

# Transit Options, Access Lanes, and Rockville's Pike Neighborhood Plan

Mark Pierzchala, Rockville Councilmember, May 26, 2016, draft for discussion

I have long been a supporter of the concept of mass transit including Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). However, at this time there are many things we don't know about Bus Rapid Transit along highway 355.

- Whether BRT along highway 355 is technically feasible.
- Where it would start and where it would stop.
- Whether there is a viable funding mechanism. This includes design and build-out, capital acquisition, and ongoing operating expenses.
- What the governance structure of BRT would be.
- How providing for this added infrastructure fits in with a backlog of county infrastructure shortages including school space and transportation depots.

Additionally, the Rockville Mayor and Council have not taken a formal position supporting BRT along Rockville Pike. The conditions under which Mayor and Council can support BRT along 355 is a topic that will be taken up as one of the 24 goals of this Mayor and Council; hopefully sooner rather than later.

The Pike Plan should provide for the possibility of BRT and provide space, but it should not assume that BRT will happen. However, the implementation of BRT is assumed throughout the proposed plan.

Similarly, the proposed plan includes the possibility of an extended East Jefferson Street. However, the eventual construction of this street is not guaranteed.

Since both BRT and an extended East Jefferson cannot be assumed, we have a possibility of eliminating the access lanes without ever realizing the potential of these or other enhanced transit options.

Therefore, the Pike Plan should keep the access lanes, and the City should continue to acquire easements, for now. The plan can be modified to eliminate the access lanes and to abandon existing easements when there is a commitment and a plan to build BRT or an East Jefferson Street. The biannual review of the master plan should be used to continually re-assess the status of BRT, and should it ever be fully committed (not waiting for actual construction), then access lanes could be removed from the plan.

To eliminate the access lanes in the plan without other major transit infrastructure is to risk further jamming the pike. At present, some private service drives mimic access lanes (page 5-7). Therefore:

- The access lanes should be retained in the plan until there is a commitment and a plan to provide BRT and/or an East Jefferson Street.
- The cross-section as shown on page 4-5 should be retained.

This proposal provides for an exception in the South Pike Plan Area (page 1-8) where access lanes and existing easements can be eliminated for a *Rockville Champion Project* that advances key City goals (including transit goals). A related, separate handout describes the idea of a *Rockville Champion Project*.

In discussion with City Staff a few weeks ago, we learned that access lanes or service drives have utility even if they don't extend the length Rockville Pike. If they are eliminated for a *Rockville Champion Project* (with transit alternatives), then the remaining service drives would still be useful.

**Note:** This sheet should be read with the one titled **Rockville Champion Projects**.

# Rockville Champion Projects

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A *Rockville Champion Project* advances key City goals near transit centers. Projects can have additional developable land and flexibility on building heights if they explicitly advance one or more key City goals. These goals are to provide more housing (including affordable housing) near Metro to handle continued population growth thereby helping to preserve existing neighborhoods, to provide more publicly accessible open space, to provide additional transit options, and/or to reduce car-based trips.

A *Rockville Champion Project* gives the City a way to explicitly achieve its goals rather than hoping that they are met after Rockville's Pike Neighborhood Plan is approved.

## Eligibility

The project is automatically eligible when:

- It is within the South Pike Plan Area Region (page I – 8).
- It contains at least 5 contiguous acres in the project.
- Achieves a point total (from the zoning ordinance) that makes the Mayor and Council the approving body.

## City Goals

One or more of the following goals would be met by the *Rockville Champion Project*. The exact mix of goals would be negotiated by Mayor and Council with the developer and would be influenced by site conditions and current opportunities. This approach allows for creative solutions and would allow the Mayor and Council to prioritize one or more goals over the others.

- Supports increased multi-family housing near Metro by, for example.
  - Increased affordable housing ratios , or
  - Increases the amount of residential that can be built
- Requires up to 20% publicly accessible open space for the project area. Part of the 20% could be replaced by indoor space for a community amenity.
- Provides increased mobility options by building new streets and/or providing or constructing Vision Zero<sup>1</sup> infrastructure, and/or providing pedestrian–bicycle connectivity possibly including between Lewis Avenue in Twinbrook and Rockville Pike.

A *Rockville Champion Project* would adhere to the guidelines in Rockville's Pike Neighborhood Plan and zoning ordinance with the following exceptions. These exceptions provide incentives for a developer to build a *Rockville Champion Project*.

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<sup>1</sup> Vision Zero.<sup>®</sup> is a collaborative international movement to eliminate traffic fatalities. There is a wide variety of strategies including many that focus on improved safety of pedestrians, cyclists and vulnerable users. Several opportunities exist in the area for new or improved infrastructure that will improve connectivity, safety and transit.

- Access lanes along Rockville Pike would not be required and existing access lane easements could be abandoned, providing more horizontal space.
- Taller buildings are allowed.

**Note:** This sheet should be read with the one titled **Transit Options, Access Lanes, and Rockville's Pike Neighborhood Plan**. That sheet proposes keeping access lanes in Rockville's Neighborhood Pike Plan until certain conditions are met. It also proposes that the City continues to acquire easements for the time being.