

PCPS -- A STUDY OF QUESTIONABLE INTEGRITY

In April of 2019, the County Board directed staff to conduct a study of the capacity of 22202's multi-modal transportation infrastructure to determine whether, and if so how much more density could be accommodated in Pentagon City whose PDSP currently limits density by its CO 2.5 zoning proscription. Presumably the Board and other commercial property owners wanted to explore the possibility of rezoning Pentagon City to allow greater density given, and perhaps because of, the “friendly” arrangement Amazon had secured to build its 4.1 million square foot HQ2 campus on the last undeveloped land in Pentagon City.¹

Perhaps the most critical component of any such study is the availability and capacity of transportation infrastructure needed to support the movement of people within, as well as into and out of 22202 where Pentagon City is situated without creating undue congestion that could compromise the area's livability – and commercial profitability.² And to their credit, staff did launch in November of 2019 a transportation study, albeit one focused on just Pentagon City's infrastructure rather than holistically on all of 22202 given its walled-in geography.

Then, in the summer of 2020, County staff launched a broader Pentagon City Planning Study (“PCPS”) which, with support from GoodyClancy, has been focused from the outset instead on where and how large new buildings could be squeezed into Pentagon City. And the Study's “focus group” was told that County staff had developed a modeling system that could predict how much density new buildings could accommodate assuming the occupants were to utilize the particular transportation modes projected by staff.³ Beyond staff's assurance that its modeling process was ironclad, and despite repeated requests for detailed information developed during its transportation study launched well more than a year earlier, staff have responded by saying it would only be made public together with publication this summer of the final PCPS. This timing will, of course, deprive members of the focus group of any meaningful opportunity to analyze staff's modeling process and the reliability of the transportation study's findings and conclusions.

The one and only significant Study finding that has been shared with the Focus Group to date has been a projection by staff that once all of the construction of new buildings in 22202 that is currently anticipated has been completed in the coming years, the infrastructure will still be capable of accommodating an additional 20% of growth.⁴ Once again, we have not been told how staff arrived at this conclusion. However, we were told that it was predicated on successful engineering of the greater population's choice of transportation mode splits to favor walking,

¹ ARCA had been campaigning for such a study for many years.

² While there are also other forms of infrastructure that are required to support population growth, another critical form is the availability of schools capable of accommodating a surge in resident population of children, a topic that had been given no consideration whatsoever by the Pentagon City Planning Study.

³ “Mode Splits” refers to the selection by a given population, e.g. HQ2's 25,000 employees, what percent will choose to walk, bike, or use VRE, Metro, bus or automobile when moving about.

⁴ The building growth anticipated includes all projects that have been approved for construction as well as those in the pipeline and those projected by the Crystal City Sector Plan.

biking and public transit, along with the abandonment of automobiles, presumably accomplished via implementation of TDM strategies. And in one slide, #15 presented during the March 11th Focus Group meeting, staff identified the percent of various unbuilt buildings' populations that would need to elect specified mode splits in order to enable their anticipated additional new populations to move about successfully, without undue congestion. But what's to say they will do so.

Of course, this analytical model assumes that future populations, not just in Pentagon City, or even all of 22202 and to the south in Alexandria and beyond, will actually choose the mode splits that staff has predicted they will choose as a result of the newly engineered conditions that will presumably have succeeded in discouraging utilization of automobiles while encouraging use of specific modes of public transit. But how reliable will such predictions prove to be?

While we can predictably control land use and density via zoning and the GLUP, can we with equal success control human behavior when it comes to people in 2040 selecting how they choose to get where they need to go, not just to jobs, but also for groceries, entertainment, sporting activities, medical care and socializing with family and friends often located far away or in locations not conveniently served by public transit.⁵ Those decisions are based not only on staff predictions, but also on, e.g., unpredictable weather conditions, travel distances, peoples' physical fitness and age (children and seniors), number of fellow travelers, volume and weight of gear needed to be transported, e.g., golf clubs, suitcases, or purchases. The automobile, whether personally owned, rented or hired will continue to be the only feasible means of travel for many trips. Indeed, once AVs become available, their cost and convenience may make them a more attractive mode of transportation than public transit modes.

By reverse engineering this density Study, and putting land use goals ahead of transportation capacity, staff "has put the cart in front of the horse" while preventing meaningful public input due to information blackout. Rather, in the hopes of pleasing commercial property owners by concluding that they may be given license to build many new and much larger and more lucrative buildings in Pentagon City, which would in turn generate much more tax revenue for the County, staff designed and has implemented a Study to produce a desired, but unreliable outcome.

Indeed, from its outset the PCPS has focused solely on density in terms of vertical and horizontal square feet, without giving any consideration whatsoever to the numbers of additional people projected to occupy and move about in Pentagon City, much less throughout all of 22202, as well as those entering, passing through and leaving 22202, particularly during rush hours. Nor has any thought been given to the County's projected costs of providing necessary services to an enlarged population in 22202.

⁵Unlike New York's and many other cities' subway systems, our Metro is a hub-and-spoke system designed to get suburbanites to jobs in the city and home again. It simply is not capable of getting people close to wherever they may need to go in the metropolitan area and beyond.

