



AURORA HIGHLANDS CIVIC ASSOCIATION

January 10, 2024

Re: Melwood Site Plan Application Comparison

Dear Mr. Berkey (Eric),

At the November 19, 2024 walkthrough, you suggested the concerned community review Gilliam Place on Columbia Pike as an example to understand what is being proposed by Melwood. The AHCA Zoning Committee did this and offers the following feedback.

Please see the photo below. We start on Monroe Street on the west side of the property. PODS are stored on Monroe Street, a residential side-street in an unwalled-off area. Note how tall the loading dock vehicles / PODS are. It would have been better to provide a tall wall to enclose this loading area from the residential area to the north and the street. There is a similar condition at the Melwood site, except it is adjacent to a children's park and includes a transformer field and parking / generator exhaust. SPRC co-chair Jim Lantelme suggested **a wall separating the loading area from the park at Melwood**, and this photo is a good example of why a wall would be helpful. See our December 18, 2024 letter for an example of a wall location under "Community Correspondence".

<https://www.arlingtonva.us/Government/Projects/Project-Types/Site-Plan/Melwood>



There are a few major differences between Gilliam Place and the Melwood proposal:

- 1) Gilliam Place is on a very heavy commercial strip on Columbia Pike that has four lanes plus layby parking. Melwood is on 23rd Street, a small two-lane road that is in a low-density residential neighborhood. 23rd Street is completely inappropriate for the height and density proposed. The Melwood building **will tower over** everything around it.

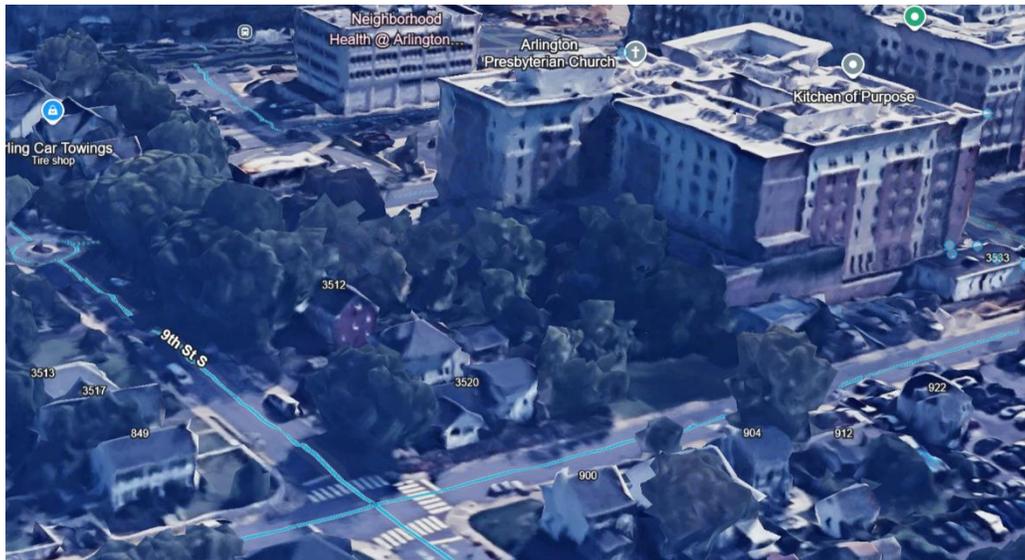


Columbia Pike



23rd Street

- 2) The side of the Gilliam Place building that faces the residential neighborhood is planted with trees. Gilliam Place backs up to residential backyards, and while it is completely out of scale, at least the residents can plant their own trees in their back yards, which it appears they have done to help screen themselves from the oversized building with rows of windows that otherwise view right into their bedrooms.



Because it is in the middle of a residential neighborhood and not on a commercial strip like Gilliam Place, **every side of the Melwood building fronts onto the residential neighborhood.** Unlike Gilliam Place there is no way for residents to provide the same kind of additional screening from the building in their front yards as might be possible in their backyards.

Unlike Gilliam Place there are no other tall buildings for blocks around Melwood. The Melwood project will stick out, and **will inappropriately tower over the low-slung historic neighborhood**. Like Gilliam Place, the Melwood project does not have the transitioning step backs required by the zoning code.

- 3) Here is the condition at Gilliam Place without heavy landscaping – the deciduous trees without leaves in the winter **provide no screening**. This might be tolerable at the heavily commercial Columbia Pike but this would be completely inappropriate at the Melwood site. **A “forest”, as recommended by Commissioner Tenley Peterson, and screening walls as recommended by SPRC co-chair Jim Lantelme would reduce the most egregious impact of this situation.** Note the dumpsters at the loading dock, while they are behind a small fence, nonetheless they are open to the street. A different configuration or a front gate would have eliminated that condition and should be reviewed at the Melwood site.



- 4) Here is what Arlington touts as historic preservation at Gilliam Place.



In case you missed it, the “preservation” is a plaque on the stone wall. It is just to the right of the umbrellas stored in the corner. There is nothing that is preservation about this except the old stone was re-used (Melwood has refused even to re-use the brick from the Nellie Custis

School.) This is demolition, it is not historic preservation. This is what is being proposed for the historic Nellie Custis School, one of the few remaining historic structures east of 395 in Arlington. **This is the poorest example of how to handle a historic building.** AHCA has proposed a solution that will keep the trees in the northeast portion of the Melwood site and retain the historic building in our Alternate Envelope. There are other ways to keep the historic façade included in our January 4, 2025 letter posted on the Melwood Site Plan website noted previously.

- 5) There is also a case study online done by GMU students with the support of APAH about Gilliam Place:

[https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/housing/sites/housing/files/assets/documents/housing%20challenge/gmu_gilliam%20place%20case%20study_nov%202019%20\(002\).pdf](https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/housing/sites/housing/files/assets/documents/housing%20challenge/gmu_gilliam%20place%20case%20study_nov%202019%20(002).pdf)

Of note from this study:

- a. HALRB made a determination on the Gilliam Place site in 2014 that the original church was not historic. The vote was not unanimous and HALRB member Vincent was quoted as,

“I... think it is unfortunate that the church believes that it can only accomplish its mission going forward by tearing down part of its history, by throwing away its historic walls, and the stories that live within the walls. It is unfortunate that the church has not brought itself where it could incorporate that building and its history moving forward”.

The rezoning process at Gilliam Place did not proceed until the HALRB acted. The Melwood site has been accepted by HALRB for a Local Historic District Study which is ongoing, yet the County has continued to review a site plan that would become unbuildable if the HALRB and County Board approve the Local Historic District application which would then be a waste of not just Melwood’s time, but also the time and money spent by the County and community reviewing the inappropriate project. **The rezoning process should have stopped to allow HALRB to do its work last summer.**

- b. Even though Gilliam Place is on a main bus line route (unlike Melwood) and four blocks from grocery, more sufficient parking was provided at Gilliam Place than what is being proposed at Melwood.
- i. There are 173 units, 8500 square feet of retail and 205 parking spaces at Gilliam Place.
 - ii. Assuming the retail required approximately 32 spaces at the 1/250 SF ratio, that leaves 170 spaces for the residential units, or about 1 parking space per unit.
 - iii. The average size apartment was 1.5 bedrooms, and there were 260 bedrooms, for a parking ratio of .65 per bedroom.

Melwood is not in a Metro walkshed, and there is just one bus line on 23rd Street. It is a mile from a grocery store. The Melwood **parking ratio proposed is .7 per unit and .34 per bedroom, around half of what was provided at Gilliam Place**, in a residential neighborhood already short of parking.

- c. The Gilliam Place project received AHIF “gap” funding of \$18M for approximately 25% of the project cost. Melwood stated in a meeting with AHCA on January 8, 2025 that there **is no AHIF funding available for the Melwood project** and that the team is **in discussion with other organizations to try to find gap funding for the project**. If other gap funding is being obtained, the community is concerned that it is being done without acknowledgement of the issues the community has raised.

Melwood has held out funding requirements as a reason for an inappropriately large project size (to reduce the cost-per-unit¹), and the same time held out lack of funding to substantiate inadequate parking and trees, not preserving the historic building, and not providing community benefits such as Nelly Custis Park improvements. But, without AHIF and with no other sources of gap fund identified, **how can Melwood make any representations about their ability to execute the project at all? Without gap funding, is this even a feasible proposal?**

If another organization is providing gap funding, wouldn't they want to support a project that is approved by the community, and that resolves these issues, instead of one that has so many problems?

“Parcel 42” in DC was the first building completed in DC with Amazon’s Housing Equity Fund Mezzanine Financing. “Parcel 42”, is now known as “Station U & O” and opened last year. Here is a link to the project website:

<https://www.dantespartners.com/our-experience/stationuando/>

Parcel 42 is in a very different location than Melwood, but is similar to Melwood in one respect, like Melwood, development on the Parcel 42 site struggled notoriously for decades because it could not be made financially feasible. However, Amazon stepped in **and changed everything by providing the appropriate amount of gap funding that allowed the project to proceed, and proceed in a way that garnered community support.**

Aurora Highlands residents will face significant negative quality of life impacts as a result of the proposed development (in its current state.) AHCA endorsed an **Alternative Envelope** in our November 12, 2024 and earlier correspondence, that will allow appropriate development on the site. When a

¹ Melwood also claims it cannot build an appropriately sized building for the site because Virginia LIHTC rules reward competitive points for low cost / unit ratios, **but Virginia has changed that rule**, and no longer rewards low cost / unit ratios, so that constraint has been lifted. And, as noted previously Virginia LIHTC **rewards and encourages smaller projects** over larger ones.

community approves a building, it will impact the area for a long time, and real people are affected. We should be able to create buildings the community wants and is proud of. Good design is thoughtful, and takes in the concerns of those most impacted by change and that is best done collaboratively.

Melwood, unfortunately, has just not proposed a good design.

I hope that you find this analysis helpful as you proceed with the review of the Melwood proposal. If you have questions or need additional information, please let me know. Thank you,

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SM', is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and somewhat abstract.

Stacy Meyer, RA, LEED AP
AHCA, SPRC Rep
VP & Zoning Committee Chair

Cc: HALRB
Planning Commission
Arlington County Board