

# COLUMBIA NEW TOWN ZONING TASK FORCE REPORT

May 2007

## **Introduction**

It is 40 years since Jim Rouse launched his vision for a planned community in Columbia. He succeeded but circumstances have changed; the vision needs to be updated and consolidated in written form. A master plan for Downtown is underway but the rest of Columbia must be proactive rather than reactive to ensure that all of Columbia has a plan.

A task force composed of representatives from Columbia's villages began meeting in late 2006 to consider the problems of uncoordinated redevelopment and infill, as well as issues of density, affordable housing and current urban planning concepts. The task force concludes that a unifying and updated master plan is needed now for Columbia, and the new plan should ensure that the community has a primary role.

The group also poses questions concerning the retention of New Town Zoning and how an updated plan can be implemented. The task force makes the following recommendations for discussion by village boards and residents. The task force hopes that a summary of the results can form the basis for a proposal to the County Executive.

## **Recommendation 1: Update the Master Plan**

Problem: Columbia now faces issues not envisioned in the Rouse plan. As our community ages, older buildings are being replaced and infill is continuing. We need to ensure these processes are coordinated and will enhance the community in ways desired by the residents. Already, some building projects which differ from the prevailing design are causing friction with neighbors who feel excluded from the planning process. These are some issues which have arisen:

- density - should this increase?
- village centers - what should be their role and should they be redeveloped?
- mixed use - should residences be built over shops?
- building heights - should higher buildings be allowed in residential areas?
- affordable housing - what forms should this take and how will it relate to density, mixed use, accessory apartments and building height? Will it aim for diversity and how will it be distributed geographically?
- outparcels - how can they be coordinated with New Town properties?

Solution: Work needs to begin now on an updated master plan. The Downtown planning process may be a model, but rather than a citizen focus group which acts chiefly as a sounding board for DPZ there should be a task force of village representatives assisted by professional planners. The task force should be organized into work groups

which do the actual designing. Residents may want to decide whether any task force should be appointed by the County Executive, or by the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ) instead. The master plan can address issues listed above and others set forth below.

### **Recommendation 2: Retain New Town Zoning**

Problem: How can an updated master plan best achieve its objectives?

Possible Solution: Objectives may be most attainable if we retain New Town Zoning, because it is flexible and unifying. Zoning is the principal planning tool which shapes a community. Jim Rouse devised New Town Zoning as the most effective way to implement his plan for Columbia. Overall percentages were set for the categories of uses, including commercial, single family housing, and multifamily housing. This system demarcates areas for particular categories of uses but it also allows the use and type of design to be designated for each individual property. This produced a finely tuned, well-coordinated design. The Rouse plan also boldly required that one-third of the land be open space.

The remainder of Howard County has standard zoning. This establishes districts in which a particular use is allowed for the whole district. While standard zoning is simpler the result may be less nuanced and less responsive to the needs of the public than New Town Zoning, and it does not require open space.

Any zoning system for Columbia needs to spell out how it relates to the village covenants which specify design elements and maintenance standards. All Columbia owners agree to the covenants as a term of purchase.

Outparcels also need to be addressed. These are properties Jim Rouse was unable to acquire; as a result they have standard county zoning. They affect adjacent New Town Zoning properties and residents. An updated master plan could address outparcels, requiring notice and dialogue with adjacent residents when development is proposed, as well as village board approval.

### **Recommendation 3: Modify the Enforcement Mechanism**

Problem: Any master plan must have a 'gatekeeper' as an enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with the master plan when any rezoning proposal is made.

Possible Solutions: There are various options but in any event the mechanism should be independent and must provide for involvement by the residents and be answerable to them. Currently GGP is the gatekeeper; any proposal to change the zoning for a specific property must be submitted through it. This is because GGP inherited the role of enforcing the original master plan when it bought the Rouse Company. GGP uses its judgment on whether to submit any proposal to DPZ, and charges a fee for its services. Currently, residents may participate in the process only if they occupy or own adjacent

property, in which case they are only entitled to a presubmission meeting with the developer before GGP submits the proposal to DPZ.

The Task Force suggests that the community consider a variety of possible gatekeepers but in each instance the village ought to have the right to contest any decision. We list some possibilities with pros and cons, as follows.

**a. Have GGP continue as gatekeeper, with the community.**

Pro: Keep GGP in its current role with more public involvement; this would allow for continuity and avoid the need to establish a new entity.

Con: It may be unfair to impose on GGP the burden of implementing a new master plan. Also, GGP could leave Columbia, be subject to a takeover, or change its corporate philosophy, or it might be reluctant to include the public.

**b. Create a new gatekeeper such as:**

**1) A public board or agency**

Pro: The County Executive could appoint a board of Columbia residents with DPZ as an advisor, much like the existing county Planning Board (PB). Note: This differs from the PB which serves the entire county, and which may have no Columbia residents or only one or two out of five members. The new board should be accountable to Columbia residents.

Con: It may be difficult to devise a mechanism for a public board to represent residents and be accountable to them.

**2) The villages separately**

Pro: The 10 villages have relevant experience from enforcing their covenants which govern the style and maintenance of residences. They know their community intimately. Villages have staffs, an architectural committee and an elected board which could oversee implementation of a new master plan.

Con: The villages may lack the technical expertise and creativity to implement a new vision. This new task might overburden their resources without additional CA or county funding. Individual villages are accountable to their own residents and might make decisions different from other villages, resulting in a lack of uniformity in Columbia.

### **3) The villages as a group**

Pro: Together the villages could ensure a unifying vision and conserve resources and staff as well as the time and/or cost of any consultants or DPZ advisors.

Con: There would need to be a mechanism for all villages to be represented. It might be difficult for a unified body to impose its decisions on individual villages. The varying village covenants would have to be made uniform and additional CA or county funding would be needed.

### **4) A hybrid entity**

An example of a hybrid entity would be a non-profit private corporation chartered by the 10 villages and another organization such as CA or GGP or the county. Some members would be appointed by the villages with funding by CA and perhaps the county. The corporation would be advised by DPZ technical staff.

Pro: A corporation could be independent and make the hard decisions ensuring a unified vision, even if an individual village differed with the decision. It would require less funding and staffing than having this function duplicated in each village.

Con: This would allow less control by individual villages and less accountability to their residents.

## **Conclusion**

Columbia needs an updated, written master plan to address changed circumstances and to avoid haphazard redevelopment and infill which is underway. An appointed task force of residents and DPZ planners should draft a plan to unify and coordinate further development. This could be a creative process incorporating old and new concepts. Above all, the master plan must ensure a strong role for the residents and accountability to them.