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Concerns expressed about public input on transit center

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Officials released the latest version of plans for the Silver Spring transit center last week, which sparked some debate over how much public input will be accepted on the project.

"I'm concerned about the openness of the process," said Dale Tibbitts of Silver Spring at a meeting last week. After the meeting, he said, "this is the first time we've had anybody say anything to us since" officials released their plans in June.

Since the last public display of the transit center designs, little has changed, but officials have further solidified how a hiker-biker path and the proposed cross-county light rail, known as the Purple Line, would be located at the transit center. A private office complex that will be built atop the Metro land will decrease in size by 50,000 square feet.

County and Metro planners said that while the project is more complex because there are private developers involved, there will be plenty of time for public input on the \$162 million project.

Silver Spring residents were included in much of the early redevelopment meetings, which resulted in the plans for the Downtown Silver Spring project and the original plans for the transit center.

The plans for the transit center bring together all modes of mass transit to the Silver Spring Metro. Officials hoped that by 2004, the Metro rail station, which already houses Metro and Ride On buses, would also have room for taxis, the MARC commuter train and a Greyhound bus station.

The transit center changed in concept last year when Metro officials agreed to allow developers to build above Metro's land. Several developers will bring a 14-story apartment building, a 14-story hotel, and an 11-story, 200,000 square-foot office building.

Kassa Seyoum, a county engineer, said before the project can begin, Metro, the county and the developer must finalize their terms, which could optimistically happen in July. Once the terms are complete, he said, officials expect the project to take three to three and a half years to finish.

Seyoum said that because there is a private developer on the project now, the project has become more complex and those negotiations take time. Also, the county is finalizing its deals with construction contractors for its part of the transit center.

"I'm trying to balance my information" to the neighbors, Seyoum said, "but it's still in negotiation."

Robert Hicks, who chairs a county committee on Silver Spring transportation, said he's unconcerned about the level of communication.

"There has been a pretty good-faith effort put forth on the side of the county," Hicks said. "We realize that this takes time. We're not going to get a briefing every month; there's a lot of negotiations going on," Hicks said.

Image

