



To: Chair Takis Karantonis and Members of the County Board

CC: County Manager Mark Schwartz, Civic Federation

From: Eric Cassel, President, Crystal City Civic Association

Date: September 3, 2025

Subject: Concerns Regarding Adaptive Reuse Proposal for 1800 and 1901 S. Bell Street

Dear Chair Karantonis and Members of the County Board,

The Crystal City Civic Association (CCCA) is reviewing JBG Smith's adaptive reuse permit application for 1800 and 1901 S. Bell Street (Site Plan #56). As the applicant's full presentation and application details are not yet available, we cannot comment on specific elements of the proposal. However, our preliminary assessment identifies three critical concerns: the adaptive reuse process, impacts on the Library and Entertainment District, and adherence to sound planning practices.

1. Imbalanced Benefits in the Adaptive Reuse Process.

The County's Adaptive Reuse policy successfully repurposes office buildings into residential units, revitalizing the housing and office stock. However, the current framework disproportionately benefits applicants while undermining Crystal City Sector Plan (CCSP) objectives. For instance, the proposed reuse of 1901 S. Bell Street conflicts with plans to demolish the building to create Center Park, a key CCSP component. Approval of this adaptive reuse would delay or eliminate Center Park until the end of 1901 S. Bell's proposed useful life, compromising long-term community goals.

2. Impacts on the Library and Entertainment District.

We were anticipating a library of approximately 8,000-10,000 sq ft at 1901 S Bell Street for 10 years as part of the 1900 Crystal Drive and 2001 20th Street site plans community benefits. The CCCA has consistently advocated for a Crystal City branch library at 1800 S. Bell Street, a prime location within the CCSP-designated Entertainment District. CCSP called for cultural resources in the heart of the Entertainment District and specifically cited: *"Careful coordination within project phasing will be required to ensure these resources are provided and delivered in a timely manner. The principal desires for future cultural elements within the Master Plan include:*

- *Two 125-seat black box theaters...*
- *One 200-250 seat rectangular proscenium theater...*

The proposed adaptive reuse for solely residential purposes risks eliminating opportunities for a library and cultural facilities, such as the Synetic Theatre at 1800 S. Bell. Without these amenities, the Entertainment District vision outlined in the CCSP will remain unrealized, depriving the community of critical cultural and civic resources.

3. Neglect of Sound Planning Practices.

Effective planning anticipates future community needs and incorporates public input to address them. The current proposal overlooks key considerations, such as pick-up and drop-off (PUDO) logistics, and fails to align with CCSP objectives. While adaptive reuse unlocks value in underutilized office buildings, applicants must be required to address sector plan goals to ensure balanced community benefits.

Recommendations

The CCCA urges the County Board to ensure that any approval of this adaptive reuse proposal addresses the following:

- **Library Funding and Location:** Utilize the allocated library funds and prioritize 1800 S. Bell Street or an alternative site for a Crystal City branch library.
- **Theater Space:** Reactivate the Synetic Theatre space at 1800 S. Bell Street, aligning with the CCSP's cultural resource objectives.
- **Center Park:** Ensure the adaptive reuse of 1901 S. Bell Street does not preclude the timely development of Center Park.

The CCCA welcomes the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Board and County staff. Given the complexity of this project compared to prior adaptive reuse efforts, early engagement is critical to ensure a streamlined review process that balances community and applicant interests.

Sincerely,

Eric Cassel

President, Crystal City Civic Association

Background Appendix:

1800 S. Bell Street

Constructed in the 1960s as an office building, 1800 S. Bell Street (Site Plan #56, not listed on the County website) hosts the Synetic Theatre, a key cultural resource since 2010. The CCSP (p. 108) envisions cultural facilities, including black box and proscenium theaters,

within the Entertainment District. While we support adaptive reuse, we oppose converting the entire building to residential use (up to 129 units) without preserving space for cultural purposes. The proposed use of the theater space is unclear and must be addressed as part of the approval process.

1901 S. Bell Street (Site Plans #46, #421, and PDSP #454):

Approved on March 21, 2020, PDSP Site Plan #454 for 1900 Crystal Drive, 101 S. 12th Street, and 233 23rd Street included community benefits such as a 45,000 sq. ft. easement and \$300,000 for Center Park planning, alongside 7,200 sq. ft. of rent-free community space at 1901 S. Bell Street for 20 years, intended for a public library. **Library Update:** For a decade, the CCCA anticipated an 8,000–10,000 sq. ft. library at 1901 S. Bell Street. In March 2024, the County deemed fit-out costs excessive, securing \$5.8 million from JBG Smith for an alternative library location. These funds remain on hold.

Center Park: The CCSP (p. 36, 81) envisions Center Park (74,200 sq. ft.) at Clark-Bell and 20th Streets as Crystal City’s civic centerpiece, supporting events, recreation, and daily activities. Adaptive reuse of 1901 S. Bell Street must not hinder this critical open space development. We appreciate your attention to these concerns and look forward to collaborating to ensure this project aligns with the CCSP and serves the Crystal City community effectively.