

Shaping the City

By Roger K. Lewis, *Washington Post* Columnist
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Southeast D.C. Project Asked Too Much of the Private Sector

Asking the private sector to plan and carry out the redevelopment of large, publicly owned tracts of land might seem like a good idea, but it can be the wrong idea. Sometimes cities themselves must do the work and shoulder the responsibility for planning new neighborhoods.

*This is exactly what I told Montgomery County about the **Woodmont Triangle** in Bethesda. I said individual buildings are not projects — the neighborhood is the project. Each building is a piece of a larger puzzle.*

For example, the public realm is the reason to have an “Amenity Fund.” Undergrounding utilities one building at a time and financing it with private money is double-dumb -- it is the most expensive way to do the work and the most expensive way to finance it!

Government’s failure to do their job slows good development and raises costs to both the public and private sectors (in painfully detailed time-consuming “review and approval.”)

Poplar Point, 110 acres of mostly public land in Ward 8 on the east side of the Anacostia River, across from Nationals Park, is a case in point.



Several years ago, the National Park Service agreed to convey Poplar Point's federally owned riverfront parkland to the D.C. government. The District sponsored a competition to select a master plan and master developer that would finance front-end site development. The theory was that return on that investment would be generated through greatly increased value and the sale of developed parcels.

In 2007, the city invited three well-qualified real estate development firms to submit detailed proposals. Each set forth a plan showing streets, blocks and major open spaces, as well as specific functions, building types and special features.

Last February, the city chose Clark Realty Capital and its ambitious \$2.5 billion plan. The Clark plan would impose a new urban pattern, a dense mix of mid-rise housing, office buildings, retail, restaurants, cultural facilities and recreational venues, including a possible soccer stadium for D.C. United. At its heart was a grand waterfront park.

But the boldest element was a very expensive piece of infrastructure: a three-block-long deck spanning Interstate 295 to visually and functionally unite historic Anacostia and a redeveloped Poplar Point.

Last month, Clark announced that it was dropping out. A year of dreadful market and economic conditions made the company want to change the terms of the deal. It reportedly asked the District to take on the front-end financial obligations and risks as an investment partner, with Clark to receive a fee as development manager. The District declined. **Although Clark's decision to drop out surprised many, it was inevitable.**

The company's withdrawal illuminates the fallacies of the District's Poplar Point strategy. Given the economic climate, the developer was asked to predict, promise and risk too much. It **was unrealistic** to demand a visionary program and plan whose feasibility was questionable from the outset and then **expect the developer to provide all the financing.**

Now the process is back to square one, or perhaps square two -- some previous or ongoing work may prove useful. For example, an environmental impact study, required as a condition for conveying the federal land to the District, is underway and should be completed.

But the **city** should not conduct another competition. It **should prepare and adopt its own framework plan of streets, blocks, civic spaces, parks and key public facilities.** This is the kind of plan for the city that Pierre L'Enfant created at the end of the 18th century, and it's a planning tradition that should continue.

This is exactly what I explain in detail on my web page for the [Woodmont Triangle](#)

Because it establishes the pattern and character of the public realm for generations, an urban framework plan must **embody a long-term vision. It must incorporate design criteria and guidelines governing the form of development** -- building mass and height, density and streetscape design -- and flexibly accommodate many land uses.

Be very wary of being too mathematically specific. Elevators are vertical Metro-rail. The real priority is to maximize the sources and destinations of pedestrians within walking distance of rail stations. Design and experience of place is key. The vision plan — pictures and stories — provides the framework for an efficient design-review process to encourage creative submissions by the private sector. Too many numbers are artificially confining and will do more harm than good.

With such a plan, private and public investments can produce projects block by block, street by street, parcel by parcel. Inevitably, market and financial conditions, not preconceived schedules, determine the pace and type of development.

Over time, as needs and circumstances evolve, well-conceived framework plans can be tweaked. Recall that the District closed G Street NW between Sixth and Seventh streets to accommodate the Verizon Center, an arena too large to fit on a single block.

L'Enfant might complain, but his plan was able to absorb loss of a block-long segment of G Street without unduly compromising street connections and functions.

Fortunately, the District's planning professionals and consultants know how to plan. And they know that effective plans result from collaboration between planners and stakeholders -- local residents, civic institutions, government officials, property owners and businesses.

As part of the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, launched under Mayor Anthony A. Williams, the D.C. Office of Planning drafted a preliminary Poplar Point plan a few years ago. The office also prepared a framework plan for Hill East Waterfront, a new neighborhood on the west bank of the river, around D.C. General Hospital. Both of these involved stakeholder collaboration.

Poplar Point needs to be developed collaboratively, and the private sector will play a large part in that development. But **let the District, not private developers, craft Poplar Point's framework plan.**

And rationally and efficiently fund improving the public realm. The private development will repay them in spades.

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