

June 10, 2003

Parkway Commons Rezoning Request

Today at noon I drove from city hall to Independence Square, then back out Columbia Pike to Mack Hatcher, around Mack Hatcher to Royal Oaks Boulevard, down Royal Oaks to Highway 96 East and back to city hall. I had to stop at 5 traffic lights. It took 22 minutes. Traffic was steady but moving.

From Independence Square south to Mack Hatcher is 2.9 miles. I counted 9 gas stations, 23 restaurants, 4 car dealerships, 2 car washes and a new convenience storage facility. I did not count all the other shops and businesses in this corridor. From Columbia Pike to Highway 96 East at Royal Oaks Boulevard is 3.7 miles. I didn't begin to count the gas stations, restaurants, car dealerships or other stores and businesses located at this activity center.

Within this small circle you will find seven major grocery stores, including two Krogers, Kmart, Goodys, Steinmart, Home Depot, and 84 Lumber. You will find new strip shopping centers, and others that are blighted or abandoned and in need of upgrading. You will also find vacant storefronts and a brand new gas station completely boarded up. And you will find our historic downtown, with it's own unique development opportunities and pressures. What you won't find are many open spaces and the open space that is left is not necessarily screaming to be developed. How much more convenience and how many more commercial strip centers do we need?

National retailers do not care about our quality of life. They care about profit. They blackmail us into following their design standards, rather than conforming to ours. They demand enormous, big box facilities pushed back from the street and fronted by a sea of asphalt that will never be filled. They create traffic by their very design and require us to use automobiles to reach them. If something bigger or more profitable becomes available, they walk away. WalMart, Kroger and Albertson's have walked away from buildings in this area. And we have let them. We make them clothe their buildings with brick, and plant a few trees to try to hide them from our view, but we don't require much else. The Highway 96 East corridor started this process and Cool Springs has perpetuated it. And if we don't change the model, we will continue to get more of the same. But these are design issues and not part of this request tonight.

The issue before us tonight is not to approve or deny a development called Parkway Commons. We are here to deal with the request of this applicant to change the land use zoning from Light Industrial to General Commercial. In essence, this applicant is asking the city to write him a blank check for this property, property which has arguably historic and economic significance in its current state, in the hope that he will be able to pull off Parkway Commons. This request comes with no guarantees.

The city has several commercial zoning options within our zoning ordinance. General Commercial is one of the most lenient versus Planned Commercial which is the most restrictive. Both of these zones will allow this concept to proceed with the single exception of a gas station, included in the Parkway Commons concept plan. Gas Stations are not permitted in Planned Commercial. Other uses not allowed in Planned Commercial zones are Automotive sales, Automotive supply, Automotive rental, Automotive repair, Car washes, Motorcycle sales, Building materials, Engine and motor repair, Convenience storage, Laboratories, Commercial printing, Coin operated laundries, Appliance repair and Retirement centers. Some of these are already permitted in Light Industrial zoning and all are permitted in General Commercial — we are being asked to open the door to any of these uses in the event that Parkway Commons doesn't happen just so they can have a gas station, now a requirement of Kroger, a national retailer. General Commercial is just as permissive as Light Industrial. Light Industrial may not be the most appropriate zoning for this site, but neither is General Commercial.

This applicant has numerous questions to answer and significant details to work out before our planning staff and the planning commission will allow Parkway Commons to move forward. I am not convinced that these conditions can be resolved to my satisfaction. Because of this, and other reasons, I cannot support the applicant's request for General Commercial Zoning. I am not willing to write that blank check.