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Maryland Community News

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Published: Wednesday, April 3, 2013

**Rezoning for Aspen Hill Walmart could be on horizon** [by Kate S. Alexander](#) Staff writer

More than a year after Walmart announced plans for a store in Aspen Hill, the project's developer finally could have the project on the fast track for rezoning.

But a request to move an application to rezone the land onto Montgomery County Planning Department's to-do list already has the Montgomery County Council taking positions.

"Let's move forward with this and make sure we give Aspen Hill a chance," Councilman Craig Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown said.

"I'm concerned about the precedent we're setting," Councilman George L. Leventhal said. "I feel that we are now finding ourselves placing the cart before the horse."

Before a crowd holding signs asking "What's the wait?" the county's Planning Department requested to add a minor master plan amendment for the Aspen Hill property to its schedule for 2015.

Lee Development Group, which owns the 10-acre property at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Aspen Hill Road, is seeking approval for a 118,000-square-foot Walmart. But bringing Walmart to Aspen Hill requires rezoning from office use to retail.

The property owner applied in October 2012 for a minor master plan amendment to rezone the land. The minor master plan amendment process is designed to consider zoning changes for specific properties instead of waiting until an area's master plan is updated.

With little chance of the Aspen Hill master plan being updated soon and six other master plan amendments scheduled to be before the council by October — the most ever undertaken at once by the council — Acting Planning Director Rose Krasnow said planning staff believed it worthwhile to put a minor master plan amendment for the site on its schedule.

Both community and retail interests want to see the languishing property become vital again, she said.

The relocation of defense, aerospace and security company BAE Systems to Rockville emptied the building in 2010, but market forces have kept it vacant since, said Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group.

"We're sitting with an obsolete office building in Aspen Hill," he said. "There's simply no office market."

Office tenants have bypassed the site, but discount retailer Walmart wants to call it home and the community wants another supermarket option, Lee said.

"We have an opportunity to create more jobs and tax revenue for our county and state by changing the zone from office only to retail," Lee wrote in an email Tuesday. "Nothing is easy in Montgomery County, but with strong community support anything can happen."

Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said the amendment is not only at the request of the developer but specifically to accommodate its agreement with Walmart. A recommendation that the county take up the amendment is a recommendation that Walmart locate in that space.

The county has not had a chance to weigh Walmart over other potential uses for the land, he said.

## Trail meets rail

In addition to the Aspen Hill amendment, the planning department also requested adding an amendment for Bethesda where the Purple Line, Capital Crescent Trail and Red Line intersect at the Apex building.

The proposal for the Apex building amendment came in Friday, Krasnow said.

According to the proposal, Montgomery County is concerned about the availability of public dollars for the Purple Line and one of the most expensive pieces is the point where the trail and the rails meet.

The master plan amendment could create the framework to stimulate construction of the point where the proposed 16-mile Purple Line meets the existing Red Line in Bethesda.

“We are recommending that this one not only be put on the schedule but that we start on it right away,” she said. The council will consider what will be part of the department’s work plan over the next few weeks.

Staff Writer Lindsay A. Powers contributed to this report.

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