

Lauraville Urban Renewal Plan Community Review Panel

Dear Chairman Costello and Committee Members,

The Lauraville Business District URP Community Review Panel (CRP) offers the following input on the Harford Road Overlay District proposal, Council Bill 24-0544. We request this input be considered in the Committee's deliberations on this bill.

To begin, we understand that after your Committee's consideration the Bill will go to City Council for a joint 1st and 2nd Reader to protect the restrictions in the Lauraville URP, before it's expiration in October.

This is not the case. Despite Councilman Dorsey's assurance as recently as our June meeting, shortly before the introduction of the Bill, the majority of the use restrictions in the URP are not retained, nor are the design and signage requirements.

We would like the Committee to know there was no previous discussion with Councilman Dorsey regarding this Bill. To the contrary, we have been in conversation with the Councilman since 2022 regarding his "streamlining" our 2022 URP update, approved by the Planning and Law Departments. Prior to advancing it. Our concern is this speeded up process is taken unnecessarily, as there is little to no imprint of the URP on the Bill.

We also note there have been no recommendations received from DHCD; BDC or DOT. Perhaps if not for the abbreviated process, more recommendations would be forthcoming, particularly from DHCD, as the Planning Commission commented in their recommendation " if enacted could create a large demand for staff in Zoning Administration and Zoning Enforcement".

As of 9/5/2024, Zoning Administration senior staff were unaware of the Bill.

We understand the logic of increased population density as a means to advance business growth and increase potential customers along the Harford Road corridor, however we do not believe this Bill is the best way to achieve the stated goal of "increase customer supply to businesses along the Harford Road corridor".

We believe these efforts should be more focused on increasing both business growth and residential density on Harford Road, rather than extending several hundred feet into the neighboring communities, a distance that has been questioned in the Planning Commission's meeting (the only previous one open to public comment) and in increasingly frequent community discussions.

With a few exceptions, the entirety of the Harford Rd. corridor within this Bill is OR-1 and C1 through C-3, therefore allowing multi-family conversion of SF dwellings.

Within the Lauraville URP Land Use area, there has been little use of this right. To our knowledge, only two SF dwellings (4706 and 4906 Harford) have been converted to, or are becoming, multi-family, and two large residential complexes are being built (4511-27 Harford and 5717-5723 Harford) - all in the last year. Prior to this, only 1 property (4801 Harford) has utilized this zoning allowance since its adoption.

How Businesses and Business Corridors Thrive:

To be competitive and provide businesses a new start, we believe what is needed is providing access to incentives such as ones utilized through the Central Baltimore Partnership and in "Pigtown".

This view seems to be supported in the proposed Comprehensive Plan update, as the corridor and surrounding neighborhoods are solidly within the "Middle Neighborhood" framework, definitions and strategies outlined in the Plan. Council Bill 24-0544 appears to conflict with these goals, despite being included on the Proposed Land Use Map.

Until such a time that residential density and business incentives are increased on Harford Rd, we are not convinced that increasing density deeper into the neighborhood, will be a benefit. Particularly in that the business models of online purchasing have dramatically altered commerce and the need for physical storefronts. We respectfully suggest the need for careful consideration for alteration of stable neighborhoods and that impact on our businesses and on the work of the Hamilton-Lauraville Main Street . It should be noted that, to date, the Hamilton-Lauraville Main Street is one of the most successful Main Street programs in Baltimore with the largest # of business and lowest vacancies, above or equal to Fells Point and Federal Hill.

Furthermore, we question why, in the proposed Comprehensive Plan update, this is the only area of Baltimore with such a significant number of properties changed to high density. We also note that in adjacent Council District 14, the proposed change is from high to low density, in what appears to be the 2nd largest change in Baltimore, and a 3rd area of substantial change, Council District 4 combines R-7 through R-1 properties to be medium density.

In contrast, the nearby Belair Rd. corridor, also from Argonne/Parkside Dr. to the City line, remains residential low density. It comprises a remarkably similar mix of residential and commercial zoning with both detached and attached residences (R-6 to R-3) to the Harford Road Overlay area,

We appreciate that the proposed Overlay District recognizes the value of restricting certain types of uses, as we have found this one of the primary benefits of the current URP.

However, not included are restrictions contained in the current URP and more specifically in the 2022 URP revision that we believe had Councilman Dorsey's support and has been discussed with him multiple times. We ask that they be considered in the Overlay District, either as relating specifically to the URP area, or the entirety of the overlay, as best meets the Councilman's goals.

We are also concerned with the elimination of URP design requirements, including minimum sidewalk widths and signage types, size and quantity amongst others that differ from the Design and Sign Manuals.

The biggest value of the current Lauraville URP is that it recognizes the existence of the CRP, includes provision for permits in the URP area to be provided to the CRP, and affords the CRP the opportunity to provide input before a final permit decision is made. We have found the CRP a valuable forum not only for ensuring compliance with the URP but also as a standing body of representatives from the neighborhoods, the business district and HLMS. This broad representation ensures that the CRP has a uniquely balanced approach to addressing the needs of both the neighborhoods and the business community. The concerns of Community Associations within the URP are communicated directly to the CRP, ensuring a high degree of community engagement in decisions that directly affect their neighborhoods.

The CRP meets regularly, is familiar with the businesses and nature of the area, has existing relationships with residents, businesses, neighborhood associations and Main Street. It has an established process for reviewing and crafting recommendations on proposed changes and fosters Community involvement and oversight. This engagement model could prove an asset to the many other communities included and impacted by the proposed Bill, and a partner with City Agencies also impacted by the Bill.

Our strongest recommended changes to this proposed overlay district are that at a minimum,

1. Include the Uses and Design/Sign negotiated with the Councilman.
2. Recognize the existence of the Lauraville CRP and preserve the CRP permit review process. Ideally it could expand CRP coverage to include the entire corridor. This may be unwieldy for one body, but three or four such entities could be established and recognized for the Lauraville, Hamilton, Hamilton-Northern Parkway, and Northern Parkway-City Line areas.

We hope to continue work with Baltimore City and ideally the Planning Department, to achieve the potential of this area of Baltimore to the benefit of the entire city.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this input on the planned overlay district.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of the Lauraville Community Review Panel

Brian Tetreault, Chairperson
Sue Kessel, Vice Chairperson

John Harris, Vice Chairperson
Janelle Cousino, Secretary