

July 13, 2021

To: Council President Hucker

All Council Members

Cc: County Executive Elrich

Re: Expedited Bill 27-21, Wheaton Regional Headquarters - Lease Approval

During discussion of Expedited Bill 27-21, Wheaton Regional Headquarters - Lease Approval, I wish to take the opportunity to remind the County Executive and County Councilmembers of an outstanding issue regarding this building: ongoing unleased retail and day care spaces. We appreciate the investment in Wheaton's revitalization with this LEED Platinum building and the goal of creating a vibrant town center. However, as the County takes legal responsibility for these spaces, there remains a major impediment to true revitalization of the area.

The GO/PHED meeting of October 20, 2020 addressed several of these issues and we are pleased to see some corrective actions being undertaken and/or planned.

However, if one of the main purposes of this investment was to spur economic development and provide additional amenities to the community, there remains a significant impediment to this goal: the currently unleased retail and day care spaces designated in this building.

While the hope was to attract some new businesses into the area as well as provide an "anchor" restaurant and new "local Wheaton flavor" retail in the approximately 12,000 square foot space on the Triangle Lane side of the building, the fact remains that there appears to be no real movement in leasing this space. While the recent pandemic has certainly changed the commercial rental environment, the feedback leasing agents seem to hear is the prohibitive "build out" costs involved in occupying the space. Additionally, the approximately 3,000 square foot area designated for a day care center also presents a similar impediment.

If the County Executive and Council wish to make the dream of revitalization come to fruition, it is imperative that some considerations be given to how to make the utilization of these spaces more attractive to for-profit and/or not-for-profit businesses. Are there some financial incentives that can be provided?

Please look at section 4.5 of the Lease entitled Retail Use and more specifically 4.5.3 where possible build-out is mentioned.....perhaps the Council can add some language providing incentives to prospective lessors?

An additional concern is the image the unleased commercial space represents to the community. How many additional years will these spaces remain vacant? Are there temporary uses that could benefit the community, while addressing the appropriate liability and safety concerns? Perhaps an "artist maker space" or a "temporary pop-up event space" or a county-sponsored incubator space? At least some artwork on the windows to cover up the empty construction space? In fact, the lease agreement you are approving today specifically states in Schedule One Merchandising Plan for Retail Space.... *"If a retail space is vacant for more than ninety (90) days, the County must provide a temporary, attractive display in the windows of the retail space on a topic that is of interest to the Wheaton community until such time as the space is leased or occupied..."*

Thank you again for helping to make the Wheaton Urban District an attractive destination and community gathering place. But to make it a true “revitalization” requires people, business, community and activities that truly provide value. A county building full of agencies and departments and empty unfinished spaces visible to the public, especially while telework is ongoing, does not provide the proper environment to make the Wheaton Urban District the desirable space we all seek.

Thank you again for approving the lease between the County/DGS and M-NCPPC. It is now truly the County’s responsibility to make these leasable spaces affordably available.

Please note, for the purposes of public testimony and due to timing, I am presenting this as a private citizen. However, this letter/testimony is being presented for approval to WUDAC at tonight’s monthly meeting and will be sent formally upon approval.

Respectfully,

Jim Epstein
Incoming Chair,
Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC)

Public Testimony spoken 2+ minutes

I am Jim Epstein and I wish to take this opportunity to remind the Councilmembers of an outstanding issue regarding this building: the ongoing unleased retail and day care spaces. We appreciate the investment in Wheaton's revitalization with this LEED Platinum building and the goal of creating a vibrant town center. However, as the County takes legal responsibility for these spaces, there remains a major impediment to true revitalization of the area.

While the recent pandemic has certainly changed the commercial rental environment, the feedback leasing agents seem to hear is the prohibitive "build out" costs involved in occupying the space. Additionally, the approximately 3,000 square foot area designated for a day care center also presents a similar impediment.

If the County Executive and Council wish to make the dream of revitalization come to fruition, it is imperative that some considerations be given to how to make the utilization of these spaces more attractive to for-profit and/or not-for-profit businesses. Are there some financial incentives that can be provided?

Please look at section 4.5 of the Lease entitled Retail Use and more specifically 4.5.3 where possible build-out is mentioned.....perhaps the Council can add some language providing incentives to prospective lessors?

An additional concern is the image the unleased commercial space represents to the community. How many additional years will these spaces remain vacant? Are there temporary uses that could benefit the community, while addressing the appropriate liability and safety concerns? Perhaps an "artist maker space" or a "temporary pop-up event space" or a county-sponsored incubator space? At least some artwork on the windows to cover up the empty construction space? In fact, the lease agreement you are approving later today specifically states in Schedule One Merchandising Plan for Retail Space.... *"If a retail space is vacant for more than ninety (90) days, the County must provide a temporary, attractive display in the windows of the retail space on a topic that is of interest to the Wheaton community until such time as the space is leased or occupied...."* Let's take this action now.

A county building full of agencies and departments and empty unfinished spaces visible to the public, especially while telework is ongoing, does not provide the proper environment to make the Wheaton Urban District the desirable space we all seek. Thank you again for approving the lease between the County/DGS and M-NCPPC. It is now truly the County's responsibility to make these leasable spaces affordably available.