

Silver Spring Design Advisory Panel

Meeting Minutes

PROJECT: **Blairs Block F2/G**

DATE: July 23, 2026

Attendance:

Panel

Bill Bonstra

Alice Enz

Praj Kasbekar

Paul Mortensen, Ex-Officio

Staff

Atul Sharma, Design, Placemaking and Policy (DPP) Division

Sandra Pereira, Urban Design Supervisor, Design, Placemaking, and Policy (DPP) Division

Grace Bogdan, Planner IV, DPP

Natasha Fahim, Planner III, DPP

Applicant Team

Chris Ruhlen, Lerch Early and Brewer

Bill Kominers, Lerch Early and Brewer

Kate Sipos, Tower Companies

Patrick Leuger, Tower Companies

Fiver Soraruf, Design Collective

Eric Wohnsigl, Design Collective

Emily Sales, Design Collective

Alyse Talbot, Design Collective

Peng Gu, Surrounds Landscaping

Ian Duke, VIKa

Discussion Points:

Staff: This Project is an amendment to a previously approved project, the Blairs Master Plan, which is grandfathered under the old zoning code. There will be no public benefits or consideration of design excellence points for the Project, however the DAP should review for conformance with the Silver Spring Downtown and Adjacent Communities Plan and Design Guidelines, and provide any additional comments for the Project to incorporate through regulatory review.



Panel:

General

- What was the original height of the master plan?
 - *Applicant Response: Approximately 180'*
- What is the geothermal green area north of the proposed building?
 - *Applicant Response: It is something we are exploring now and may be subsurface.*
- It is an exciting project, I like the ties that you have created to the Pearl but also the original buildings, a collision of form so to speak. I visited the site and saw that there are existing single-family homes across Eastern Avenue so I think this is compatible to the surrounding homes and the mid-rise buildings across Blair Mills Road.

Eastern Avenue / Blair Mill Road

- What makes that green strip on Eastern Avenue?
 - *Applicant Response: There is a 20-foot setback from Eastern Avenue and so we are filling that area with bioretention and landscaping. There are two levels of sidewalk, one along Eastern Avenue and one that is closer to the building above the slope. We are south facing so we would like to fill the space with plantings to soften the space and feel welcome.*
- Will there be access to the amenity spaces from the south side? On Eastern Avenue?
 - *Applicant Response: We are going to have walk up units on Blair Mill Road and at the eastern end we will have some stoops.*
 - What about Eastern Avenue? Will there be access into the amenity space from there? I think the access on Blair Mill Road is great and successful but it makes me want more porosity on Eastern Avenue that makes it more accessible for residents.
 - *We can look into giving card swipe access, we just need to ensure visibility and security.*
- Could the fitness center be moved to one side and not connected on each side to have that porosity?
 - *Applicant Response: One thing this drawing isn't showing is the significant grade change. It is about 12 feet up off the roads.*
 - A previous project that I've worked on had a similar grade difficulty, and just having the ability to view with a patio or terrace is helpful.
- The entry doesn't bother me that much, but the high sidewalk along Eastern Avenue is a bit linear and so I wonder if the sidewalk can be more bucolic or meandering to play that up as a public amenity with the plantings that you had described.
 - *Applicant Response: I understand, to create a different feeling for each pathway?*
 - Yes, that ties into the great pedestrian experience that you are creating above.

Pedestrian Connection & Central Open Space

- I had some thoughts about the massing, the green space doesn't quite connect to the west. Are there cars in the mews?

- *Applicant Response: No, it's pedestrian only from Eastern Avenue and crosses the internal street (High Park Lane). We are working on designing a flush connection if possible.*
- I recall this project being presented back in 2013 and the green space was a huge matter of discussion. The major goal of this development then was to make these important connections. I think from a high view, I like this plan and the intention of keeping these connections, so I commend you for keeping with that theme.
- What is the user's experience as they are walking through that connection, I wouldn't want it to be static with a bunch of hardscape.
 - *Applicant Response: Here is a rendering showing the entrance from Eastern Avenue, we've created spaces in the middle of the connection for tree plantings and spaces to reflect and sit along the space. There are also openings into the courtyards of other existing buildings and residences. It is a short passage between these buildings, approximately 40 second walk and we designed the space with that in mind.*
- It needs to be very inviting and very "public" from each end so that the general public feels comfortable walking through the mews.
- Can you talk a little bit about the central open space and the timeline of that being improved?
 - *Applicant Response: Block E is already approved as part of the larger Master Plan. That being said we do not have an exact timeline and it is not moving concurrently with this project. It will likely be at least a number of years after. It will likely be tied to that future building.*
 - That makes sense. This was helpful to see the spaces, I feel good about the design of the passage way and a celebrated connection and a recommendation of the Master Plan. Certainly, the modified central park space north of the new building will be important in the future.
 - As for articulation, I think its important to see how these units look along the connection.
- One of the important pieces, understanding that we don't know what will happen in the future, is that this diagram implies directionality. This space is now a very centralized space. Thinking about programming of the space is important moving forward so we don't lose the elements of the Master Plan. Before, it was more about transition and fingers through. Now with the one connection, it puts more emphasis on creating a special moment in that space. I know you aren't there yet, but its most important moving forward. How do we think about this holistically.
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, that is something we do want to focus on. Tower Companies is very sustainability focused and we carefully think about our open spaces. It is very well used now, and it is important to us to keep it that way.*
 - I noticed the space was very well used when I visited this morning.

High Park Lane

- I think the massing moves are really successful and appreciate everything that was done there with the Pearl as well. A couple of comments on the ground floor plan: How does this corner (High Park Lane near loading) relate? And I know there are no backs on

this building but is there any way to get something more active on this corner? It feels like a missed opportunity here. Not now, but down the line it will be a key moment.

- (staff) High Park Lane has been discussed heavily at the staff level. It is the only street that connects through and is a major gateway into the site.
- I do think one problem is that with the many frontages it is hard to know where the obvious entry of the building is.
- I think you can solve the back, on High Park Lane, easily and move the loading off the corner and screen that. We've seen successful screenings recently in downtown Silver Spring, such as the Tastee Diner site.
- Where do the guests come from when they drive or walk?
 - *Applicant Response: They can do both, and we will have street parking along High Park Lane. Another element that we are doing but not showing here is both sides of the street with screening and plantings.*
 - (staff) Where does the planting and curbside treatment start?
 - *It is around the front entry*
 - (staff) I wonder if that could start much earlier to Blair Mill Road rather than the geothermal green. I'm not saying change the width rather the treatment to soften the utility areas of the street. Treating this whole space as for the pedestrian rather than the cars would be a simple way within the existing footprint. You would also have some design freedom in this triangular area to feel more spatial than a street and setback that is more orthogonal. More of a woonerf type feel.
- There is way more attention given on this portion of High Park Lane and Blair Mill Road. A lot of pedestrians use this portion of the street and I think this design is a bit of a disservice to the existing patterns. Is there anything you can do to improve the utility and diminish the back of house feel of this area?
 - *Applicant Response: I'm sure once we really get into the design, this will be improved and will take great care. Tower Companies office enters this way so they have a personal interest in making this a great gateway.*
- High Park Lane has to be handled correctly and that's tough because that's where the parking and the loading comes in and the community front.

Materiality

- I do have one final comment regarding the materiality. The Pearl is really successful in the material variation, and this building is proposing really long facades. Revit elevations are very monochromatic and so I take it with a grain of salt, but I encourage you to think about incorporating the variation. Particularly for buildings of this size, the color choice is very important. Incorporating the warm elements similar to the Pearl will help the building skin.
- That joint doesn't really do justice at the fitness space. Is this really necessary?
 - *Applicant Response: It is unfortunately.*
 - I kind of like it.
 - Well, you could clip it and lose a unit at the corner, it's a tough corner.
- Is the fitness center a mass timber feel?
 - *Applicant Response: Yes, that is the initial thought.*