

Focus Group Meeting: GGCC October 12, 2020

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This focus group invited input from the Gaithersburg-Germantown Chamber of Commerce. Representatives from GGCC participated. The session lasted for an hour and a half. The following are highlighted points from the discussion:

- Group expressed a desire for all of the possibilities (increased housing, employment, and amenities) to happen on the Lakeforest Site
- Redevelopment could help with the housing shortage in County
- It was discussed that large big box retail is a desirable use, as there is nothing between the Clarksburg Mall and Westfield Mall in Bethesda. Staff then noted the number of big box retailers within the City and within a ½ mile of the Mall.
- The Group asked about whether a venue should be part of Lakeforest; it presents the opportunity for something more unique
- The group noted that employment is important and asked whether the goal for Lakeforest is to bring business in or to improve the surrounding community
- Employment as a training opportunity was discussed and what kind of retail should go to Lakeforest that avoids internal competition and cannibalism from other areas of the City
- Staff noted that if all retail at Lakeforest went away, it would eliminate the existing retail surplus, but there is a demand for additional neighborhood retail (unlike the regional retail of the mall)
- The Group suggested looking at biotech and R&D as another possibility for Lakeforest, especially if higher paying jobs are desired
- The Group noted looking at Lakeforest more holistically, with the surrounding Leidos property and Fairgrounds
- Redevelopment could feed off of the Life Sciences Center, AstraZeneca and NIST
- The need for housing that is affordable is desirable for younger workers, with a mix of rentals and some ownership opportunities
- There was discussion that redevelopment should be attractive to Millennials and Gen Z
- Should try to incorporate experiential uses to make it more attractive to visitors and residents

- The Group noted that the lack of affordable housing options results in young graduates and workers looking at other (more affordable) areas after college
- Other amenities and things to do are needed for younger workers and recent graduates, in addition to housing options
- It was agreed that a range of housing types is desirable, to allow different ages and activities to occur, which makes a community more resilient over time because more of the population is engaged and cares about the community
- That there are affordably priced ownership housing options in Montgomery Village, so the housing options in Lakeforest should focus more on young workers (Millennials)
- That Lakeforest should reflect what Gaithersburg is about, such as the green tree on the City's logo
- Lakeforest shouldn't be a copy of Washingtonian or Crown, and should offer things like outdoor sport areas and trails, which would appeal to Millennials
- That Montgomery County has twice as much retail as it needs, and COVID-19 is not helping, so Lakeforest may not need any commercial component, and multifamily housing makes sense, especially if it is affordable; Lakeforest site makes more sense for residential
- Noted the need for park land and green space in the Lakeforest area, as well as connectivity to the surrounding area and job opportunities
- There was general agreement that affordable housing, diversity of housing stock, greenspace, and job opportunities can lead to an equitable and sustainable development
- Suggested that Lakeforest should focus on live (housing) and play (amenities), and the surrounding area can continue focusing on work (jobs)
- Suggested turning the transit center into a community amenity rather than having it pushed out to the edge on its own, which should help to discourage perceived bad behavior and crime; what happens at one part of an area (like the transit center) will create a general perception of the entire area (the whole mall)
- When asked how long would you wait to achieve success: "you can't rush perfection"
- It is better to wait for something better, but some progress should happen in the next 5 years towards that goal, such as having a plan that is ready to move forward
- That 5 years is a good time frame to see something starting at Lakeforest
- It was also noted that the economic uncertainty from the pandemic (unemployment, commercial loan delinquencies, demand for retail, etc.) probably may make the 5 year timeframe to see something happen at Lakeforest too aggressive
- Noted that the full turnaround of Lakeforest probably will take 20 years, but that doesn't mean that nothing at all will happen over those 20 years
- That inflexibility and too prescriptive could be a bad strategy for the master plan– "perfection is the enemy", so the master plan should be flexible
- There is a need for a vision for not just Lakeforest, but for Lakeforest as it relates to the surrounding area, and such a vision should be holistic rather than piecemeal, even if the ultimate vision takes longer