

What will it take to finally get the Skyland Project Open?

Developers Talk 2013 Opening, Residents Question Delays

ARTICLE BY HUNTER GORINSON | PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

For the past seven-and-a-half years, residents of Ward 7's Hillcrest community have anxiously awaited the District-sponsored transformation of a modest strip mall at Good Hope Rd. and Alabama Ave., SE, into a new mixed-use, mixed-income development named the Skyland Town Center. Now, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development's (DMPED) team of choice for the project -- The Rappaport Companies, William C. Smith & Co., Harrison Malone Development and the Marshall Heights Community Development Organization -- believes that the project will finally break ground in late 2011, despite a rash of lawsuits that threaten delay it even further. For local residents, however, that date can't come quickly enough.

According to Steve Green of William C. Smith & Co., himself a former DMPED official, the would-be developers of the Skyland Town Center

are tentatively scheduled to complete both the Planned Unit Development (PUD) and land disposition processes with the District government this coming fall. That means work on Skyland's sprawling 280,000 square feet of retail space -- including a "big box" retail anchor slated to be either a Wal-Mart or Target -- and 468 condominiums could begin as soon as the fall of 2011 and open for business some two years later.

That timeline, however, could be complicated by the fact that DMPED and the now-defunct National Capital Revitalization Corporation (NCRC) acquired the majority of the Town Center's 18.7 acres via the legally murky tactic of eminent domain. Though the process of obtaining the Skyland Shopping Center parcels that currently host a cadre of liquor stores, fast food joints, local retailers of sundry goods and street vendors began more than five years ago, DC Attorney General Peter Nickles is still combating nine lawsuits brought

by land owners and commercial tenants whose places of business would be demolished to make way for the project. While the DMPED's interests were upheld in initial rulings and \$40 million in financing has been approved to get the Town Center in the ground as quickly as possible, two litigants are currently appealing their cases on constitutional grounds, while the remainder await final judgment.

"We anticipate decisions...before the end of the year that should hopefully uphold the validity of the takings," said Nickles.

"Once the District's authority to take the Skyland properties has been confirmed by the courts, an amount of just compensation that the District must pay for the takings must still be determined by jury trial or resolved by settlement," he said.

While the development team believes by the time they are ready to start construction, all the outstanding lawsuits will have been decided, the inability of the Fenty administration and DMPED to seal the deal on Skyland is, for some,

indicative of a larger problem.

"You could say that this project has been in the works for almost 25 years... [and] we've probably come closer to getting the shopping center under [former DC mayor] Tony Williams," said At-Large City Councilmember and Chair of the Council's Committee on Economic Development, Kwame Brown. "We were able to go through the RFP process through Tony Williams and we were able to get a developer selected through Tony Williams."

"[The Council has] done everything we could do through the legislative process, from making sure that the money was there to making sure that the land disposition agreement was signed and passed," he continued. "We even moved some of this in emergency because it was an emergency a year ago. The community is frustrated...If it was up to them, they would just tear down the buildings and, if the city wins, we'll be further along in the process. If the city doesn't win, then there will be a [settlement] cost associated with it and some people don't care what the cost is. They think -- and I think -- that the city is obligated to get this project done."



Discount Mart manager Shelia Barnes: "Some people could be offered the chance to go to a Wal-Mart or Target and they'd still come here."

A Rocky Road to Development

Councilmember Brown is not alone in that sentiment. Many want to see Skyland done -- and done right. Though representatives of the development team have personally met with multiple local governing bodies, including the ANC7B, ANC8A, ANC8B, the Hillcrest Community Civic Association (HCCA), and residents of nearby Akron Place and Fort Baker Drive, more than a dozen times over the past two years, many residents of the greater Skyland area feel left out of, not to mention exasperated by, the protracted planning process and seemingly endless string of delays.

Ken Davis, who currently chairs the ANC7B's Skyland Committee and lives only a few hundred yards away from the site, described the development team's many presentations as "drive-by" without options that can be decided upon by the community itself.





Muhammad Rashid manning his stall at the planned site of the Skyland Town Center.

“In my view, the community urgently wants improvements to the Skyland Shopping Center. However, the currently proposed high housing density, lack of buffering to the residential neighborhoods, unknown environmental impacts, undefined traffic issues, and the city’s failure to present a generally understandable design make this project unacceptable to the community,” said Davis.

Meanwhile, Karen Williams, President of the HCCA, which has also met repeatedly with the development team, simply thinks that process has sapped an unreasonable amount of time and energy out of those who once championed it.

“We’re experiencing overall frustration with the project, since it has taken so long to come to fruition. They can build [Nationals Park] in a few years and we’ve been trying to get something like this done for the past twenty,” she said.

“If you know the area, you know there’s no real shopping area and we like to spend our dollars in our city,” she continued, noting that many area residents make the trek to Virginia or Prince George’s County due to a lack of suitable outlets in Ward 7. “Now, a lot of the people who started working on this project are getting so old they feel that they won’t be able to use it.”



A small cadre of street vendors on the job at the Skyland Shopping Center.

A New and Improved Hillcrest?

There is also some trepidation from another contingent of Hillcrest residents who feel that the Skyland Town Center may take away hundreds of jobs from community they’ve known since childhood and indelibly change its character. At least two of the Skyland Shopping Center’s current tenants, Field’s Music and Discount Mart (whose owner, Sammy Franco, is one of the appellants currently contesting the Attorney General for possession of his storefront), have been community staples for three decades.

Discount Mart’s longtime manager, Shelia Barnes, has seen the expansive Alabama Avenue shop emerge as her community’s one-stop shop for everything from school uniforms to shampoo – and watched it maintain its foothold even as a new Safeway opened up directly across the street. To her, the presence of the family-owned neighborhood retailer can’t be matched by a chain store behemoth.

“I’ll have been here for 23 years,” said Barnes. “Some people could be offered the chance to go a Wal-Mart or Target and they’d still come here. We try to treat people like we’d like to be treated and I know some people who’ve been coming here since they were babies. I like working here very much.”

For their part, the Skyland Town Center’s development team has used the time lost by the confluence of legal

challenges and economic declines to re-jigger and refine their plans. Once the project is complete, they’re confident that the Skyland Town Center will represent a rebirth for the Hillcrest community, not unlike what happened in Columbia Heights following the opening of the similarly Target-centric DCUSA development.

“As the rezoning is set down in the next few months, we continue to work to obtain community support, specifically with the several community ANCs,” said Rappaport Companies President Gary Rappaport, noting that he and his colleagues have already provided updates to not only the residents of Hillcrest, but those throughout greater Wards 7 and 8 as well.

“Over time, Skyland’s design has changed from an all-retail development into the present proposed Town Center because the extra residential component sets a 24 hour, 7 day a week active environment. This added residential density will allow us a larger and more diverse group of retailers to choose from...Every retailer in this market knows about Skyland and is waiting for us to tell them who the anchor tenant will be and when we can actually build the development.”

For the citizens of Ward 7, and the past and future patrons of Skyland itself, that too remains the burning question.

For more information on Skyland Town Center, go to <http://www.skylandtown-center.com> ★

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