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TOWN OF SOMERSET

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Rich Charnovich
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Testimony on Westbard Plan/Equity One Sketch Plan Marnie Shaul, Council Vice-President, Town of Somerset

Chairman Anderson and Members of the Planning Board,

Today I would like to highlight just a few topics important to the Town of Somerset.

Our first concern is density. We continue to be concerned about the level of density for Equity One, especially since it is hard to understand what is actually being proposed. When we read the staff summary of the development on page 1, it is for “up to 1,800,000 square feet of total development (existing and proposed), up to 1,290,000 square feet of residential uses, not including square footage with MPDUs and up to 510,000 square feet of non-residential uses. I want to assure you that we support the goal of at least 15% MPDUs within the project even though this will increase the density. Our concern is with the allotments across the various sites for other uses.

When we total new commercial and residential development for the five projects shown on pages 18-20, the total and commercial square footage exceed the caps. The new projects total 1,819,624; this does not include the existing square footage on the HOC site—which page 1 claims is in the total. If we add in the existing HOC building, the project total would exceed the cap in all categories. Thus, we have a concern about what the actual allowable total will be on each site in order to stay within the 1,800,000 cap.

Site	Total SF	Commercial SF	Residential SF	Page Cite
Westwood I	1,081,048	405,393	675,655	18
Westwood II	190,920	63,640	127,280	19
HOC, new	116,920	23,384	93,536	20
Bowlmor	313,703	62,741	250,962	19-20

Manor Care	117,033	0	117,033	19
Total, new	1,819,624	555,158	1,264,466	
HOC, existing	211,020		211,020	
Total, new & existing	2,030,644	555,158	1,475,486	
Cap	1,800,000	510,000	1,290,000	1

Source: Staff report, 2/10/2017, and author's calculations

It seems to us that some adjustment must be made on some of the project sites in order to keep the density within the cap. We also wonder if the proposed square footage on the Westwood II site is for the size of the site before Westbard Avenue is realigned and if the Manor Care site square footage has been adjusted for the realigned road. In addition, we don't understand why the phrase commercial square footage is used for individual projects but page 1 says "non-residential" uses. What does that mean? Is that something other than commercial? Finally, we ask that the entire HOC site be removed from consideration at this hearing because we believe a holistic approach is needed for that sensitive site.

Our second concern is the Greenway and Willett Branch. The Plan that you adopted recommends "Naturalizing the Willett Branch stream into a major amenity that will become a unifying feature of the community". This Greenway will be a wonderful amenity for new residents of Westbard, nearby neighbors like Somerset, and residents around Montgomery County. However, the proposed Greenway needs much greater support and protection than Equity One provides in its Sketch Plan. For a completely connected Greenway, land needs to be dedicated behind each parcel that abuts the Willett Branch. Also, we do not want further encroachment into the stream valley buffer beyond the existing building footprints, except possibly for the Westwood II site. If Westbard Avenue is realigned, a very tight building site remains. It seems that the staff has crafted an acceptable compromise with conditions that Equity One would need to fulfill in order to build into the buffer. We would also like to know where the Greenway is located on the site and to hear more from the Parks Department about their design for the Greenway and how the park will be funded.

Our third concern is maintaining small businesses in Westbard. Somerset residents shop at Westbard and hear from business owners and workers that they are facing a high level of uncertainty about their future—when their leases are up, what will happen during construction, and what kind of rents they might have in the new Westbard. We want more assurances that Equity One will not force our small businesses to close during construction and that Equity One will live up to its commitment to charge them the existing square foot rent plus inflation. We want assurance that Equity One is earning its public benefit points in its effort to retain existing small businesses.

Thank you.