

Dear President Giacobbe and AHCA Board:

I understand that there will be an emergency meeting of the AHCA tonight to discuss whether to take a position on Melwood's recent General Land Use Plan (GLUP) Study request. I'm writing this letter to clarify certain aspects of our proposed project. I would be happy to make myself available for your regularly scheduled April meeting to have a more interactive dialogue.

What Is Currently Being Considered

As mentioned above, the pending GLUP request is for a Tier 1 Initial Review. It determines whether the County should undertake the work to perform a Tier 2 GLUP study. A Tier 1 Initial Review does not: (1) make a recommendation to amend the GLUP, (2) re-zone the property, or (3) approve a site plan.

We have applied for a Tier 1 Initial Review, in hopes that the County will permit a Tier 2 GLUP study, because we eventually hope to add affordable dwelling units to this site and that will require a GLUP amendment in future.

If a member of AHCA supports the exploration of adding any affordable housing at our location, then they should support the Tier 1 initial review keeping in mind that they can reserve objections on matters like height, scale, and site plan for the later steps in the process that were specifically designed to address those items.

Should the Tier 1 Initial Review determine that a Tier 2 GLUP study is appropriate, Melwood will be seeking a Low-Medium GLUP designation because it is the lowest density GLUP designation that permits multi-family housing. If an AHCA member supports affordable housing and wants to keep density as low as possible, then they should support the consideration of a Low-Medium GLUP designation.

The Tier 2 GLUP Study does not: (1) rezone the property, or (2) approve a site plan. An AHCA member who supports affordable housing and therefore supports the Tier 2 GLUP Study, would still be able to reserve objections on matters like height, scale, and site plan for the Re-Zoning Process and Site Plan Approval Process which have been designed to address such concerns.

Proposed Size of Initial Concept Design

The AHCA Newsletter mentioned that the "new building would have 130-units of affordable housing." Our initial concept envisions 104 units. The 104-unit figure is documented in Melwood's GLUP application.

The project has been repeatedly referred to as a 6-story building. The initial concept is a 3-5 story building with 5 stories at its highest point along 23rd street, tapering down to 3 stories on the side that adjoins Nelly Custis Park.

The Zoning Committee has suggested that it could actually be a 12-story building citing §12.3.7(A)(2) and §15.5.9 (A) of the Zoning Code. "May" is the operative word in that code section. This additional height is not guaranteed by right. Rather, the developer would have to request it and the County would have to award it as a result of the site plan approval process (§15.5.9.A.3(a)).

Let me be clear – Melwood has no intention of building a 12-story building. Our request is for a 3-5 story building. Also, as mentioned above, the current GLUP request is for a Tier 1 Initial Review. This is the first step in a long process. It only determines whether the County should undertake the work to perform a study to look at land use at this location. The site plan approval process, which is several steps down the line, will include public engagement and public meetings. (The process is outlined here: <https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Programs/Building/Review-Processes/Site-Plan>). If there were ever an actual proposal to build something taller than 60 feet, the Association would have the opportunity during the future Site Plan Approval Process to oppose that plan.

Public Use of 750 23rd Street

Because of the nature of some of the discussions and because the Committee’s report characterizes the proposed GLUP change as “(l)osing one of the few public facilities in the area,” I wanted to clarify that 750 23rd Street South (the Property) is private property wholly owned by Melwood.

The Property was part of a land swap in 1981 between the County and the previous Property owner, Sheltered Occupational Center of Northern Virginia (“SOC”). On October 23, 1981, SOC transferred privately-owned improved land in Ballston to the County in exchange for the Property. The County was able to build the current Ballston Metro Station and SOC (now Melwood) was able to continue its programming in Arlington at the current Property. As part of SOC’s acquisition of the Property, SOC granted a public park and open space easement of roughly 6,800 square feet contributing to Nelly Custis Park. (The 6,800 sq feet contributing to Nelly Custis Park are not impacted by this project.) There is no covenant, easement, or restriction on the remaining Property (roughly 75K square feet consisting of Melwood’s building and parking lot).

The proposed AHCA letter argues that the GLUP amendment should not go through because Melwood’s Property reflects one of the “most viable locations for the county to convert existing facilities to meet current and future community-use needs of the growing neighborhood population.” The letter fails to recognize that the County would have to purchase this privately-owned property for that to occur. The County’s Public Spaces Master Plan identifies properties for potential acquisition to meet this need; it does not designate this Property for potential acquisition.

The reason that there has been public use of the Property is because Melwood and its predecessors value contributing to our community. I’d like to address those public uses and how Melwood intends to maintain them.

Voting Location on Election Day

Voting occurs at Melwood now, even though it is private property. Melwood volunteers the use of our building as a polling place and intends to continue offering the use of Melwood programming space in the redeveloped building as a polling place on Election Day. Neither a GLUP amendment nor the completion of this project will result in the loss of a polling place. (§ 24.2-310 of the Code of Virginia sets the requirements for polling places. In subsection B, it reads “(e)ach polling place shall be located in a public building whenever practicable.” The building is not public now, yet it continues to serve as a polling location.)

Parking

With respect to parking, Melwood currently allows use of its private surface parking lot by neighboring churches. We intentionally offer those spots to be a good neighbor, and we intend to continue offering our excess weekend parking to the neighborhood churches.

The initial proposed concept has over 125 below-grade parking spaces. Please keep in mind that one of the unique values of this property is its proximity to mass transit, because the majority of people served by Melwood do not own a vehicle or drive. It is possible that Melwood will actually be able to offer more parking to the neighboring churches on weekends as a result of this project when completed.

Greenspace and Public Events

The initial proposed concept preserves the façade of the historic portion of the building as well as the large greenspace along 23rd Street. Melwood has committed many times that it would like to work with the community throughout this project to design that greenspace into an inviting place that serves as a community amenity.

While the large evergreen tree does not enjoy protection (it is deemed an invasive species), the initial proposed concept preserves it because Melwood values hosting the Miracle on 23rd Street event for the community. We actually intend to grow the number of events: last year we added a movie night and this year we intend to add a Halloween event. The Halloween event will consist of a costume workshop to build adaptive costumes for children using wheelchairs, walkers, etc. and an inclusive community celebration such a trunk-or-treat, costume parade or party.

As I shared in my recent presentation, we are looking actively at ways to invite the community into the newly developed building. We have been looking forward to a collaborative process as we moved from concept to design.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that Melwood remains committed to transparency and engagement throughout this process. I hope that AHCA will choose to accept that offer and to work with us to get an accurate understanding of our intentions, our mission, and our commitment to the community.

Respectfully,

Scott T. Gibson, MGA
Chief Strategy Officer