



Sandy Spring-Ashton Rural Preservation Consortium

We are pro-Master Plan, not anti-development

MCCF Community Hero Award, January 2009

www.ssarpc.org -- SSARPC, Post Office Box 518, Ashton, MD 20861

Good Morning.

For the record, my name is Michelle Layton. Along with Ms. Donna Selden, I co-chair the Sandy Spring Ashton Rural Preservation Consortium. I live at 17905 Ednor View Terrace, which is 2 miles from the Ashton Village Center and about 3 miles from the Sandy Spring Village Center.

As our name implies, the SSARPC's mission is to support development in Ashton and Sandy Spring that conforms to the 1998 Ashton/Sandy Spring Master Plan, in order to preserve the historic rural villages that Ashton and Sandy Spring are.

We are, in fact, Pro-Master Plan, not anti development.

Now in its sixth year, the SSARPC is made up of community volunteers who are energetically dedicated to ensure that future developments that are within the 1998 Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan boundaries recognize the community's desire to remain rural and conform to that plan while at the same time encouraging business and commercial expansion.

In the matter of the proposed Thomas Building, which sits at the edge of the historic district and at the entryway to the village in Sandy Spring, the SSARPC Steering Committee prefers to see a smaller footprint. It is our belief that the maximum recommendations made by the Planning Board at the November 13, 2008 hearing were just a beginning.

We believe that the recommendations made at that hearing were a jumping off point in which to assure that the Thomas Building meets the Master Plan and respects the purpose clause of the very important Rural Village Overlay Zone. We also believe that those recommendations do not go far enough.

At the November 13, 2008 hearing for the same property, we agreed with the statement made by former Planning Board member John Robinson when he said about the binding elements, "Hopefully this will lead to a reduction in parking and more open space." We heard as the Planning Board members deliberated in the belief that the massing of this building was too much for a historic district. We silently applauded Commissioner Royce Hanson when you said that the developer was "trying to pack too much on the site" and that "If this were not in Sandy Spring, he would feel differently than if it was in an urban area rather than a rural village." Finally, we heard clearly when Board member Joe Alfandre said, "Scale can only be ensured now, not at Site Plan."

That is why we are here today.

The Thomas Building, as currently proposed, is out of character with Sandy Spring in terms of the size and massing of the buildings, as is the parking deck, with its 294 spaces, which would almost quadruple the amount of parking currently in the Sandy Spring Village. These structures would occupy most of the available site.

In addition to the size and massing of the building, the proposed plan for the Thomas building is not consistent with the Rural Overlay Zone because it does not meet the purpose clause of the Zone. Nor is the plan in conformance with the 1998 Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan.

We understand that at this stage of the review process, Planning Commission must make a finding that satisfies the Master Plan and the Rural Village Overlay Zone. This Overlay Zone, written by citizens and adopted by the County Council in 1998 uses very descriptive language to ensure the preservation of this rural historic village.

On that note, we believe that the current proposal fails on these counts.

- It does not respect the purpose Clause of the Rural Overlay Zone.
- It does not respect the intent of the Master Plan including the Design Guidelines noted for the entryway to Sandy Spring.
- It is not compatible to the buildings and space around it.

First, the plan is not consistent with the purpose clause of the Rural Village Overlay Zone, which is to:

(a) Preserve and enhance the rural village character of the Sandy Spring and Ashton Village centers by ensuring an attractive and traditional pattern of houses, commercial establishments, open spaces and their relationship to the roadways.

and

(b) Encourage a compatible relationship between new or expanded houses or businesses and traditional neighboring structures that reflect the best of local village character particularly in term of scale, siting, design features and orientation of the site.

The proposed plan does not insure the right pattern. The buildings are too massive and do not fit into the existing traditional architecture. In no way does a three-story building with a 2 story parking structure that runs the entire underground of the site meet the existing patterns. Shoe horning a building, parking garage, storm water management system in the middle of downtown Sandy Spring, in addition to removing all of the trees, definitely does not “preserve and enhance rural village character.”

Additionally, the proposal is not compatible with the existing buildings and space around it. Businesses are small in Sandy Spring. Buildings are small in Sandy Spring and for all the reasons already noted; the Thomas Building does not fit the descriptions of a small rural village from the Rural Village Overlay Zone or the Master Plan.

Even the 2 houses directly across the street of the proposed Thomas Building exhibit rural village character and are “neighboring structures.” Small, quaint and with front porches, both are used as commercial properties.

A comparison could be made to the size of the Moore and Bentley Buildings, and the proposed Thomas Building, but these buildings, built as two separate buildings, are not at the entryway to this village nor can one see them from the road. One must actually turn onto Meeting House Road to see the size and architecture of those buildings. Therefore, while those buildings might be considered to set a standard of size and design, they do not sit at the entryway of Sandy Spring, which has its own guidelines in the Master Plan.

In addition to not respecting the purpose clause of the Rural Overlay Zone, the plan does not substantially conform with the 1998 Sandy Spring/Ashton Master Plan.

The Master Plan consistently uses language like “rural villages,” “small scale village design,” and in terms of the entryway to Sandy Spring, “entrances to the village center that should help to establish the character of the area.” (p.29) In fact, the Master Plan uses the word “rural” 231 times. How much more clearly can the Master Plan be in its message?

Staff sites 2 examples that they believe show that this plan substantially conforms to the Master Plan. Yes. The building is “situated close to the street” and the parking is “placed behind the proposed building,” but what it doesn’t say is that this 30,000 sq. ft. building with its 2 story parking garage, negates the word rural by its sheer size in relation to what is around it.

It should take more than meeting two design guidelines to meet the intent of the Master Plan and the Overlay Zone, both which talk about traditional size, scale and design.

Also, the Thomas Building will be the first building that people come upon when entering the village of Sandy Spring. It sits exactly at the west entryway. We believe that this design of the Thomas Building establishes the opposite character that is described in the Master Plan.

Too big, too massive, too much on too little space.

We understand that the design will be fine-tuned at Site Plan Review, but it is important to note now the Design Guidelines (p. 36) in the Master Plan that address the entryways as well. It notes the need to

- Preserve the rural entry experience along MD 108, Brooke Road and Norwood and Dr. Bird Road and to
- Provide the critical rural setting for the Sandy Spring Village center right at the edge of the village.

This entryway building, does not, as submitted, preserve any rural experience that is called for in both the 1980 and 1998 Master Plans.

30 years ago, the Master Plan was written to keep this area rural. 12 years ago the Master Plan was re-written to keep Sandy Spring rural and that commitment is still just as strong for historic Sandy Spring and its village center today.

We recognize that the tenant, the Goddard School, and its requirements to run efficiently have determined the footprint for this building. Know that we welcome them to the area. However, the need to accommodate the school and its direct need for parking should not drive this project. We are sensitive to the economic realities of building this building, but that should not overrule the Master Plan. The mass and scale of the building can be reduced to still honor their needs.

It is the hope of the SSARPC Steering Committee that the result of this hearing will be to deny the Preliminary Plan for the Thomas Building. Unless it is scaled back from what is currently proposed it can never reflect traditional small-scale village design that is called for in the Master Plan and respect the purpose clause of the Rural Village Overlay Zone

Thank you.