

METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT OF NASHVILLE AND DAVIDSON COUNTY



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LONNELL MATTHEWS, JR.

Councilman, District 1

June 22, 2009

Mr. James T. McLean, Sr., Chairman
Metro Planning Commission
P. O. Box 100453
Nashville, Tennessee 37224

RE: Support for May Town Center

Dear Chairman McLean and Members of the Commission:

As councilman for District 1, I will serve as sponsor of the May Town Center SP ordinance that will come before the Metro Planning Commission on June 25 and the Metro Council on July 7. As a result of numerous positive changes to the original plan, a host of community meetings and an enormous amount of communication and public debate, I stand in strong support of May Town Center.

I addressed in great detail my reasons for this support at the Planning Commission's May 28, 2009, public hearing on the project. I want to reiterate my strong support for May Town Center – and the best future for Bells Bend, District 1, and the entire City of Nashville – and share with you, as an attachment, a copy of my remarks from that public hearing.

I support May Town Center because of the thousands of high-paying jobs the University of Tennessee's Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) states it will bring to District 1, Nashville/Davidson County, and our region. I support it for the millions in annual net new tax revenue the CBER states it will generate for Nashville/Davidson County. I support it because of what it will mean for Tennessee State University, and the establishment of a research center in Middle Tennessee (as has already been done in both West and East Tennessee). I support it because the project will compliment downtown Nashville, providing a campus alternative for corporate relocations inside of Davidson County. I support it because May Town Center will provide a better plan for conservation in Bells Bend, more so than the current land use policy for the area.

Mostly, as I said in my remarks to the Planning Commission and to the public, I support this project because I believe that it represents the very best future for Nashville, and will be right for generations to come. Finally, I believe the May Town Center plan reflects the best balance of the community's vision and support efforts to strengthen and extend Nashville's position as a great city in which to live, work, and raise our families.

A Need for Balanced Growth

My name is Lonnell Matthews, Jr., and I represent the residents of the first district here in Nashville/Davidson County.

Throughout my time on the council, I have come to recognize the complex web of interests that exist in and around my district.

Our issues run the gamut from improving schools and reducing crime to promoting economic development and preserving our natural resources.

I also recognize that the decisions made in the first district can have a profound impact on our entire city and I take that responsibility very seriously.

We must approach every issue with an open mind to truly understand the impact it will have on both sides of the aisle.

As anyone who has picked up a newspaper or watched television in the past year, you have probably recognized the passion that exists on both sides of May Town Center in Bells Bend...I know that I have.

Regardless of your view of the project, the significant effort to communicate should be commended; public participation is critical to the success of this city.

A year ago, I stood before my constituents, members of the planning commission and fellow council members with questions surrounding May Town Center.

Opponents of the project voiced their concerns about preserving farmland, about development encroaching and about how the project will be funded.

Supporters of the project discussed the significant impact May Town Center will have on our local economy and how it will enable Nashville to compete with surrounding areas. They discussed the jobs it will create in north Nashville and how May Town Center will preserve vast areas of green space in Davidson County.

At that time, i was not in a position to make a decision on this project because there were unknowns. I asked for action to be deferred for one year so those questions could be answered.

Over the past year, my questions have been answered.

Nashville and the surrounding 5-county region are poised to capture more corporate relocations which will bring high paying jobs, new tax revenues and increased private investment to the area. A study conducted by Cumberland Region Tomorrow projects a population growth of over 400,000 people by the year 2020.

In addition to this population growth, all trends show that companies are migrating from the coastal and rust belt regions to the southeastern United States. This evidence clearly indicates that Nashville needs to be positioned to compete for its share of these relocating companies. In order to compete, in order to be a serious player in corporate relocations to the middle Tennessee region, we must reposition ourselves and get back in the game.

Opponents of the May Town Center have made some compelling arguments. They have argued that May Town Center will destroy and consume the last stretch of rural character in Davidson County. They have argued that the development of May Town Center will create traffic hazards. They have argued that May Town will drain the life out of downtown. They have even argued and speculated that the May Town Center would never see the light of day, that the developers are just selling a pipe dream, full of empty hopes and promises.

One constituent even told me that this project is too risky, and that there is no risk if we just leave things how they are. However, I fundamentally disagree. There is a very large risk in a lack of planning for smart, sustainable growth.

When we do what we have always done, we will get what we have always gotten.

If we do nothing in this case, just leaving things how they are, we will continue to have underserved communities in North Nashville and Davidson County. We will continue to have problems with our infrastructure and water services, in communities like Joelton, because we can not afford to do the proper maintenance on old, out-of-date water pipes. We will continue to have problems with our public safety in communities like Bordeaux, because we can not afford to put more good men and women in uniform and on the streets. We will continue to have problems with our educational system, if we can not figure out ways to fully fund the continuance of initiatives that have been started to improve our classrooms of our students.

It is for these reasons and more that I can not support just leaving things how they are.

I stand before you today in full support of May Town Center, a project that will have a catalytic effect on our city's economic growth. I am for this development because:

- 1) May Town Center will result in economic growth and opportunity in north Nashville that will expand the overall tax base of Davidson County significantly.
- 2) This is the greenest, most sustainable smart growth plan in our region's history.
- 3) This plan provides a better future for land conservation in bells bend, more so than the current land use policy.

As a steward of public tax dollars, I know we must do everything in our power to reduce expenditures and limit the exposure of the taxpayer.

I also know that as the cost of doing business increases, we must either provide fewer services or find ways to generate new revenue streams to fund our priorities.

As a steward of our natural resources, I know the importance of preserving green space and promoting smart growth principles that limit the ecological impact of development.

I also believe thru sustainable development we can serve the needs of today while preserving resources for future generations.

As an elected official, it is my responsibility to find a fair balance between both, if there is a balance to be found. If every issue were easy, there would be no compromise. And without compromise, there is no collaboration.

I would also like to take a moment to commend the planning department for what I understand to be one of the most in depth planning and review processes Metro has conducted.

On a project the scale of May Town Center, it is critical that all parties come together to learn from one another, to disagree and to identify potential solutions.

Over the past year, my questions have been answered. I have listened to my constituents, and I have worked with all the stakeholders to find the place of balance where I stand.

Through this process, we have seen the plans for May Town Center evolve addressing the issues raised following the announcement of the project. The revised SP Zoning application reflects a balanced approach to economic development and land preservation.

May Town Center will create vast opportunities for our community, while minimizing the impact on surrounding property owners, the environment and most importantly, the Davidson County taxpayers.

For these reasons, I stand before you today in full support of May Town Center and will guide the SP Zoning application as it works its way through the approval process.

This plan reflects the community's vision and supports efforts to strengthen Nashville's position as a great city in which to live and operate a business.

An example of the transformative nature of this project came several months ago with the announcement of a partnership with Tennessee State University that will create one of the nation's premier agricultural centers and research parks.

Over 250 acres have been dedicated to the university to create a state-of-the-art research and agricultural center. Areas of study will focus on finding sustainable ways to develop agriculture in areas including bio-security, organic farming, bio-fuels and alternative crops.

The agricultural research center will place TSU, and Nashville, at the forefront of sustainable agricultural research, creating boundless new opportunities for the school, its students and our great city.

The May Center for sustainable agriculture will elevate TSU's prominence as an academic and research leader while serving as an entrepreneurial incubator for the middle Tennessee region.

From an economic development perspective, this partnership will differentiate Nashville from competing cities, providing yet another reason for relocating companies to move to Nashville.

Across the country these types of research institutions have spun off new businesses, new jobs, new investments and new tax revenues for the areas within close proximity to the research parks.

This partnership will set a new foundation for growth in my district, but more importantly it will create new opportunities for all Nashvillians.

May Town Center will generate thousands of employment opportunities in north Nashville. The partnership with TSU will strengthen opportunities for area businesses that will thrive from the infusion of new investment and new customers.

There has been plenty of speculation about the partnership between the May Town Center and TSU. The truth about their partnership is that the May family only approached the university with intent of partnering on the sustainable agricultural farm. It was Dr. Melvin Johnson, the president of TSU, who presented the idea of including a research park within the May Town Center plan. So this partnership is not just about gifts to the university, it is about the developers believing and embracing Dr. Johnson's vision of research in Davidson County.

And, May Town Center will be an economic catalyst for the city of Nashville, creating thousands of new jobs and millions in new tax revenues for the city.

The increased tax revenues will increase funding for Nashville/Davidson county's priorities such as public education, fire and safety, economic development, tourism, urban revitalization, multi-modal transportation and other quality of life initiatives.

May Town Center will enable Nashville to compete for corporate relocations and expansions that have historically bypassed Nashville for the suburbs like Nissan, Verizon wireless, Healthways and Tractor Supply Company.

These companies had the opportunity to relocate to downtown Nashville, some even rented space downtown while they spent millions developing corporate campuses in outlying counties.

May Town Center will not be a second downtown but will create an alternative option within our own county. This will enable Nashville to compete for those companies looking outside of the central business district.

This concept is very similar to a city supporting two separate convention centers, one in Opryland and one south of Broadway, that attempt to attract two separate groups of clients that are looking a certain type of setting for their conventions.

In this perspective, the companies that want to move into downtown are not looking for the setting that May Town Center will have to offer, and companies looking for the corporate campus setting of May Town Center will not be looking to move into downtown. Nashville needs to be able to accommodate both types of corporations.

Right now, Davidson County can't compete with neighboring communities because we don't offer the corporate campuses these companies are seeking.

This project will enable all of Nashville to compete, and I am particularly excited about the historic prospect this will bring to north Nashville, a part of our city that has missed many previous opportunities for prosperity.

And, May Town Center is respectful of Nashville's precious green space. From a sustainable design aspect, the developers have made monumental commitments to land preservation and green construction practices.

The proposed site is comprised of roughly 1,500 acres at the sparsely populated southern tip of Bells Bend. Through the partnership with TSU and conservation commitments contained within the application, over 2/3's of the site will remain open green space.

The May family has also committed to fund a 600-foot wide buffer along Old Hickory Blvd; which will prevent future development north of the proposed site.

The May family has also established a fund that will enable residents of the Bend to place conservation easements on their properties mirroring those placed on the May Town Center development, in certain areas.

Under the leadership of Mayor Karl Dean, our city is taking bold steps to become the “greenest city in the Southeast.” This commitment goes beyond recycling, turning off lights and carpooling. This pledge requires that we rethink the way we conduct business and the way we approach development.

May Town Center is a perfect complement to this idea, in that it seeks to create an economic engine, much like that of Cool Springs, only it will require a mere fraction of the land that Cool Springs covers.

By promoting a dense mix of uses on a smaller footprint, we can achieve the economic successes of our neighboring community while reducing the negative effects of urban sprawl such as transportation gridlock, poor air quality and haphazard land use practices that fuel the depletion of resources.

In closing, I would like to say that my decision to support May Town Center came after many months of deliberation and did not come easily.

I have worked closely with the residents of District 1, particularly those living in Bells Bend and Scottsboro. I have spoken with business owners in north Nashville and fellow council members whose districts will be impacted by the development.

I have listened to residents and businesses across the river that will one day be connected to this dynamic project via a new bridge across the Cumberland River. A bridge that will be fully funded by the developers at no cost to the tax payers. This is a provision specifically outlined in the SP Zoning application.

I have spoken with the developers to address the issues of concern raised by those who elected me and have required a commitment from the developers to be the very best neighbor that the residents of Bells Bend has ever had. When concerns are being raised about the development from the community, I want the developers to acknowledge those concerns with sincerity and to address those concerns with a level of reasoning, similar to that which I have used to consider my support for this project.

I have also spoken with members of the broader business community and economic development leaders to discuss the pros and cons of this development.


Throughout the course of those conversations and the resulting changes to the plan that followed, I believe we have reached that critical balance. I believe this project is right for Nashville and will be right for generations beyond our lifetime.

For these reasons, I stand in support for May Town Center and ask members of the Planning Commission and fellow members of the Metro Council to approve the SP Zoning application currently before you. I will continue to listen as we work together to pursue this rare opportunity for our city, an opportunity that has come during a time when we badly need it, an opportunity that will continue to require thoughtful collaboration. I appreciate your time and continued interest in the first District as we move forward through this process.

Mr. Jim McLean, Chairman
June 22, 2009
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I look forward to continuing our work together to build a better Nashville.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lonell Matthews, Jr.", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Lonell Matthews, Jr.
Councilman, District 1

LMJr/rh

Attachment

cc: The Honorable Mayor Karl Dean
Vice Mayor Diane Neighbors
Members of the Metropolitan Council
Mr. Rick Bernhardt, Director
Members of the Planning Commission