

Council Corner: Inner Arbor Plan

On February 14, CA approved a plan for Symphony Woods called the Inner Arbor Plan which includes an Arts Village (visit www.villageofriverhill.org to see the plan). The Inner Arbor Plan will add a cultural/musical/arts dimension, while protecting the woods. It is a balance of active and passive uses. Moreover, as the Inner Arbor Plan will fulfill Jim Rouse's idea for a Tivoli-like area in Columbia, it is fitting for CA to complete one of Jim Rouse's unfinished plans. The public has asked several questions which need to be addressed.

"What about public input?"

CA's approval of the Inner Arbor Plan is just the beginning of the process. It is still a concept plan. The County has defined a sixteen-step process for developing land in Downtown Columbia. This process allows public input in eight forums including two community meetings. There is a lot of opportunity for public input/comment. This gives the public, particularly Columbia residents, ample opportunity to ask their questions and express their opinions.

This process for developing land in Downtown Columbia has been used previously by GGP for the Mall expansion and by Howard Hughes Corporation for the new Metropolitan apartments. There is no need for CA to duplicate the County process. Adding another CA process on top of the County process sends the message that CA wants to be special and that the County's process is not good enough for CA. We need to work more cooperatively with the County and relying on the County process is in everyone's best interest.

"Didn't CA already complete the County Downtown Development Process?"

No, CA started the process, but did not complete the entire process. Building cannot start until the whole sixteen-step process is complete. The County's process is divided into two phases, each with eight steps (and ample opportunity for public input). The first phase can be described as the concept or planning phase. In general terms, this first conceptual planning phase of the County process addresses: how the design fits into the overall Downtown Plan and specifically the local neighborhood plan; how the design meets the Downtown and neighborhood design guidelines; how the design is compatible with the surrounding buildings/uses; and how the design meets the requirements for Downtown Columbia.

The second phase of the County process can be described as the detailed plan. This phase describes exactly what is to be built in precise terms (height, size, construction material, landscape, etc.), exactly where it is to be built, and what infrastructure (roads, water, sewer, electrical, etc.) is needed. The final result of completing this phase is a very detailed site design plan, which can then move into the construction process.

"Can CA merge the first plan with the Inner Arbor Plan?"

Actually, the Inner Arbor Plan incorporates many of the items included in the first concept plan. The Inner Arbor plan includes a fountain, several plazas, an amphitheater, pathways, and one or two food places in addition to an Arts Village and other items. What the Inner Arbor Plan does is to position these items in different areas, consistent with the County's Decision and Order and its binding stipulations. Where CA's first plan addressed the north-

ern section of Symphony Woods, the Inner Arbor Plan addresses the whole of Symphony Woods. It gives a broad view of what is planned for the entire park. It also better integrates Symphony Woods with Merriweather Post Pavilion and surrounding properties.

Again, CA's original design, or any design that requires trees to be cut down because of the formal geometry of paths (e.g. straight lines, circles, etc.) is not permitted. As per the County's binding Decision and Order, the paths must "meander" through the woods, and this is what the Inner Arbor Plan calls for.

"Does the Inner Arbor Plan meet the Downtown Columbia Vision?"

Yes, which is evident from the County's reaction. At least four of the five County Council Members (Calvin Ball, Mary Kay Sigaty, Jen Terrasa, and Courtney Watson) and County Executive Ken Ulman have written endorsements of the Inner Arbor Plan and the formation of the Trust to effectuate its development, and they praised CA for its leadership in this regard. Howard County's leaders believe that the Inner Arbor Plan is a physical design of what the strategic law of the land, articulated in the Downtown Columbia Plan, enacted by the County on February 1, 2010.

While County officials were lukewarm, at best, regarding CA's first plan; all indications are that CA has hit a home run with the Inner Arbor Plan. The Inner Arbor Plan will add a cultural/musical/arts dimension for which the Columbia community has been clamoring, while protecting the precious woods. It is a balance of active and passive uses, in an environmentally sensitive strategy.

"Isn't the Inner Arbor Plan rather rushed?"

No. The CA Board has been working on plans for Symphony Woods for over two years. There have been many discussions about Symphony Woods and working with the County and Howard Hughes Corporation. In October, the CA Board, in an open meeting followed by a work session open to the public, discussed Symphony Woods and took a straw vote that it wanted to make the Inner Arbor Plan the centerpiece of the development of Symphony Woods, that it wanted to set up a Trust for Symphony Woods, and that the preferred location for a CA Headquarters would be Symphony Woods. This was done in an open meeting and people were free to pass this information along to Village Boards and residents. The Inner Arbor Plan presented in January was the result of the CA Board's direction to CA management.

Thanks to Andy Stack, Owen Brown Council Representative, for providing this useful information.

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