

## **Deliberation Day 2007 Report**

### **Falls Church City: What Are We Becoming?**

Date of Event: March 17, 2007  
Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School  
Falls Church, Virginia

Sponsored by

Citizens for a Better City  
Falls Church League of Women Voters  
Village Preservation and Improvement Society

**Rough transcript of large group discussions with City panel:  
Mayor Robin Gardner, School Board Chair Craig Cheney, Economic Development  
Authority Chair Ed Saltzberg, Planning Commission Chair Ruth Rodgers,  
Moderator Pete Behr**

**First round: 10:35 a.m. to 11:25 a.m.  
City officials answer questions prepared by participants in small group  
discussions**

Behr

What have you learned over the past four years about growth and development in Falls Church? What would you have done differently now that you have seen what's taken place?

Saltzberg

...this [City of Falls Church] was not a very developer-friendly area [in the 1990s]. There was a [correct] view of Falls Church at the time that we really didn't want development in the city.... And as a result we really didn't get much....That changed in the late 1990s as the City Council moved in a different direction, formed the EDA [Economic Development Authority] and we have several new developments [as a result]...that tries to meet social goals as well as economic goals. I think that's what we're really talking about here, so as to maintain that balance as we move forward so we're generating enough income to meet increasing costs, but also maintain our social objectives.

Gardner

...We really do have to look at balance. Back in the 90s until 2000 there really was no development going on in the City of Falls Church, and all of the revenue the City generated was based on the backs of you, the homeowners. Any rise in school costs, any rise in services all came through tax increases to you. The objective at that point was how do we bring in some development to the City that would help us with our revenue generation so that we could provide services both in the schools and the city....With that came commercial development, and we also brought in the special exception ordinance...which encouraged businesses to move into the City and allowed a mixed use development in traditional commercial areas...It was recognized that we

needed to have people living in the buildings to utilize the services, to build up a dynamic in the city both in the City Center and along our major corridors, that would have people using those businesses. What I've learned is...not only do we need that [social/economic] balance, but we need to take into account the residences that surround those businesses and those corridors and make sure that they feel that...this [mixed use development] is adding benefit not only to the City but also to their community....

Another thing we have to focus upon is the size and the scale of [new multi-story] building. Many people look at us and say we rubber-stamp commercial development. That is not true...look at the Hekemian building, which we originally turned down....There are other [examples of development proposals that originally met rejection.]

The major change I would make is...the scale of buildings. It could be changing the setback; it could be changing the height of the building in the front and making it taller towards the back and shorter towards the front.

Cheney

What I've learned is the importance of the schools and the City government working very very closely together....[Regarding aging school buildings] We are going to be engaged in the next few years in a series of new joint community planning studies, about what should our facilities look like in the future and how we can maximize the use of them....We need more...joint planning, more joint use of facilities and space to be as efficient as possible and (to minimize) the costs we ask you taxpayers to bear.

Rodgers

One of the things that I've learned is that we have to stick to our plans....We have to follow our [comprehensive] plan...our long-range goals....our vision statement....When the special exception first came in we took some really big chances. We okayed some buildings that some people didn't want us to....I think they turned out okay. It was important to do that because we needed to get the [development] process started. Now that we've got those buildings and that new development, we've got to look at them and say, 'Is this what we want to continue to do?' My feeling is that some of them are working and some of them are not. Some of them don't fit in with our long range goals and our [comprehensive] plan. The new things that are coming in, we have to look at from the perspective of 'Will these new buildings fit in with our long range goals and our [comprehensive] plan. Each time we evaluate a proposal that comes in, we need to listen -- not only to the people who in that neighborhood, because it's going to affect them and their lifestyles -- we need to listen to the entire community.

As we move ahead, I've learned that we have to do more listening, we have to do more work sessions, and we have to do more planning.

Behr

How do we get greater involvement and participation, by more of the community, in these difficult decisions that the City is facing?

Gardner

....We have boards and commissions that are always looking for people....Boards and commissions allow you to have a voice in the process....

We also have the website....It tells you about boards and commissions, it tells you about upcoming agendas....There is a listing of all the upcoming council meetings and work sessions and what the topics are....

Saltzberg

....It's important to become informed citizens....At some of the EDA meetings we have educational forums...where we're inviting developers in and other economic development professionals to educate us on the facts....For example...we would like to get more retail [businesses] in our development. But...that requires more parking, which means the [retail] structure has got to be smaller, which means the [projected retail and tax] revenues go down....

Behr

Are we in something close to a critical stage in terms of being able to afford all the things we want as a community? School costs? Teacher pay? Housing? How urgent is this issue?

Gardner

Each and every year there is a problem because each and every year assessments go up, with the exception of this [past] year for some....Assessments directly impact our City budget, as do the increased costs of having employees in the City and the school system and making sure we're getting the best teachers we can, and to pay for the infrastructure in the City. Those costs rise no matter what we do....We can raise taxes, or we can think of other ways to generate revenue for the City. Increase development can bring in more people to shop, our sales taxes would increase, our commercial real estate tax revenue would increase....It is a balance where we can make sure that you are not paying taxes that are extraordinary, but we want to give you services that you expect.

Keep in mind that if the City Council approves a project, it is not going to be up and running for two years. The timetable isn't 'We need money now, so let's build a building that will be up tomorrow and generating revenue'....We have to be forward-thinking.

I don't think it [the City's current situation] is critical. It was critical three or four years ago, and that's the reason the Byron, the Broadway, Pearson Square comes on line, Spectrum comes on line, all are going to be beneficial. But we don't want to be stagnant, because we will look less attractive and when we do need the revenue, we won't be able to get it [through development].

Cheney

Forty or fifty percent of the City budget pays for schools. About eighty percent of school costs are for people [personnel]....We are in a market situation. Our neighbors are

growing, new schools, they are adding many, many new teachers. There is a competition, supply and demand is involved....That's an issue we are always going to face....

Some good things we were able to do this year...the cost of [benefit] increases was much lower....We made some tough prioritization decisions. We have a strategic plan...and we made budget decisions around [in accordance with] that strategic plan....

I think the key to the future is going to be making sure the community expresses what it wants in the school system in a very clear way, so that when we [the school board] try to prioritize, we continue to have the same kind of vision that's been provided on growth and development....

Saltzberg

...As the EDA chair, I'm interested in the revenue side. The revenue side depends upon assessments....An under-utilized property, and we have many under-utilized commercial properties here, an acre of under-utilized commercial property generally generates about the same amount of revenue as an acre of residential land. A mixed-use development generally generate six times that per acre, which is why we focus so much on trying to get higher-end...projects into the City. The higher-end projects don't go all over the City, but they have to go into the core, and that's where the density needs to be. So...on the revenue side, the economic development is really vital for us moving forward and not having to increase the total amount of taxes we pay as citizens, and still be able to fund all the services we want, both on the school side and on the City side.

Behr

How well is the current development following the City's comprehensive plan? Are we too eager to go along with the developers? How do we adjust our plans so that we aren't too quick to make exceptions?

Gardner

...[There are] two major thoroughfares through the City, Route 7 and Route 29, and look at that as being [the place of] our commercial development. So we are trying to build the best projects in those areas that we can....I don't think we bend over backwards for the developers. Some of the projects we already put in, they worked well with developers, and they [the developers] are coming back with additional projects, such as Akridge. But I do think that we are scrutinizing them very thoroughly, and I think we have citizen participation and there's always room for additional citizen participation....I think it [recent development] is fitting into the master plan.

Behr

When developers' first proposals do not conform with city plans that have received considerable citizen input, is it a communications problem? If not, what is the problem?

Gardner

I think we have made our ideas very clear. [For example] The Streetworks process [four or five years ago] was very clear about what we're looking for....Each and every council member...[is looking for] a *there* place. Something that makes the project unique....being the bottom line, [whether it] be it offices, mixed use development, or be it residential. Something that makes it special, makes people want to come from outside the City to shop in the City, but also that we in the City can utilize.

If the developers do not bring that forth, then they aren't paying attention and they are trying to push something down our throats....Our planning staff works very closely with developers to say this is what the City wants and needs....There are specific things that they [developers] need, and...[in return the City asks for things], it could be parkland, it could be a fountain that kids could play in, it could be open area for community events, it could be a green roof [or] a green design.

Saltzberg

I think the developers that we are working with now are paying attention....The communication is very, very good, evidenced by the fact that the Akridge proposal that they're calling Gateway...on the south end of Washington Street...that public engagement process that they did was really very, very good....The final proposal that is moving ahead...is less dense, it makes [Akridge] less money, but [Akridge] listened to what the community was saying and came back with a proposal that was really acceptable....

Rodgers

One of the things we have to realize when the developers come forward with their projects is that they are looking to make the most money [they can] from the project....They come in with projects that we might not like, that we don't think looks the way we want it to look, but they have a formula that's gonna make them the most money. Our challenge is to work with them to get them off their formula and into the Falls Church plan. And that's a really difficult thing to do. It takes a lot of time. Sometimes we're limited in that time because we have certain deadlines that we have to meet....We're constantly working with the developers to get them to be where we want them to be. Sometimes they dig in their heels. And I think that what we need to do is to dig in our heels a little bit more. So that we can just say to them, we're not going there unless you come to us a little bit more....We're really trying our best to do that.

Behr

Can we really afford to do that? Do we have the leverage as a community to say no to developers in a metropolitan area where there a lot of [other] opportunities to go [somewhere else] and do what they want to do?

Saltzberg

....In terms of projects that really are within the guidelines...[in] the back and forth...negotiation [with developers], the City has a lot of power because of the Special Exception [Ordinance]. Developers have to earn the special exception. And if they don't earn it, they don't get the density increase or the changes that [they want]....

Otherwise, they can put in something by right. The real danger here is that in some cases [i.e.], things that are by right, the developers can make enough money [if they just put in what they want] such as Taco Bell....or a gas station....which is fine, but we don't want that in every place.

Gardner

I think the development community recognizes that the City of Falls Church has people who have pocket books who would like to be able to shop in their own community....We have a lot to offer developers. Our job is to try to make it a more friendly City to do business in through the development process, compared to the 800 pound gorilla of Fairfax County...We know how to negotiate and are doing that for you....

Behr

Are there important questions involving the City that really require a comprehensive study? For example, a transportation study of North Washington Street on the east side? Pedestrian studies? What are the city-wide issues that call for further study?

Gardner

I think traffic is always worth studying, as traffic patterns change and development happens....we are going to be working with Arlington County...[to study the area surrounding the I-66 and Lee Highway interchange]. [City staff is studying a number of other areas]....Remember that when we're talking about comprehensive traffic planning, we are talking about how it affects the entire City.

Rodgers

In the past we have done several comprehensive studies....We've never really adopted them. We've looked at the problems, we've had a lot of consultants come in and talk to us, and we've just recently had one for the downtown area, and that [study of downtown] is good, comprehensive suggestions that they have. But it seems to me we never adopt them. We don't have something that we can look at and say, well, this is in our long range plan and we have to go along with [what the long range plan says] it.

No matter how many studies we have, if we don't actually follow it and adopt it, it's not going to be useful.

Cheney

We will be doing school [building] long term studies, starting next month. It's a great opportunity to get familiar with...how we can use these multi-million dollar facilities that we're building.

Behr

Is there a problem of not adopting studies?

Gardner

You can get stuck in analysis paralysis....We did actually have an Open Space Task Force that did a study and we did adopt it....Transportation...is a challenge....Should we have permit parking? We've been doing [studying] that for three years....[Study recommendations often foment opposition from those directly affected but] we need to take a hard line and just decide this [the study recommendation] is the way we're going and face that not everyone is going to be happy with the decision that's made....We need to do that with regard to traffic study.

Behr

We have a very strong and defined policy regarding commercial development. Our comprehensive plan speaks of a tension between wanting more commercial development and maintaining the quality of our neighborhoods. Is there a lack of a process on the neighborhood side for giving equal weight to the quality of life in neighborhoods? Do we need some more tools, some more approaches, so that the value of the neighborhoods is also protected when they come in competition or conflict with commercial development? In Arlington there are communities with neighborhood organizations that are recognized by the county.

Gardner

We do have some organizations in the city that we traditionally turn to. VPIS is one. CBC is another. Cherry Hill Homeowners Association is here because we are specifically going to be talking about the City Center that directly impacts them because it's in their backyard....We encourage neighborhoods to get together and talk about development throughout the City and would ask them to give input when we do public hearings....We also always turn to our boards and commissions about those developments....

Rodgers

One of things that we do is have work sessions....It's not for the general public to speak up at work sessions, prior to the work sessions you can call a member of the particular board and speak to them [to make your neighborhood's voice in support or opposition to a particular development project]....

Cheney

I do think the way the City works is through boards and commissions....Work sessions are where the nuts and bolts of what we do gets laid out and discussed....That's a critical point to be involved in if you are interested in these issues.

Behr

Do you think the residents are satisfied with the work session process, in terms of the ability of residents to speak and communicate? There are some work sessions where the developer speaks and the residents cannot. Do we need to change that process?

Gardner

I'd like to think that if there's a need at a work session for the public to speak....that [instead] we would hold public hearings separate from those work sessions....That does not mean your opportunity to speak is shot down. We are a small community....We expect you to take the opportunity [to stop a City official and talk]...I've been stopped in Giant many a time. As an elected official, I expect that...

**Second round**  
**Discussion by City officials of participants' suggestions**  
**Concluding round-up by three participants**

**11:55 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.**

Behr

What can we do differently as a community, with [what you heard at] this meeting in mind?

Saltzberg

....As the EDA chair, I want to be sure what we're doing is well-advertised, so that you know the things we are involved in....

[Concerning deliberators' suggestions]...it's all about getting the opportunity to be involved. Getting the data so that you can be well-informed or be good advisors, and I share that concern....

Gardner

...I hope that when this ends we can find out what communication method worked best that got all of you here, because that is a true struggle for us in the City in terms of finding what is the best way to communicate. There are so many different avenues....

[Concerning deliberators' suggestions]...There are a number of ways to get information [about City issues and decision processes]...We are thinking about putting on a weekly news show....or something like a blog answering questions on a regular basis on the City website....We are in the midst of planning an Open House at City Hall so that you can see what the different departments do....

There are a number of things [suggested] that we are not doing and that we will take a close look at and see whether we might be able to implement those....We have talked about [broadcasting taped) budget work sessions....We will work on moving forward with that....

Cheney

....This week we introduced a brand new electronic mailing system that allows basically every policy document we have at the school board to be open for your review....on the schools website.

Sometimes we get lost in the issues...one of my commitments, my take-aways, is to make sure we are talking about the most important strategic issues on a regular basis in public....People are hungry for that conversation.

Rodgers

...The thing that I'm going to do after this is start looking for new people in the community [who have just moved to the City]. Please help me [to reach out and involve them].

Behr

Village character, the need to be more welcoming, change, commercial development: Are there ways to balance all these competing things?

Saltzberg

I don't think they're really in conflict....We've just got to be careful that the design and the location and the feel [of new development] doesn't drive us off in some other direction. No one wants to be what we are not: We're not a Tysons Corner, we're not a Ballston. ...Boards and commissions and citizen involvement is what Falls Church is and I don't see that changing.

Gardner

...By bringing in some development, we might also bring in some things that are considered gathering places...enhancing the City and its livability.

Cheney

...The Falls Church Way...really does matter [to resolving conflicts, by]....making sure we're talking a lot about options and being creative about how we are engaging each other.

Rodgers

Community does have to do with bricks and mortar. What we have to do is keep in mind human scale and make sure that [buildings] relate to us and what we do....That's going to be my goal. [Applause]....

### **Participant round-up**

Sarah Fitzgerald

I'm Sarah Fitzgerald and I'm a new resident of Falls Church. I've lived here about two and a half years. I moved to the Broadway from Arlington, where the residents think there is an Arlington way, I might say.

I realize that being a Broadway resident, some folks may regard me with horns in my head.

I was very impressed with the energy, the passion and the turn-out of the folks here today. I think the challenge for the organizers and the groups involved and the City officials who are here when you come away from this is how do we build on this and how do we build it in a structured way, and think about the new approaches to some of the things we talked about today, in terms of communication. Keep thinking fresh.

And also, among groups, finding ways that we can work together, collectively, to do some great projects like this.

It was interesting, one of the things I heard people talking about was a need for homeowners associations and neighborhood associations. I know within our own building, possibly because we were all new at the same time, we have created that kind of mechanism. A number of us have gotten involved in joining organizations, and I would agree that that's really the way to get involved in the community on a very quick basis.

I hope we can step back from this and build on it and find new ways to do this again in the future.

Jim Saulsbury

My name is Jim Saulsbury. My wife Diane and I moved here two months ago today. We live in the Byron. We had many many choices to move in this area. This is a buyers' market. We're really very pleased that we chose the City of Falls Church. We like the small town feel. There's huge canyons we drive through to get here. But we moved here from a small town in Pennsylvania, Camp Hill, which is outside Harrisburg, and this is a real nice community. To see this event going on, very impressive. I come from a condominium environment there, and I know the only way these things work is if people get involved.

I think what I'm going to do – we're still in the owner-run building mode because we have not sold 75% of our units yet, but that's going to change in the next month – what we're going to do is we're going to invite some of these civic organizations to our community room to address our people. We have ninety residents. It's a great way to reach a lot of folks that live here. We really look forward to having you folks come in and explain what's going on. Thank you very much. Wonderful forum.

Janine Baumgardner

Today, we agreed that our small town feel does seem to be eluding us. We talked about development and how better plans can be made to increase affordable housing and community diversity. We discussed how to balance necessary services and the economic success of the City. We talked about how we as individuals can improve the communal aspect of our City through kindness, tolerance and participation in the community.

May 11, 2007  
City of Falls Church, Virginia

Deliberation Falls Church City

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*A chance to be heard and a reason to listen*