

Dear County Board,

At our September 30 meeting, the Crystal and Pentagon Cities Council (CPCC) reviewed the proposed adaptive reuse projects at 1800 and 1901 South Bell Streets in Crystal City. These projects are the second pair of office to residential conversions within the purview Crystal City Sector Plan (CCSP) since the County adopted its adaptive reuse policy. The CPCC sent a letter regarding the first project, at 2100 and 2200, supporting the conceptual conversions but requesting more clarity from the Board in how it will balance the need to address office vacancy rates and housing supply policies with its long term adopted plans. The Board approved those projects and included an agreement with JBG to identify a vision for the Crystal City Underground.

Ultimately beneficial, these new projects raise similar questions of balance in achieving the goals of the Plan. The CCSP includes the vision principle of a “full mix of uses typical of a complete, urban community” and the goal to “ensure Crystal City’s long-term economic viability.” Converting an underutilized office building into needed-residential fits those purposes. However, the CCSP also includes the principle of “Very high quality public parks that are accessible to all” and elements specific to the block at hand that are, when taken literally, not in alignment with the proposed use. It further includes goals relating to important cultural amenities, which the County has yet to identify pathways to achievement for. The Board will again need to weigh how to balance different elements of long term plans and the County’s current policy priorities.

Element 3.3.2 of the CCSP envisions the block that includes 1800 and 1901 South Bell Streets to be part of a “Central Business District”. Renderings show 1800 South Bell Street, along with the existing and newly renovated Marriott hotel next door, replaced by one much larger building. Allowing adaptive reuse of the current building would presumably delay the eventual achievement of this new structure. Element 3.7.4 of the CCSP calls for doubling the size of the existing Center Park, so it would be the largest park in the neighborhood and “the centerpiece of Crystal City.” The expanded park would replace 1901 South Bell, though the CCSP offers no details how this currently privately owned space could be converted to public use. The Board reaffirmed this block plan, including the expanded park, as recently as 2019 with the approval of the 1900 Crystal Drive project. While it is difficult to know whether and when the economic circumstances will exist to facilitate its creation, this project would likely preclude achieving the expanded park until the longer term.

At the same time, replacing outdated office buildings that are unlikely to be replaced in accordance with the CCSP anytime in the near future brings significant benefits to the neighborhood through increased housing, economic activity for local businesses, and

revenue for the County. More foot traffic and ground floor retail will better engage a block adjacent to a Metro stop and several hotels.

The CPCC did not reach a conclusion in our meeting on how to best address these tradeoffs. The market conditions that would allow for the more dense building at 1800 South Bell are also unlikely to occur anytime soon. It is better for the overall goals of the CCSP that these buildings be fully occupied than to sit dormant for an extended period of time. However, when compared with the planned density and community amenities that may be achievable in the long term, the Board must weigh balancing the proposed relatively less efficient uses of this land for the near future. The Board would likely significantly lengthen the time it takes to achieve certain goals of the CCSP by accepting these plans without adopting alternate ways of achieving those goals.

Given the large number of other aging office buildings in Pentagon and Crystal Cities that could be converted to residential instead of replaced as envisioned by the CCSP, the Board should consider what mechanisms are available to continue moving in the direction envisioned by the Plan and how the continued approval of adaptive reuse applications interplay with office leasing dynamics and traditional site plans. Crystal City residents have long expressed a desire for more open space and other community amenities, especially those called for in element 3.9.4 of the CCSP. These include a library that had been originally funded for a build-out and planned for 1901 South Bell but appears indefinitely delayed due to a lack of identified ongoing operational funding and a replacement for the loss of Synetic Theater as a cultural draw to the neighborhood. If it is possible to use the consideration of this adaptive reuse proposal to coordinate achievement of additional cultural draws to Crystal City, the Board should seize the opportunity to do so.

The Board should also contemplate how increased tax revenues achieved from conversion projects will be reinvested in expanded public space and community amenities for the surrounding area thereby bringing the tradeoffs between the short and long term priorities into better balance. The county applies a Tax Increment Financing district in this area and should ensure that revenues from that program are directed within the areas subject to the Sector Plan.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ben D'Avanzo, Chair

Robert Vaught, Vice-Chair