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Montgomery County approves Donohoe Development's Bethesda project

Washington Business Journal - by [Sarah Krouse](#) Staff Reporter

Montgomery County planners approved Donohoe Development Co.'s 457-unit apartment building in Woodmont Triangle days before a moratorium on residential development takes effect.

The project, Woodmont Central, was originally scheduled to go before the planning board in July, after the county's moratorium on residential developments started July 1.

"They got all approvals they needed in on time," said Joshua Sloan, coordinator at the county's development review division who recommended the planning board approve Donohoe's site plan with some conditions. And though board member Amy Presley referred to Donohoe's need to get the approval quickly as "the elephant in the room," Sloan said the decision wasn't rushed. Sloan said the planners' response to the preliminary site plan was overdue because the board had requested an extension beyond the usual 90-day review period.

The residential moratorium, which would affect Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Clarksburg and Seneca Valley, was announced by the board June 8. It came after the board received results of the annual school test, which compares projected 2014 enrollment figures against classroom capacity in the county's public schools. The test showed that the number of students enrolled by 2014 was greater than the 120 percent cap set by the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance.

The development limitations, which only allow for subdivisions of three or fewer units or for retirement communities, were established to avoid putting schools over capacity with enrollment from new housing projects.

The residential component of Donohoe's project is actually part of the second and third phases of development, so its construction would likely begin after the ban, if it is lifted next July. The first phase of the development is a 91,612-square-foot, six-story retail and office building.

The 18-story, 462,160-square-foot residential and retail component would follow. Sloan said the residential phase was not likely to deliver for another five to six years.

At the time the moratorium was set, Donohoe President Peter Gartland said his project would likely make it before the board in advance of the moratorium, adding that the county's 2009-2011 growth policy conflicted with the development ban.

“The future of the county is in its walkable, transit-oriented areas,” Gartland said, echoing the growth policy’s findings that Montgomery County should focus on infill and transit-oriented, mixed-use developments. “We have faith the county will solve this problem because urban areas like Bethesda are where new development should be channeled,” he said.

The moratorium will likely last until next year’s review unless the identified areas can show a projected drop in enrollment or an ability to host more students. School expansions may be considered in the fall and would be funded by Montgomery County’s capital improvements program.

The board approved the project with a 3-2 vote but with several conditions. The project must achieve a Silver LEED rating and the developer must adjust height limitations, building setbacks, public space and retail frontage. Northwest, Northwood, Paint Branch, Quince Orchard, Rockville, Wheaton, Walter Johnson, Whitman and Richard Montgomery were also identified as areas that will be overcrowded by more than 105 percent in 2014. Developers hoping for subdivision approval in those areas will have to pay a fee.

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