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Aspen Hill looks to rezone office space for retail use [by Sarah Scully](#) *Staff writer*

Residents and business owners urged county planners to expedite the rezoning process to allow retail to fill the vacant BAE Systems building in Aspen Hill during a meeting Tuesday.

The meeting kicked off the process to amend the Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan. Allowing retail could pave the way for a Walmart to move in. Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group, which owns the property, has been in conversations with Walmart about leasing the space in recent years.

The Vitro office building, near the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and Aspen Hill Road, has occupied the site since Lee's grandfather built it in 1968. The land was previously the family's farm. Since BAE Systems vacated the building in 2010, [it has remained empty](#), as Lee has seen almost zero interest in the site for office space. He started to look for new tenants soon after the company began to move employees out in 2008. Retail has looked more promising, and he thinks that says something about the market and what makes sense for the site.

"We marketed the property for three years and we did no tours for private companies," Lee said. One bite for temporary use by a government agency fell through, and Costco was interested until Montgomery County enticed them to Wheaton with \$4 million. Recently Walmart has looked like a likely future tenant. With rezoning over one year out, nothing's set in stone, Lee said, but "they're very interested in the site."

Lee said that vacant office space is becoming a growing issue throughout the county, and other areas have also started converting empty office buildings to residential and retail spaces.

Had the rezoning gone through the Master Plan review process, slated to begin next year, [Lee said it could be another 15 years](#) until the space was filled. Meanwhile his company pays about \$700,000 a year on the site, in property taxes and utilities to maintain the building and for insurance reasons. Montgomery County police also use it for training sometimes, free of charge.

But the County Council moved last spring to have an amendment to the minor master plan [reviewed prior to the Master Plan](#), seeing the need to bring business to the space. Planning staff kicked off this faster process at Tuesday night's meeting, which they hope to complete by March 2015.

And this was in line with what many residents voiced as well, asking planning staff to expedite the process even further, which staff said was impossible given the required steps and review periods.

Nearby businesses said they've struggled since BAE Systems left. Boris Lander, principal at Luis Group Management, which manages the Dunkin Donuts across the street, said, "we just hope for something," in the space. "We used to do really well when it was occupied. When BAE left, we took a huge hit," he said.

Bob Clarke, recording secretary for the Aspen Hill Civic Association said, "we'd like to see the piece of property rezoned because it's standing idle with no hope of office occupancy and it's becoming a blight on the community." The association has taken no position on who should lease the space. "We just want to see the property being used, maintained, paying taxes and employing people," he said.

When it comes to Walmart, some remain hesitant.

Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring supports using the site for retail, but believes, as she wrote in a letter to Lee, "Aspen Hill has a unique character that could be irreparably damaged by the introduction of a Walmart."

However dozens of local business owners and residents wrote to Lee in support of bringing a Walmart to the area.

A second community meeting will be scheduled for early spring 2014, where staff will present recommendations and take further community feedback.

Planning staff continues to accept comments, which may be emailed to Senior Planner Andrea Gilles at andrea.gilles@montgomeryplanning.org.

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