



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING BOARD**  
THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

OFFICE OF THE CHAIR

June 3, 2015

Mr. Jeffrey Z. Slavin  
Mayor, Town of Somerset  
4510 Cumberland Avenue  
Chevy Chase, Maryland 20815

SUBJECT: Comments on Westbard Sector Plan Update

Dear Mr. Slavin: *to Amy!*

Thank you for your letter of May 12, 2015, summarizing the Town Council's comments on the Westbard Sector Plan ("Plan") efforts to date. I appreciate your comments and suggestions as the Planning Board will soon be considering the Working Draft.

As the development of the Working Draft continues, the Planning Department staff will continue to address concerns related to proposed density, school options, transportation, compatibility of design, and other aspects of the Plan. Below are responses to the points raised in your letter:

*Density*

The Plan contemplates an increase in residential density (from 1,684 allowed by current zoning today to a proposed build-out of 3,200 units), but a decrease in retail and industrial density. This is consistent with the goal of keeping Westbard a primarily residential suburban area and not a regional retail destination. This is also consistent with the goal of focusing new growth in Montgomery County in infill locations near infrastructure rather than greenfield development. This kind of infill allows the County to grow and adapt to the needs of the future without intensifying development in neighborhoods zoned for single family residences, including the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the Westbard plan area.

In addition to Equity One, property owners along River Road and Westbard Avenue have discussed near or mid-term redevelopment within the Plan area.

### *School Options*

The planning team has had many discussions with the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Long Range Planning Team to evaluate current and projected school capacity in the B-CC and Whitman clusters. In coordination with MCPS, our staff provided a narrative describing the spectrum of options available to address additional student capacity needs. Options described at the Planning Board briefing on April 30, 2015 include additions to existing schools, reopening closed schools, building new schools and limited redistricting. In short, MCPS has many ways of addressing school capacity needs.

Sector Plans do not make specific recommendations about which options MCPS should pursue to address school capacity. However, the Plan will include the MCPS description of available options. The vision of the Plan is typically a 20-year time horizon, while specific school capacity issues within each cluster are addressed on a 6-year time line through the MCPS Capital Improvements Program (CIP) and are more specifically assessed when a developer applies for Preliminary Plan of Subdivision through the County's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO).

### *Transportation*

An independent consultant was hired to conduct a regional and local traffic analysis of the Plan's projected impacts to the existing transportation network. The report prepared by the consultants provides a considerable amount of data and analysis, and the planning staff would be pleased to brief you on the findings in detail. Although the plan projects a significant amount of growth over the next twenty years, planning staff has conducted preliminary analyses that suggest that the future growth will still allow the existing intersections to operate within established County standards for acceptable levels of congestion. Any major modifications to the transportation network will be coordinated with the Town of Somerset and the various transportation agencies prior to the final drafting of the Plan.

### *River Road Urban Design and Compatibility*

River Road is a wide street, ranging between 95 feet and 110 feet of right-of-way (ROW) width. The 1982 Westbard Sector Plan recommends a ROW of 120 feet and the current Sector Plan update will reconfirm this recommendation. Best practices in urban design recognize that the "canyon effect" only occurs when building heights exceed the road

Mr. Jeffrey Z. Slavin  
June 3, 2015  
Page 3

width as measured from building face to building face, so the staff does not believe that the proposed 75-foot building height relative to the 120-foot ROW will produce this effect. Furthermore, development along River Road will occur slowly over the 20 year life of the Plan. Economics and site constraints will result in variation in the heights of buildings with respect to their use and intensity.

The planning team has addressed concerns from the community to step down heights near single-family residential neighborhoods. Their recommended height limits have been revised down to 50 feet where appropriate and indicated on the revised Concept Plan dated April 30, 2015. Additionally, the proposed Commercial Residential (CR) zones proposed within the Plan specify requirements for setbacks and step backs to address compatibility of uses.

Once the Sector Plan Working Draft is complete, we will start to develop an Urban Design Guidelines document that will supplement and further strengthen the specific design intents and character for River Road and other portions of the Plan.

I appreciate your acknowledgement that our staff has worked with the community to incorporate many of their ideas: the Catholic University Plan concepts, townhouses near bordering communities, retention of light industrial, pedestrian-friendly enhancements to River Road and visionary concepts for the future of the Willett Branch. The Planning Board and staff welcome a continued dialogue with you and other community leaders to achieve the goal of drafting a new vision for Westbard that serves the local needs of the community today, while responsibly planning for future growth in an orderly, attractive and sustainable manner.

Sincerely,



Casey Anderson  
Chair

CA:md

Attachment: Sabra Wang Traffic Study

cc: **Rich Charnovich, Manager and Clerk-Treasurer, Town of Somerset**  
Robert Kronenberg, M-NCPPC  
Marc DeOcampo, M-NCPPC  
John Marcolin, M-NCPPC



# Sabra, Wang & Associates, Inc.

ENGINEERS • PLANNERS • ANALYSTS

April 25, 2014

Mr. Richard Charnovich  
Manager, Town of Somerset  
4510 Cumberland Avenue  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

**Re: Final Technical Memorandum**

Dear Mr. Charnovich:

Sabra, Wang and Associates (SWA) has concluded its traffic review for the Town of Somerset and is pleased to produce the final observations and recommendations noted below. These recommendations have been based on field observations; prior studies; available public/private traffic data; speed data from Somerset's radar; results from an Origin-Destination Study; geolocation of all signs and traffic calming devices; an evaluation of various traffic concerns submitted by residents/Council; and resident testimony from a public meeting. Various supporting documentation has been produced for this effort and these have been appended to this memorandum.

*Observations:*

- In general, speeding in excess of the Town-wide posted speed limit of 20 mph is minimal. While there are a few streets with a large percentage of speeders exceeding the speed limit, these roads are lightly traveled.
- Regarding stop sign compliance, field observations revealed instances of non-compliance; however, all stop signs were visible and stop bars clearly marked. Ample sight distance existed for all approaches.
- Opportunity exists for sign consolidation (i.e. combining adjacent signs onto a single pole) at approximately 15 locations within the Town.
- Dorset Road carries approximately 20% to 45% cut through traffic in the AM and PM peak hours; however, the cut-through volumes are currently insufficient, nominally and percentage-wise, to trigger County review of turn restrictions on Wisconsin Ave and Little Falls Parkway. This is true during and excluding the times that public schools are in session. Other entrances to Somerset see very little cut through traffic.
- Dorset Road has a traffic calming device approximate every 350' for its entire length; it is unlikely that additional devices will have a material impact on travel speeds or deterring cut through drivers.
- The Town of Somerset is adjacent to two high-density urban areas that are likely to see increased growth – the Bethesda CBD and the Friendship Heights area. Wisconsin Ave carries 32,000 vehicles per day; River Road carries 22,000 vehicles per day; and Little Falls Parkway carries about 20,000 vehicles per day. Despite these large volumes, and the proximity to two urban hubs, Dorset Road carries less than 3,000 vehicles per day (which *includes* traffic from Somerset residents).
- The streets of Somerset have been designed to maximize traffic calming. With narrow roadway widths, a dense and close-in tree canopy, multiple crosswalks, sidewalks, speed humps/bumps, on-street parking, and multiple all-way stop control, Somerset has created a driving environment that produces visual and tactile cues to let drivers know there are other competing travel modes and/or vulnerable road users. These cues encourage cautious driving behavior, and hence, slower speeds.

*Recommendations:*

Based on the observations above, Sabra Wang recommends the following:

- Add sidewalk wherever feasible. Somerset's public right-of-way is substantially wider than the 22' typical paved roadway width. Adding sidewalk may require removing trees or going around them (potentially onto private property).
- Add more high visibility "ladder style" crosswalks.
- Maintain the tree canopy. An expansive tree canopy produces a tunnel effect that serves to slow drivers.
- Other visual cues exist that are non-compliant with Maryland's MUTCD, but would still convey to drivers the residential quality of the Town and the need to remain vigilant. An example of such a cue would be leaving bicycles and children's play toys in front yards, or installing small signs placed roadside that indicate that children may be present (e.g. little fluorescent-green plastic figurines with flags that convey the message to "slow" are sometimes used by residents to calm traffic). The latter option may work on Uppingham, between Greystone and Trent.
- Remain active in County planning and zoning. Land near Somerset is in high demand and is in close proximity to high-quality transit; accordingly it is ripe for development and/or upzoning (increase in density over existing zoning). Watch for zoning changes nearby, because that could add traffic to Somerset's streets. New commercial or residential projects in close proximity to Somerset could have an impact on Dorset Road traffic. Somerset should be aware of the redevelopment of the Westwood shopping center and the update of the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan, as well as other nearby County planning/zoning efforts.
- If a significant amount of new construction comes online, then Somerset should consider an additional origin-destination study. If the Town wants to pursue turn restrictions on Dorset, SHA would require looking at the impact the restrictions on adjacent intersections. In addition, Somerset should evaluate how turn restrictions on Dorset would impact the traffic on other lower-volume Town streets.

If you have any comments or questions about this memorandum or any of the supporting documentation, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

**SABRA, WANG & ASSOCIATES, INC.**

Bryon White, P.E., PTOE  
Project Manager

