

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A Feb. 25 Metro article and accompanying information box incorrectly reported that a public hearing on a proposed redevelopment plan in the city of Falls Church was tomorrow. The hearing is tonight. Another hearing will be at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in the council chambers, 300 Park Ave. Also, a photograph accompanying the article incorrectly identified City Manager Wyatt Shields as Richard Goff, the city's economic development director.

Falls Church Turns to the Future

Council Gets Ready To Vote on City Center Redevelopment Plan

By Kristen Mack
Washington Post Staff Writer
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[Falls Church](#), long considered the hallway between [Baileys Crossroads](#) and [Tysons Corner](#), wants people to stop there instead of driving through.

This week, the city of 11,000 should find out whether that could happen. After public hearings tonight and Thursday, the Falls Church City Council will vote on an ambitious plan to remake its aging downtown, a goal of city leaders for nearly eight years.

Atlantic Realty, a Tysons-based developer known for such projects as [Bethesda](#) Corner, Plaza America in [Reston](#) and Ashbrook in [Loudoun County](#), is proposing to tear up the city's center of vacant parking lots and buildings and replace them with an eight-story hotel, office buildings, apartments, a bowling alley and a [Harris Teeter](#) supermarket.

If approved, the \$317 million project would be the biggest thing to happen to Falls Church since Metro extended the Orange Line there in 1986. In addition to attracting shoppers and diners from across the region, city officials say, they hope the revival of the downtown area will bring young professionals, first-time homeowners and empty nesters to buy condominiums, rent townhouses and establish roots in Falls Church.

Right now, Falls Church Mayor Robin S. Gardner says, the downtown is "not walker-friendly; there's no big open space. It's underutilized, and I don't consider it pleasant. There's nothing that would draw me here."

Falls Church's downtown, bisected by West Broad Street (Route 7), is not unlike other aging city centers that need

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rejuvenating. In recent years, Fairfax City, Herndon, [Springfield](#), [McLean](#) and [Annandale](#), among other places, have redone their downtown commercial areas or have been considering it.

One reason is to expand the commercial tax base to shift more of the burden from homeowners to businesses. Falls Church has one of the area's best school systems and has largely paid for that success through increases in the real estate tax rate and, until recently, higher residential assessments. The so-called City Center project would bring in almost \$3 million a year in revenue once the project was complete.

The council voted last month to move Atlantic Realty's proposal forward but will take a final vote Thursday. If approved, construction could begin as early as summer if the developer and officials can resolve details about siting. The proposed schedule would take place in two phases, wrapping up by 2013, according to the developers.

For an investment by Falls Church of \$6 million, City Center would add a million square feet of development to a four-block area near Broad and South Washington streets.

The proposal faces some uncertainty. No hotel chain has committed to the site, although developers have been talking to [Marriott](#) about putting a Residence Inn there. Harris Teeter has signed a letter of intent, not a contract.

Concerns about the project's financing led the Falls Church Planning Commission to recommend recently that the council reject it. Maureen Budetti, chair of the Planning Commission, said the panel also believed the downtown plan "felt rushed" and did not include the commission's involvement.

Budetti said the council is "pretty sold on the project. I don't know whether any of our specific concerns will be addressed."

"The council is going to have to reevaluate the project, especially in light of the planning commission's vote," said Nader Baroukh, a lawyer who lives in Winter Hill. "We want a city center, but this falls on its face. They have sold city land at garage-rate prices. The city has to have the stewardship to get the development it deserves."

Detractors have raised other questions. They say that the project's mix of 60 percent residential and 40 percent commercial development is unbalanced and that the project doesn't have enough parking, lacks access to transit and needs to include open space.

Jeff Peterson, president of the Village Preservation and Improvement Society, said the city is throwing in all the land it owns and buying additional land without getting a "public square or commons" in return.

"The height, mass and modern design elements of the proposed project all act to undermine the distinctive feel of Falls Church as a special place," he said, citing the architecture of the historic church that gave the city its name.

Adam B. Shulman, a partner at Atlantic, said: "This process has been long in the works. . . . It's not me coming in and saying, 'This is what you need.' It's us responding to what the city wants."

Added Gardner: "This is not our first go. We've had many iterations."

The uncertainty of the economy is another potential barrier. Some places that are hoping to rejuvenate their downtowns -- notably Herndon, [Manassas Park](#) and Springfield -- recently have scaled back projects or even killed them because of the real estate market slowdown and its drain on local government revenue.

Falls Church's budget for the coming fiscal year will show a drop in revenue mainly because of the housing market slump.

City Manager Wyatt Shields said the housing troubles would not hurt the City Center plan because the city has not seen a marked slowdown in private investment.

"There may be several reasons for this: Confidence in the long-term strength of the Washington area economy is certainly one reason," he said. "But there are local factors specific to the city as well, such as our great location and our strong schools. Falls Church is a great place to live and work, and the market for high-quality mixed-use development here remains healthy."

On Thursday, Gardner said, the council will take the planning commission's recommendation into account. But she said she believes the timing is right for City Center.

"We are at a major crossroads, and this will determine where we are going," she said. "This is the right project for now."

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