

December 6, 2019

TO: Planning Commission Members

FROM: Jillian Dierks, Planner, Building and Planning Department

SUBJECT: TENTATIVE SKETCH PLAN – 231 & 251 St. Asaphs Road, One & Three Bala Plaza, Bala Cynwyd. LD# 3819. Ward. 9

Proposal

The applicant, Alfred Fuscaldo, on behalf of Bala Plaza Property, Inc., is seeking Tentative Sketch Plan approval for a phased master redevelopment/infill plan that includes the following the following:

- Phased construction of 11 new structures containing:
 - Three mixed-use buildings containing a total of 255 residential units above first floor retail uses and containing structured parking (Buildings R1B and R2A & B) ranging in height from five to seven stories;
 - Three single-use residential buildings containing a total of 310 units (Buildings R2C & R1A & C) ranging in height between seven and 14 stories;
 - A nine-story hotel containing 168 rooms;
 - A 14-story office building constructed above at-grade parking (Office North Two); and
 - Two, 14-story mixed-use buildings containing office above first floor retail and structured parking (Office South & Office North).
- Relocation of the existing access driveway along Belmont Avenue approximately 160 feet to the southeast from its current location;
- Reconfiguration of the existing surface parking areas to remove 1,837 surface parking spaces and add 4,563 structured parking spaces for a total of 4,966 parking spaces on the site;
- Construction of minor private streets and pedestrian pathways throughout the site;
- Creation of three public gathering spaces totaling 477,200 sq. ft. (11 acres);
- Construction of an outdoor amphitheater; and
- Installation of multipurpose pathways along Monument Road, Belmont Avenue, and along the interior of the site.



231 & 251 St. Asaphs Road, One & Three Bala Plaza

Total New Development Proposed	
Hotel Rooms	168
Residential Units	565
Office Area	610,867*
Retail Area	80,555*
Restaurant Area	26,040*

*Net floor area

The proposal is illustrated on the attached seven sheet plan set prepared by Momen Engineering Associates, dated October 22, 2019, last revised November 15, 2019.

Staff notes that the applicant also owns Two Bala Plaza and is seeking Tentative Sketch Plan approval to expand that property as well. The projects are being presented as a phased master plan. Separate approval is required for each property.

Property Description

The site is comprised of two properties (231 & 251 St. Asaphs Road) measuring approximately 46 acres. The site is currently improved with three buildings, One Bala Plaza, a six-story office building, and Three Bala Plaza, which includes two, seven-story office buildings and 2,240 surface parking spaces. Signalized access to the site is located on St. Asaphs Road with nonsignalized access from Belmont Avenue and Monument Road.

Montgomery County Planning Commission Review

The County review letter is attached. The County reviewed the originally submitted plan (dated October 2018) and staff notes that the applicant has reduced several aspects of the development in subsequent revisions. The County's review comments (attached) have been resolved with revisions, incorporated into the issues discussed below, and/or included as recommended conditions of approval.

Regional and Township Comprehensive Plan Compliance

The City Avenue District in Lower Merion Township is identified as a Regional Mixed Use Center in the Future Land Use Plan of the Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan, [*Montco2040: A Shared Vision*](#). Regional Mixed-Use Centers are intensely developed suburban cores with significant retail, office, and residential land uses. The proposed development is generally consistent with the goal to "encourage development and transformative investment where infrastructure already exists."

The [Land Use Element of the 2016 Lower Merion Township Comprehensive Plan](#) identifies the City Avenue District area as a Regional Center which is the primary growth area within the Township. The proposed development is generally consistent with the goal of the Regional Center "to transform the predominant auto oriented, office-based environment into a more functionally diverse live/work/shop environment."

City Avenue District Zoning

At the [November 11, 2019 Planning Commission meeting](#), staff provided the Planning Commission with background on the City Avenue District, including the impetus, the public process, the adoption, development to date, as well as subsequent December CAD 2018 amendments.

The application was submitted prior to the [December CAD 2018 amendments](#), which sought to equalize the intended land use mix by limiting the development potential for future multifamily projects while simultaneously providing additional design flexibility necessary to promote commercial development and addressing needed technical "clean ups." The applicable zoning code will be provided to the Planning Commission and is available at the link below:

Pre-December 2018 City Avenue District Code: <https://app.sharebase.com/#/folder/2395/share/166-rQq7U4Cvd6QWXDRLD8T9uMk7fTc>

While standards were amended in the code, the goals and objectives remain unchanged and are provided below:

155-217.A. Purpose

(1) **General goals and objectives.** The City Avenue District Regional Center Area (RCA) is intended to encourage higher-density, multiple-use, pedestrian-oriented development, and more economically productive use of land parcels in the vicinity of City Avenue (U.S. Route 1) (as shown on Map 1). It recognizes the importance of City Avenue as both a gateway and as an economic generator for Lower Merion Township by permitting higher densities with a mix of land uses while providing sufficient off-street parking.

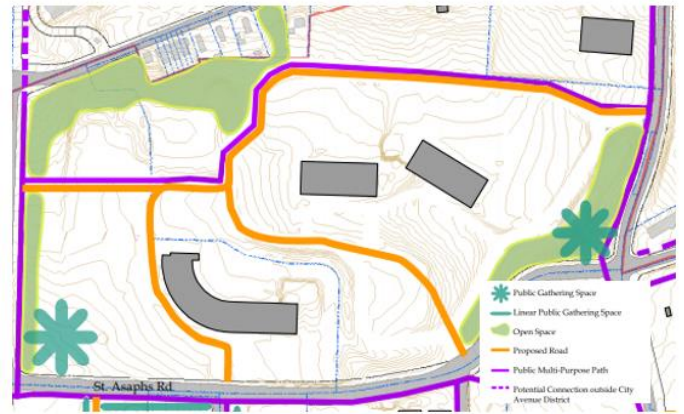
(2) These general goals and objectives include the following specific purposes:

- (a) Enable the development of a mix of commercial, institutional and residential uses.
- (b) Minimize pedestrian and vehicular conflicts and encourage the renovation and erection of buildings that provide direct connections from buildings to the street and sidewalk.
- (c) Discourage the dependence on automobile use by promoting alternate modes of transportation, including buses and trains, improving connections and links to public transit and creating safe and inviting pedestrian accessways, thereby reducing traffic congestion.
- (d) Create transition in bulk and scale between higher-density development and existing residential neighborhoods.
- (e) Enhance the visual character and identity of the district through building mass, scale and design, landscaping and signage, all appropriate to the goals and objectives of the RCA zoning.
- (f) Promote the smooth and safe flow of vehicular traffic through the corridor while reducing cut-through traffic in the neighboring residential districts by creating pedestrian-scaled blocks, separated by public access streets with sidewalks.
- (g) Encourage the development of shared parking, wrapped structure parking, underground structure parking, and attractive and convenient off-street parking facilities to reduce on-street congestion and facilitate vehicular and pedestrian circulation.
- (h) Promote the creation and maintenance of landscaped open areas among buildings for public gathering space.
- (i) Protect the character and quality of existing residential neighborhoods proximate to the RCA.

Official Map

The [Official Map](#), adopted by the Board of Commissioners on [April 25, 2012](#), in accordance with [Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code](#) Article 4, shows the following improvements on this property:

- 1) Public, multipurpose paths along the Monument Road frontage, Belmont Avenue frontage, and along the rear of the site.
 - *A multipurpose path is provided along both road frontages and along the rear of the property, although the location deviates slightly.*
- 2) Public gathering space at (a) the intersection of Belmont Avenue and St. Asaphs Road and (b) the intersection of Monument Road and St. Asaphs Road.
 - *The public gathering spaces are shown in these locations.*
- 3) Open Space along the Belmont Avenue frontage and at the intersection of Monument Road and St. Asaphs Road.
 - *Open space is shown along the Belmont Avenue frontage, but two buildings are shown along the open space area along St. Asaphs Road and Monument Road.*
- 4) Proposed Roads are shown internal to the site.
 - *Proposed roads are shown throughout the site; however, their location slightly deviates from what is shown on the Official Map.*



The deviations to the Official Map are addressed in Issue 1 below.

Purpose of Tentative Sketch Plan

The purpose of a Tentative Sketch Plan is to determine appropriate locations for buildings, driveways and parking lots and how such improvements can least impact a site's natural features. It has become practice in the Township to use the Tentative Sketch Plan phase to flesh out other issues and give applicants a program to address at the Preliminary Plan phase.

Environmental Advisory Council (EAC)

The EAC reviewed the plan at their [October 22, 2019](#) meeting and expressed concern with the overall site layout of buildings and circulation. The EAC commented that no descriptive information was provided to help explain the site plan including the logic behind the building envelopes or rationale for internal pedestrian circulation patterns. The EAC noted that this site presents an opportunity to cluster the development, to create significant open areas of green space (or natural ecological areas) and to provide substantial spaces for social/public gathering.

Zoning

The property is split zoned with 46 acres located in CAD-RCA and .6 acres located in R6A. The portion of property zoned R6A is located along Righters Ferry Road. The following table details the bulk, area and setback requirements for the existing and proposed conditions.

CAD-RCA Zoning Requirements- Multiple Use Development		Existing	Proposed
Net Lot Area (Minimum)	N/A	46 acres	46 acres
Lot Width (Minimum)	600'	>600'	varies*
Building Area (Maximum)	50%	6% 117,103 sq. ft.	27.5 553,004 sq. ft.
Build to Line	20' minimum- 70' maximum	n/a	20' - 70'
Side Yard (Minimum)	25' (structures > 48')	n/a	n/a
Rear Yard (Minimum)	50'	-	50'
Impervious Surface (Maximum)	70%	58.4% 1,186,625 sq. ft.	60.5% 1,216,359 sq. ft. (Increase of 29,734 sq. ft.)
Building Height	28' minimum- 200' maximum	90'-105'	35'-146'
Parking	4,747 Spaces	2,240 spaces	4,966 spaces
Car Share Parking	4 Car Share Spaces 1 space per 50 units	-	Not Provided**
Bicycle Parking	Maximum of 20 per building	-	20 per building

*Compliance with Zoning Section 155-217.C.5.b is not required pursuant to Zoning Code Section 155-217.C.5.d

**A condition of approval has been included requiring the applicant to provide the needed car share spaces.

Floor Area Ratio (FAR)			
FAR Permitted	0.7 Base – 1.75 Max. (GSA: 795,150 Base- 3,552,577 Max)		
	Amenity	Total Increase	Gross Floor Area
Existing (.4)			795,150
Base FAR		0.7	1,405,879
Bonus 1	Public Gathering Space	.15	+301,259
Bonus 1	Aggregation of Public Gathering Space	.15	+301,259
Bonus 2	Structured Parking*	.17	+341,427
Bonus 3	Public Multipurpose Pathway	.15	+301,259
Total FAR Permitted		1.32	2,651,083
Total FAR Proposed		1.25	2,516,701

* The applicant has prorated the increase for providing 92% (or 4,563 of the 4,966) of the parking in a structure structured parking.

Issues

1. Official Map

As summarized above, the plan deviates from the Official Map with regard to the location of the proposed open space along the frontage of St. Asaphs and Monument Roads, the location of the multipurpose path and the proposed roads. The applicant should explain why they chose to deviate from the Official Map with these improvements.

Staff supports the applicant’s proposal to deviate from the location of some improvements but would like the applicant to provide a justification for the deviations. Staff would also like the applicant to provide a plan that overlays the proposed improvements on the Official Map to better understand the impacts. Staff has concerns with the location of mixed-use residential and retail building (R2A) in the location of the open space along St. Asaphs Road and Monument Road and their potential impact to the existing slopes and has included a condition of approval requiring the applicant to be relocated.

	Phased Residential Development	
	Units Proposed	Staff’s Recommendation
Phase 1	157	174
Phase 2	174	0
Phase 3	164	0
Phase 4	70	391
Total	565	565

In their review the County stated, “We support any collaborative efforts between the applicant and the Township to refine the proposed street layout on the official map to achieve the most efficient site layout for this large site.” Staff notes that the Official Map may be amended by the approval of a land development application without requiring further action.

2. Master Plans & Phasing

The project is shown to be completed in four phases extending through 2038 and complying with the [Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code](#) (MPC), Section 508.4.iv, requirement to incorporate 25% of residential development in each phase. The MPC allows this requirement to be adjusted when authorized by the governing body. In reviewing the proposed phases, staff has suggested moving portions of the residential construction out to later phases and prioritizing portions of the project that directly achieve the goals and objectives of the CAD, specifically the development of an active mix of commercial, institutional and residential uses to create active spaces, while establishing attractive viewsheds that define CAD.

Staff’s recommended changes, which are attached to this document, push out much of the proposed residential development until the last phase. Staff has included a condition of approval requiring the applicant to work with staff to adjust the proposed development phasing through a developer’s agreement. A recommended condition of approval requires that the applicant:

- Submit documentation with the Preliminary Plan submission to demonstrate compliance with the Zoning Code, including but not limited to parking, public gathering space, etc., as required for the increased density; and
- Provide a market analysis to support the proposed phasing.

3. Site Layout

In reviewing the site layout staff has several specific recommendations but would like to continue to look holistically at the development site, including its context within the district, in an effort to better determine appropriate building and roadway locations. Staff has included an attached graphic highlighting the areas which we feel need additional consideration. In addition to the graphic provided, staff has the following comments:

Building Layout:

- Active Uses: The CAD requires buildings with structured parking to be wrapped with active uses for 80% of the ground floor façade. This standard requires Office North Two and residential building R2C to be flipped so the active portion of the building is located along the internal road and the bulk of the structured parking is located in the rear of the structure. Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to demonstrate compliance with this standard with the Preliminary Plan submission.
- Height: At the November Planning Commission meeting, requests from the community were made to relocate some of the taller buildings to the interior of the site. Specifically, reducing the height associated with the two, 14-story mixed-use office buildings (Office North and Office South) and increasing the height associated with the two, five and six-story mixed-use residential buildings (R2A & R2B) located along St. Asaphs Road and Monument Road.

In their review, the County also provided potential layout options, entitled ‘Bala Plaza Conceptual Sketch 1 & 2’ (attached) which redistribute the proposed height on the site. The conceptual sketches show lower building heights to the rear of the site between the proposed mixed-use development and the existing homes on Righters Mill Road, slightly taller buildings at entrances to the site from Belmont Avenue and Monument Road, and the tallest buildings along St. Asaphs Road.

Staff has included a condition of approval requiring the applicant to consider the height recommendations from both the County and the adjacent residential community prior to submission of a Preliminary Plan.

- Drop-off Area: The CAD district prohibits parking lots, driveways, loading/unloading zones and other auto-related areas in front of the building, with the exception of hotel uses. This standard requires the drop off area associated with residential building R2C to be adjusted to demonstrate compliance with this requirement.

New Minor Private Streets: The CAD requires the creation of new minor streets in an effort to create pedestrian-scaled blocks that deter single vehicular trips within the development and the District as a whole. The new minor streets would be privately owned and maintained by the property owner. A comparable concept was utilized on Suburban Square’s [St. James Place](#), which is maintained by Suburban Square but allows for public access and parking. Staff is focused on ensuring that the new minor street provides a traditional streetscape design with comfortable sidewalk depth, street trees, and pedestrian scaled lighting.

Staff will continue to work with the applicant on the internal roadway configuration to ensure that it reduces pedestrian conflicts and places vehicular access to structured parking to the rear or side of structures. For example, staff would like the applicant to investigate relocating the street that is shown dividing the Village Square/Bala Café area between Office North and Office South and relocate the vehicular access into the structured parking of Office North to the eastern or northern elevation. The County also recommended reducing the number of offset intersections being created by the internal roads to allow for additional public green space and usable pedestrian and bicycle pathways.

Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to provide more on-street parking spaces along the new minor streets. In addition to increasing the convenient available parking on-site, on-street parking provides traffic calming as well as increased pedestrian comfort and supports the traditional streetscape design.

Viewsheds: The site has three primary frontages with views into the development, which represent three very different visual experiences. Staff would like to continue to work with the applicant on the design of these viewsheds to ensure that they respect the context of the adjacent residential neighborhood along Belmont Avenue, provide visual connections with the surrounding District and views into the site from St. Asaphs Road, and respect and enhance the sensitive natural features and green spaces along Monument Road. In analyzing the proposed viewsheds, staff would like the applicant to consider:

- Can you see the proposed building from a distance?
Is the interior of the building visible from the outside?
- Is there a good visual connection between this space and adjacent buildings? Or, is it surrounded by elements that discourage people from entering the space?



The Courtyard at Suburban Square

Placemaking: Prior to the enactment of the CAD many residents and property owners lamented that the District lacked a sense of place. In developing this plan, the applicant has included outdoor amenities for the occupants of the site as well as the larger adjacent residential community. Combining traditional retail functions of mixed-use developments with leisure amenities emerged as a retailing trend in the late 1990s and can be seen in local development such as the [Courtyard at Suburban Square](#) and the [Central Green at the Navy Yard](#). At the Preliminary Plan phase staff will be looking to ensure that these proposed spaces are designed to achieve the desired outcome and that they create a sense of place, attract visitors and serve as a usable space for the everyday occupants of the site and the larger community. Staff would also like the applicant to consider embedding indoor civic space into the development, such as a small auxiliary library space or a community gathering space that serves a local non-profit to draw residents to the site. Staff commends the applicant for the proposed public open spaces and innovative amphitheater.



The Central Green at the Navy Yard



Civic space incorporated into a commercial streetscape and into the interior of a new mixed-use building

4. Connectivity

A traffic study is not required during the Tentative Sketch process, but given the magnitude of the proposal, the applicant's traffic engineer has been present at several meetings at which the proposal has been discussed. The applicant's traffic study should be focused on ensuring that the traffic generated by the development is mitigated and also considers pedestrian safety and multimodal access as well as transportation demand management techniques. Lastly staff would like the applicant to explore enhancing last mile connections to encourage increased transit usage and investigate transportation demand management (TDM) strategies and policies to reduce travel demand or to redistribute this demand in space or in time.

Staff has also included a requirement for the property owner to perform traffic studies at each of the proposed phases of the development process, so that development is not constructed using traffic studies containing out of date traffic counts.

Staff has included a condition for the applicant to work with staff, the City Avenue District, and adjacent property owners along St. Asaphs Road to refine the St. Asaphs corridor to promote safer access between properties and traffic calming as a result of increased flow of traffic.

The CAD requires that pedestrianways be provided on both sides of all public and private streets. Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to revise the plans to provide the required six-foot landscape verge and eight-foot sidewalk along the proposed internal roads and to include cross-sections with the Preliminary Plan submission.

Staff has also requested that a Pedestrian Circulation Plan be submitted to ensure that crosswalks are provided at all pedestrian crossings. Staff would like the Pedestrian Plan to consider the proposed destinations within the development that will serve the occasional user, such as the public gathering spaces and outdoor amenity areas and consider:

- Can people easily walk there? Or are they intimidated by heavy traffic or bleak streetscapes?
- Do sidewalks lead to and from the adjacent areas?
- Do the paths throughout the space take people where they actually want to go?
- Can people use a variety of transportation options—bus, train, car, and bicycle—to reach important locations within the development?

5. Landscape Plan & Public Gathering Space

The green space internal to the site has been thoughtfully designed to create a meaningful outdoor experience for occupants of the site. With the submission of a Landscape Plan at the Preliminary Plan phase, staff will be focused on ensuring compliance with the Natural Features Code requirements, Greening Standards, street tree requirements and the standards associated with public gathering spaces.

Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to adjust the limits of the public gathering spaces as some of the proposed area is in excess of the requirement and not does not appear to meet the CAD requirements.

6. Sustainability

Given the size and impact that this development will have on the Township, staff would like the applicant to consider incorporating as many sustainable elements into the proposal as possible including but not limited to green building technology such as geothermal heating and cooling, green roofs and solar panels, green stormwater infrastructure such as porous paving and bioretention areas in the parking lots, use of native plants that provide food for wildlife and attempting to reduce impervious surface as much as possible.

7. Relief

The application requires relief from the following Code sections:

1. Relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section [101-5.C.2.a](#) to not minimize site disturbance on slopes exceeding 15%.
2. Relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section [101-5.C.2.b](#) to disturb slopes exceeding 25%.

The site contains several sloped areas. The subject slopes may be man-made and created by previous site disturbance. Considering the location and impact of the proposed buildings on the slopes, staff recommends that the relief be withdrawn and resubmitted with the Preliminary Plan application. Conditions requiring this information with the Preliminary Plan submission have been included.

8. Action

The Planning Commission must take the following actions for this application:

1. Provide a recommendation on Tentative Sketch Plan.
2. Requested Relief:
 - A. Relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section [101-5.C.2.a](#) to not minimize site disturbance on slopes exceeding 15%.
 - B. Relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section [101-5.C.2.b](#) to disturb slopes exceeding 25%.