

Testimony before the Montgomery County Planning Board on Preliminary Plan No. 120070510 (EZ Storage—Burtonsville Industrial Park), February 14, 2008

COMMUNITY EXHIBIT
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ITEM NO. 4
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My name is **Stuart Rochester** and I'm testifying on behalf of the Fairland Master Plan Citizens Advisory Committee. First of all, let me add my condolences on the loss of Gene Lynch as well as Marilyn Praisner. They were two very special people whose passing is a profound loss both personally and institutionally. The last conversation I had with Marilyn was about this project in the context of how concerned we were about the future of Burtonsville.

You have my testimony in the packet. Let me say a couple of things at the outset before I sum up the concerns of the CAC and the many residents who have contacted us about this proposal.

The applicant, a Howard County interest that purchased this property only recently, and his attorney are entitled to their opinion as to what uses are appropriate in this zone, but not to substitute that opinion for the considered judgment of your planners or the CAC—which went through a detailed master plan process that discussed over months and years the intent of the overlay zone. No CAC or community would ever support any such overlay zone if it had so little rigor or substance that, contrary to the explicit intent and stated priorities of the zone, rows of idle self-storage buildings could become its signature feature.

Let me say, too, that the Fairland Master Plan Committee is proud of its record of working with developers to find common ground that creates value for propertyowners consistent with master plan provisions and legitimate community concerns—whether the Cherry Orchard center in Calverton, the expansion of the Briggs Chaney Auto Park, our work with Winchester Homes on a number of projects and with Artery on the Fairland Park development, Washington Adventist Hospital, etc. etc. You have two items before you today—the Greencastle Towns (which was Item #3) and the tiny lots resulting from TDR densities at Rolling Acres (I think it's item #6)—that we don't particularly like but that we respect because they were master planned and because we believe in the integrity of and the need to rely on those plans, for developers and the community alike.

We haven't even been up here for the better part of a year—and I know you've missed us—but the CAC takes its role very seriously and when we weigh in it's for a good reason. **This is among the worst projects and potentially the most serious breach of the master plan I've seen in 10 years.** And I would add that we advised this applicant early on—I spent over an hour on the phone with him myself—explaining the problem and offering to help find an alternative use, to no avail.

With minimal overhead, storage operations are well-known cash cows. The applicant understandably views this as another opportunity in a string of profitable ventures, which is his right. But let's not confuse a businessman's opportunity with fulfilling a local need. There is as much "need" for another storage facility on the east side of US 29 as there is for another rental car agency or pawn shop. The planning area is inundated with

transient uses, self-storage facilities in particular, both north-south and east-west. They are monuments to the poor planning of the 1980s that dumped an overconcentration of rental properties on the east side. Large parts of White Oak and Fairland are now defined by transiency—in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and by the number of U-haul and storage operations. Fortunately, and the jury's still out on whether it was too little too late, the 1997 master plan was conceived and had as its primary goal to remedy the housing imbalance and to replace the proliferation of businesses like this with productive employment, pride of community, and a sense of place.

It has been difficult to achieve this in Burtonsville because of the uncertainty relating to the ICC and road improvements on 198 in the vicinity of 29, and because of slack enforcement of violations by County agencies. (DPS, incorrectly as it turned out, approved a used car lot in the overlay zone and the County only now is getting around to investigating citizen complaints about the storage and repair of large construction vehicles on an adjacent site owned by the Siena Corporation that has been cited for multiple violations. The Planning Department is guilty itself for never enforcing—until this year, a decade after the approval—a screening and buffering requirement around the existing storage operation off of Dino Drive that has created a major eyesore.) Out of plain neglect or the lack of inspectors, this gateway into Montgomery from Prince Georges and Howard counties has become an embarrassment to all of us and a sad commentary on our planning and implementation. Even with the problems, however, there is still the opportunity for coherence and rational planning here if we but adhere to an approved and adopted master plan that, if it has any meaning or worth, states, as specifically as a master plan can, that the purpose of the overlay zone is to provide for a “*diversity of uses*” and a “*unified employment center.*”

This proposal manages to fail not one but BOTH conditions of the overlay zone: in terms of diversity, there is already a storage facility perhaps .1 of a mile from this site; in terms of the project contributing to an employment center, there would be on-site a single, at most 2 or 3, employees associated with this activity. The developer has tried to use the existing storage facility as a precedent, suggesting that one eyesore deserves another. But there are technical differences between the two having to do with the underlying I-1 vs. I-3 zone, and *in any case*, if language means anything in our master plans, to put a second storage facility in the overlay would make a mockery of the diversity clause as well as the employment clause.

And so we urge you to support your staff's recommendation for denial and send a signal to Burtonsville residents and businesses that the goals and vision of the master plan for this area remain consistent and there remains reason for hope and encouragement. I've heard the applicant say dismissively that “nothing's been built here in 20 years.” First of all, that's patently false: a new office building went up within the past six months directly across the street, and the owners of both shopping centers are about to undertake multi-million dollar investments in the renovation of their properties. What is certain, however, is that if this undesirable project—a building lacking not only a heart or a soul but even a pulse—even without *activity* except at night or odd hours—somehow gets approved and consigns the overlay zone that was a key element of the 1997 plan to more incoherence and mediocrity, nothing of worth or quality will be built there for the next 20 years.


Stuart Rochester