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Maryland Community News

Published: Wednesday, April 10, 2013

Aspen Hill businesses unite to fill void [by Lindsay A. Powers](#) Staff writer

After watching an office building remain vacant since June 2010, business leaders in Aspen Hill have formed a coalition to help put the site to use as well as promote new retail in the area.

Boris Lander — a founder of the Aspen Hill Business Coalition and the owner of two Dunkin' Donuts stores in the community — said the group will serve to unite the area's businesses and offer one voice to county leaders' ears.

The hot-button issue for the group consisting of about a dozen businesses, Lander said, is the vacant former BAE Systems site zoned for office use on Connecticut Avenue, which he described as "a major eyesore."

"It's just like a stranglehold over Aspen Hill, the way I see it," he said.

Lander said there is frustration in the community about how long the building has stood vacant and the red tape they feel is blocking it from being occupied.

The coalition — which met for the first time in late March — wants to see the void on the site quickly filled and rezoned for a use that would benefit the community, Lander said.

Walmart [announced more than a year ago](#) that it planned to locate a store on the site. Yet the county would have to change the site's zoning to allow the new use.

Lee Development Group, the property owner, applied for a minor master plan amendment in October 2012 to rezone the land from office use to retail use.

"We're sitting with an obsolete office building in Aspen Hill," said Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group. "There's simply no office market."

Lee said the strong support from the coalition and other community members for the building's rezoning is "humbling."

The Montgomery County Council [recently discussed](#) the amendment, which is under consideration for addition to the Montgomery County Planning Department's schedule for 2015.

County Councilwoman Nancy Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park — chair of the Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee — said she anticipates the amendment will come up when the committee discusses the planning department's work program on April 22.

Lander said one of his store locations sits close to the vacant building and took a big hit when the company using the facility left.

"We used to have a booming business when that office was filled," he said.

For Francis Nolan, coalition member and owner of Nolan's Apache Appliance, the long-vacant building's productive use is so important that he said he would be willing to see it occupied by Walmart — a company he said he is "intellectually opposed to," but is the only company that has shown interest.

"I've gotten to the point where I accept Walmart is the only option for (the building)," he said.

Nolan, whose store has been in Aspen Hill for 11 years, said he doesn't see any downside to allowing the company to use the site, and thinks it would bring more people to the area and provide jobs for local residents.

While the area's individual merchants are doing well, he said, any business in the community would be a bit better if Walmart used the building.

"It would bring a little more vitality into the Aspen Hill community," he said.

Mary-Jo Ember, owner of Aspen Hill Florist and a coalition member, said she thinks the coalition has a good sense of what the community needs — an opinion she says differs from that of the people "making the decisions."

A Walmart or another retail store in the Connecticut Avenue building, she said, would provide needed competition and jobs for local residents.

The vacant site is one issue among others the area faces, Ember said, but is the one the coalition currently is focusing on as a long-standing problem with potential to help the area.

"To me, this is like a simple thing that could be addressed now and enhance our community," Ember said.

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