

Colonial
Williamsburg



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September 14, 1993

CW presents views on new courthouse to City Council

The following are remarks by William L. Roberts, vice president and chief financial officer, and Victoria Gussman, director of property resources and planning and vice president of Williamsburg Developments, Inc. They are to be made before the Williamsburg City Council at the council's request during its meeting today, concerning the siting of the new Williamsburg-James City County Courthouse.

Mr. Roberts:

"It appears the current discussion about a new courthouse site has narrowed down to two general areas. One is the Quarterpath Road site, the other is the current location — perhaps utilizing a portion of Bicentennial Park.

Colonial Williamsburg believes building on the current site, and using part or all of Bicentennial Park, is the least desirable of any of the options we have heard about.

We question whether an adequate-sized facility can be constructed on this location. We worry about the design and visual impact on the general area. We question whether adequate parking can be found nearby. Bicentennial Park is a valuable community asset and we hope it can be preserved. A new, larger courthouse is likely to mean a multiplication of automobile traffic in a part of the city that has already experienced rapid traffic growth.

For many years we have openly expressed our interest in the courthouse property as future expansion space for the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery. In fact, it is the only place we can someday expand this world-class facility.

Equally important, what happens at the present courthouse site is crucial to our longer-range plans for the re-establishment of the Custis Garden — the best documented 18th-century garden in Williamsburg — just across Nassau Street from the Wallace Gallery.

Building a larger courthouse with additional parking in the area runs counter to our joint need to protect the Historic Area. Any expansion of parking on the block adjoining the Custis Garden site is something we are having difficulty reconciling with our plans for reconstruction of the garden.

The alternate courthouse parking solution — a below surface, decked parking facility to be built on Block 5, the lot across Francis Street from the old Post Office — is no more attractive. It runs counter to the need for expanded parking for Merchants Square, something that is as much in the city's interest as our own.

In summary, we believe building at the present site would compromise the city's ability to someday expand the courthouse, would compromise Bicentennial Park on land conveyed to the city for a park, would compromise our ability to expand the Wallace Gallery, would compromise the setting for a restored Custis garden and would create additional parking and congestion problems.

The Quarterpath Road site, on the other hand, overcomes all the concerns I've expressed and has many advantages. There is room for parking, and it can accommodate traffic easily, given its proximity to Route 199.

This said, I want to offer what I think is a compelling advantage to the Quarterpath Road site. The new courthouse could be an anchor in a larger, top-notch commercial development. Colonial Williamsburg is willing to work jointly with the city for the development of the courthouse site as well as the adjoining property across the street.

As you know, the whole area is designated for commercial use or economic development in your comprehensive plan. The ultimate

result of working together could be a major and lasting economic boost for the city.

Colonial Williamsburg has no set proposals for developing this area. At your request, we have prepared two conceptual plans. I want to emphasize that these plans were developed simply to show what can be done, not a specific development proposal. We welcome the opportunity to work with the city and others in the planning process.

You'll see that one of the plans shows parking on the former landfill site. However, that's something to be determined by those who are experts in this field. We are simply saying one of the possibilities is to place parking on the old landfill.

Finally, I want to emphasize that we believe the Quarterpath Road and Route 199 site eventually will be developed, whether or not the courthouse is relocated there. In offering it to the city at this time, we are simply trying to facilitate a solution to your needs. We'd be happy with many other locations as long as they do not involve an expansion of the current site."

Ms. Gussman:

"As you recall, at your last work session we were asked to provide you with additional information on Colonial Williamsburg's property at the intersection of Quarterpath Road and Route 199. We asked the engineering firm of Langley and McDonald to analyze the property and to sketch some alternatives for its development.

The first alternative indicates the developable areas of the three "pods" at this intersection. The main site contains 12.3 developable acres. This excludes slopes greater than 20 percent, avoids Chesapeake Bay protection areas and protects a band of existing vegetation within 75 feet of the right-of-way of Route 199.

To the north, the site of the old landfill potentially contains 12.5 developable acres. As Mr. Roberts mentioned, the uses to which this land may be put need to be further investigated. Finally, the land across the street contains about six developable acres.

Preliminary analyses indicate that the site can support both a 75,000 square-foot courthouse and considerably more economic development. One hypothetical alternative shows 75,000 square feet of courthouse space in a two-story building. The building could be expanded an additional 25,000 square feet to achieve a total of 100,000 square feet.

In addition to the courthouse, the first alternative shows 85,000 square feet of economic development — offices, restaurants and support services. A building next to the courthouse could be a private office building or it could become a courthouse annex. All parking is surface parking.

The second alternative shows a possible development plan for a courthouse of maximum size — 150,000 square feet or twice the size projected by the consultant. This plan gives two options to meet parking needs: surface parking combined with decked parking behind the courthouse or surface parking on the main site with surface parking also on a portion of the old landfill site."