

Montgomery council members clash over ‘minor’ master plans

By [Bill Turque](#), Published: April 2

Two Montgomery County Council members charged Tuesday that county planners are catering to certain individual property owners by attempting to expedite zoning changes on their land.

A procedure called the “[minor master plan amendment](#)” allows individual property owners to pursue rezonings that bypass the traditional master plan reviews for neighborhoods, which can take many years. The provision, championed by former county planning director Rollin Stanley, is viewed as a way of accelerating a land development review process that is regarded by business leaders as notoriously cumbersome and slow.

The Montgomery County Planning Board is considering four such amendments that would expedite proposed projects in Aspen Hill, Pooks Hill and Sandy Spring. Another pending proposal is in Bethesda, where Vanguard Realty Group has offered to raze its Apex Building to accommodate a Purple Line stop. In exchange, it is seeking zoning for a bigger building.

One of the projects, a proposed rezoning that would [clear the way for a Walmart](#) at Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue, triggered unusually sharp exchanges among council members Tuesday. Lee Development Group owns an office building at the site and is [seeking expedited rezoning](#) for retail use.

Under the planning board’s current work schedule, a revised Aspen Hill master plan isn’t due to reach the council until early 2017. A minor master plan amendment involving the Walmart site is scheduled for council consideration in early 2015. There is sentiment on the council and the planning board for moving the timetable up further.

But the idea drew stiff criticism from council members Marc Elrich (D-At Large) and George Leventhal (D-At Large), who said minor master plan amendments are giveaways to developers who want to quickly enhance the value of their properties.

Elrich said the mechanism could lead to “a festival of spot zoning.” He warned that the county was “opening up a Pandora’s box.”

“We’ve now opened ourselves up to the importuning of individual landowners who want to be upzoned,” said Leventhal, who drew the ire of a large contingent of Aspen Hill residents in the audience who support the Walmart project. A spokesman for Lee Development Group said the company provided transportation to the hearing and signs for residents to display.

Both members enjoy considerable support from Montgomery's largest public sector union, the Municipal and County Government Employees Organization (MCGEO), which has been lobbying against the Aspen Hill Walmart. While Elrich and Leventhal both expressed serious misgivings about Walmart's labor policies ("I think Walmart sucks, frankly," Elrich said after the hearing), they contended that their main concern was about a process that allows for piecemeal rezoning.

But other council members said that if the projects are clearly of public benefit, then the county should try to move more quickly.

"I really do think we have to get back to the fundamental question, why do we make things so hard on ourselves?" said council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large).

Leventhal, referring to the audience filled with professionally made signs, said he wondered when the next orchestrated group would come to pressure the council. That drew a rebuke from council member Craig Rice (D-Upcounty) who called Leventhal "disrespectful."

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