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Rich Charnovich
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Statement of Barbara Zeughauser, Council Member, Town of Somerset

Presented by Council Member Barbara Condos, Town of Somerset

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Planning Board,

I am presenting this testimony on behalf of my Council colleague, Barbara Zeughauser, who could not be here this afternoon.

Diversity in housing can be an important contributor to a vital area. One age group I want to focus on is seniors. According to the 2010 census, in this part of the county about 21% of residents are 65 or over compared with about 12% in the rest of Montgomery County. Our residents like living in Somerset and want to stay nearby as they age. It would be wonderful if Westbard could include housing options such as independent and assisted living units. Just in the last year, at least four Somerset families decided to downsize. One of them moved to a town home in Westbard, and the others chose Sumner Village, Silver Spring and Northwest DC. If there were more housing options for seniors in Westbard, I think more of our residents can remain in our neighborhood.

If more senior housing was located on River Road and the improvements recommended in the plan were made to River Road, it will be attractive for pedestrians. Many seniors are happy to get out of their cars and walk to nearby grocery stores, restaurants, and shops. But River Road will need to be redeveloped as a boulevard for it to feel safe and welcoming. Wider sidewalks, substantial building setbacks, the addition of trees and grass, and the elimination of as many curb cuts as possible will totally change a pedestrian's willingness to use River Road. As developers come to the county with their site plans, it will be essential that funds are made available to make this vision happen. As a reminder, when the McDonald's site was redeveloped, it included a wide sidewalk, grassy area, and trees, and the building is set back from the street. So, we know this vision can be accomplished during redevelopment.

"Where People and Trees Have Deep Roots and Grow Strong"

I am also interested in improving pedestrian safety. Getting from one side of River Road to the other is a challenge with 4-5 moving lanes of traffic. A traffic light at Landy Lane will make it safer to cross this busy road. That will not only help seniors, but also school children from several nearby schools. In addition, it will encourage bus transportation by making it safer to cross River Road to use the bus stops.

Finally, I support the plan's retention of the existing industrial zone. I, and other Somerset residents, love being able to drop our cars off for repairs and walk home. And pet owners like me enjoy being able to walk with our pets to the veterinary clinic, among the many other local services.

Thank you for letting me present some of my thoughts about the plan.