



ULI WASHINGTON TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL

The Montgomery County Planning Department partnered with the Washington, DC District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to conduct a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) review from Tuesday, December 1 through Wednesday, December 2, 2015. The event, titled “What’s Next for the Rock Spring Office Park and the Executive Boulevard area in White Flint,” was held at 6110 Executive Boulevard in Rockville.

The workshop included site visits, roundtable discussions and a presentation of findings from a multi-disciplinary team of real estate and land use experts who are members of ULI Washington. The panelists suggested ways of making the two office parks in North Bethesda more economically competitive and vibrant. These office districts, located less than two miles apart in the Rock Spring and Executive Boulevard areas, are now being studied by the County Planning Department as part of its ongoing planning efforts.

CHALLENGES OF THE ROCK SPRING & EXECUTIVE BOULEVARD AREAS

- **HIGH OFFICE VACANCY:**The Rock Spring office park has a vacancy rate of 21.2 percent and the Executive Boulevard office park within the White Flint 2 area has a vacancy rate of 29.2 percent, compared to Montgomery County’s overall office vacancy rate of 14.8 percent (according to CoStar statistics).
- **CHANGING OFFICE MARKET:** Each office park contains three completely empty buildings. A major tenant in Rock Spring, Marriott International, has announced tentative plans to relocate to a more walkable, transit-served and mixed-use setting. Experts on the panel pointed out that high office vacancy rates are not unique to Montgomery County.
- **LACK OF COMMUNITY IDENTITY:** The ULI panelists emphasized the absence of amenities, such as coffee shops, lunch venues, gyms, and drug stores, within the office parks; the lack of pedestrian access and connectivity to offsite amenities; and the need to diversify land uses, since currently there is only a single land use – office – in the two areas.

TAP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE BOULEVARD AREA

During the report-out on December 2, the ULI experts presented strategies for transforming the office parks. Their recommendations for the Executive Boulevard area of White Flint are:

- Accelerate implementation of the north/west Pike & Rose Metrorail station entrance.
- Implement the planned Old Georgetown Road and Executive Boulevard realignment (called the Western Workaround).
- Improve pedestrian connections to amenities, such as those at Pike & Rose, and the existing White Flint Metrorail station.
- Leverage and link to the White Flint recreation loop for walking and biking.
- Introduce Bikeshare as a multimodal connector.
- Introduce convenience retail for office workers and future residents, including coffee shops, cafes, drug stores, dry cleaners.
- Decrease perceived distances between office building entrances and the street by encouraging small retail spaces, pop-up amenities (food trucks, parklets) and outdoor seating.
- Embrace and enhance the ample green spaces, including mature trees and landscaping, already present.
- Leverage and link the Executive Boulevard office park to Pike & Rose’s identity.
- Create a consistent signage and streetscape package to reinforce new identify for office parks.

TAP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ROCK SPRING AREA

The experts organized their comments according to the major challenges of identity, connectivity, amenities and land use as follows:

- Draw on the theme of “live well” by building on existing medical tenants and green environment of Rock Spring.
- Create an anchor for wellness/central community uses and a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented environment.
- Improve entry points by creating gateways through artwork, signage and archways.
- Provide a shuttle to the Metrorail station and enhance pedestrian and bike connections to Westfield Montgomery Mall - which the panel viewed as a major amenity for the area.
- Enhance transit rider knowledge through technology tools.
- Introduce Bikeshare stations.
- Break up superblocks of office buildings with mid-block crossings for pedestrians.
- Concentrate communal amenities (community center, library, civic functions) in a central location.
- Create a centrally located mixed-use village center, possibly including a library and arts facilities.
- Leverage existing green spaces by building a trail network, seating, and open spaces.
- Catalyze development of the approved, mixed-use Rock Spring Center project.
- Change zoning to eliminate constraints, allow maximum land-use flexibility and make the area market-responsive.
- Explore creative approaches to school overcrowding in the area, such as adding another school on or adjacent to the Walter Johnson High School site, reusing an office building for a school and/or building a new school within the Rock Spring office park, possibly on an existing surface parking lot.
- Use financial tools to achieve goals, such as tax abatement and tax-increment financing; special assessment taxing districts to accelerate infrastructure improvements; County acquisition of vacant and underperforming offices buildings to spur changes in use; and public-private partnerships.
- Create buy-in for real estate changes through community education.

Many of these recommendations will be considered by County planners in developing the new Rock Spring Master Plan and White Flint 2 Sector Plan. The Plans will guide and encourage the transformation of the office parks, and recommend facilities and policies needed to support new uses.

For more information about the Rock Spring Master Plan, go to montgomeryplanning.org/rockspring

For more information about the White Flint 2 Sector Plan, go to montgomeryplanning.org/wf2

ABOUT THE ULI TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL

The panelists for the Rock Spring and Executive Boulevard areas were:

Bob Eisenberg, Chair, Clark Enterprises
Robert Atkinson, Davis Carter Scott
Dean Bellas, Urban Analytics
Brigg Bunker, Foulger Pratt Development
Barbara Byron, Fairfax County Office of Community Revitalization

Matt Klein, Akridge
Alex Rixey, Fehr and Peers
Rebecca Snyder, Insight Property Group
Stan Wall, HR&A Advisors