



October 29, 2021

Hon. Casey Anderson, Chair
Montgomery County Planning
Board 2425 Reddie Drive
Silver Spring, MD 20902

Re: 5500 Wisconsin Avenue Development Proposal

Dear Chair Anderson and Planning Board Members,

I am writing on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Somerset House II Condominium Association concerning the proposed development at 5500 Wisconsin Avenue. Our condominium building lies directly north of the project, separated only by the Chevy Chase Medical Building and Somerset Terrace, which is a private access road to our community that is subject to a public easement from Wisconsin Avenue to The Hills Plaza. We would like to express the following concerns about the proposed Sketch Plan for the project.

1. Density. Section 59.7.3.E.2 of the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance requires a Sketch Plan to substantially conform with the recommendations of the applicable master or sector plan. Here, the applicable plan is the 1998 Friendship Heights Sector Plan ("Sector Plan" or "Plan").

The density or floor area ratio ("FAR") proposed for 5500 Wisconsin Avenue in the Sector Plan is 3.0. Plan, pp. 35-36. Similarly, the FAR limit in the property's CR zone is 3.0, with a potential square foot bonus for Moderately Priced Dwelling Units ("MPDUs").

At a meeting with the developers' team last summer, they stated that the proposed FAR for the project was 3.4, which would include an MPDU bonus of 0.4. However, we have since learned from reviewing the Sketch Plan that the FAR for the proposed development is now over 5.0, because it includes prior street dedications. This excessive FAR is clearly inconsistent with the provisions of the Sector Plan.

Moreover, the FAR limits in the CR zones are density maximums, not densities that are allowed as a matter of right. Section 59.7.3.E.7 of the Zoning Ordinance requires a Sketch Plan to include an outline of proposed public benefits that will support the density (FAR) requested for the project in question, and that are appropriate for the specific community.

We urge the Planning Staff to carefully review the developers' FAR calculations, their prior street dedications, and their proffered public benefit points to ensure the proposed development meets all the requirements of the Zoning Ordinance.

Somerset House II Condominium Association, Inc.
5610 Wisconsin Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD 20815
Tel: 301-656-5610 Fax: 301-656-0403

2. Building Height. The height limit for 5500 Wisconsin Avenue set forth in the Sector Plan is 90 feet. Plan, pp. 35-36. A height of 90 feet is also the limit for the property under the applicable Commercial Residential ("CR") Zone. In their Sketch Plan, however, the developers are proposing a residential building with a total height of 213 feet (approximately 21 stories) including rooftop structures.

The Zoning Ordinance also requires a Sketch Plan to achieve compatible relationships with nearby existing development. See Sec. 59.7.3.E.5. In this case, the Sketch Plan for 5500 Wisconsin Avenue proposes an "infill" building reaching 213 feet in height to be located on Wisconsin Avenue between the 12-story Marriott hotel and 14-story Chevy Chase Medical Office buildings to the north, and the 15-story Highland House residential building to the south.

A building of this height will clearly create the "canyon" effect specifically discouraged by the 1998 Sector Plan. Plan, pp. 31. The proposed development of the last remaining open parcel in the Village of Friendship Heights along Wisconsin Avenue will also effectively eliminate the views of many Somerset House II residents looking southeast toward the District of Columbia.

We note that a main goal of the current Friendship Heights Sector Plan is to "Preserve and enhance the environment for residents of high-rise buildings. This principle can be achieved. . . by limiting the height of new buildings close to high rise apartments to preserve views." (Emphasis added.) Plan, p. 31.

The Sketch Plan relies on the height averaging provisions of the zoning code to justify the building's 213-foot height. However, the electronic exhibits furnished by the developers showing the calculations of roof dimensions for averaging purposes are not readable. We urge the Planning Staff to review carefully the calculations provided by the developer's architects and engineers that purportedly justify a 213-foot building, which will be approximately 123 feet higher than the 90-foot building allowed by the 1998 Sector Plan and the base CR zone.

We also note that several of the exhibits to the Sketch Plan are misleading from a compatibility perspective. They purport to show that the proposed 21-story building height is compatible with the heights of nearby residential buildings in the immediate area. These include the three Somerset House buildings (18, 20 and 21 stories), the Elizabeth (18 stories), and Highland House West (17 stories). However, these exhibits ignore the topographical realities of the Village of Friendship Heights and the Somerset House community.

In fact, the proposed building is on the highest point of land in the area. The "Friendship Heights" area came by its name for a reason. The property at 5500 Wisconsin Avenue is at the top of the "Heights." The topography of the area then slopes down significantly to the south, west, and north. No compatibility analyses of the proposed height of the new building with the heights of surrounding buildings can be valid without topographical sections showing the relative elevations of the nearby buildings.

3. Traffic Generation. According to the Sketch Plan, the 5500 Wisconsin apartment building will include up to 380 rental units, the same number of underground parking spaces for cars, additional spaces for moving vans, service vehicles, and delivery trucks, as well as approximately 15,000 square feet of new retail space. Zoning Ordinance Section 59.7.3.3.E.6 requires a Sketch Plan to provide satisfactory vehicular, pedestrian, and bicycle circulation as well as satisfactory provisions for parking and loading.

The developers' traffic consultant claims that this proposed development will generate less vehicle traffic than the vehicle traffic from the 49,292 square feet of retail space currently on the property, most of which is vacant. This claim is based on traffic generation rates from the Institute of Traffic Engineers ("ITE") Traffic Generation Manual 10th Edition that are shown in the developers' traffic report.

However, the developers' traffic consultant has used ITE traffic generation rates for an urban "Shopping Center" to calculate traffic from the current retail space despite the fact that the retail use on the property has never approached the level of activity of an urban shopping center.

Instead, the much lower ITE generation rates for "Apparel Stores" should have been used to reflect the fact that upscale clothing stores have historically occupied the now mostly empty commercial space (e.g., Brooks Brothers, Saks Jandel, Sylene, Eduardo DePandi, etc.).

When the appropriate "Apparel Stores" generation rates are used, the calculations below show that the developers' traffic consultant has overstated by 180 trips the PM vehicle trips that the current retail space would generate if reopened. The correct figure should be 55 vehicles, not the 235 vehicles shown in the consultant's report.

Current Retail Space	49,292 square feet
Shopping Center Generation Rate	<u>x4.90</u> vehicles per 1,000 square feet
Total PM Rush Hour Vehicles	235 vehicles

Current Retail Space	49,292 square feet
Apparel Store Generation Rate	<u>x 1.12</u> vehicles per 1,000 square feet
Total PM Rush Hour Vehicles	55 vehicles

In addition, based on the data in the developers' traffic report and appropriate Apparel Store traffic generation rates, the proposed new residential and commercial development will generate approximately 125 PM peak hour vehicles.

380 Rental Apartment Units	108 PM peak hour trips
Commercial (15,000 s.ft.)	+17 vehicles (1.12 vehicles per 1,000 sq.ft.)
Total PM Rush Hour Vehicles	125 vehicles

Thus, the developers' claim that their new development will generate less traffic than the current retail space is clearly inaccurate. As these figures show, the new development will generate substantially more traffic (125 PM vehicles) than the current retail space (55 PM vehicles) if the now-closed apparel stores were reopened.

4. Somerset Terrace Traffic. The Zoning Ordinance also requires a Sketch Plan to provide satisfactory circulation patterns for vehicle, pedestrians, and bicycles, as well as adequate parking and loading facilities. Sec. 59.7.3.3 E.6.

The Somerset House II community is particularly concerned about traffic impacts from the proposed development on Somerset Terrace, the two-way street just north of the Chevy Chase Medical Building that runs east-west from Wisconsin Avenue to the main entrance of the Somerset House community.

As the Sketch Plan shows, all bicycles and vehicles (cars, delivery trucks, service vehicles, and moving vans) will exit the new Building's parking garage on the two-way internal street (the "Woonerf") that will run between The Hills Plaza and Wisconsin Avenue. If the vehicles turn right (east) from the garage to reach Wisconsin Avenue, they will have to turn right again and travel south because the Wisconsin Avenue median will block a left turn traveling north.

To travel north, they will have to turn left (west) out of the parking garage to reach The Hills Plaza from which they can access Wisconsin Avenue at the intersection of either South Park Avenue or Somerset Terrace. However, both these local streets are already heavily congested during much of the day.

For example, traffic trying to enter the Chevy Chase Medical Building garage on Wisconsin Avenue backs up and blocks the intersection with Somerset Terrace at all hours of the day. Moreover, trucks delivering supplies to the Medical Building, as well as taxis and cars dropping off, picking up, and waiting for patients, routinely park or stand illegally in the right lanes of Somerset Terrace in both directions, leaving only the left lanes for through traffic to and from Wisconsin Avenue.

To exacerbate the problem, because Somerset Terrace is a private street subject to a public easement between The Hills Plaza and Wisconsin Avenue, neither County police nor the Village's security personnel can ticket or otherwise enforce the "No Parking" and "No Standing" signs along the block between The Hills Plaza and Wisconsin.

Based on the data in the developers' traffic report adjusted for applicable traffic generation rates, the new development will clearly generate over 100 new vehicle trips in each of the AM and PM peak hours. It is also clear that some significant portion of that traffic will head north on Wisconsin Avenue via Somerset Terrace. However, this local side street simply cannot handle the additional traffic that will inevitably flow from the new development. Thus, the Sketch Plan does not provide for satisfactory traffic circulation.

5. Design and Public Benefit Issues. Finally, we are concerned about the so-called "Woonerf," the internal street between the residential building and the hotel. The developers claim that this street, which the Sketch Plan shows as approximately 47-feet wide, should be treated as a public benefit that qualifies for density (FAR) bonus points because it features "exceptional design" and because it serves as a "through block connection."

As to "exceptional design," we understand that a minimum width for a suburban two-way street is approximately 28 feet, and that any sidewalks on either side should each be a minimum of 5 to 6 feet wide to accommodate two persons walking together.

If these design standards are applied to the 47-foot wide Woonerf, there will be virtually no space left for all the retail and restaurant activities that are supposed to energize what the developers are calling a "predominately pedestrian street." It is inconceivable that the attractive renderings and photos attached to the Sketch Plan as illustrative amenities could be realized given the Woonerf's current design.

Regarding traffic flows, this "through block connection" is really nothing more than an alley between the new residential building and the existing hotel that will provide access to the sole point of entry and exit into and out of the residential building.

This alley will have to handle all the two-way traffic between Wisconsin Avenue and Hills Plaza for the cars and bicycles using the parking spaces in the building, as well as all the traffic from moving vans, service trucks and delivery vehicles serving the 380 rental apartment units and 15,000 square feet of commercial space in the building.

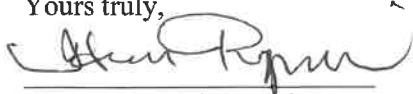
Dangerous vehicular, bicycle and pedestrian conflicts will be inevitable. This internal street is not just poorly designed to serve as a "predominately pedestrian street that will enliven the neighborhood," it will also be a dangerous safety hazard for all the vehicle, bicycle and pedestrian traffic that the new development will generate.

As a result, the Sketch Plan for 5500 Wisconsin Avenue does not provide a satisfactory circulation pattern for vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians as required by Section 59.7.3.E.6 of the Zoning Ordinance. Similarly, the proposed Woonerf does not qualify under Section 59.7.3.E.7 as a public benefit that would support the height and density (FAR) requested for the new development.

6. Conclusion. The Board of Directors of the Somerset House II Condominium Association understands that the property at 5500 Wisconsin Avenue is ripe for redevelopment. However, as is usually the case with major residential and commercial projects, the proverbial devil is in the detail.

We urge the Planning Board and Staff to review the developers' height, FAR, traffic generation, and public benefit calculations closely, and to consider the impacts of this proposed development on our Somerset House community as well as on the Village of Friendship Heights carefully.

Yours truly,



Hossein Razavi, President
Somerset House II Condominium Association

CC: Elza Hisel-McCoy, Division Chief
Down-County Planning
Montgomery County Planning Department

Grace Bogdan, Planning Coordinator
Montgomery County Planning Department

Melanie Rose White, Mayor
Village of Friendship Heights

Jeffrey Z. Slavin, Mayor
Town of Somerset

Shana Davis-Cook, Manager
Chevy Chase Village

David Forman, Chair
Citizens Coordinating Committee on
Friendship Heights