

Tyson's Corner: Five Years From Now

Metro won't bring "overnight change" to Fairfax's largest commercial district.

By **Julia O'Donoghue**

Wednesday, September 01, 2010

Elected officials, real estate developers and residents often talk about the transformational effect four new subway stations will have on Tyson's Corner, the metropolitan region's largest commercial district.

The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors predicts the Metrorail access will help move Tyson's from a primarily business-only area to a true urban downtown – where people want to live, work and entertain themselves.

Currently, Tyson's is a huge success from a real estate and business perspective but it has about as much charm as a large, suburban office park. There is little nightlife and most restaurants or entertainment options cater to a business-lunch crowd. Tyson's commuters outnumber residents by a ratio of approximately 6 to 1.

Real estate developers and the supervisors insist the Metro stations, coupled with an urban approach to land use, will change the Tyson's landscape. But the total overhaul could take decades to achieve.

The new Tyson's metro stations are not expected to open for at least another two years and several redevelopment efforts won't get underway until after the new Metro line is up and running.

In the short term, many people said the changes in Tyson's would, for the most part, be more subtle. The following is what some "people in the know" said they expect Tyson's Corner to look like in five years:

Walter Alcorn, Fairfax County Planning Commissioner (At-large)

Five years might be too short of timeline to expect any major changes on the development front in Tyson's Corner," said Alcorn.

"Tyson's will look mostly like it does now except for the rail running down the middle of it," he said.

There are a few projects that have already gone through or are near the end of the county approval process and could be partially up and running in five years, said the planning commissioner.

The Georgelas Group may have opened a few buildings on their 28-acre site at Spring Hill Road and Route 7. Lerner Enterprises could have developed the property on Tyson's Boulevard next to the Tyson's Galleria. Owners of the Tyson's Corner Center also have the ability to add density to their site, said Alcorn.

But a few buildings will not make a huge difference overall in Tyson's, an area that is of similar size to the stretch of land between Georgetown and the Capitol in Washington D.C.

"Here we are talking about three or four buildings and Tyson's has hundreds of buildings. Even when the market is strong, a place as large and complex as Tyson's will not change overnight," said Alcorn.

"It has taken 45 years for Tyson's to get where it is now. Five years is not nearly long enough to change the built landscape," he added.

Ted Georgelas, The Georgelas Group

Big change will come to at least one section of Tyson's Corner if Georgelas, manager at The Georgelas Group, has a say in the matter.

The real estate developer's company owns 28 acres near the corner of Spring Hill Road and Route 7, including the area directly adjacent to the Tyson's West Metro station.

In five years, Georgelas expects at least two apartment buildings with 800 living units, one office building with 500,000 square-feet of space and a hotel with 300 rooms to open on that property.

"The change will be overwhelming and dramatic. There will be one large, iconic office building that has been integrated into the Metro stop and two rental properties next to it," said the developer, who plans to put 15 buildings on the site into total.

Linda Smyth, Providence Supervisor

In five years, Smyth expects the first wave of redevelopment projects in Tyson's to be under construction, she said.

"I think we are going to have some cranes out there. Capital One just filed its application. ...Things are looking like they are going to get going," said Smyth.

The supervisor said most of the real estate developers who seem most anxious to start new projects own land very close to the future Metro stations.

With regard to traffic, it is very difficult to say whether the community can expect an improvement in five years. According to Smyth, a lot will depend on whether a circulator system can be implemented in Tyson's before that time and whether Fairfax can get bus service along Route 7 between Tyson's and Loudoun County.

Stu Mendelsohn, Former Dranesville Supervisor and Tyson's Task Force member

Mendelsohn anticipates a few office and residential buildings will be open in Tyson's Corner five years from now but the largest change to the landscape by far will be the new aboveground rail and stations, he said.

"We will probably have a few new buildings operating but we are not going to have a huge change here in just a few years," said Mendelsohn, a former chairman of the Fairfax County Chamber of Commerce.

Stewart Schwartz, Coalition for Smarter Growth

At the end of the next five years, Schwartz hopes Tyson's Corner will have more sidewalks, ground-floor retail and public amenities like parks.

"I want us to start off with some good examples to give people an idea of where we are headed – toward a

pedestrian-friendly, livable and urban environment," said Schwartz.

Schwartz added that he thinks Fairfax will see more residents, particularly empty nesters and retirees, become interested in living in "downsizing" from their single-family homes to a condominium complex. Large residential developments in Tysons could provide a great opportunity for people who want a smaller living space to stay in the county, he said.

"In five years, I think we will continue to see a trend of people wanting to work and live in walkable communities," said Schwartz.

Mark Lowham, WestGroup

In five years, Lowham expects to see large-scale new developments at the east and west ends of Tysons Corner, close to the Tysons East and Tysons West Metro stations.

"I think there will be change at the gateways to Tysons, both east and west," said Lowham, vice president of a real estate company that used to own the largest amount of land in Tysons Corner.

In general, Lowham expects more new buildings to go up near the stations first, particularly on pieces of property that are currently vacant or have buildings that are unoccupied. For example, the Lerner Enterprises property next to the Tysons Galleria and a string of sites on Westpark Drive – which WestGroup used to own -- are both likely to be among the first sites with construction, he said.

"You will see significant changes in pockets of Tysons. ... The new transformation will start at the stations," said Lowham.

Lowham added that a new type of client might be interested in commercial real estate in Tysons once the Metro opens. With convenient access to transit, the U.S. General Services Administration could become interested in locating government offices in Tysons Corner.

A client like the federal government could potentially be a game changer in the Tysons real estate market. The General Services Administration sometimes looks for extremely large blocks of office space, in the 500,000 square-foot range, at one time. Tysons currently absorbs an average of about 400,000 square-feet of office space per year, said Lowham.

Billy Thompson, Vienna-Tysons Chamber of Commerce board member

In five years, Thompson expects Tysons Corner to be less aesthetically attractive because the new Metro rail line will be running above ground and right down the middle of the business district.

"I was a supporter of the tunnel but there really is nothing that can be done about that now," he said.

Other than the new rail stations, Thompson said he doesn't expect to see many other new buildings in Tysons over the next few years. He also thinks traffic will be about as bad as it is now, since very little transit-oriented development will be open for business at that point.

"I think Tysons will pretty much look the same. The big construction isn't going to happen overnight," said Thompson, who lives in Vienna and owns a moving business based in Merrifield.

"The true test won't be in five years. The true test will be in 15 or 20 years," he added.

Rob Jackson, McLean Citizens Association

Though the new Metro stations will help with traffic, Jackson does not see the current road congestion improving dramatically over the next five years.

"I think traffic is going to be bad for the foreseeable future," he said.

The extent to which the new Metro line assists with traffic in Tysons Corner and the surrounding areas will depend on what type of support services are in place, according to Jackson.

He is in favor of a proposal to put parking garages around the Metro stations temporarily so that residents have an easy way to get to the station in the early years, when pedestrian and transit options have not been fully developed.

Jackson also supports proposals for bus routes that would link McLean and Vienna neighborhoods to the new stations directly.

Jerry Gordon, Fairfax County Economic Development Authority

The number of people living in Tysons should have increased five years from now and the business district should be "showing signs" of turning into a real city, said Gordon.

Tysons full transformation will not take place for a few decades, said Gordon.

"I think we will be all the way there in a generation or a generation and a half," he said.