

A betting man's wager on new mall

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OPINION
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The odds are growing against the 200,000-square-foot Shops at Brandywine Valley and the traffic gridlock the proposed shopping center is bound to create.

Under plans filed last year by developer Stoltz, the 44-acre site at the southwest corner of Concord Pike and Beaver Valley Road would include two large, two-story commercial buildings, one for grocer Whole Foods, plus a number of other businesses.

Since the intersection is already near its breaking point, some left-hand turns might have to be eliminated and traffic directed through the shopping center.

The plans are unpalatable to New Castle County planners, the Council of Civic Associations of Brandywine Hundred, many residents and civic groups, probably the Delaware Department of Transportation, and perhaps even to Woodlawn Trustees, owners of the land from which Stoltz has an option. The sentiment on New Castle County Council, which would have to make the final decision since a rezoning would be required, apparently also frowns on the idea.

What's happening behind the scenes are discussions on how to make the plans more in keeping with the Suburban Transition zoning that now exists. That might include some commercial space, housing and offices. New Castle County Councilman Bob Weiner thinks it would be a perfect site for a trauma center operated by Christiana Care, since no such full-service emergency hospital now exists in the northernmost part of the state.

The 44 acres are bordered by the Concord Pike, Beaver Valley Road, Ramsey or Thompson Bridge Road, and Rocky Run Parkway. Naamans Road coming from the east becomes Beaver Run Road to the west.

Up and down the Concord Pike are other shopping centers losing tenants. U.S. 202 has become more and more of a traffic headache. The affected intersection and roads around it are all but impassable between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Just what's needed: another 200,000 square feet of businesses in the area.

An official of Woodlawn Trustees believes the opposition makes it unlikely construction will proceed according to the original plans. Woodlawn is only indirectly involved in changes that might occur. Woodlawn, founded more than a century ago by William P. Bancroft, has preserved thousands of acres much along the Brandywine, and maintains many Wilmington rental units at affordable prices.

It has leased or sold some land for residential developments, community groups and commercial uses. This includes the site across Beaver Valley Road, which Woodlawn swapped for wooded land in Pennsylvania, and on which two large office buildings now stand. The tenants in one of those buildings have reportedly threatened to move back to Pennsylvania if the expected traffic crunch occurs.

It's no wonder that after a public hearing last October, the Department of Land Use found the exploratory plan unacceptable. Among the reasons it cited are that a zoning change is inappropriate at this time, preliminary plans did not indicate uses of individual buildings, the layout is unfriendly to pedestrians, the site is along scenic road corridors, that wetlands and a floodplain are involved, and that a historic circa-1895 "Eight Square School" is on the site. Planners also had "serious concerns about the wisdom of the [traffic] changes from the standpoints of safety, convenience and efficiency." Stoltz has until September to submit a revised preliminary plan.

Whatever is finally agreed to by the many public and private groups involved, I'd be willing to wager that there will be no 200,000-square-foot shopping center on the site.

Better uses must and will be found, along with improvement for the almost gridlocked intersection.

Harry Themal has been writing for The News Journal since 1959.