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City To Clarify Direction Of The City Center South Initiative



The Falls Church City Council will hold an important special work session Thursday evening which will have a major impact on the future of the City Center South initiative. The central issue is whether or not changes being requested by the developer Atlantic Realty are of such a nature they require full re-approval of the project by the City Council.

UPDATE 1: A quick update from the work session based on comments from The Mayor. This is pretty raw info, which may be clarified in a presser released later.

- Changes proposed by the developer will not require the project to be re-approved. The nature of the changes was the reduction height in the tallest buildings from 11 stories to 7 stories. A change considered but ultimately not requested by AR would have required re-approval, but the request was dropped.
- There was no loss of open space. There was some division of residential units to create more units with windows which actually increased courtyard areas from two to three.
- There were no changes to any of the other core components of the project - traffic patterns, setbacks, the HarrisTeeter, parks, bowling alley, commercial space, or hotel.
- The lower height changes reduced some of the financial benefits to the city - from an estimated 2.7 mil to about 2.5 mil. Baroukh made a big deal about this, so expect to see more mystery meat math from that crowd in the coming weeks. But the changes in the economic benefit were very narrow in a range - not a deal killer at all.
- The changes will go to the PC following standard procedures in January. There will be public comment and a charette process associated with the next stage of review.
- The work session was packed with interested citizens.

On a personal note, I wanted to give special props to the League of Women Voters. I criticized them for a LTE calling for full review of the project (based on what I believe was mis-information received from Baroukh's girlfriend who sits on their board), but since that letter they have reached out to many people involved in the project to learn more about what is being proposed and how the changes are expected to be discussed and shared with the community. They were apparently at the work session in force learning about the latest developments. Very impressive. They deserve respect for their efforts ... and my apologies for blog barking at them. They are good people.

The City Council will meet first in closed session to discuss legal questions associated with the project and the so-called special exception ordinance. After its closed session, Council will hold an open work session to publicly describe how the City will proceed on the project. The work session will not be broadcast live, but will be taped and re-broadcast on FCC-TV.

Council Member [Nader Baroukh](#), an ardent opponent of the city center plan who ran for office largely on a campaign promise to stop the city center, has already publicly said the project should be required to be re-approved by City Council and go through a complete redesign and contracting process.



Council Member [Team Dave Snyder](#), who publicly opposed the city center project but voted for it, has said

he will not attend the special work session.

The City, however, may face several legal challenges if it vitiates its existing agreements on the already approved project. Also, from a practical political perspective, the approval process for the city center initiative took eight years. If the process was forced to start over from the beginning, it seems likely the initiative would fail just from political attrition.

If the City determines the changes proposed by the developer do not require a full re-approval process, the project will go to the Planning Commission (you all remember them, right?) who will hold a series of public meetings and re-design charettes to vet just the changes being proposed the developer. The Planning Commission voted against the city center project earlier this year, but its vote was overridden by a super majority of City Council. In a controversial vote to reject the site plan for the affordable housing initiative earlier this week, at least one Planning Commissioner openly tied the policy viability of the two projects together.

Generally speaking, the developer is proposing to scale down the design due to changed market conditions. Early opponents of the project, like Baroukh, argued for a smaller scale project, but the fact it may now happen due to market conditions is not expected to dampen their enthusiasm for defeating a project they associate with a progressive "social engineering" agenda of their political opponents.

The City Council is in a no win situation at the moment. If the project is required to be fully re-approved the City likely faces litigation and the political reality the project is hopelessly entangled in local politics. If the project moves forward to the Planning Commission it faces inevitable criticism from entrenched opponents, a politically sensitive situation with the Planning Commission, and the challenge of effectively communicating changed finances and design components to a community already struggling with infrastructure growth pains.

It seems to me the best the City Council can hope for is to keep the city center initiative alive and within the parameters of excellence the city is expecting.

Posted by Mike on December 04, 2008 in [Affordable Housing](#), [City Business](#), [City Center](#), [City Events](#), [City Politics](#), [FCC Planning Commission](#), [Nader Baroukh \(City\)](#), [Team Dave Snyder \(City\)](#) | [Permalink](#) [ShareThis](#)

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Comments

Word on the streets is that AR will scale back the height due to expense, but keep the density the same by reducing or removing courtyards and public areas and setbacks.

Posted by: lurking | [December 04, 2008 at 09:48 PM](#)

Okay - so I was at the meeting tonight and I want to clarify some comments.

Yes, the project is being scaled back (basically, the heights are being lowered by 2 floors in the Harris Teeter building and 4 floor in the Senior active living building) due to the fact that the costs needed to come down for the developer. These changes will NOT change the number of apartments in the Harris Teeter project but will effect the inside courtyards (creating three instead of two to allow for more windows for internal apartments) and the step-backs (bump-outs on the building). NO public areas will be effected and NO setbacks will be effected. The footprint of the building remains the same.

Hope that helps.

Posted by: Robin | [December 04, 2008 at 11:02 PM](#)

So in other words, more density and less green space. I'm trying not to be a nag, and I know you really want this to go up - but are we becoming a concrete jungle?

Posted by: NTRGNTRG | [December 04, 2008 at 11:40 PM](#)

Robin: Thanks for the official clarifications. The unchanging setbacks are great news, as well as the lack of impact on public areas. The inside courtyards must be pretty narrow now, right? The pool is unaffected because it is on the roof? How did the new HT building look? What is the impact of the decrease in the senior building in terms of tax revenue and number of units?

Posted by: lurking | [December 04, 2008 at 11:50 PM](#)