

October 1, 2008

Honorable Howard County Executive Ken Ulman
Council Chairperson Courtney Watson
Council Vice Chairperson Mary Kay Sigaty
Council members Calvin Ball, Greg Fox and Jennifer Terrasa
Director of Planning and Zoning Marsha McLaughlin
Columbia residents:

Upon arriving here and meeting the many fine people who call Columbia home, one learns immediately that few places have such a deep sense of their past, or such a determined focus on their future. This has been very evident as Columbia has prepared over the last three years for the re-invention of its downtown. General Growth Properties (GGP) is pleased to present this submission which is an extensive body of collective thought on shaping Columbia's future.

James Rouse, for all his vision, could not have seen how long he would remain Columbia's leading light. The story is well known. The Rouse Company and Howard County committed to rezone more than 14,000 acres, approximately eight percent of the rural county in 1967. The County entrusted Rouse with great flexibility in creating his place - a place joining the social, architectural, financial, religious and economic ingredients of community building in America, in the post-war age of the automobile. He in turn laid out a schematic diagram of nine villages surrounding a downtown, and four simple principles to be honored: build a complete city, be respectful of the land, provide an environment that nourishes human growth, and be profitable.

Rouse's extraordinary body of thought about "city building," a term he favored for his life's work, lives on. As the years have mounted since Columbia's bold beginnings, so has the evidence that Rouse and Howard County knew well what they were doing. What happened here is studied so frequently by planning professionals throughout the world because Rouse, Howard County and Columbia's various pioneers were right. By nearly all objective measures the formula appears to have been sound.



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In quantifiable measure after measure, Howard County now ranks among the best in the state, and in many cases the country. Columbia's 100,000 people today comprise roughly 36% of the County's population, and 42% of its jobs. There's little doubt that the comprehensive planning approach embarked on in 1967 has had a major hand in the County's success.

Columbia's contribution to Howard County is more profound than that which is measured by demographers and statisticians. With the support of the County and community, organizations and institutions were established that would thrive more than 40 years later, and in some cases surpass the lofty aspirations which inspired their creation. As Columbia had a hand in determining the success of the County, so did the responsible and innovative County foster the success of Columbia.

It's easy to see why people love Howard County and Columbia. There's a lot to love. But an honest observer sees there's need for some change. Downtown Columbia has ceased to be the center of commercial activity for the region. Though a highly successful mall thrives downtown, office buildings which surround it have vacancy rates higher than local or regional averages; once bustling open spaces are now virtually empty; neighboring village centers are in need of revitalization; the lack of modern erosion and sediment control techniques have taken their toll; walking throughout the downtown is a challenge; and the goal of diversity is not completed with young people choosing to leave, or not come to Columbia. Against this backdrop of reality is the future.

Columbia's central location between Baltimore and Washington and its appealing amenities, now as ever, make growth here inevitable. Though at a slower pace than preceding decades, the County's population through 2040 is projected to grow by approximately 50,000 people. How and where the County and Columbia choose to grow are the critical questions. Today one landowner, though holding far less than Rouse's original 14,000 acres, has assumed the role as successor to The Rouse Company - General Growth Properties. Through its commitment to collaborative process, GGP has advanced the possibility to comprehensively plan the rebirth of the "New City," and for the community to reap the many benefits of smart growth.



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This submission, with its expansive breadth of features and concepts, is a carefully devised, community-driven alternative to piecemeal, short-sighted development that has befallen too many places around the country. Columbia was conceived precisely to overcome that ever-present possibility, and it now falls to us to once again choose the better way.

Providing for about 20 percent of the County's future population growth in a revived downtown, this submission is perhaps the best opportunity the County and Columbia will see for comprehensively planned and community-driven growth. After what may be the most extensive community conversation ever held about a redevelopment, with an extraordinary number of attentive and engaged citizens, a clear direction has taken shape.

Some of the most renowned and respected experts in the world have been engaged to study the community's heritage, hear its collective voice and bring forth a vision worthy of both. Their charge has been to consider the unique history of Columbia, the values we commonly hold and the demands of the modern marketplace; then design a restored, resurgent downtown where the land is respected, the environment conserved and more generations of people from all walks of life will grow and succeed. Four principles have emerged from the process that guide and define it: connectivity, restoration, inclusion, and culture and other amenities.

This submission to the County does not mark the end of the journey. As Rouse insisted in the quotation below, the journey really has no end, but merely another beginning. Community engagement will be sustained throughout the County process in the months ahead, and will continue with each major step and adjustment over the next three decades. As Columbia's founder would have it, we will go on doing it together.

Sincerely,

Gregory F. Hamm
Regional Vice President
General Manager, Columbia
General Growth Properties, Inc.

"It will be a long time being completed - maybe never - we hope never."

- Jim Rouse, June 21, 1967