

Turning the Corner:
Land Use, New Urbanism and Tyson's Corner

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Few exurbs in the United States currently face such extremely unbalanced growth as Tysons Corner, Virginia. The last census pegged the population at 18,540 residents, but this city is no sleepy hamlet. Situated just eight miles west of the nations capital, it is the twelfth largest employment center in the United States, providing jobs for more than 120,000 people. It is the headquarters for several prominent companies, including *USA Today's* parent company Gannett, Hilton Hotels, the defense contractor SAIC and Capital One. In addition, the city is a major shopping destination. Tysons Corner Center, the seventh largest mall in the country, serves 20 million shoppers a year, and the city has over four million square feet of retail space.¹

Joel Garreau, an academic and journalist, coined the term “Edge City” to describe a community in which high numbers of people commute in to work during the day and disappear at night, residing elsewhere.² The vast disparity between the number of employees working in Tysons Corner and the number of residents living there is the classic example of this phenomenon.³ With no significant public transportation, the city is dominated by the automobile, causing massive traffic congestion on weekdays, and creating significant carbon emissions as cars commute and idle in traffic.

This dismal situation could change in the coming years, though, if an inno-

¹“Tysons Corner Center Presentation.” Sully Supervisor District. <http://www.sullydistrict.org/DATA/050928DATATODTysonsCornerCenter.pdf>

²Gerreau, Joel, “Edge city: life on the new frontier,” Anchor Books, 1992.

³In fact, Garreau uses Tysons Corner as one of his original examples of an edge city.

vative new land use plan is fully implemented. The instigation for the urban transformation was the final approval of an extension to the DC Metro system, which currently does not serve the Dulles corridor. The construction of the new Silver Line will connect downtown DC with the Dulles Airport, planting four stops on the route in the heart of Tysons Corner. The new line offered the city's government leaders an opportunity to recenter development — an opportunity they seized. Discussions have lasted five years, with different constituencies concerned about what the character of the community would be under the newly developed plans.⁴

That plan was passed in June 2010 by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, which hopes that their Comprehensive Plan Amendment will transform Tysons Corner into a vibrant urban space centered around those four new stops, Tysons East, Tysons Central 123, Tysons Central 7, and Tysons West, all to be opened by 2014. This new plan makes powerful use of the General Plan as a tool to effect change in urban development, sustainability, and livability. If implemented effectively, it will transform Tysons Corner into a model for a New Urbanist city: a city that is at once sustainable, equitable, and economically viable. In this paper we will examine the strengths and weaknesses of this innovative general plan, and discuss possible pitfalls it could encounter on its path to implementation.

⁴Hosh, Kafia A., "Update to Tysons Corner land-use plan approved by Fairfax Planning Commission," Washington Post, 29 May 2010.

The general plan was developed in the context of several decades of urban planning decision-making. With the construction of the Dulles Airport Access Road and the Capital Beltway in the 1960s, Tysons Corner evolved from a rural crossroads in Fairfax County to the office mecca that exists today. Its proximity to Washington, D.C., easy airport access and open, inexpensive land made the city an ideal location for major business and office development space. The city was identified as a location for possible major urbanization as early as 1990, with the goal to make the city an urban downtown for Fairfax County.⁵

Transit-oriented urban planning, currently in vogue in urban redevelopment plans, has been central to Tysons Corner's approach for the past two decades. The plan to extend the Washington Metro system to Dulles prompted the city to begin investigating transit-oriented development centered around possible new stations. In 1994, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved an amendment to the General Plan to support these goals, designating land use for three possible Metro stops in the city. A decade later, with the locations of four Silver Line stops approved and funded, the Board laid out the goals of the Tysons Corner Land Use Task Force, through which the General Plan for the city, last updated in 1994, was to be changed. The goals included adding mixed-use buildings, transit-oriented development, pedestrian walkways and more residential development while bol-

⁵All citations for the general plan come from "Tysons Corner Comprehensive Plan," Amendment No. 2007-23, Department of Planning and Zoning, Fairfax County, VA, pg. 4.

stering public spaces, green spaces, and public art. This plan will guide the city through the next 20 years of growth and development, and sets the stage for future General Plan revisions past the year 2030 to accommodate future city growth.

Despite the immense changes called for by the plan (which will be covered shortly), controversy over the plan has been relatively benign. The city and county truly took advantage of the nature of an update to the general plan to include citizens and civic organizations, and the government has developed a reservoir of credibility among citizens over the past 17 years that has assisted in reaching the finish line. Most concerns over the plan have been focused on the length of the plan's duration. The city's planning department originally developed a 40-year plan, but dissent attenuated the length to 20 years. The flexibility of the city government to adapt to the Metro's development and citizen concerns is a strong point in this government and land use case.

The scale of the goals for the community also entails an equally substantial land use plan. The 2010 General Plan for Tysons Corner designates eight districts within the city, each with their own comprehensive land use map. One of the most important components of the plan is to focus development around the four new Metro rail stations. This objective, known as "Transit Station Mixed Use," will confine 75% of new development in the city to a half mile radius around the new stations. The highest density development will occur very close to the metro rail

stations, and the density will taper off with distance from the station. The county expects that these four new Transit-Oriented Districts (TODs) will become the new commercial and retail hubs in the city.⁶

The General Plan implements this development through the floor-area ratio (FAR), which is the total surface area of all floors in all buildings on a certain plot of land, divided by the area of the plot. Thus, a higher FAR indicates denser development. For all development within a quarter mile of a Silver Line station, there is to be no FAR limit. For development more than a quarter mile away from the stations, the limit varies between 2 and 2.5. The plan calls for most new office space to be constructed in these transit-oriented developments very close to the stations, encouraging commuters to take the rail line in to the city instead of driving. The designation Train Station Mixed Use designates 65% of development to be office space, and 20% residential.⁷ In order to encourage office space within walking distance of the rail line, re-zoning proposals for offices within a quarter mile of the stations will be approved with a Special Exemption; other development that has less potential rail commuter traffic would not be eligible for the Special Exemption and would have to go through the traditional re-zoning process.⁸

This carrot-and-stick scheme is a smart approach to encourage the type of development desired by the community. Similar to the national exemptions available

⁶General Plan, pg. 20

⁷General Plan, pg. 21

⁸General Plan, pg. 26

for wetlands development by the Army Corps of Engineers, Tysons Corner has developed a system that decreases the bureaucratic hassles for projects meeting the goals of the General Plan, while increasing the number of steps required of developments that are inconsistent with the city's vision. This soft incentive approach is good for developers and the city as well.

Mixed-use development is promoted as a primary goal for the new Tysons Corner. The plan encourages redevelopment of large, low-density spaces, including strip malls and car dealerships, into higher density, mixed-use buildings, either horizontally (between blocks) or vertically (in the same, multi-story building).⁹ The goal is to reduce the number of automobile trips between retail outlets by collocating different types of business in centralized areas, and to encourage people to live closer to where they are employed. This system also addresses the goal of decreasing the ratio of employees to residents from its current 13:1 to a ratio of four jobs to one household in Tysons Corner.

Mixed-use development is a core element of new urbanism philosophy, and Tysons Corner has fully embraced this strategy. While such approaches to urban renewal have been proven successful in several communities, there are few projects as large as the one considered by Tysons Corner to use as a benchmark. The cost of the plan is immense, projected to be over \$1.2 billion, and thus, the government plans to renew the city in stages. Our top concern is whether there will be residents

⁹General Plan, pg. 21

who are willing to live in a city in transition— a city that may fully embrace new urbanism, but not until 2030.

While there are concerns about the city’s housing approach, one very positive development is a projected increase in the number of affordable housing units, a trend that could greatly reduce the city’s traffic burden. The General Plan includes a provision that sets a minimum floor on the number of new housing units that are considered affordable. The current policy of Fairfax County is to ensure that 12% of new development units are affordable housing, defined as less than 120% of the area mean income.¹⁰ The 2010 Plan changes this percentage to 20%, to encourage inclusivity and socioeconomic diversity among residents while reducing traffic during peak commute times.

Outside of mixed-use development, the General Plan’s most important objective — and the area fraught with the most risk — is changing the traffic patterns of the city. The Silver Line metro stations will serve as centers for development, but will also link travelers to other modes of transportation. Bicycles are one of the most important components of the plan. The centers will have bicycle storage and bike rentals for commuters to discourage the use of cars. Furthermore, Fairfax County plans to incorporate a bicycle system, independent of the General Plan changes of 2010. The goal is to create a system of bicycle infrastructure, including lanes, paths, and parking for bicycles, as well as to outfit municipal buses with

¹⁰General Plan, pg. 35

bike racks.¹¹ In addition to the public transportation provided by the Silver Line, Tysons Corner will provide circulator buses, which will function to move people to the metro stations from more than one quarter mile away, and to move people around the city itself.¹² The schedules of the circulator buses will be integrated with the Silver Line train arrivals, and will serve to decrease automobile trips within the city by allowing people to get from the rail stops to work or retail that is not within easy walking distance. Finally, the city will designate parking for car-sharing services, which allow people to rent cars hourly as needed.¹³

As befits a “comprehensive” plan, the city has developed a fully encompassing transportation plan that could solve all of the city’s problems. However, our concern is that the city is trying to do too much too quickly. Human movement patterns develop organically — they adapt to the changing landscape and have a particular dynamism that is difficult for planners to predict in advance. This is particularly the case in Tysons Corner, where the city is hoping to fundamentally alter the community from an edge city into a truly livable community. How will new residents want to live in the city? That question is difficult to answer without practical data, and the city should not get ahead of itself, but instead respond to the needs of citizens as they arrive. With the exception of the rail stations, the other components of the General Plan can be developed when required.

¹¹General Plan, pg. 59

¹²General Plan, pg. 43

¹³General Plan, pg. 41

One final major component of the General Plan concerns changing the environmental sustainability of the community. In keeping with the goal of providing Tysons Corner with public green space, the plan introduces a Green Network, which connects every Tysons district with a park or other greenway.¹⁴ The network features a signature central park, which will host civic gatherings such as farmers markets, musical or art shows, and festivals. This park is located in close proximity to large municipal venues such as the library and performing arts center to encourage a community district. Multiple parks and natural spaces will be scattered throughout the city, and they will be connected through trail networks and stream valley parks, which are already in existence.

In terms of the built environment, the plan requires that all new, non-residential buildings be LEED-Silver certified.¹⁵ LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, provides a ranking system to measure how well a building is performing in terms of energy efficiency, water use, and carbon emissions. This requirement speaks to the goal of reducing Fairfax Countys carbon emissions by 80%, making the city one of the most efficient in the United States.

Both of the environmental components are strong, and the city is poised to be a leader in sustainability. The central park concept is well-thought out, particularly with its close proximity to important civic venues and its connections to urban

¹⁴General Plan, pg. 77

¹⁵General Plan, pg. 25

greenways. The city's leadership has identified a win-win opportunity to increase the quality of the community through land use designation of park land, while also increasing the value of nearby properties — significantly raising tax revenue.

Indeed, the increase in tax revenue from the entire plan will ensure that the city's government will be able to provide city services in a sustainable manner. The higher density of housing will lower the per capita cost of municipal services like garbage collection and public safety while also increasing tax collection density. The ease of entering the city will make the city a more enjoyable shopping district, cementing the city's reputation as the shopping capital of the Washington/Baltimore metropolitan area. In the final analysis, it is the finances of a general plan that are most important, and Tysons Corner appears to be in a strong position to build the city and finance it for the long-term.

The new Comprehensive Plan for Tysons Corner is a strong example of new urbanism planning at its finest. While we have concerns about the transportation plan and its ability to predict human movement patterns, the core land use decisions around the new Silver Line stations are sound. Furthermore, the city's use of the general plan as a tool to engage the community in the future of the city is a strong example of the power of municipal government. Tysons Corner is truly turning a corner from its edge city status, and within the next few years, will become a beacon for urban renewal in the United States.