

Crystal City Citizens Review Council

July 17, 2017

CRYSTAL CITY VRE STATION RELOCATION

RESIDENT'S REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Progress in Crystal City depends on transparency, mutual understanding and unity

Current issue

The planning process has, unnecessarily, created an upheaval in the Crystal City resident community, essentially for two reasons: a seriously flawed process and a clear signal that the County is prepared to ignore fundamental expectations regarding 'quality of life.' This needs to be rectified before the time comes for decision-making.

Broader context

During the mere seven years since the adoption of the Crystal City Sector Plan, important aspects of the basic premise for steady growth and rejuvenation have changed. Instead of new buildings, we see more renovation and 'reskinning'. A scramble for the piecemeal filling of vacant, old office space has ensued. The anticipated gradual shift in the use mix balance has been hastened by the office market situation, and now results in increased dependence on new residential buildings and their tenants. Crystal City remains a 'cash cow' for Arlington County, but currently with 'somewhat less meat on the bones.'

In the circumstances, it is critical that the inherent advantages of Crystal City be fully utilized and promoted. Just as for Arlington as a whole, the key is "location, location, location." But what makes Crystal City special, for instance in comparison with Rosslyn or Ballston, is the remarkable access to a multitude of transportation modes. Reagan National Airport, the VRE (and potentially the railroad more generally), and the Metroway make for a unique complement, which has to be exploited.

It is likely to be more natural for the business sector to embrace easily the potential which the unique richness of transportation options offers. Commuters among Crystal City residents may tend to focus mainly on the one or two modes which matter to them personally, and some old-timers retain their habits of car-dependency.

Against this background, the County has an obvious task in terms of educating and engaging the entire Crystal City community, with emphasis on the residential component. Ignoring legitimate concerns and hiding from a dialog, instead running roughshod over attempts to seek a compromise, is obviously not the way to obtain a buy-in.

Mutual understanding and respect

There is widespread recognition of the need to have the commercial sector and the resident community not only co-exist harmoniously, but also collaborate and identify areas of mutual interest. From the

early days of Crystal City, a spirit of respect and caring has been manifested in the actions of the dominant land-owners. Similarly, residents have understood that growth and change are keys to the ability of the community to get the resources needed for retail and amenities and for the public realm.

The existence of the unique entity of CCCRC has in itself promoted mutual understanding and respect. Non-partisan discussions of fundamental issues have often led to a meeting of minds. Similarly, the existence of a BID and its valuable place-making efforts have served as a 'bridge builder.' But the key has been the dialog in the context of the plethora of Site Plan Review processes, where concrete examples of two-way accommodation have been common and appreciated.

By contrast, the issues and situations which have caused anger among the resident community, have often involved processes where the County has conspicuously 'put its thumb on the scale'. Moreover, decisions about the application of countywide policies to different types of areas have sometimes given the distinct impression that the County is not genuinely concerned about 'quality of life' for all its citizens. People grasp the general implications of the choice to live in a high-density area, but they do expect support for reasonable living conditions. In this regard, the contrast to the perceived 'wrapping of single-family neighborhoods in cotton wool' has created a sense of ruthless discrimination.

Process related to station location

Going back to the point about 'educating and engaging' the community, the crux is that none of that has happened during the four months since the process and the first public meeting was advertised by VRE. Instead, the impression is that the County has concluded that it is unnecessary or a waste of time to try to obtain a buy-in from the resident community, and that a non-consultative process is preferable.

This is a dramatic deviation from normal approaches, with the closest comparison being the decision to shut out both the land-owners and the residents from the critical final phases, viz., operations and implementation, in the Metroway project. It is also in sharp contrast to the frequent routine County consultations on much smaller matters, such as minor use permits, insignificant site plan amendments and issues such as the location for BikeShare stations. That the siting of a major infrastructure component like a railway station should be exempt from full consultation is mystifying, and the sharp reactions from the resident community are not surprising.

Beyond the issue of a non-existent formal consultation process, different entities of the resident community report a total lack of response to inquiries or requests for an informal dialog. In the second wave of presentations last month, there was a firm and explicit promise that the County would appear jointly with the VRE representatives, explaining the County's preferences and its views on pros and cons for different options. This simply did not happen.

It appears that the County tries to explain its decision to 'remain in hiding' behind VRE, by referring to the technicality that the VRE Operations Board takes the formal decision after obtaining a County indication of its strong preference. But VRE staff openly admitted in its presentations that it has never happened that a strong County preference has been overridden. And it lacks credibility that the VRE would be pushing strongly for an option that is not already known to be the County preference.

In any event, there is no reason for refraining from being open about the County preference and to argue professionally for it. This is what might lead to a universal buy-in. Instead the County has left it to VRE to present a supposedly correct analysis which 'happens' to point distinctly to the option that the

County now clearly seems to be demanding. However, the analysis is so obviously 'flawed', that it instead strongly suggests a County awareness of the problems it would have to get a buy-in on the merits of its arguments.

Basic arguments related to the location options

Essentially, the argument from the resident community is that, if among the three options there is one which places the station at office buildings and not flush up against residential buildings, then that one option is the only reasonable choice, unless there is an overwhelming counterargument. The residents see this position as based on a fundamental aspect of 'quality of life' and as a matter of 'absolutes'.

The County places its emphasis on close proximity between the VRE station and the planned second Metro station entrance, perhaps to facilitate for VRE passengers, but presumably even more for the sake of the image of a transit node in the 'Metro block' of 18th Street. This is perfectly understandable. However, it is more in the nature of 'relativities', meaning that it is a matter of subjective judgement as to whether the option behind office buildings, with an entrance on the street a mere 400 feet away, would really undermine the County objectives. If the County wants to find a solution on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, then 'it should not to let the best be the enemy of the good.'

Apropos the notion of 'identifying areas of mutual interest', a great example is the desire to ensure that the chosen station location support easy access from Crystal City to the Airport via the station. Leaving aside the occasional advantage for the residents themselves, they obviously appreciate the vital economic interest in having easy access, which would entice more air travelers to view Crystal City as a place to stay and visit, and make current and potential office tenants see great benefits. This aspect, which fully fits with the option preferred by residents, is what the County needs to give high priority.

Ironically, there is also a drawback to the notions of 'transit node' and 'close proximity,' if they are taken to an extreme in a location that does not have the capacity for it. The area of Crystal Drive and 18th Street is already overloaded during rush hour. This is in part an effect of less than ideal arrangements for the Transitway concept, but also of a major access point to the Mount Vernon Trail in this very location. Both County staff and VRE have acknowledged the already existing hazards and congestion. For the sake of workers, residents and people transferring or passing through the area, it behooves the County to avoid a choice which would exacerbate a situation that is already unacceptable.

Final reflection

The combined Crystal City community clearly wishes to continue a co-existence characterized by 'mutual understanding and respect,' an atmosphere which also best supports the needs of Crystal City and the County. The wrong choice, and the wrong final stage of the process, would do substantial, perhaps irreparable, damage. Crystal City needs to be able to attract and retain long-term residents with vested interests and a sense of 'full citizenship.' The County must recognize and respect this reality.

The most important decision is now for the County to step back and avoid the trap of 'letting the best become the enemy of the good,' when in fact there is a win-win solution. To paraphrase: 'the issues at stake are far too important to be treated merely as technical traffic issues.'

Taking a step back would also involve slowing down the process slightly, something which would not create a hardship for the VRE or the County. The County Board owes the community a full dialog prior

to the meeting where the Board will take its decision regarding a recommendation to the VRE Board. This additional step should also include full consideration by the Planning Commission, a body familiar with the weighing of the entire spectrum of considerations in community planning. A meeting of the Transportation Commission, a mere three days prior to the final Board decision, just does not do it!

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jerry D. Norris". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jerry D. Norris

CHAIR

C: County Manager