

To: President of the Aurora Highlands Civic Association, Cory Giacobbe

From: Aurora Highlands Civic Association Zoning Committee, Stacy Meyer, Chair

Date: March 8, 2022

Re: Melwood Proposal for General Land Use Permit Study 750 23<sup>rd</sup> Street South Analysis

### **PROCESS AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As stated in the March, 2022 AHCA Newsletter, Melwood has applied to the County for a Special General Land Use Permit (GLUP) Study for the property at 750 23<sup>rd</sup> Street South, commensurate with their desire to increase the zoning density available on the site and build a five/six-story building at said location. It is anticipated that in addition to maintaining Melwood offices and facilities, the building will house 104 residential units ranging in size between one and three bedrooms. While *proposed* as a five/six story building, changing the zoning to RA-8-18, as requested, would actually allow a building of a height up to 120 feet (a 12+ story building). See Arlington Code §15.5.9 (3)(b)(1).

The Zoning Committee met on March 7, 2022 to review a preliminary draft analysis of the proposed Melwood GLUP. The review continued into March 8, 2022, with the Committee reaching a consensus. The committee does not recommend support of the Melwood application. Such development is inappropriate at this location. Further, the request to change the existing zoning from “public” to “private multi-family” use in a *single-family* neighborhood runs wholly counter to the entire purpose behind zoning laws and would create significant negative precedent.

One committee member expressed concern regarding the availability of affordable housing in the area and the beneficiaries of such. But, even this member agreed that the project, as proposed, was too large for the existing space.

The general consensus formed that the height and mass of the project is too large for the location. Further, the area cannot adequately support the number of units proposed, let alone support the residents which the project may contain. Moreover, the project neither matches the scale of the neighborhood nor its height limitations.

A project of this size and scale is more appropriate for a commercial area, where it could be closer to public transport and could meet existing zoning requirements, with no change in zoning required.

The committee voted and approved this analysis and recommendation on March 8, 2022.

## **CONFORMANCE OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT WITH RELEVANT EXISTING LAND USE POLICIES**

### **1. GENERAL LAND USE PLAN**

- a. The General Land Use Plan designates the location as remaining “public use” as it has been since Nelly Custis School was built well over 50 years ago. The proposal to revise the zoning and convert the property into 104 private apartments does not conform with public use. Moreover, Article 4 of the Arlington County Zoning Code has no such “public” designation for multifamily residences.

### **2. EXISTING ZONING**

- a. The existing zoning for the site is a combination of C-1, which is a commercial district, and R-6, a residential district for single family housing. Multifamily is not intended in C-1 zoning per the table of uses in the Arlington County Zoning Code Section 7.1.2 H. Lots zoned R-6 are also not intended for multifamily.
- b. The proposed building envelope exceeds the limits for the existing C-1 or R-6 zoning which is 35 ft per the zoning code Section 7.9.1. Under the proposed RA8-18 zoning, a building may be up to 60 feet high. But, per a 2021 amendment to the zoning code, §12.3.7(A)(2), “The County Board may further approve additional density in accordance with §15.5.9.A *beyond that specified in §12.3.7.A.1*; and *approve additional height beyond that specified in §12.3.7.A.1*, in accordance with §15.5.9.A.3(b).” The newly revised Section §15.5.9(A)(3)(b) states that an additional 60 feet may be added by the County Board in an affordable income housing project such as this. Thus, once zoned for RA8-18 as currently proposed, the zoning would allow for 60 feet plus an additional 60 feet, for a total of 120 feet, the height of a 12-13 story high rise building. This building would tower over the current neighborhood maximum of 35 feet.
- c. Residents have noted this parcel with its existing public zoning remaining in place is 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, and should therefore not be re-zoned.

### **3. CRYSTAL CITY SECTOR PLAN**

- a. The Crystal City Sector Plan, a plan that was created with significant input from residents and that enjoys continued public support from residents, notes that public spaces should be preserved. Notably, there is “interest in reinvestment into [the Aurora Highlands] neighborhood public open spaces as demands on these spaces are likely to increase with a growing Jefferson Davis Corridor [currently known as National Landing area].” With the increasing density it is increasingly important to preserve existing public space.

- b. The Crystal City Sector Plan discusses the scale of the Aurora Highlands neighborhood to the west and specifically states that:

“In the development of this plan, a number of planning issues related to the surrounding Aurora Highlands and Arlington Ridge neighborhoods were identified, including: Tapering down in building heights and scale from Crystal City [high rise buildings] to the neighborhoods [1 and 2 story residential buildings]; Potential transportation impacts resulting from planned future development, including the potential for an increase in cut-through traffic on neighborhood streets.”

See Attachment B for the Crystal City Sector Plan Tapering Map which delineates the blocks to further east tapered to 35 feet. The parcel is well within the residential area.

#### **4. AURORA HILLS NEIGHBORHOOD CONSERVATION PLAN**

- a. The Aurora Highlands Neighborhood Conservation Plan adopted by the Aurora Highlands Civic Association has as its number one priority to preserve the single-family neighborhood, its character, and its height. Specifically, it discusses this 700 Block of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street:

“The 700 block of 23rd Street has a combination of office, storefront commercial, and institutional usage. The Sheltered Occupational Center (SOC) [existing Melwood site] occupies about half of the south side, facing low-rise office buildings across 23rd Street. The building mix and heights are compatible with the surrounding residential blocks and are of recent construction. The community would like to preserve this arrangement and continue the existing zoning and height limitations.”

#### **5. AFFORDABLE HOUSING MASTER PLAN**

- a. The Affordable Housing Master Plan 2015 projected an additional 1700 affordable housing units by 2040 in the National Landing area previously referred to as the “Jefferson Davis Corridor”. With the development going forward now, and Amazon’s investments in affordable housing, the area appears to be moving forward faster than other areas of the county to meet affordable housing goals. More data from the county on the cumulative planned affordable housing tracking against the stated goals is needed. Of note, the parcel is not included in the area “Jefferson Davis Corridor”. See Attachment C - Excerpt from the 2015 Affordable Housing Masterplan (2040 Map).
- b. There is no shortage of affordable housing in South Arlington as compared to high opportunity areas of the county. Since there is limited updated information on

measuring the equitability of the location of affordable housing, reference is made to the high school free and reduced lunch statistics (F/R). In 2019, the Aurora Highlands / South Arlington High School, Wakefield (in South Arlington) recorded 41% F/R, Washington Liberty (in Central/North Arlington) recorded 29% F/R and Yorktown (in North Arlington) recorded 11% F/R lunches. While all of Arlington's high schools are highly ranked, the severe economic inequity in the schools directly parallels the schools' rankings by US News and World Report, which ranked Wakefield #44, Washington Liberty #28 and Yorktown #14 in the state.

- c. The need to create equity in affordable housing and opportunity, means more new affordable housing opportunities should be equitably located within the high opportunity locations such as the Washington Liberty and Yorktown school boundary areas.

## **6. PUBLIC SPACES MASTER PLAN**

- a. The goal of the public spaces master plan is to maintain and expand public spaces as the county density increases. The Aurora Highlands area is indicated as one of the areas with the greatest gap in accessibility to public spaces. Losing one of the few public facilities in the area is counter to that goal.

## **7. HISTORIC PRESERVATION MASTER PLAN**

- a. The Aurora Highlands Neighborhood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008. Key to maintaining its character is preserving the existing zoning [neighborhood scale] and public facilities.

## **REVIEW OF THE GLUP PROPOSAL**

### **1. TRAFFIC STUDY**

- a. The GLUP traffic study indicates an additional net 235 vehicle trips per day from this project. However, there is no study included that indicates the cumulative impact of this and all the other density proposed in Aurora Highlands on the small residential streets. Until such a study which includes the impact of future density is conducted the traffic analysis is simply incomplete and cannot be reviewed or approved. Further, the averages used in the study provided by Melwood use the average daily traffic volume from 2017. The amount of growth since 2017 has been dramatic and using these outdated numbers does not show the true impact on the surrounding community which already faces increased traffic.
- b. Given the access to Nelly Custis Park and Nina Park by several surrounding daycare facilities and by children, it is an inappropriate and unsafe location to increase traffic by 235 vehicle trips per day because children and toddlers cross the sidewalks and streets to get to both parks.

- c. Parking was not addressed in the traffic study but the community notes that currently street parking is at and beyond capacity. Most houses do not have a driveway and rely on street parking. Guests for the commercial areas on 23rd frequently park on the street in surrounding areas. Residents living on 24th St often are forced to park further away on 25th Street, etc. As an example of the extremely limited amount of parking, Calvary Methodist Church, directly across Grant Street from the parcel, has such limited parking that it closes Grant Street on Sunday between 23rd and 24th Streets for parking. Additionally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints across 23rd Street from the parcel, uses the Melwood parking lot for its Sunday services.

## **2. MASSING**

- a. See Attachment A for massing study excerpts. The proposal is a massive 5 to 6-story building in an historic neighborhood with 1 and 2-story houses adjacent to and looming over a popular and newly remodeled children's park. The project is completely out of scale with the existing neighborhood. As noted above, such a proposal could represent only 50% of the total height constructed on the parcel should proposed zoning be approved.
- b. The impact on stormwater and drainage has not been discussed but the area already has issues with flooding and groundwater swells. Noise and light pollution from the maintenance and care of such a large building have not been discussed.

## **3. EXISTING USES**

- a. The proposal does not indicate how the existing uses of the site will be maintained.
  - i. The site is used as a voting precinct
  - ii. The site parking is used by the adjacent churches
  - iii. The site with its extensive outdoor space is used for horticultural training
  - iv. The mature pine tree on 23rd Street serves as part of a longtime traditional, popular neighborhood gathering winter annual tree lighting ceremony
- b. Each of these provides a specific concern.
  - i. Where and how neighbors vote is an essential part of a functioning democracy. Use of a commercial facility is not allowed in existing statute, and no alternative site has been identified that could accommodate the growing number of voters currently assigned to that polling station.
  - ii. The impact of at least three churches within one block of the proposed site not being able to utilize Sunday parking, much less compete with additional street parking, is not accounted for in the current, inadequate, pro-forma traffic assessment.

#### 4. INCONSISTENCIES IN THE PROPOSAL

- a. The maps and images provided are not internally consistent. Numerous overhead maps in the provided documentations provide inconsistent representations of the relevant parcel. Some images represent the parcels described in text, other representations present the property inconsistently. It is difficult to adequately review the proposal as a result.

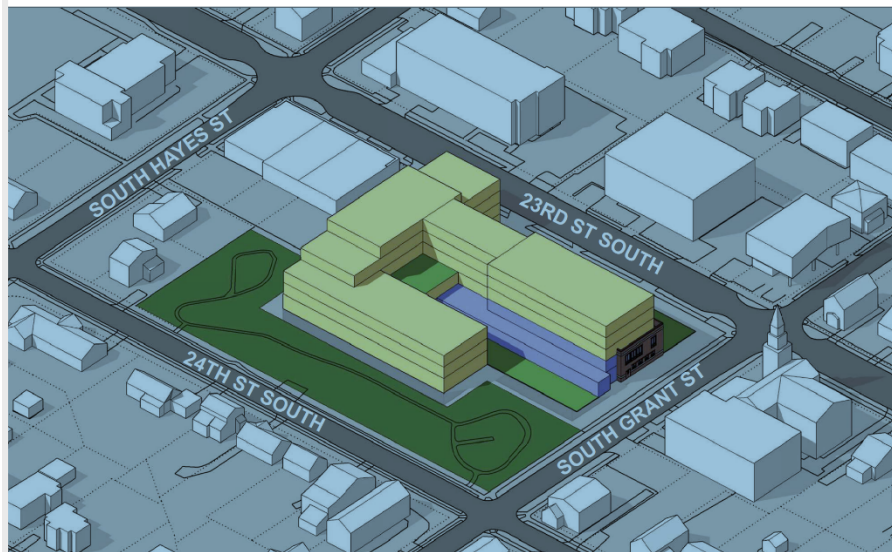
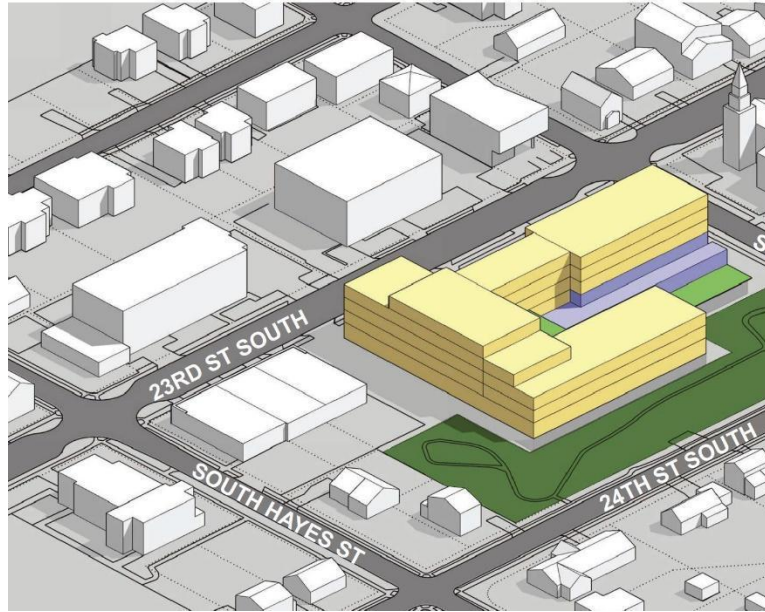
#### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Aurora Highlands Neighborhood is experiencing unprecedented growth with the arrival of Amazon's new HQ2 and the Virginia Tech Innovation Center, which are increasing density and traffic (separate from the increase in density) in the existing historic neighborhood. The growth has included hundreds of new residential units created within existing high-density portions of the neighborhood nearest to the metro station and massive commercial growth in that portion of the neighborhood. There is increasing pressure, as exemplified by this unprecedented GLUP application, to develop any potential nearby property areas despite historic norms and despite vetted county plans.

The Zoning Committee has heard from numerous Aurora Highlands residents expressing deep concern about the increasing density in the single-family area of the neighborhood, and specifically at this location. The Civic Association should follow up by soliciting feedback from residents on this project.

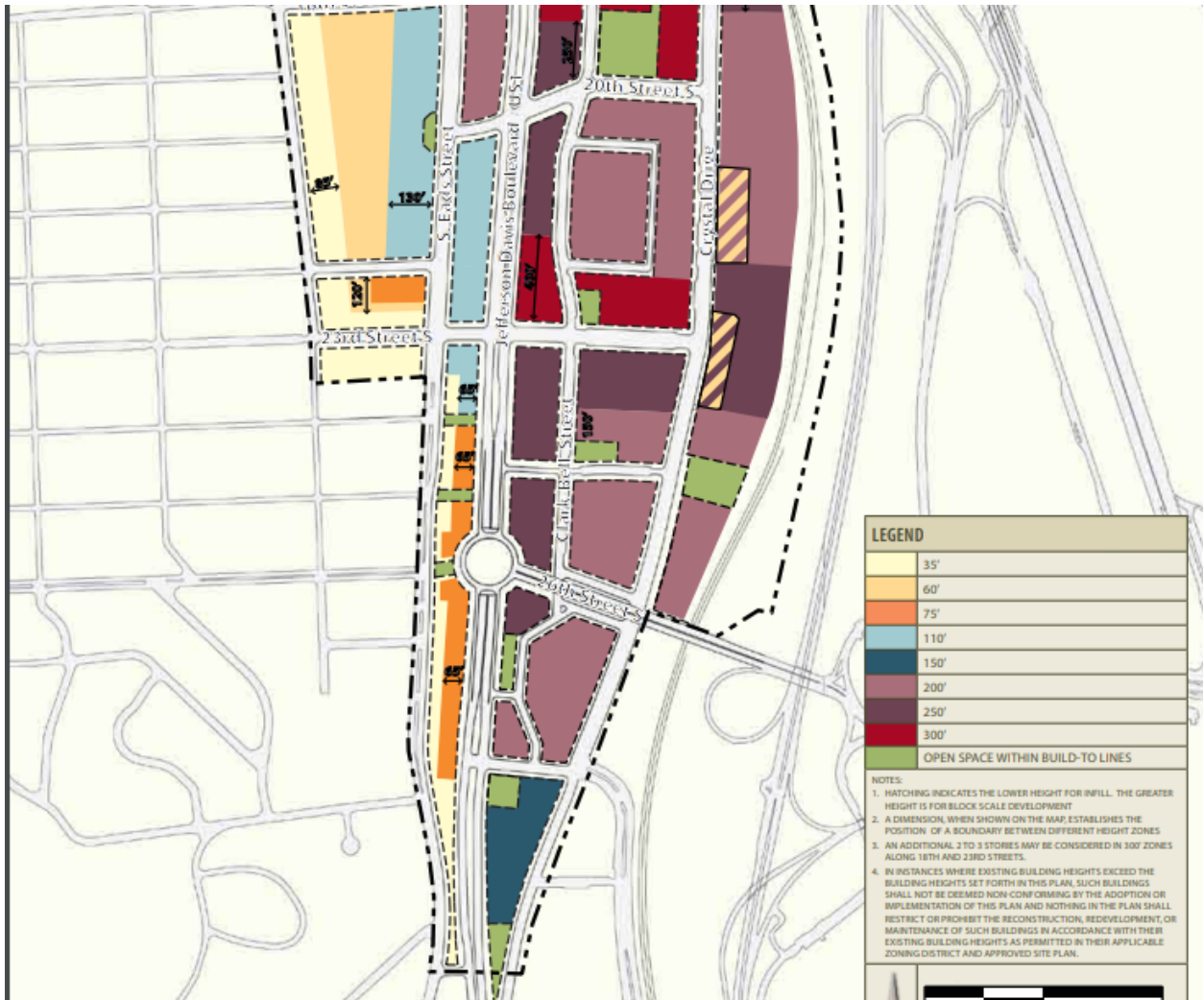
The Zoning Committee requests that the Aurora Highlands Civic Association review this memo and if in agreement, send a letter (incorporating this analysis) to county staff, the County Manager, the Planning Commission and the County Board as soon as possible opposing the proposed GLUP because it does not fit in with the neighborhood, any county planning, the required building envelope for the location and the permitted use. Further, allowing such a change in use would set a poor precedent for other property owners seeking to inappropriately increase density in the neighborhood in both single family (R-6) and commercial (C-1) zones.

ATTACHMENT A – GLUP Massing Studies Excerpts



Proposed massing dwarfs 1 and 2 story historic adjacent residences and looms over the recently renovated Nelly Custis Park ignoring the mature landscaping and trees.

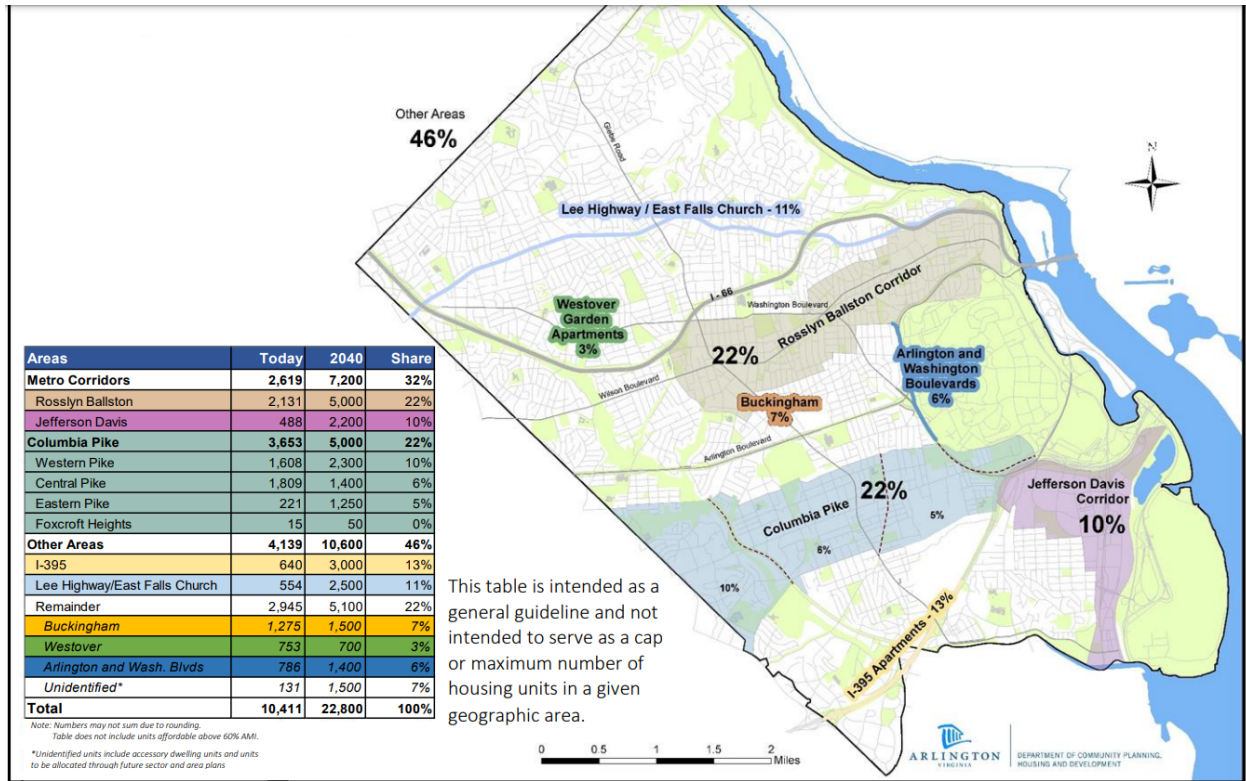
ATTACHMENT B - Excerpt from Crystal City Sector Plan on Building Tapering



The parcel is one long block to the west of the dashed tapering area and well within the historic residential neighborhood



Attachment C - Excerpt from the 2015 Affordable Housing Masterplan (2040 Map)



The parcel is one long block west of the Jefferson Davis Corridor