

Smart Growth and S-2863: Proposed Costco Gas Station in Westfield Wheaton

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By Donna R. Savage, DonnaRSavage@gmail.com

(for the Stop Costco Gas Coalition, www.stopcostcogas.org)

Overview

The Planning staff should recommend denying Special Exception S-2863 because it embodies one of the three major reasons for denial of a special exception for gas stations, as listed in the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance: "Sec. 59-G-2.06: Automobile filling stations....the use at the proposed location [will] adversely affect [or] retard the logical development of the general neighborhood or of the industrial or commercial zone in which the station is proposed." The major categories in which this SE application will adversely affect and retard Wheaton's development are that the proposal: 1) does not conform to the letter or the spirit of the 2012 Wheaton Sector Plan, 2) is the polar opposite of Smart Growth and Transit Oriented Development, and 3) violates the vision of Wheaton's future that has taken years of consensus meetings to build.

Wheaton Sector Plan

Section 59-G-1.21 of the County Zoning Ordinance, states: "General conditions. (a) A special exception may be granted when the Board or the Hearing Examiner finds from a preponderance of the evidence of record that the proposed use: ... (3) Will be consistent with the general plan for the physical development of the District, including any master plan adopted by the Commission." This Costco gas station proposal does not comply with that provision of the zoning code.

Specific statements in the Sector Plan. This Costco gas station proposal does not conform with the letter of the Wheaton Sector Plan. Reference is made to the following quotes from pages 69-72, which indicate clearly that a car-centric mega gas station, such as this proposal, is far outside the parameters of the Wheaton Sector Plan:

- ☑ Page 69: "Transit is an integral component of Wheaton's mobility system, both today and tomorrow. The Plan's vision is built on Metrorail, future bus rapid transit (BRT), and local bus service. Wheaton's crossroads setting requires transit service designed to accommodate trip origins, destinations, and connections among types of service. As a result, the Plan supports development and actions that raise the visibility of transit while also improving the area's already high level of service. ... Project planning should recognize the Metro station as the focus of Wheaton's transportation infrastructure. Providing easy and safe multi-modal access to and from the station, and incorporating features that reinforce the station area as a transit place, are important parts of the Plan vision."
- ☑ Page 71: "Transit use by residents (journey-to-work data), as opposed to transit use by employees working in Wheaton, is estimated at 52 percent, nearly three times the Countywide average. As Wheaton becomes a more vibrant mixed-use center, one objective will be to ensure that transit, bicycling, and walking remain viable options for future residents who also choose to work in Wheaton."
- ☑ Page 72: "Wheaton is served by a robust transit system including a Metro station and several bus lines. Bus Rapid Transit is under consideration on Veirs Mill Road and University Boulevard West within the Plan's horizon."
- ☑ Page 72: "Retain some convenient parking for the Metro station, but devote primary efforts to increasing the percentage of Metrorail passengers walking, using the bus, or riding bicycles to and from the station."

Consistency of Sector Plan application. “Outlot B” is a 3-acre site in the NE quadrant of Kensington Heights, at the intersection of University Blvd. and Valley View Ave. (at the entrance to Westfield Wheaton Mall near Giant and Target). Those of us who worked many hours over multiple years on helping to craft that development were told from the start that because one tiny corner of that property was within a half mile of the Metro, we would have to accept upzoning from the then-current Sector Plan’s R-60 designation. Forcing upzoning on a property that has a tiny corner within half a mile of Metro and then supporting the establishment of a mega gas station that is *three-tenths of a mile from Metro*, on the argument that the Mall is not part of the Transit-Oriented Development/Smart Growth efforts of the County (as asserted in Costco’s Land Use report, Exhibit O), is a wholly inconsistent application of the Wheaton Sector Plan, made especially so because both would be applied to the same community.

Consistency, Part 2. The current Wheaton Sector Plan rezoned a significant portion of Westfield Wheaton’s property to allow 6.0 FAR density and 200-foot height in order to allow mixed-use commercial/residential development. This increased density and FAR was due to the property’s close proximity to Metro. Westfield showed the Planning Board and various Wheaton groups their draft plans for redevelopment using this increased density and height. Adding a mega-gas station to the Westfield Wheaton property is further inconsistent application of Sector Plan intentions.

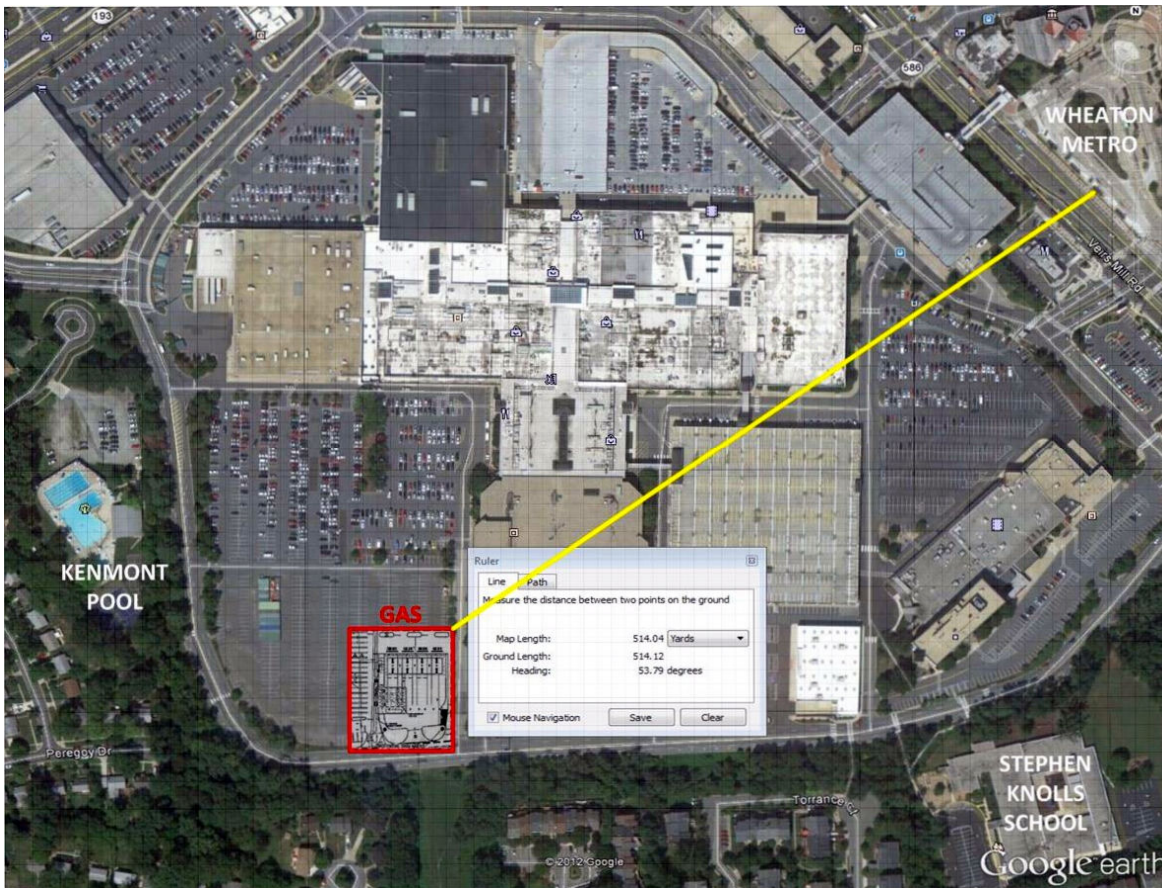
Other uses for this site. In a nearly-final version of the Wheaton Sector Plan, Planning staff envisioned the area between the south and west corners of the (built) Mall and the respective adjoining residential area as being appropriate for townhouse development, given its proximity to the Metro (and, obviously, shopping). Clearly that vision will have to wait now that the Costco warehouse has been built (and that recommendation was not included in the final Sector Plan, unfortunately). That potential remains a possibility because, even with the warehouse, ample room remains for other developments in that segment of the Mall. (Note, the Sector Plan, at page 48, clearly envisions that other County zoning efforts may still affect the Mall structure. It is our understanding that a primary concern was to avoid making the Mall as a whole a “nonconforming use,” which would have had significant consequences for the existing structures. That is not at all the same thing as saying a huge piece of developable land, so close to the Metro, is to remain forever tied to the old view of the relations between retail, business, and residential development.)

A gas station, especially one this large, will be much more difficult to put to other uses in the future, primarily for environmental clean-up reasons. While future use cannot be predicted and development should not necessarily be halted based on possibilities not yet decided, preserving this land for much more appropriate uses in the future is yet another reason to deny this Special Exception application. Certainly, it will be difficult or impossible to create any additional residential development within the perimeter of the ring road in light of the emphasis in Costco’s application on the fact that the road and the wall are needed to protect market values of housing outside the ring road. Would anyone voluntarily choose to buy a home directly overlooking a mega gas station?

Smart Growth and Transit Oriented Development

Land that is within easy walking distance of the Wheaton Metro and that can still be developed is a scarce and diminishing resource. Such parcels should not be tied up with uses that do not benefit whatsoever from their Metro accessibility. No one will ever ride the Red Line to Wheaton with an empty gas can, fill it up at Costco’s mega gas station, and then ride back with it on the Metro to Capitol Hill or Glenmont. However, with good restaurants or a theatre at that site, or business or residential townhouses, or, perhaps most usefully, a hotel to serve the Wheaton community, easy access to Metrorail and Metrobus would be a significant asset.

No mega gas station within half-mile radius of Wheaton Metro. No additional gas stations – and certainly not this mega gas station estimated to pump 12 million gallons of gas per year – should be allowed within a half-mile radius from the Wheaton Metrorail station. A half-mile radius is considered the “ped-shed” distance that pedestrians are likely to walk to and from public transportation. This proposed gas station is approximately half that distance from public transportation, at 3/10ths of a mile from the Wheaton Metrorail platform and the Metrobus loading/unloading area.



(514 yards is 0.29 miles)

It is wholly inconsistent with the tenets of Smart Growth to allow a mega gas station within that radius, especially a mega gas station that would serve only its members and would not be available to the public.

Montgomery County prides itself on its Smart Growth policies and on developing within Transit Oriented Development guidelines and concepts. Wheaton is an urbanizing area of the County that is redeveloping around its busy Metrorail station and Metrobus terminus. One person recently called the Costco gas station proposal “*Stupid Growth*,” and we agree. If TOD is applied successfully in Wheaton, which is the plan, there will be no need for the additional gasoline sold by this proposed gas station because more current residents will be using transit and more future residents will move to Wheaton specifically for its excellent access to transit. (For the principles of TOD as practiced and planned in Maryland, click here: <http://www.mdot-realestate.org/tod.asp>.) And as demonstrated in the needs analysis, separately submitted, federal energy projections show the need for gasoline dropping nationwide for the next 30 years.

Summary. This huge gas station is not a reasonable use of approximately 1 acre of unimproved land that is 0.29 miles from the Wheaton Metro platform, and the presence of such a gas station will retard and adversely affect the transit-oriented, Smart Growth development of Wheaton.

Vision of Wheaton’s Future

In addition to the Costco gas station proposal not conforming to the letter of the Wheaton Sector Plan, it also does not conform to the spirit of that Plan, and certainly not to the spirit of what Wheaton-area residents are hoping their community will become or become more of – walkable and not car-centric. Wheaton-area residents have participated in years of vision meetings for Wheaton, and a ginormous gas

station is not anywhere near that vision. In the vision of Wheaton's redevelopment, from residents and planners, walkability has been key; a 16-nozzle mega gas station is the polar opposite of walkability.

Attracting young professionals to Wheaton. The vision of Wheaton's future includes attracting young professionals to its growing housing stock of apartments and condos, many of them relatively upscale and sitting on top of or very near the Metrorail station and Metrobus loading/unloading areas. Recent studies indicate that young people today are driving significantly fewer miles and are using transit with significantly higher frequency than just 10 years ago. See "A creative generation loses its car keys" in "How Bicycling is Transforming Business" (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/how-bicycling-is-transforming-business>) and the U.S. PIRG Education Fund report titled "Transportation and the New Generation: Why Young People Are Driving Less and What It Means for Transportation Policy" (<http://www.frontiergroup.org/reports/fg/transportation-and-new-generation>). As Wheaton moves toward its vision of attracting more young professionals to live (and possibly work) in its environs, a mega gas station will be anachronistic and of negative benefit to this vision.

A pedestrian-friendly Mall?! As shown at www.wheatonmd.org/discover/walkabout-wheaton, two official walking routes encompass the Mall – the "Marathon at the Mall" route includes the entire Mall and the "Valley View Summit" route includes the Valley View entrance and loops around the Giant, the Starbucks/Quiznos line of stores, and the parking lot in between. A mega gas station would significantly deepen the car-centric nature of the Mall, in opposition to the pedestrian-friendly atmosphere Wheaton residents – and the County via this official Web site – clearly are trying to inculcate.

Summary. The Mall, including the proposed site of the Costco gas station, is part of Wheaton and has been part of the visioning process for Wheaton's future that has taken place over the years. The vision of Wheaton held by nearly every Wheaton resident and anyone else who has participated in the visioning process does not include even the glimmer of a humongous gas station.

Overall Summary

Costco should not be granted a Special Exception to jam what would be the busiest gas station in the County into a Metro-served, transit-oriented, designated Arts & Entertainment, urban district. The Stop Costco Gas Coalition respectfully requests that the Planning Department recommend to the Planning Board that Special Exception S-2863 be denied for the reasons stated above.