

Gazette.Net

Maryland Community News

Published: Monday, May 6, 2013

On again, off again: Montgomery council expedites Vitro [by Kate S. Alexander](#) Staff writer

The Montgomery County Council will expedite a zoning review of the former BAE Systems/Vitro site in Aspen Hill that is targeted for a Walmart.

Critics say the decision only fast-tracks the big-box retailer's plan to locate in Aspen Hill.

In a 5-4 vote Monday, the council kept a minor master plan amendment for the Vitro site on the planning board's plate, rejecting a committee recommendation that the review be broadened to include all Aspen Hill commercial and retail areas.

Citing the property owner's intent to lease to Walmart and the narrow scope of the minor master plan process as major concerns, the Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee [recommended more comprehensive planning](#) of the retail area, yet not as comprehensive as a full master plan, scheduled to begin in fiscal year 2016.

"I am really pleased that the majority of the county council recognized what the community wants, and I'm proud that they came to the right conclusion," said Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group, owner of the Vitro site. "I think that the community has spoken and the community wants retail at that location. And that's what we are going to pursue."

Councilman Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, who grew up in Aspen Hill, said the community desires to see the [blight that is the Vitro site](#) redeveloped.

Opponents of Walmart hoped the council would take a broader approach.

Councilman Marc B. Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park said the committee's recommendation would have delayed review only for "eight lousy months."

"I'm a little bit vexed as to why this is so important to not take eight more months and get the whole thing right," he said.

L. Anthony Perez, trustee and director of legislative growth strategies for United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, said the vote was disappointing.

However, Matthew Hanson, campaign coordinator for Raise Maryland, a group pushing to increase the state's minimum wage, said the vote was closer than expected.

"I think that this fight's not over," Hanson said. "We're going to continue to organize and mobilize and if we don't want to see another Walmart open up, depress wages and put more folks out of work, [then] we have to keep up the fight."

Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Bethesda said a minor master plan still would address the broader questions raised in the committee's recommendation.

The council's decision Monday does not prevent Walmart or ensure it will come to the site, but Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said it clearly fast-tracks the retailer locating in Aspen Hill, as Walmart is the intended tenant.

Lee Development Group has a signed letter of intent from Walmart stating that the company wants to be on the Aspen Hill site.

Whether it does come to Aspen Hill remains to be seen, Lee said.

Most business people realize that letters of intent are nonbinding, he said.

"We still have many, many months to go, and it's going to take a long time to go through this process, so [there's] no guarantee that will be the tenant there," Lee said, acknowledging that Walmart has so far been a partner in the developer's efforts.

Although Lee said retail "is the market," exactly what final zoning designation the county will assign to his property also will be determined by the process.

Council President Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring, who represents a piece of Aspen Hill, said now is the time to move forward and focus on what could be on the Vitro site.

Review of the Aspen Hill minor master plan will begin January 2014, and the council should have a recommendation from planning by January 2015.

kalexander@gazette.net

© 2013 PostNewsweek Media, Inc./Gazette.Net