

## Planning Board Gives Thumbs Up to Hotel, Office Tower at Bethesda Police Station Site

Avocet Tower will bring new level of design excellence to downtown area, planning director says

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VIA MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT

County planning officials on Thursday praised a project to build a 250-foot "trophy" tower designed at a quality level not seen before in downtown Bethesda.

But they don't necessarily want other developers to copy Avocet Tower, the project at 7359 Wisconsin Ave., Montgomery County Planning Board members said.

"This is an internationally known architectural firm. The artist is an internationally known artist, and it's taking things to the kind of level of design excellence that we've been striving for," Planning Director Gwen Wright said. "But I do think we have to be careful because others may try to say, 'Well, you know, we can do this with the local architect we hired down the street.'"

The board approved a package of plans for the project that will bring a roughly 220-room AC Hotel by Marriott and 400,000 square feet of office space. The 1.5-acre project site at the corner of Montgomery and Wisconsin avenues is now occupied by a county police station, Carpet Palace and an office building.

"Hopefully, you'll see today a development that, in our opinion, is really a phenomenal place-maker in the new Bethesda downtown," said Jane Galbraith Mahaffie, a principal for the developer StonebridgeCarras.

The building will energize the street level by integrating the hotel and office portions, providing space for dining, working and congregating. The structure will also make a statement from a distance, with a tall shade trellis and garden on the building's rooftop that will mirror the green space at its base, according to the staff report.

The proposal calls for a 3,650-square-foot plaza tucked underneath a tower overhang, an area that would feature landscaped terraces and a waterfall with pools and bridges, according to a planning staff report.



*Proposed public plaza underneath building overhang. Via Montgomery County Planning Department.*

Planning board member Natali Fani-Gonzalez said she'd like to see a larger plaza that could help bring more plant life to downtown Bethesda.

"When you look at Bethesda ... it's so gray. We need more green," she said.

Planning board Chairman Casey Anderson said he generally doesn't endorse the overhangs he's seen in many 90s-era buildings in Bethesda and Silver Spring and thinks some developers choose this approach to carve out open space while maximizing the size of the tower building. Avocet Tower is an exception to the rule, he said.

"I would not want to suggest that this is a strategy that should be encouraged or allowed as a matter of course," he said. "In this case, I don't think they're cheaping out. I think they're trying, really, to make an artistic effort, and I think they're successful. ... I certainly don't think we want to suggest that this is the model."

While planning staff said no one from the community had sent in written comments about the project, Mary Flynn, founder of the Coalition of Bethesda Area Residents, raised a few questions during Thursday's meeting.

She said community members are concerned that the board was voting on the sketch plan, preliminary plan and site plan simultaneously, rather than spacing out the approvals. The developer's decision to send all three documents through the development review process at once made it more difficult for residents to digest the proposal and suggest changes, Flynn said.

"That really is the core of our concern," she said. "We're not objecting to this project."

Board members, planning staff, Flynn and representatives of StonebridgeCarras did discuss potential problems with the project's proposed garage entry on Waverly Street. StonebridgeCarras wants to install an entrance lane and two exit lanes at the garage; planning staff argue this design would force pedestrians to walk a long distance across the path of cars and suggested eliminating one of the outbound lanes.

However, Bob Dalrymple, an attorney for StonebridgeCarras, said cutting an exit lane would cause backlogs in the garage.

"To have one way out would be devastating for this project," he said.

The developer representatives and planning officials agreed to narrow the width of the proposed lanes and evaluate the sight-lines for pedestrians and cars at the garage entry.

Flynn also asked about the safety of the designs for a layby lane where cars on Montgomery Avenue could pull over and drop off hotel guests. The illustrations included in the staff report show a bike lane running between the pull-over area and the sidewalk, and she said this layout could create conflicts between cyclists and visitors.

A county planner said the transportation plan for Montgomery Avenue is still under development, and the drawing shown in the staff report might not be the final configuration.

Anderson urged staff to look at ways of guiding hotel visitors across to the sidewalk so they don't linger in the bike lane.

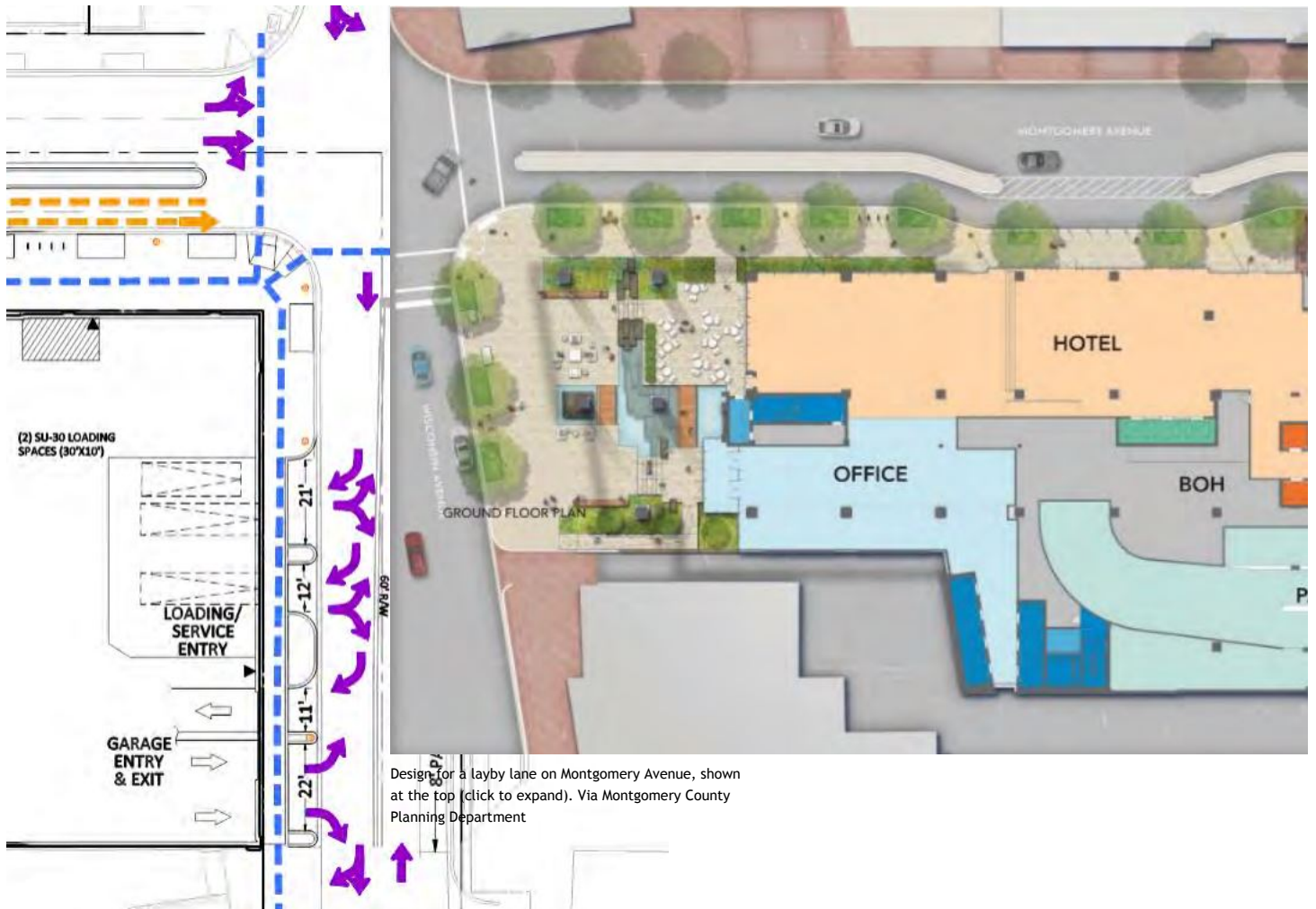
"I think you need to physically sort of make it clear that here is where you're supposed to cross into the office/hotel complex," he said.

The board unanimously voted to approve the sketch, preliminary and site plans, although board members Norman Dreyfuss and Gerald Cichy were absent.

The Avocet Tower plan would require StonebridgeCarras to provide a roughly \$2.15 million park impact payment to the county in exchange for about 215,000 square feet of additional density beyond what the site's zoning allows, according to staff.

The developer is looking to break ground on Avocet Tower in early 2019 and finish construction by 2021.

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Design for a layby lane on Montgomery Avenue, shown at the top (click to expand). Via Montgomery County Planning Department

Plan for one entrance lane and two exit lanes at the garage on Waverly Street (click to expand). Via Montgomery County Planning Department