http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/howard/columbia/ph-symphony-woods-speak-out-20130124,0,7616978.story

Columbia residents split on concept for Symphony Woods Park

Detractors cite issues with public process at Thursday's meeting

By Luke Lavoie, llavoie@tribune.com

9:15 a.m. EST, January 25, 2013

The Columbia Association unveiled new plans for the Symphony Woods Park on Friday. (Provided by the Columbia Association)

Residents of greater Columbia packed the walls of the Columbia Association board room on Thursday evening to voice their opinion on the new concept plan for Symphony Woods Park

unveiled by CA on Jan. 18.

The plan, called the Inner Arbor Plan, shifts the focus of the development from the northern section of the park to the eastern section, and includes a new CA headquarters, three restaurants, a 1,750-space parking garage and the creation of an "arts village," which will house Toby's Dinner Theatre and a new children's theater.

The new development would be constructed adjacent to Merriweather Post Pavilion.

Of the 16 residents who spoke at the meeting, nine voiced opposition to the plan, the majority of whom objected to the public input process.

"I am concerned about the process that is being talked about," said Linda Wengel, a Town Center resident. "This is a completely new plan in a different area of the Merriweather Post Pavilion/Symphony Woods neighborhood."

Wengel, also a member of the Town Center village board, added that she believes the plan should start the 16-step redevelopment process--mandated by the 30-year Downtown Columbia Master Plan--"from scratch."

If approved by the CA board, Phase 1 of the new plan, which encompasses the development of the north section of the park, would start at the ninth step in the 16-step process, according to CA President Phil Nelson.

"This process was legislated over five long years to ensure maximum public input. I believe it would be a huge blunder for CA to circumvent this due process," Wengel said.

If approved by the board, Phase 2 and 3 of the plan, which include the development of the parking garage, the theaters, the headquarters and the restaurants, would start the 16-step process from the beginning, according to plan designer Michael McCall.

While some opposed the plan, seven voiced their praise.

Dennis Lane, author of the local blog, "Tale of Two Cities," said the plan "creates a destination" at the site.

"You have to create vibrancy and energy," said Lane, who works in Columbia. "This is a big plan, a big idea, and you all should be applauded for the bravery and insight you've shown."

County Council member Jen Terrasa, who represents the Columbia villages of Owen Brown and Kings Contrivance, attended the meeting along with fellow Columbia County Council member Mary Kay Sigaty.

"The design is pretty exciting," said Terrasa after the meeting. "It's something we would be proud to see."

In addition to the "arts village," the plan would create an outdoor tree-top amphitheater, a canopy walk, an interactive sculpture, and the redevelopment of the botanical gardens located in the southern portion of the park.

The majority of CA board members praised the initial design plan, although some echoed residents' concerns regarding process.

"If we want this plan, and we want to get people behind this plan, we need to engage the community," said CA board member Cynthia Coyle.

The board could vote on the plan as early as its Feb. 14 meeting. A public information session on the plan has been scheduled for Thursday, Jan. 31 inside Slayton House in Wilde Lake.