

Bethesda Developer Rethinks Open Space

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The developer of the proposed Woodmont East high-rise hotel and condominium complex in downtown Bethesda has gone back to the drawing board to expand open space on the site after a community outcry late last year.

Angry residents of several Bethesda neighborhoods mounted what

turned out to be a successful letter-writing campaign that helped persuade Montgomery County's planning board to encourage the developer, JBG Associates, to rethink its plans.

Last week, at a community meeting organized by County Council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), about 100 residents

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got a glimpse of the new proposal, which would push the building back about 90 feet from its original frontage on Woodmont Avenue, with little reduction in the number of condos and hotel rooms. The 540,000-square-foot development would sit next to the popular Capital Crescent Trail tunnel across from the Barnes & Noble bookstore.

The developer's representatives declined to provide copies of the plans, or provide specific numbers of units, saying they were still refining them. What they flashed on the screen during the 90-minute meeting Jan. 8 showed a combination of green space and a plaza and "com-

mons" that would be paved.

Pat Harris, the attorney representing the developer, said the new concept was developed primarily because of concerns expressed by the community and the planning board.

"We went back to the drawing board, literally and figuratively," she said. "We stopped, took another look and started to work with the public realm. This is the heart of Bethesda."

The developer also will set up an advisory committee made up of residents to vet the new concept in greater detail, she said.

A proposal to include a county park on the site, put forth by three community groups, was rejected

last year by the county planning staff. The Greater Bethesda Chevy Chase Coalition, the Edgemoor Citizens Association and the East Bethesda Civic Association, made their proposal in a formal application for public open space.

But the concept got a boost when Berliner weighed in, sending the planning agency an image of a "green commons" that would require the developer to accept less density and provide more open space.

The developer's original concept would have eliminated a green space across from Landmark's Bethesda Row Cinema and Gifford's ice cream shop, which has become an informal gathering spot.

The development was to include a plaza between two high-rise buildings, which would have been connected overhead. The new concept puts the open space directly across the street from Barnes & Noble, which has its own small plaza and fountain in front. The two buildings still would be connected by an overhead bridge.

While many in the audience at last week's meeting praised the proposal as a big improvement over previous plans, there still were many skeptics.

Some voiced concerns about a proposal to combine the hiker-biker trail with a 50-foot wide mews, reduced from 75 feet in the previous plan, where pedestrians and shop-

pers would mingle with hikers and cyclists.

Nelson Rosenbaum, an avid cyclist who uses the trail, said that combining shoppers and bikers "is totally unrealistic." He urged the developer to consider routing the trail around the back of the buildings.

Bob Smythe, who heads the civic association in the nearby Sacks neighborhood, lauded the plans but said they did not include enough green space.

"You need to keep it as green as possible, not as green as convenient," he said.

Harris said the developer hopes to get a revised plan back to the planning board by mid-February.