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Kentlands is one of the first, and probably the best known, of the archetypal towns and villages of country and city which are designed by architects who actually plan, not just buildings, but entire communities and the towns in which they exist. Lakelands is a similar, adjacent, community with a character of its own.

Editorial

County Plans for Tech Park—Guest Editorial by Robert D. Turner

Recent presentations by staff members of the Montgomery County Government have described proposed plans for the acquisition of real property and sale or lease of other real property currently owned by the County, ostensibly for the purpose of improving County operations and reducing long-term costs. Little has been said, however, about the financial risks to the County and other entities if these plans are brought to fruition.

The proposed initiative involves the purchase of privately owned property in the vicinity of Md. Route 28 (Darnestown Road), namely, the so-called GE Tech Park and the Finmarc site – a total of approximately 88 acres of land that is currently zoned for (light) industrial use. County property at the Public Service Training Academy (off Key West Avenue), and the County Services Park at Crabbs Branch Way, is to be sold or leased. I have seen no fiscal data regarding these transactions, but the following points have been expressed.

1. The portion of the 52-acre PSTA facility that would be sold or leased is adjacent to the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center, and would be a valuable addition to that tract if and when the plans of Johns Hopkins University for building a major medical research facility materialize.
2. Much of the the 92-acre Crabbs Branch property is adjacent to a Metro station and deemed eminently suitable for residential development.
3. The 52-acre GE Tech Park contains a 340,000 square-foot building that would be almost immediately useful for a number of County functions (e.g., the Board of Education, the Police headquarters and classrooms and offices of the Public Safety Training Academy) that could be relocated there.
4. The 36-acre Finmarc property contains a warehouse building with an area in excess of 200,000 square feet that could be adapted for use as a warehouse by the County's Department of Liquor Control, and the County-sponsored study states that there is adequate area in the tract to permit construction of a new food-preparation facility for the Montgomery County Public School System. These functions are currently located on the Crabbs Branch site.

Financial Risks to Montgomery County

It must be recognized that implementation of these concepts poses substantial financial risk to the County. The County would have to expend substantial sums to acquire the GE Tech Park and Finmarc properties, and additional outlays would be needed to ready those sites for the functions that would be relocated there. A total outlay in excess of \$100 million seems likely.

Only then could the County begin to relocate the functions from other locations, and only after that relocation had been at least partially completed could the County begin to sell the vacated lands. Additional outlays might be needed to raze the property and make it suitable for sale to residential developers.

In today's unstable market for real estate, there is little assurance that the proceeds from the sale of County property would be immediately available or sufficient to offset the prior expenditures for land acquisition and functional relocation. In particular, there is likely to be a considerable lapse of time before qualified developers appear with sufficient fiscal resources and the desire to acquire the County's land, and any sale to a developer who proposes to leverage a purchase should probably be avoided.

Cost to the City of Gaithersburg

As far as I know, there has been no public discussion of the implications of the proposed County purchase of the GE Tech Park and Finmarc tracts on the City's tax base. Such an analysis should take into account the contribution of the GE Tech Park if and when it is rezoned from Industrial to MXD. If this property were rezoned and developed (as has been actively proposed), then it would add perhaps \$50 million to the City's tax base, If the Finmarc tract were similarly rezoned, it could add another \$25 million to the tax base. These tracts could therefore represent a substantially greater increment of the City's tax base than the County would pay for them while they are zoned as Industrial sites.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion raises critical issues for both Montgomery County and the City of Gaithersburg as to the fiscal soundness of the acquisitions and relocations proposed in the County-sponsored Property Use Study. No decision to proceed with implementing the recommendations of that study should be made until these fiscal issues have been thoroughly investigated and the results of that analysis have been made available for public comment.

Ancillary Issues

The preceding discussion does not even consider whether the proposed plans actually represent worthwhile solutions to the problems that are identified in the County-sponsored study, and whether they would achieve long-term benefits to the County. That constitutes a whole other subject for thought and discussion. Certainly, key issues in this regard are the proposed disintegration of the Public Safety Training Academy and relocation, rather than renovation, of the District 1 Police Headquarters.

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