

Residents, developer gear up for public hearing on Aspen Hill site

Some fear planning board recommended zoning will lead to big-box store there

by [Kevin James Shay](#) Staff writer

Residents in Aspen Hill living near the site of a vacant 263,000-square-foot building and the developer of the property are gearing up for a Feb. 3 public hearing before the Montgomery County Council about the future zoning of that property.

The highly visible, 10-acre property on Connecticut Avenue near Aspen Hill Road has had a vacant building since 2010, when defense and aerospace contractor BAE Systems moved out. The site comprises most of the 14 acres being reviewed by county officials through an amendment process to Aspen Hill's master plan.

In December, the Montgomery County Planning Board approved a plan that recommended that the former BAE property be rezoned to neighborhood retail from its present office designation. Some residents fear that will lead to a big-box store, even after Wal-Mart pulled plans for a 118,000-square-foot store there last year.

The issue now goes before the County Council, which scheduled the hearing for 7:30 p.m. Feb. 3 at 100 Maryland Ave. in Rockville.

Sam Nasios, who lives near the site, said he'd like to see smaller employers, such as cafes, pharmacies and medical offices, rather than a big-box store that could add significantly to his neighborhood's traffic congestion and noise.

"We know the developer has to do something with that site," said Nasios, a steering committee member of the Aspen Hill Homeowners Group, which met on the issue on Thursday. "But we'd like to have a say in the process and help minimize the effect of change."

Bruce H. Lee, president of Silver Spring-based Lee Development Group, the site's developer, said he has tried for several years to find an office tenant without success. Wal-Mart expressed interest in the property if the zoning was changed, then withdrew due to uncertainty in the county's zoning processes.

Before that, Costco was interested in Aspen Hill, but was lured to Wheaton after the county offered a \$4 million subsidy. A Costco opened there in 2013.

"It's been a long road to get to this point," Lee said. "We want to duplicate what we have been able to accomplish at Northgate Plaza."

At the nearby Northgate Plaza Shopping Center, Lee's company spent millions of dollars in upgrades and added a roughly 60,000-square-foot Kohl's Department Store in 2012.

Lee said he was pleased with the planning board's recommended zoning for the former BAE site. He said he can't really negotiate with stores until a retail zoning is set, providing more certainty in the process.

"There are a lot of opportunities," Lee said, giving examples such as Dick's Sporting Goods, PetSmart and grocery stores.

Neighborhood retail zoning could allow a building up to 218,453 square feet, as high as five stories, said Melissa Ryan, president of the Aspen Hill Civic Association. She supported commercial residential neighborhood zoning, which she said allowed up to 50,000 square feet unless the retailer is a grocery store.

Lee said that 218,453-square-foot level was the maximum allowed under neighborhood retail, and by the time parking and other requirements are met, such a store will be significantly smaller than that on the property in question.

He said he wasn't going to build just small retailers. "There is plenty of that there," Lee said.

Some residents, including a few from Leisure World, a senior citizen community north of the site, said during a hearing last fall before the Montgomery County Planning Board that they would like more competition for grocers and retailers in the area to lower prices and improve selection.

The former BAE building was first occupied by Vitro Corp., which started in the 1950s as a manufacturing company of mostly slide transparencies for overhead projectors and eventually became part of BAE. Vitro once had two other buildings in a campus there, but they were torn down in the 1990s to make way for Home Depot.

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