

Memorandum

Date: November 6, 2015

From: The Dover, Kohl & Partners team

To: Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing & Development

Re: Lee Highway Visioning Study: Pre-Charrette Interviews

The Dover, Kohl & Partners team conducted a site visit October 15 and 16, 2015; during this time consultant team members toured and photographed the Lee Highway corridor, and conducted a series of interviews with representatives from assorted stakeholder groups including the Lee Highway Alliance (LHA), property owners, developers, business owners, housing and historic preservation advocates, County commissions and staff, Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), and Arlington Public Schools (APS). This memorandum contains a brief summary of opportunities and issues heard through meetings and interviews, to be explored further during the planning charrette (November 6 – 9, 2015).

Summary of Key Opportunities, Challenges, and Feedback Heard

- **Create a Walkable, Bikeable Street**

Stakeholders voiced a desire to have Lee Highway be more walkable and bikeable. Today, it is reported that most people travel the corridor by car; vehicle travel speeds are too high to make walking and biking comfortable. Stakeholders felt more pedestrian crossings are needed, especially near schools and in areas of retail activity. Bike facilities are discontinuous; it was suggested there may be opportunity to provide a network along Lee Highway that connects to other regional bike lanes and trails.

Business owners report that most customers arrive by car, and not necessarily from surrounding neighborhoods; cars move by at relatively fast speeds, so drivers often do not notice the many small businesses along the corridor. Slowing down traffic is desired. Parking is also an issue – customers report lack of parking as one reason they do not frequent Lee Highway businesses. Due to small parcel sizes and the existing required ratios, the need for space for parking is a potential impediment to redevelopment.

Stakeholders reported that the road is currently designed to VDOT arterial standards for 35 – 40 mph speeds; this is in conflict with the desire to walk and bike along the corridor. Concerns were raised by community participants during a recent streetscape design forum; community

members have questioned if the County could take ownership, to have more flexibility in design standards. It was reported that this may be unlikely due to the corridor's U.S. highway status, and the recent proposal to put HOT lanes on I-66 (and the uncertainty of what this will mean for Lee Highway).

Next steps: Charrette workshops and meetings will be used to continue to explore the desires of the community and identify specific segments of the corridor where street design changes are desired. During the charrette, meetings will be held with VDOT and County representatives to explore possibilities for multimodal street design.

- **Improve the Built Environment**

Stakeholders expressed a desire for improvements to the current built environment – with new development can come new public open spaces, improved buildings and streetscapes.

Stakeholders identified several challenges to development that could hinder the ability to see future transformations:

- Dimensions of Parcels – many of the commercial parcels along Lee Highway are shallow, and back up immediately to single family residential homes. With limited space for new buildings, parking, and transitions to surrounding neighborhoods, redevelopment could be challenging. Property owners could look to consolidate parcels to create more space. Stakeholders identified some larger parcels near key intersections that could be opportunity sites.
- Approval Process – the cost and time associated with going through the Site Plan approval process was reported as a hindrance to new development. It was suggested that the consultant team look at potential options for reforming the approvals process to streamline approval for the type of development wanted. Today, it was reported by stakeholders that only large projects can afford to move through the process, leaving many smaller property owners out; ways to make it easier for smaller, incremental development should be explored.
- Scale of Development – the community has expressed a desire for low to medium density. Developers report that the economics of development (including the cost to tear down and rebuild) is an obstacle to low density projects which do not have the same returns as higher density. It was suggested that during the charrette the consultant team explore community preferences for various densities. Particularly, there may be some areas of the corridor that may be more appropriate for higher densities and more urban lifestyles, and others where that is not appropriate.

Next steps: Work with Charrette participants to identify opportunity sites, and test potential future development scenarios. Use three-dimensional illustrations to test community preferences for various scales of development along different portions of the corridor, including what is the meaning of “low to medium density”. Continue to talk with property owners and County staff to understand the dynamics of the approvals process and potential zoning tools that could be appropriate for Lee Highway.

- **Keep Small, Local Businesses**

The community would like to keep local businesses in the corridor. Business owners have reported that rents are too high; some that own their building can make more money by renting rather than by running a business. Stakeholders stated that typically only chain stores can afford the higher rents. It is reported that many businesses that rent space have had to leave the corridor. Stakeholders suggested exploring the potential for “affordable commerce” requirements or incentives as part of new development, as one way this can be addressed.

Next steps: Continue to discuss challenges with community members, business owners, and County staff. Discuss existing policies and potential future strategies to retain local businesses.

- **Keep Housing Affordable, For All Ages**

Stakeholders advocated for the vision for Lee Highway to include more affordable housing. The Affordable Housing Master Plan set a goal for Lee Highway to increase the number of affordable units (from 5% of the County total to 11% of the County total) by 2040. Accessory dwellings, medium density apartments and smaller affordable-by-design units were suggested as appropriate for this area. Specifically, the area has an aging population that may be ready to move out of larger homes, but want to stay in the area. “Mansion apartments” – buildings that have two or three units but fit in with surrounding single family homes was suggested as one way to achieve affordable units that fit with the local context.

Next steps: Continue the conversation with community members and housing advocates to understand the challenges and help identify potential solutions. Explore the potential for affordable-by-design housing types; look for opportunity sites where new housing units, including affordable units, can be added. Use visualizations to test strategies during the charrette.

- **Consider Public Spaces, Schools and Facilities, Historic Preservation**

There is a desire among stakeholders for more community open spaces and gathering spots. Today, several local businesses along the corridor serve that function – tomorrow, the community would like more open spaces in the corridor that encourage interaction and strengthen communities.

There is an ongoing community facilities study, which has projected demographics. It was reported that schools are overcrowded, and this has caused some anxiety over density; this will need to be considered with future growth. A recent facilities study recommended relocating Fire Station No. 8, which was not well received by the community; a Task Force may be formed to look specifically at this issue.

There are a number of historically significant sites along the corridor. Specifically the Hall’s Hill (Highview Park) neighborhood and Calloway Church and cemetery were brought to the consultant team’s attention. Several National Register Historic Districts line the corridor,

including Cherrydale, Maywood, and Lyon Village. Several stakeholders advocated for preservation and interpretation concepts to become an essential part of the vision

Next steps: Look for opportunities to enhance the open space network throughout the corridor, using a variety of open space types (such as greens, plazas, squares). Gain further understanding of community facilities and needs in the corridor. Continue to gain understanding of the historically significant districts and sites along the corridor, gather additional feedback from charrette participants, and seek ways to integrate preservation and interpretation concepts into the vision for the corridor.