

Village Center Revitalization

Hickory Ridge Village Center Listening Session May 5, 2008 Meeting Summary

Introduction

Kim Flowers, Deputy Director, Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ), introduced the purpose of the meeting. She thanked the Village Board for the opportunity to hear from the community about their ideas for revitalizing Columbia village centers. Mina Hilsenrath, DPZ Chief of Environmental and Community Planning, facilitated the discussion by asking a series of questions about the village center. About 25 people attended. The meeting notes provide a summary of the listening session. Comments have been reorganized slightly so that they are grouped by topic.

Village Discussion

What Works Well?

The community agrees that Hickory Ridge is a pretty village center (“The Avenue” in particular); that it is well-lit, welcoming and feels safe. Its central location along a main road is also seen as a benefit. The grocery store as an anchor is vital to its success. Residents go to the center because of its convenience, because they know the shop proprietors and employees, and because they don’t have to get back into their cars to go to several shops. They also value its sense of intimacy and uniqueness, with a design that is different from conventional strip shopping centers.

What Changes Might Improve the Village Center?

Residents are concerned about vacancies in the center and want good tenants to fill the stores. They would like Kimco to interact more with the Village Board and the community and be more responsive to their needs and requests. Attendees also expressed dissatisfaction with Giant, especially the store’s lack of cleanliness and insufficient shelf stocking. They understand that Giant may be planning some renovation of the store. They also have heard that Giant feels the store needs to expand by 30,000 square feet to adequately serve the area, but there isn’t the space to do that because the only currently vacant land belongs to the Columbia Association. Several residents suggested that new supermarkets such as Harris Teeter and Wegmans may provide more choices and may be an incentive for Giant to improve the Hickory Ridge store. They hope that the store will be improved rather than replaced by something that could be more profitable for the owner. Several residents suggested that a drive-thru pharmacy would be a nice addition to the Village Center.

It was suggested that it would be nice to have a community facility at the center. The Hickory Ridge Community Center is at Hawthorn, rather than at the village center as is the case in other village centers; thus a sense of community may be lacking at the Hickory Ridge Village Center. One attendee mentioned that outdoor areas to stop and chat with friends and neighbors need improvement. People sitting and smoking in “The Avenue” central open space is a disincentive for others to use the space. It was also mentioned that the center could be more senior-friendly, that better signage is needed and that more short-term parking could be provided for quick and easy access to the stores by shoppers. No shared vision was offered for what might occur on the 3-acre parcel that the Columbia Association owns adjacent to the center.

What should be the Process for Village Center Revitalization?

The attendees voiced no consensus about who should be able to propose changes to village center zoning and land use, although they did agree that the role should probably no longer be left to General Growth Properties (GGP). They disagreed about whether the community, or just the property owners, should have the right to propose zoning changes.

If changes are proposed, they believe the public needs more notification about hearings and that the developer should meet with the Village Board and residents before any plans are submitted. The attendees suggested that a process for community involvement is needed, but that the approval process might be able to have fewer steps than the current Planning Board process. In any event, clear milestones and a well-publicized time frame for plan approval were called for.

Some felt that it would be a good idea to have rigorous design guidelines and review by a professional design panel that would strive for a more cohesive look at village center design.

What Land Uses Might be Appropriate in the Village Center?

Attendees expressed skepticism about having housing and office uses above retail, believing that such uses had not been successful at other village centers. Some attendees were not interested in adding office uses, while others felt that office uses would be welcomed and could provide an opportunity to retrofit buildings as “green.” Others suggested that the focus should be on revitalizing older office and commercial space at Hickory Ridge Road and Cedar Lane. In general, the audience was unsure if there would be an adequate market for office and residential uses at the Village Center.

Residential uses and an increase in residential density were generally not favored unless they were similar to the current neighborhood character. They believe that Harpers Choice is the only village center that has residential development as a permitted use and they asked for more background information about why housing was now being mentioned as a possibility for all the village centers. They felt that Hickory Ridge does not lend itself to high-rise or high-end apartments such as those at River Hill. Likewise, affordable housing would seem out of place given the low density, low-rise development around the center. A concern about crime was mentioned, although some residents suggested that adding residential land uses would increase crime while others said that more people living there would decrease it.

Several residents expressed concerns about available infrastructure for additional uses, saying that Cedar Lane and MD Route 108 are already overburdened with traffic. It was suggested that the west side of Columbia would benefit from a park-and-ride lot, with better access to regional bus transit.

Closing Comments

Residents feel it is important to make sure that they have all the needed stores and services in the village center to meet their daily needs. They believe that needed improvements can be made to Hickory Ridge with existing zoning. One resident suggested that village center redevelopment should be controlled on a case-by-case basis, rather than making broad changes. They do not want what happened at Wilde Lake—the loss of the grocery store and subsequent vacancies—to happen at Hickory Ridge. They hope that village center owners will be wise about the businesses they put in the centers.