



March 28, 2021

Matt Pfeiffer
Arlington County CPHD Site Plan Supervisor
Mpfeiffer@arlingtonva.us

Dear Mr. Pfeiffer:

Re: Concept Plan for 3422 13th St N / Arlington YMCA

On behalf of the Ballston-Virginia Square Civic Association (BVSCA) Executive Committee, please find our *initial* reactions to the Concept Plan for 3422 13th St N / Arlington YMCA ("Concept Plan")¹. This letter has been prepared after obtaining preliminary feedback from the nearest (and most active) neighbors to the site and the broader BVSCA membership through our monthly membership meeting. By way of background, having become aware of this initiative through press reports, we subsequently reached out to you to explain the process and direct us to the project material on the Arlington County website. We would like to thank you for the opportunity to present our preliminary community feedback regarding the Concept Plan.

As you know, the BVSCA has been deeply engaged in the development of the Washington-Kirkwood GLUP Special Study + ("GLUP"), as well as in the Site Plan Review Committees for the first two projects that emerged from it.² We intend to maintain the same or greater level of engagement on this project, all the more so because it is the largest project in the mix, will have the most impact on the surrounding community, and because it most directly and conspicuously abuts the largest number of community residences. While we recognize that the Concept Plan does not represent the Applicant's formal submission, we nevertheless would like to provide community feedback early, to discourage the Applicant from taking the project in directions that could negatively impact this community and to identify project elements that we support. As plans become clearer and more community members begin to become aware and take part in our deliberations, there may well be other issues that emerge besides these first thoughts.

Our main areas of concern are the following:

1. **Transition to the neighboring communities:** One cannot overestimate how important GLUP Guiding Principles #2 and #3 are to the residents in the area surrounding the YMCA site. Guiding Principle #3, as an overarching goal, commits to *"Preserve and reinforce the primarily residential character of the*

¹ The Concept Plan documents reviewed were retrieved from the Arlington Archives, Permit Project website, under Project ID SPLC21-00002 <https://archives.arlingtonva.us/publicaccess/permitarlington.aspx>

² *Washington Boulevard & Kirkwood Road SPECIAL GLUP STUDY "PLUS" and CONCEPT PLAN* (November 2017) at https://commissions.arlingtonva.us/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/12/FINAL-ADOPTED-NOV-2017_Washington_Kirkwood-Study-and-Concept-Plan_web.pdf; The American Legion Post 139 Development Project (Site Plan 439) <https://projects.arlingtonva.us/projects/3445-washington-blvd/>; 3411-21 Washington Blvd and 1122 Kirkwood (Site Plan 450) <https://projects.arlingtonva.us/projects/washington-kirkwood/>

neighborhood and neighborhood streets west and north of the site.”³ Guiding Principle #2, speaks to the transition issue more directly, committing to “Locate, design and sculpt new buildings to achieve deliberate and harmonious transitions between potential mid-rise, mixed-use development and adjoining single family residences, and reinforce these transitions through strategies such as building step backs, green buffers, and rights of way.”⁴ The GLUP also contains other specific language speaking of “the vision for a distinct transition and step-down in scale from potential redevelopment in the study area to the single-family residences.”⁵ We feel very strongly about these Principles and will continue to fight hard to ensure their effective implementation.

Unfortunately, in more than a few places, the Concept Plan appears to challenge, if not abrogate, these Principles. Stepping back from the details, the Plan disappoints in not taking advantage of the possibilities presented in the GLUP, especially in Scenario 5, for innovative multi-modal options that take full advantage of the topography and effect appropriate transitions to the surrounding neighborhoods. For example, the opportunity for a vertical mixed-use (YMCA below, residences above) on the Kirkwood side of the property appear to have been unexplored. Most importantly, the notion of mixing high/mid-rise residential options with townhouses abutting the single-family homes on 13th St., 12th Road, and Kansas St - a vision that permeates the presentation of Scenario 5 options from pages 26-30⁶ - was totally ignored, even though it would provide the most respectful and effective transition. Instead, the Plan presents two massive, boring structures that encroach and overshadow the neighborhoods around them. This was not at all what was presented in the GLUP, not at all what we expected, and not at all what we want.

There are also some very specific ways in which the transitions presented in this Concept Plan are inconsistent with the GLUP as passed and amended by the County Board on November 18, 2017:

- a. Building stepdowns: The height and massing of the proposed YMCA building does not comply with the GLUP stipulation that building heights should step down to 4 stories (45 feet) and then 3 stories (35 feet) on the North and the West side of the project site (a similar step down on 13th St., East of Lynbrook was explicitly removed by Board amendment). In the Concept Plan, the YMCA building would appear to reach over 65 feet on the West side.⁷ It should be further noted that in place of the 160 to 241 foot offsets to the West presented in the GLUP,⁸ this overly massive structure would be situated a mere 16.9 feet from the lot line of the neighboring residence.⁹ It should also be noted that the position of the north face of the YMCA building roughly 20 feet from 13th Street is also inconsistent with the GLUP transition vision, as presented in multiple maps and renderings, which showed a total distance of 175 feet to the townhouses on the north side of 13th St.¹⁰
- b. Public Greenspace: The provision of public greenspace in the Concept Plan is clearly inadequate compared to the stipulations of the GLUP, including that specifically articulated by Principle 7, which directs developers to “provide opportunities to address public open space needs of the

³ GLUP, p. 37.

⁴ GLUP, p. 36.

⁵ GLUP, p. 26.

⁶ GLUP, pp 26-30.

⁷ Concept Plan, A-09, Full Site Sections

⁸ GLUP, pp. 28, 29.

⁹ Concept Plan, p. 19, Dimension Plan

¹⁰ GLUP, pp 28, 53, 54.

surrounding community.” That document called for a public space on the west side of the project of “about 0.5 acres,” which was one of the features that provided for the larger offsets noted above. It also represents one of the few community benefits that specifically supports the neighborhood immediately impacted by this development project (as well as all the other ongoing ones on the GLUP site). The Concept Plan, however, only projects 8500 square feet (0.19 acres) of public greenspace,¹¹ which is clearly insufficient in general, and especially in relation to the residences on 12th Road. In addition, the community is very invested in preserving the old growth trees along 13th St., so we are pleased that the grove immediately across from Lynbrook is explicitly maintained (as per the 1975 YMCA Covenant with the Lynbrook HOA), but we are curious about whether the plans for the residential driveway will interfere with the smaller stand on the corner of Kirkwood and 13th St.

- c. 7th Story: When the Board amended the original GLUP building height restriction from “6 stories “ to “6 or 7 stories,” it explicitly stipulated that any deviation from the original 6 story limitation would need to be justified in terms of conformance with GLUP Guiding Principle #2 (cited above) as well as Guiding Principles 7-10. While the location of the 7th story of the residential building downhill is welcome, we will be looking to the Applicant’s formal submission to contain explicit and persuasive justification for any height above 6 stories.

- 2. **Traffic and Circulation**: Guiding Principle #3 specifically refers to preserving the “residential character of the...neighborhood streets....”¹² We are generally concerned about the prospect for significantly increased traffic on these streets from all of the redevelopment taking place on the GLUP site, including the increased number of trips associated with the 374-unit residential unit in this Concept Plan and the anticipated membership expansion of the YMCA. The Concept Plan makes significant and welcome steps in this direction such as avoiding direct connectivity between Washington Blvd and 13th St., which is a necessary, although not sufficient condition for protecting the character of the latter. That said, we believe there is perhaps room for more improvement in the next submission. Specifically, in order to further distribute the vehicular traffic flows currently proposed for the garage entrances on 13th St. and the road beside the American Legion, thought might be given to extending the proposed road between the YMCA residential building and the 11th Street property to allow for another garage entrance on the South side of the YMCA building, to the West of the Natatorium. In addition, we have some concern about the plans to situate the driveway entrance to the Residential building on 13th St. and would like the Applicant to explore options that would relocate that to Kirkwood, which might also help preserve the small grove of trees referenced above. Generally speaking, and perhaps outside the scope of this Concept Plan, thought needs to be given to measures that might mitigate any increased vehicular traffic from the garage entrance on 13th St and along the side of the properties on 12th Road North. In addition, we would like to see greater clarity in future submissions about where pick up and drop off for afterschool programs will take place, how to avoid busses idling on 13th street, where rideshare companies will be picking up and dropping off passengers, and the noise implications of locating the YMCA building loading zone right next to residences on 12th Road.

¹¹ Calculated from Concept Plan, pp 18-19.

¹² GLUP, p. 37

3. **Parking:** The massive increase in residential density across the entire GLUP site continues to raise neighborhood concerns about exacerbating an already problematic situation with street parking. This means that we will continue to be vigilant concerning the adequacy of parking ratios and plans in each of the site plans. In this regard, we would want to see explicit justification for the gap between the 399 “required” and the 330 “proposed” parking spaces for the Residential Building and the smaller gap between the 339 required and the 325 proposed for the YMCA building. We also see more scope for locating more of the both buildings’ parking areas more fully underground, which would be more consistent with the GLUP and with generally acceptable development practices in Arlington. In the case of the residential building, more advantage could be taken of the topography to situate more parking under the West tower and more units in the East tower. As far as the YMCA facility is concerned, locating more of the facility underground could also help address the building step down issues identified above.¹³

While these are our main concerns at this point in the process, let us also take the opportunity to remind Staff that many of the questions concerning the implementation of Guiding Principle #10 concerning the Ball Family Burial Grounds remain unanswered from the 11th and Kirkwood SPRC process and we will be looking forward to see how this project can be leveraged to improve conditions on the Grounds so that it can be developed into the kind of space envisioned in the discussion of Guiding Principle #10. In addition, as this project will be seeing LEED Incentive program bonuses, we would like to encourage the targeting of those credits that have the most direct impact on mitigating climate change including those associated with renewable energy generation, green power, energy performance and green vehicles.

As residents and homeowner members of the BVSCA, we represent Arlington stakeholders most impacted by the YMCA redevelopment and we welcome continued active engagement with County Staff. We look forward to continued conversations, and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person before you need to respond to the Applicant. And, while this letter draws attention to our most immediate concerns, we look forward to learning more about the Applicant’s detailed plans, including long-term programming at the YMCA and what they see as enhancements to the community.

Finally, recognition goes to our community members who have led in document reviews, neighborhood consultations, and drafting of this letter, including Paul Ashin, Henry Staples, and Jessi Swenson. BVSCA will designate a neighborhood coordinator (or two coordinators) for this development and will share the name/s and contact information when that is determined. In the meantime, Paul, Henry and Jessi – as well as our broader leadership - would be glad to respond to any questions you might have about the contents of this letter or for further outreach to our community.

Sincerely,

Maurya Meiers, BVSCA President 2020/21, on behalf of the BVSCA Executive Committee

cc:

BVSCA Executive Committee
Paul Ashin
Henry Staples
Jessi Swenson

¹³ Concept Plan, A-09

