

Membership Meeting Minutes
Aurora Highlands Civic Association
May 8, 2024, at Aurora Hills Center and via Zoom

Opening of Meeting

President Rachel Hicks opened the meeting at 7:08 p.m. with a welcome to the membership and an overview of the agenda. She also thanked Freddie Lutz of Federico Ristorante Italiano on 23rd Street for his generous contribution of a delicious antipasto platter to get the meeting started.

Minutes Approval

The draft minutes for the April 2024 regular meeting and April 24 special meeting were approved.

Walking School Bus

Andrea Walker briefed on the Oakridge elementary school walking school bus program, which needs additional volunteers to accompany children to school on Monday mornings. It's an hour a week of volunteering, interacting with young students, and enjoying the fresh air. More information is available at <https://friendsofthealliance.org/walking-school-bus-volunteers>.

President's Updates

- **Neighborhood Spring Fair** - Rachel thanked everyone who volunteered and attended the fair on April 20 at Ives Street Park. Between 100 and 150 people stopped in to enjoy the festivities that included a bounce house, food trucks, cotton candy, and a live band.
- **5k Walk/Run** - Rachel has applied for a County grant to support a neighborhood 5k at some point later in the year, details to follow.
- **Fort Myer** – The Commander is doing outreach with the neighborhood and invited Rachel to a recent briefing. Of note are the employment opportunities on base in the day care center.
- **Highlands Urban Garden** – Workday scheduled for May 11, volunteers needed.
- **Crystal House 7/8** – The next phase of the infill projects at Crystal House is getting underway, we sent a letter asking more details on the plans for the townhouses, which vary significantly from the approved plan.
- **Library** – Lots of drama on the branch library that has long been proposed for Crystal City. The County and JBG Smith could not agree on a site, so the County has asked JBG Smith to buy out the community benefit obligation. This led to scope creep with a discussion of a second central library in Crystal City, which is in opposition to the most recent Livability22202 priorities. To clean up all the misunderstandings and reset the Livability22202 priorities vis-à-vis library facilities, a joint Livability22202 letter was recently transmitted.
- **Melwood** – The planning Commission met on May 6 to review the special GLUP study. After hearing lots of testimony on the flaws of the Tier II study and benefits of the AHCA proposed alternatives, to which they nodded and commented favorably, then voted unanimously to pass the flawed study unedited to the County Board for approval at their May meeting. The Planning Commission then agreed to a motion proposing a small area plan for the 23rd Street corridor. (Editor's Note: If the 60' height is ultimately approved for Melwood, it will be hard not to have 60' become the standard for 23rd Street from Eads to Joyce Street. End Editor's Note.)

Actions

- **Letter to Melwood** – The membership voted 24-0 to send a letter to the CEO of Melwood asking for a meeting to discuss their plans and to reinstitute liaisons as required by the 1981 use permit.
- **Trees in Ives Park** – The membership voted 20-1 to send a letter to the County asking them to consider putting some shade trees in Ives Park and noting the need for sustainment.

23rd Street Parking Study

Dr. Mosi London gave an overview of the \$114,000 analysis being done for the County by Rummel Klepper & Kahl (RK&K), scheduled for completion in July 2024. In response to the 2019 approval of the Crystal House redevelopment, they are looking at parking data for the block surrounding Restaurant Row, needs for the future, and how to maximize utilization. Based on parking data, interviews with businesses, and visitors, they have found that the busiest timeframe is around 10 p.m. on weekends. The analysis is looking at all modes of transportation, duration, and turnover rates.

Rachel noted that there had been no input or interaction with AHCA and it does not appear that the project incorporates the many changes coming to the adjacent Crystal House property. It also does not include the significant contribution to parking by the lots at the Truist Bank and former Burke and Herbert Bank sites.

Dr. London pointed out that this is a preliminary study focused more on the impacts on the business community, even though the Fern Street border of the study site is marked for residential permit parking. He also said that this initial survey opens the door for a recommendation that additional study will need to be done.

County Board Member Takis Karantonis

Takis opened his presentation with a discussion on parking (after sitting through Dr. London's presentation). He noted that getting parking right is hugely expensive since it costs about \$70,000 per space for parking in a new building. It's a risky design question that needs lots of analysis. Of the 52 neighborhoods in the County, five have parking problems, and we are one of them.

He also commented that Restaurant Row is ripe for redevelopment, but hopes it can retain its "funkiness" until it is redeveloped.

On crime, he said the new crime map is not yet ready for prime time. Turns out the dots on the map are still too close to the actual locations to make the reporting anonymous. The developers are working on data presentation and we hope to see it soon.

During the question and answer period, some of the themes covered included:

- Repaving 29th St S, seems that it's done every 2-3 years, then utility work tears it up. It's an area that Takis is looking at closely as a way to control costs. Let him know when you see it.
- Pentagon City Sector Plan court ruling, County probably will not appeal the decision, sees the sector plan as a planning success story.
- Melwood – it's still at the special GLUP process, which only sets the frame. There's still time to discuss it and how to best taper to the neighborhood. Need to look at preserving the school and

the trees. The other side of the equation is affordable housing and the Melwood program. We should be judicious in giving up public assets. The buck stops with the County Board and ultimately the Board is responsible for all land use decisions. They need to follow a coherent narrative, which they sometimes do not. For example, Takis voted against the APS Career Center project. The interests of the neighborhood are clear: size, traffic, precedent for 23rd Street, quality of life of the tenants. Informed that Melwood will not meet with the neighborhood, he noted that they will be meeting with the County Board members before the vote. (Editor's Note: AHCA will also meet with the County Board members, as we did with each member of the Planning Commission. End Editor's Note.)

- Melwood Alternatives – Stacy Meyer briefed on the thorough process that she and the Planning and Zoning Committee used to look at the project, green space buffer, and historic preservation of the existing Nellie Custis School. Takis responded that he doesn't like to modify by a thousand exceptions but that the integrity of the GLUP should be part of the process. Melwood is a potential precedent and we all need to be willing to talk about the urbanism of Crystal City/Pentagon City and how they interact with the neighborhood. We have great transit and need to look at how to distribute the density. For example, look at Philadelphia and its organic density. In a good quality urban experience, the benefits outweigh the impacts. We also cannot go back to the planning principles of the 1960s that resulted in places like Cabrini-Green (Chicago) and Pruitt Igoe (St Louis). We need to focus on the sector plans.
- On taxes, the shift of the tax burden is from office to residential. It's also a question of quality of life issues. Nobody said to reduce anything, in fact Takis only received four letters expressing concerns with rising taxes. The challenge is paying uniformed services, County spends 83% of the budget on salaries. Schools are also expensive (we spend \$25k/student, in the top 3% of the U.S.) and only 20% of the community has children in the school system. People aged 30-55 are departing the County. We also have significant costs due to climate change, look at the floods of 2019 and recent weather events.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 8:55 p.m.

Nicholas J. Giacobbe, Jr.
Recording Secretary