes the plan as good as it can be."

From the Exec

The Review Task Force completed its six-week review of the master plan and presented comprehensive revisions on Aug. 16 to Schuh, Larry Tom and Assistant Planning Officer Lynn Miller. The comments of Owen McAvoy, spokesperson for Schuh, added to the general positive response the plan has been garnering, at the meeting and elsewhere.

"Steve's been more actively involved in this master plan than any county executive before him," said McAvoy. "He recognizes that West County is going to be the serious driving force in the economic development in the county, as it has been for the past decade."

What Schuh is aiming for now, McAvoy said, is to "ensure that we balance the interests of the stakeholders to ensure that the growth in West County continues in an effective, responsible manner."

McAvoy pointed to the two most recent announcements in the Town Center to cite the progress, which are of the planned openings of Ruth's Chris Steak House in the Village at Odenton Station and Giant Food in the Odenton Shopping Center. "I think we'll be hearing many similar announcements within the next year," he said.

Hopefully, the new plan will spur just that news. "Our office is optimistic that the plan will be approved, with negligible change, in the coming weeks," he said.

Hopes High

For Louder and the other task force members, the six-week, chapter-by-chapter review process didn't leave time for much of a summer vacation this year. However, she and her colleagues on that effort feel that this updated plan not only won't make anyone cringe, but will result in long-term success for Odenton.

In fact, she even thinks she can make some quick money off of it, as she's planning to auction one of the 300-page master plan books at the auction at a WCC event early this fall.

This is the third time it's been presented in its entirety with the first "modern day version" drafted in 1994, then updated for the first time in 2004. "Most plans are fully built out before it gets to this stage," Winer said.

However, "The plan's time is now," he said, for this update to — finally — spark the great things that have been imagined for many years in Odenton Town Center.

- See more at: <http://www.bizmonthly.com/odenton%e2%80%99s-master-plan-reviewed-thumb%e2%80%99s-up-for-version-3/#sthash.fDBCIMIK.dpuf>