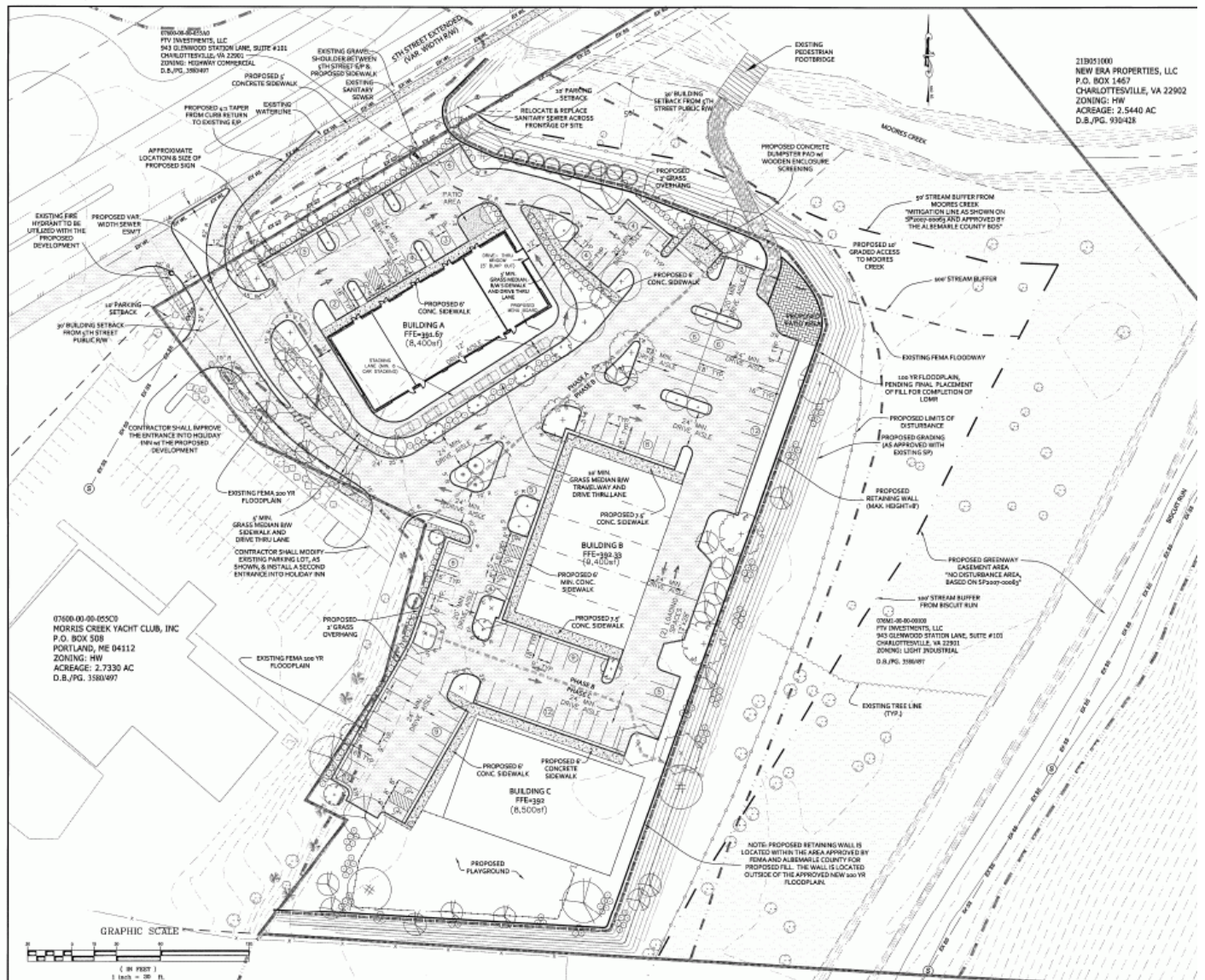


## Albemarle planners recommend Fifth Street commercial complex written by Newspack Team | June 23, 2016



According to Albemarle County's Comprehensive Plan, cars and parking lots should be hidden from view behind new commercial development. That design guideline calling for relegated parking leaves some developers and potential tenants scratching their heads.

The Albemarle Planning Commission said Tuesday that it was willing to make an exception to allow a new commercial center on Fifth Street Extended to be built farther away from the roadway than required by the county's zoning code.

"Starbucks, as well as Cracker Barrel, as well as numerous tenants that have looked at this site over the last six years all want to have some parking in the front," said Katurah Roell, of the Piedmont Development Group.

Roell's company is representing FTV Investments LLC in securing a new round of approvals for a three-building commercial complex on a property that is about 1,000 feet north of Interstate 64's Exit 120.

The county's Neighborhood Model District requires structures to be built with a maximum 30-foot

setback from roadways in part to encourage a pedestrian scale.

Roell sought a special exception to allow the building to be set back 74 feet from the road in order to fit in a two-lane drive aisle and parking.

Special exceptions can be granted if the applicant shows a low-impact design, a unique circulation plan or has a “unique target market design.”

“The applicant has said he believes this kind of an area with a drive-thru for convenience off of the interstate really does suggest that it should be allowed in the way they’ve requested it,” said Elaine Echols, the county’s principal planner.

Echols said the use is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and businesses would expand the county’s tax base.

However, Echols said the proposed plan does not meet the neighborhood model’s goal of relegating parking behind commercial structures.

“We don’t think they’ve adequately demonstrated why they need that really deep setback,” Echols said. “We can’t recommend approval as it is written.”

As one condition, Roell said the property will not be used for a gas station. A bike lane will be built along Fifth Street and the area’s trail network will be augmented.

“The owner is anticipating dedicating all of the rest of the rear of the property into greenspace and making it available for improvements and trail connections,” Roell said.

The Fifth & Avon Advisory Committee passed a resolution last week urging the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to stick with relegated parking and shorter setback.

“At our community advisory committee meeting, there was a lot of discussion about the existing pedestrian traffic, which is pretty heavy,” said Pam Riley, who represents the Scottsville District on the Planning Commission.

Riley said pedestrian traffic will get heavier in the near future. A separate company is currently building a 200-unit apartment complex south of I-64, just a half-mile away from the proposed commercial property.

“We think that the development areas all need to have good pedestrian access,” Echols said. “If you all think though that for some reason the proximity to the interstate interchange is a reason why you would want to do something different, that’s certainly your prerogative.”

Roell said the property is located in a heavily traveled area and merits the special exception.

“There are 57,000 trips a day going on the interstate, as well as a projected 36,000 trips a day on Fifth Street,” Roell said. “There may be 100 or 200 pedestrians, and we will do everything on our site plan to provide trail and pedestrian access, but it is a vehicular-driven area and even if there are 200 more apartments, I would guess that most of those folks will have cars that they use to drive to work.”

Commissioners debated whether the county should strictly enforce its expectations.

"We should be trying to establish the neighborhood model principles and pedestrian multimodal orientation on sites from here on out," Riley said. "If we don't start doing it now, when will we do it?"

However, Riley said she could support the project as long as the resolution was written in such a way as it could not be determined to be a precedent elsewhere in the county.

Commissioner Bruce Dotson said he could support the exception because of the location.

"It does seem to me that there's an argument that can be made that this is a site that has a unique target market because it's within a quarter-mile of the nearest ramp onto the interstate," Dotson said. "If that was our rationale, it would certainly limit any precedent in terms of being jurisdiction-wide."

The Planning Commission voted 5-0 to recommend approval. Commissioners Karen Firehock and Tim Keller were not present.

The matter will go before the Board of Supervisors at a date to be determined.