

# Columbia & NT Zoning Key Characteristics & Issues

## Columbia as a Planned Community

On October 30, 1963, Jim Rouse announced that his company had acquired over 14,000 acres of land in Howard County and planned to build a new city. From the very beginning, Columbia was planned. From October 1963 through November 1964, Jim Rouse had a team of nationally known experts in a variety of disciplines research the various possibilities to develop a community which would best work for the people who would eventually live there.

Jim Rouse set four goals for the development of Columbia.

1. To build a complete city;
2. To respect the land;
3. To provide for the growth of people; and
4. To make a profit.

These goals guided all the planning and development for Columbia. In explaining what he meant by a complete city, Jim Rouse said: "There will be business and industry to establish a sound economic base, roughly 30,000 houses and apartments at rents and prices to match the income of all who work there. Provision has been made for schools and churches, for a library, college, hospital, concert halls, theaters, restaurants, hotels, offices and department stores. Like any real city of 100,000, Columbia will be economically diverse, poly-cultural, multi-faith and inter-racial."

These four goals were realized by a variety of means including development regulations (New Town zoning), covenants (there are many different covenants starting with the Columbia Association covenant and the various Village Covenants), and the creation of the Columbia Association. Looking back over the past 50 years since the founding of Columbia, one can see that the community was planned. Now the focus shifts to how to keep the Columbia of the future a planned community. Columbia is basically developed; the future will be redevelopment. Unfortunately there was no specific Plan for Columbia committed to paper. It is difficult to continue the plan, without knowing what exactly the plan was.

# Key Characteristics

- I. Goals – Columbia has goals to guide its development
  - a. Columbia was created with four goals in mind. These goals help guide Columbia’s planning and construction. The goals were met.
    - i. To build a complete city;
    - ii. To respect the land;
    - iii. To provide for the growth of people; and
    - iv. To make a profit.
  - b. The goals should still guide Columbia’s planning, but need to be modified as the future focus is on redevelopment.
    - i. To keep Columbia a complete city;
    - ii. To respect the land and to preserve Columbia’s unique open space system;
    - iii. To provide for the growth of people; and
    - iv. To provide an environment that allows businesses/industry to be successful.
  - c. Keep the modified goals to guide Columbia’s redevelopment.
- II. Open Space – At least 36% of the land is set aside as Open Space
  - a. Open space is broadly defined as those lands that provide for protection of the environment, recreational or public use. The Columbia open space is a key feature and highly valued. It serves both people and wildlife. Columbia’s open space is integrated into the community rather than having green space merely encircling the developed areas. The open space is spread through Columbia and not just around the periphery or in a few large areas. The open space is linked by parcels which serve both people and wildlife. The open space is mostly natural. Open space lands weave through the community like green ribbons and are predominantly characterized by their riparian character, as opposed to large expanses of open or flat parkland. Most steep slopes and stream valleys are preserved as open space. Columbia now has three manmade lakes, an extensive pathway system, playgrounds and parks and dedicated natural areas allowing habitats for birds, waterfowl and other animals. Columbia Association owns and maintains the vast majority of the open space, ensuring that people have the opportunity to experience nature.
  - b. Open space must remain and the vast majority of it must be natural areas without buildings, roads, and parking lots. Visitors are often amazed at how green Columbia looks, especially when they are told that Columbia has 100,000 people. They ask where “are all the people” since it all looks green with all the trees.
- III. Cul-de-sac road structure – Columbia does not have a grid system of roads
  - a. One of the original goals was to respect the land and one way this was accomplished was to have housing integrated into the environment by

respecting the contours of the land. Buildings and roads were not constructed on steep slopes or in stream valleys. A grid system for roads was not implemented. Open space weaves throughout the community like continuous ribbons. Few roads cut across open space. Hence, Columbia is noted for its cul-de-sacs which preserve ribbons of open space. Imagine how different Columbia would look if every block or two there was a road cutting across open space. The fact that there are very few through streets meant traffic on streets is local and streets are peaceful

- b. A grid system of roads does not respect the land, it serves cars. You can't have continuous ribbons of open space with a grid system of roads. It breaks up the open space. Columbia was planned to have few through streets and major roads. A drawback to Columbia's road system is that it does not efficiently move traffic. However, one of Columbia's goals was to respect the land, not move traffic efficiently. Don't sacrifice the land for traffic efficiency.
- IV. Columbia is a complete city
- a. From the beginning Columbia was to be a complete city, not just a bedroom community. It was to have all the components of a city including land for industry and a true urban downtown. Today: Columbia has more than 36,000 residential units ranging from subsidized apartments to single-family homes. There is a strong economic base, with more than 91,000 jobs. There are numerous institutions, organizations and private enterprises to serve the community, including Howard County Library, Howard County General Hospital (part of the Johns Hopkins system), Howard Community College, performing arts spaces, movie theaters, restaurants, hotels, and retail options. Columbia has achieved racial and ethnic diversity. According to 2010 statistics it is approximately 57 percent white; 25 percent black; 11 percent Asian; and with 9 percent identifying themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Three interfaith centers housing multiple congregations, plus more than 41 other congregations, reflect the multi-faith population. There is land set aside for industry. The urban downtown is under construction. Columbia is a true city.
  - b. To continue to be a complete city, Columbia of the future must maintain a dense core (downtown), less dense residential areas, industry to provide jobs so people can live and work in the city, and retail to serve residential needs. The complete city is also a dynamic, changing place. If a city doesn't change over the years as society and the country change, it risks dying. Columbia needs to adopt as time goes by. It must still provide places for people to live, work, to shop. Without industry, Columbia risks failure – becoming just a bedroom community and not living up to the vision of Jim Rouse. Insist that a certain amount of land be retained for industry/jobs.
- V. Residential dwelling units cap - Columbia has a limit on number of dwelling units
- a. The PDP acted like an Adequate Public Facility Ordinance. The number of dwelling units was specified in the PDP and the process to change is

difficult (requires Zoning Board approval). Because the number of dwelling units for all of New Town was specified, public utilities and infrastructure could be correctly sized beforehand and built according to a schedule.

- b. Because the number of dwelling units is stated in the PDP, they are not attached to any particular piece of land. There is no inherent right to build dwelling units on any piece of New Town zoned land. One can't even subdivide lots and build more houses if the number of dwelling units has already been reached. This is very different from standard zoning where a piece of land is zoned by a specified number of dwelling units. Knowing in advance, the total number of dwellings units allows for the planning of all the various infrastructure required to support people. Because changing the PDP requires a Zoning Board decision, the process is long and expensive and allows for public input at both the Planning Board and the Zoning Board. It also requires the developer of the dwelling units to justify why an increase is needed.
  - c. The number of dwelling units must continue to be specific (retain the PDP) and the process to change the number of dwelling units should also require Planning Board and Zoning Board approval with the ability of residents and CA to influence the decision. Criteria should be developed to judge when an increase is in the best interests of Columbia.
- VI. Percentage for land use
- a. The percentage (sometime minimum, sometimes maximum, sometimes a range) of land uses was specified up front; certain areas are set aside for certain uses. One knew from day one the overall scope of land use in Columbia. It also meant that Columbia was planned as a whole and not just as individual pieces which may not have been related to each other.
  - b. Land use is a key part of the planning process. The percentages help keep developers from just acquiring land and then trying to get it rezoned for different uses. Columbia was planned as a whole and so every piece of land is related to every other piece of land. A redevelopment in one part of Columbia actually affects all the land in Columbia and so any redevelopment should consider its impact on all of Columbia, not just the nearby land. Keep the concept of land use percentages.
- VII. Building heights
- a. Outside of the Downtown, Columbia is a low rise city. Very few buildings are taller than a typical four story building. Trees dominate the skyline, not buildings. Outside of Downtown, Columbia is scaled to people.
  - b. Keep Columbia a low rise city outside of the downtown.
- VIII. Variety of housing types
- a. A range of housing would be provided in each Village. Housing was most dense directly around a Village Center; as one moved further from a village center, the housing became less dense.
  - b. A range of housing should still be provided in the future redevelopment of Columbia. There was no mixed use where dwelling units are located above retail/commercial/office space floors. Some apartments located

above retail spaces were included in Harper's Choice Village Center as an experiment. But no other village centers or retail areas had dwelling units incorporated into the building. How much mixed use in a building should be allowed and where to allow it are questions which need to be discussed and answered before any additional mixed use is allowed.

- IX. Villages (like small towns – more people “friendly”)
  - a. Columbia was to be composed of Villages, a Downtown, and Employment (commercial/industrial) Centers. Villages were envisioned as replicating the scale of small towns and providing a platform for citizen involvement. The Downtown as envisioned as a true downtown area of a typical large city.
  - b. Each Village would have defined neighborhoods.
  - c. Each Village would have a Village Center. Village Centers were to be focused on local retail meeting the needs of the village (local community).
  - d. Keep the concept of Villages and keep residential units in Villages (including Town Center).
- X. Planned – Things fit together
  - a. The New Town zoning process allowed the separation between planning and what actually gets built. One can focus first on a plan (CSP/FDP) and not what is to actually be built (SDP). Don't even need to consider what a development might look like. Plan it first; approve the plan; then figure out what will be built.
  - b. There was to be no “unplanned” development; no “Route 40” type of environment. Continue this; not “spot development”; Any development proposal has to fit into a “plan” and relate to the surrounding areas.
  - c. There was strict sign control; the goal was to reduce visual pollution. Continue this.
  - d. What is built looks like it is part of Columbia; future development must be integrated into existing development and not look out of place.
- XI. Separated land uses areas
  - a. Land uses were as follows:
    - i. Residential use was in the Villages;
    - ii. Major commercial/retail/office space use was in Downtown;
    - iii. Local retail/commercial uses were in Village Centers;
    - iv. Office space and Industrial uses were in Employment Centers; and
    - v. Retail space was allowed in Employment Centers.
  - b. Downtown was planned to be the densest portion of Columbia and less density occurred the farther one got from Downtown.
  - c. Employment (commercial/industrial) centers were located in east Columbia along major roads.
  - d. This seems to have worked well. Any mixed use should be located in areas identified, before development is proposed, and the total amount of mixed use should be specified.
- XII. Limited access onto major roads

- a. Very limited commercial areas access via driveways off major roads (not like Route 40 or Route 1 where each property has a driveway onto a road).
  - b. Keep access to major roads (like Broken Land Parkway, Snowden River Parkway, Little Patuxent Parkway, Cedar Lane, etc.) limited. Don't allow driveways (including turn in lanes) onto major roads. Have developments share access and access should be from secondary roads.
- XIII. Process for change with public input
- a. There is a public process to change PDP, CSPs, FDPs, and SDPs.
  - b. Keep a public process for changes.

## Other Concerns

1. Definition of "Petitioner"
  - a. There must be a way for individual land owners to petition to change an FDP. The method chosen for changes to Village Centers and to Downtown makes sense and stay with the Columbia plan. In both these cases, a plan covering either the Village Center or a Neighborhood in Downtown Columbia must be approved first before any landowner can petition to make a change; and the change must comply with the approved plan.
2. Moderate Income Housing Unit Provisions
  - a. Columbia has most of the moderate / low income housing in the County because Jim Rouse wanted (and ensured) that moderate and low cost housing was built. There were no requirements built into New Town zoning because they weren't needed. Simply adding a requirement for moderate/low cost housing would result in Columbia having even more of this type housing than the rest of the County. Perhaps, what should be done, is a determination of how much moderate/low cost housing exists in each Village/Town Center, determine a threshold of "too much" and set a requirement only if the amount currently existing is below a threshold.
3. Guidelines/Criteria/Performance Standards
  - a. There definitely need to be criteria for DPZ, the Planning Board, the Hearing Examiner, and the Zoning Board to judge whether a proposed change should be approved. One criteria should be to require any petition for change to explain how the change meets the vision/goals/plan for Columbia and how it integrates seamlessly into the existing environment.
4. Lack of a Purpose Statement for New Town Regulations
  - a. the Purpose of New Town Zoning should be to meet the four goals (modified) which guided the development of Columbia.
5. Out-parcels & how to incorporate them into the process

- a. Perhaps outparcels/adjoining parcels of land should be required to meet the four goals (modified) and be required to integrate seamlessly into the existing Columbia environment.
6. Site Development/Design vs Building Design; how to prevent each site from seeming to be an item by itself without reference to what is around it or how it fits in (traffic, driveways, sidewalks, etc.)
  - a. Each site should be required to integrate into the existing environment and be required to allow free flow of movement.
7. Standards vs Guidelines
  - a. Standards are better than guidelines; one has to meet standards, guidelines are “well, it would be nice if you met them”. Focus on standards so people can have a realistic idea of what can be done.
8. Concrete Objectives to guide approving changes
  - a. See number 3
9. Conditional uses
  - a. No conditional uses; they violate planning; they end up being allowed forever since enforcement of the requirements for a condition use is poor.
10. Aging Housing Stock
  - a. Not clear that this is a zoning problem; teardowns and redevelopment are already allowed. Columbia covenants require property to be maintained.
11. Variances
  - a. Should be strict criteria on granting variances.
12. Credited vs Non-credited Open Space
  - a. Perhaps Open Space should be identified as land on which certain type of buildings can be constructed (schools, CA facilities, churches, etc. and associated parking) and land which can't be used for buildings (like pathways, lakes, ponds, etc.)
13. Open space areas need to be linked to be effective
  - a. Any new requirements for open space in Columbia should be required to tie into the existing open space.
14. County trading land in Columbia for non-County uses
  - a. County land proposed to be trade to non-County (governmental) uses should be required to adhere to the Columbia plan and integrate into the existing environment.
15. Questions regarding Employment Center – Industrial land
  - a. How much land should continue to be for Industrial uses verses Retail uses?
  - b. Is the distinction between Employment Center – Industrial and Employment Center – Commercial still valid? Should they be merged into one category?
  - c. How close should residential units be allowed to Employment Center – Industrial land?
  - d. Should FDPs continue to rely on other zoning categories to determine uses or should uses be specified? Should use changes follow the established FDP change process?

- e. Should FDPs be standardized? Across Columbia? Across an Industrial Park?
  - f. How should “ancillary use” language be interpreted
16. Questions regarding Employment Center – Commercial land
- a. How much residential should be allowed in Commercial land, particularly Village Centers and Town Center?
  - b. How should gas stations be handled?
  - c. Should FDPs continue to rely on other zoning categories to determine uses or should uses be specified? Should use changes follow the established FDP change process?
17. Gateway needs to be brought under New Town Zoning.

## What Violates the “Plan”

Anything which does not consider the existing environment and integrate itself into that environment. Anything which does not help in meeting the four goals (modified).

Columbia is family-oriented, diverse, inclusive, clean, safe, easy to get around (not congested in residential areas in particular), environmentally friendly and fosters a spirit of community involvement and volunteerism. Development needs to continue/enhance these objectives.