



Jeffrey Z. Slavin  
Mayor

## TOWN OF SOMERSET

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Rich Charnovich  
Town Manager/Clerk-Treasurer

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Sent via email

Montgomery County Council  
Council Office Building  
100 Maryland Avenue, 4th Floor  
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Council President Berliner, Vice President Riemer, PHED Chair Floreen, and Councilmember Elrich, Councilmember Hucker, Councilmember Katz, Councilmember Leventhal, Councilmember Navarro, and Councilmember Rice:

The Town of Somerset is writing today to express our concerns about the likely effect of some provisions of the proposed Downtown Bethesda Plan on Somerset Elementary School—a highly valued asset in our Town. Somerset has worked with CBAR and our neighbors in Chevy Chase West to ensure that development in Downtown Bethesda benefits both current and future residents and continues to make Bethesda an attractive area for residents and businesses. However, we recently learned that provisions were removed from the plan that we thought would be adequate to deal with the possibility of overcrowding at Somerset Elementary School—specifically provisions in the plan restricting bonus density and height outside the High Performance Area and limiting density averaging. We strongly urge you include provisions of this sort in ZTA 16-20.

Although there is concern about school capacity throughout the county, the Bethesda planning process gave little attention to Somerset Elementary School, which includes students residing in the plan area. (See attachment Somerset ES Boundaries from MCPS). According to MCPS, Somerset's capacity is 515 students, but in 2016-17 it had 595 enrolled, and projections for the next five years (2017-18 to 2022-23) range from 586 to 616—71 to 101 students over capacity (see Somerset Elementary School #405 attachment). These projections are likely to be overly conservative, in light of MCPS' use of smoothing—a factor brought to light by CBAR

*"Where People and Trees Have Deep Roots and Grow Strong"*

during the planning process and acknowledged by MCPS. As you know, Somerset Elementary School was rebuilt several years ago and cannot be expanded further; it has the smallest tract of any elementary school in the county.

Today, the rental properties south of Bradley, which are part of the Downtown Bethesda Plan, have heights ranging from 30' to 50'; the plan ups all of these to 70', increases of 40% to 133%. A rough conservative estimate is that there are today somewhere between 300 and 400 rental units south of Bradley, the vast majority owned by Aldon and HOC. HOC has already announced its hope to transfer density here from other properties within the plan area. Aldon also has the wherewithal to transfer density from other properties to those here. These transfers, or density averaging, incur no cost to the owners, in contrast to obtaining property from the density pool or via transfers from properties owned by others. With the additional height already granted, bonus height, bonus density, and density averaging, the total number of units could increase several times over. These considerations alone should be an adequate basis for including in the ZTA a mechanism for controlling height and density beyond what is zoned.

As a starting point for discussion, CBAR has proposed several options to allow for highly localized mitigation of additional height and density that might otherwise be allowed, options that we support:

- Limiting the area in which additional height can be granted,
- Relying on benefit points for additional MPDUs outside that area, and
- Giving the Planning Board authority to deny approval or require changes if density exceeds a predetermined level (CBAR proposed either a multiple of base density or an absolute maximum for a particular property) and/or is inappropriate based on a property's relationship to other buildings, roads, neighborhoods, and/or school capacity.

Thank you again for your consideration as the ZTA addresses these complicated issues. As individual communities, and as part of CBAR, we look forward to finishing this long process with a plan and overlay zone that keep the Bethesda area a vibrant and well designed community for all.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey Z. Slavin  
Mayor



Marnie Shaul  
Council Vice President

cc: Town of Somerset Council