BACON'S REBELLION
The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Salvaging Tysons

The Tysons task force on land use has articulated a compelling vision for the future of Virginia's largest – and most dysfunctional – business district. Just one problem: It's not clear who will pay for it.

By James A. Bacon

Talk about the audacity of hope: The Obama campaign has nothing on the Tysons Land Use Task Force. The coordinating committee, appointed in 2005, wants to transform Tysons Corner from one of the largest "edge cities" in America into a thriving urban center. If the vision to reinvent Tysons Corner into the "downtown" of Fairfax County over the next 30 to 50 years is realized, the former country crossroads would match the size of today's downtown Philadelphia, the nation's fifth largest.

Achieving that vision would be a remarkable accomplishment: Unlike traditional big-city downtowns laid out in grid street patterns, Tysons grew from a rural crossroads into one of the nation's largest office clusters in most haphazard manner. The resulting patchwork of shopping centers, boxy office buildings, vast parking lots and broad thoroughfares is difficulty to navigate and devoid of the charm and sense of "place" that inspires a passionate sense of attachment.

Long devoid of the human element, Tysons Corner now is testing the limits of its one putative design virtue: its ability to accommodate cars. Ninety-eight percent of the 65,500 people who work there commute to their jobs in cars, mostly solo. Hemmed in by Interstate 95, the Dulles Toll Road and residential development, Tysons offers few alternatives for getting in and out. Consequently, rush hour congestion on the highways, as well as the Route 7 and Route 123 bottlenecks, is among the worst in Virginia. Even getting around inside the business district is a pain. There's so much asphalt to cross that people typically find it easier to cross the street by driving a car than making the effort on foot.

For salvation, many people look to the proposed construction of a rail line linking Dulles airport and Tysons Corner with the Metro rail system. Not only would Metro provide a transportation option for thousands of passengers in and out of the business district, it would spark re-development around the four Metro stations along the lines of a walkable downtown like Philadelphia's. The Tysons task force, created with the expectation that the Rail-to-Dulles project would receive funding, has been meeting for two and a half years to plan how to best leverage that multibillion-dollar public investment.

The preliminary plan, "Tysons Corner: Path to the 21st Century," hews to the principles of smart growth, including many of the principles long advocated in *Bacon's Rebellion*. A new-and-improved Tysons Corner would have a much larger residential component, zoning for a finely grained mix of land uses, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and quality open spaces. Denizens could live, work and shop locally, conducting much of their daily business on foot and interacting in public places.

Tysons Corner: An aggregation of stores and offices isolated by parking lots and cordoned off by pedestrian-hostile roads.

Building densities would be highest around the Metro stops -- 30-floor buildings would be allowed -- and would step down at the 1/8th 1/4 mile marks. On the border with adjacent neighborhoods, development would be limited to densities that would allow a smooth visual transition.

One variant of the "Path to the 21st Century" plan would create a "circulator system" buses or trolleys in dedicated lanes that carry riders to within a block or two of any location within the Tysons territory. The task force also is planning an array of public amenities such as parks and open space, affordable housing, bike lanes, stream restoration, storm water controls, fire, police and public schools, a performing arts center, even public art.

It's a wonderful vision. Carrying out the plan truly would make Tysons a wonderful place to work and live. There's just one little problem. It's not at all clear how much this ambitious plan would cost, or who will pay for it. The financial obstacles are formidable and there is little evidence that the task force has thought through the economics of getting from Point A (the dysfunctional present) to Point B (the radiant future).

The extension of Metro rail through Tysons Corner was last estimated at between $2.4 billion and $2.7 billion. While the federal government is expected to pay a significant share, a majority of that sum will come from Dulles Toll Road commuters and property owners along the rail route. Meanwhile, a list of Tysons-area traffic improvements identified in Fairfax County's 1994 comprehensive plan -- Interstate crossings, new highway ramps, and a host of smaller projects -- could well cost more than $1 billion. And that doesn't include the cost of creating the grid streets, much less the tree-lined streetscapes and other public facilities. I have been unable to uncover any document on the task force website that tallies up all the costs. It appears that the task force is forging ahead with no clear idea of what the final tally will be.

It's not clear either who will pay for the improvements. Implicit in the discussions so far is the assumption that property owners will help foot the tab. It is they, after all, who have the most to gain financially, first by creating a more desirable place to live, work and play, and secondly by rezoning that allows them to re-develop their properties at higher densities.

Rendering of a pedestrian-friendly Tysons Corner

Currently, Tysons Corner has about 44 million square feet of "floor area," 16,000 residents and 105,000 employees. With no changes to the county's comprehensive plan, by-right development will allow up to 74 million square feet, 35,000 residents and 161,500 employees.

The "prototype B" scenario crafted by the task force would allow even greater density: up to 127 million square feet, 100,000 residents and 203,000 employees. Under that scenario, proposed increases in density would allow developers to add 83 million square feet of commercial, retail and residential space compared to what exists now.

Higher density on that scale would represent a windfall to property owners, so it is perfectly reasonable to ask the private sector to help pay for the infrastructure required to support it. There appear to be two broad options. Fairfax County can tap property owners either by exacting cash proffers in rezoning cases, imposing higher taxes through special tax districts, or employing some combination of the two.

None of the plan's costs or financing mechanisms has been sketched out in any detail, which explains why property owners have been relatively quiescent. So far, from what I can tell, the public discussion has focused on how to spread the goodies around -- a far more pleasant job than figuring out how to pay for the goodies.

Judging by their feedback posted on the task force website, many landowners are concerned at this

Map shows boundary of Tysons study area, along with location of proposed Metro line and four stations.

stage with maximizing the densities allowed for their individual properties.

In a letter to the task force, the owners of the Commons Property, location of a Safeway-anchored shopping center, contend that their location warrants higher density zoning. "The proposed intensities are not sufficient to ensure redevelopment with the grid of streets, parks and community amenities envisioned. ... Outside the 1/4 mile radius [from the Metro stations], a Floor-to-Area Ratio of 2.0 or less provides little incentive to seek a rezoning and [the] myriad of proffers or conditions likely to be required."

Even privileged businesses with property on the proposed Metro stops suggest that densities aren't high enough to coax them into doing what the task force has in mind.

Says a letter from Dan Clemente, one of Northern Virginia's better known developers: "As it exists today, throughout this quadrant, all of the property is currently developed with sound business uses; the densities being proposed in this plan are not high enough to justify the economic costs involved with disrupting these going concerns. That being the case, this design will frustrate if not make impossible the planning staff's goals of consolidated development."

If the proposed densities don't induce major property owners to make the massive investments required to convert the vision into reality, the task force has a problem.

Handing out more density bonuses, as the special pleaders request, is not a viable answer either. Tysons Corner has a track record since 1994 of absorbing about 600,000 square feet of space a year. Projecting that rate into the future, the 83 million square feet of added density in the "Path to the 21st Century" plan will take about *138 years* to absorb! Granting more density to property owners will only add to an overhang that it will slow re-development to a snail's pace.

Here's another complication: The plan would increase the number of employees in Tysons Corner by nearly 100,000, or double current levels. If congestion already makes Tysons a "hell on wheels," how will the district deal with twice the current number of employees?

The Metro will provide access to Tysons Corner for a decent percentage of those employees. I can't find any numbers specifying the rail line's capacity, but it should measure in low multiples of 10,000s. Additionally, an increase in housing for an added 84,000 residents holds out the potential that thousands will live close enough to walk or ride the "circulator" to work. According to the 2000 Census, one third of the 11,300 residents in Tysons worked locally. If that proportion held steady, added housing could take another 35,000 people or so out of their cars.

Those are impressive numbers, but the result of adding so much office space -- if it's ever filled -- could be tens of thousands of additional commuters struggling to drive in and out of Tysons Corner each business day. Task force consultants have suggested that the combination of Metro rail, the circulator, mixed uses, higher densities, pedestrian streetscapes will reduce congestion. I haven't seen any report that shows how such an optimistic conclusion was reached. If it's off -- if streets and highways wind up more congested -- it could cripple efforts to attract new business.

I fear that the numbers may not add up: The massive expense of re-developing Tysons Corner on the scale envisioned -- in some cases, tearing down expensive buildings that have not been fully depreciated -- may be so high that it simply cannot be financially justified. The frightening conclusion: Tysons Corner was designed so badly and the cost of re-developing tens of billions of dollars of such poorly planned infrastructure and office buildings may be so high that it is simply beyond salvation.

I truly hope I'm wrong. The prospect of continuing Business As Usual -- helter skelter, by-right development of another 30 million square feet of space and bringing another 60,000 employees into Tysons Corner -- *without* mass transit, *without* a balanced of jobs, housing and amenities, and *without* pedestrian-friendly streetscapes is too horrifying to imagine.

– August 25, 2008

Read more columns
by Jim Bacon at
www.baconsrebellion.com.