

## Developing Dissonance

Music Hall Planned In Silver Spring Stuck On a Note of Discord

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If any family can be considered the founding family of Silver Spring, it is the Lees.

Bruce and Blair Lee's great-great-great-grandfather bought the land that is now South Silver Spring before the Civil War and built a summer home there that he named Silver Spring. The family's real estate business went on to develop nearby apartments, a shopping center and Lee Plaza, the art deco-style office building that towers over the corner of Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue.

Yet the Lees find themselves caught in a political struggle, involving the very place where their roots run so deep, over Montgomery County Executive [Isiah Leggett's](#) (D) high-profile redevelopment proposal to bring a live music venue to downtown Silver Spring.

Leggett's plan to open one of [Live Nation's](#) Fillmore music halls at the site of an old [J.C. Penney](#) store depends on \$8 million in taxpayer funds -- and the donation of land by the Lee Development Group. In exchange, the Lees want a measure of protection to ensure that the county's project does not interfere with an adjacent development they are considering.

To the county's chief planner, [Royce Hanson](#), the protection the Lees are seeking would give them a "blank check." To the Lees and Leggett, the family is giving up valuable land and needs assurances that Montgomery's development rules will not change midcourse. By their own account, the Lees run a conservative, risk-averse and closely held family operation.

"My relatives understand that this county is crazy. None of them trust the county," said [Bruce Lee](#), the company's president, who shares that mistrust.

Cousins Bruce and Blair took on leading roles at Lee Development Group after the death in 2003 of another cousin, E. Brooke Lee, who had led the company for more than two decades.

Blair Lee, 63, is the hyper-political Gazette newspaper columnist and WBAL (1090 AM) radio commentator, who works behind the scenes providing strategic advice. His father, the late Blair Lee III, was the Maryland lieutenant governor who finished out the gubernatorial term of Marvin Mandel after Mandel was convicted of mail fraud and

racketeering.

Bruce Lee, 44, is the music hall project's genial, boyish public face, who makes the rounds at the County Council. He joined the company after college, working the hands-on property management side of the business and delving into Silver Spring's revitalization debates.

"If you're talking to Bruce, you are talking to Blair and vice versa," said longtime friend Kevin Maloney, who runs a commercial real estate firm in Bethesda. "Their styles are different and their responsibilities are different, but they are working for the same end result."

There was Bruce Lee last month, flustered, his head shaking after county planners unanimously panned the land-use proposals that supporters say are needed to make the music hall a reality. Planning Board members, while supportive of the project, said Leggett's deal with the Lees would wipe out their leverage to negotiate for public space and potentially delay other construction projects for up to 15 years. Board member John M. Robinson, who counts Bruce Lee as a good friend, called the county's case for the land-use measures a "charade" that would give the Lees "privileged status."

It is unclear how the board's recommendation will influence the council when it takes up the measures next month. Leggett said last week he has "strong support" on the nine-member council, in addition to backing from a long list of business and community leaders, but he could not say whether he has five votes.

At home in Kensington, Bruce Lee has for six years kept a yellow sticky note on his bathroom mirror to remind him that the family will not be forced into building on its surrounding property until market conditions are ripe. The note reads, "Remember: This is a [Montgomery County](#) economic development initiative and the county came to you."

To understand his caution, it helps to know the history of Lee Plaza. The building opened in the late 1980s, just as a real estate recession hit. For three years, the \$21.5 million building was 80 to 85 percent vacant.

Still, it has been 18 years since the Lees demolished the J.C. Penney building now slated for the Fillmore, leaving the prime property fallow across the street from the [American Film Institute's](#) Silver Theater. Some developers privately ask what the Lees were waiting for, while others say the family was wise not to get out in front.

Developer Lloyd Moore, a veteran of the Silver Spring redevelopment wars, said there was so much bitterness and controversy at the time, "I don't see why anyone would participate in that environment."

The path to building the Fillmore is unprecedented in local land-use history because the music hall, which would count as the Lee group's public amenity and public-use space, would be built before the Lees commit to an adjacent project.

"He's kind of handing off his bargaining chip before he knows what he's going to need to strike a deal," Silver Spring developer Bryant Foulger said of the risk to the Lees.

Though they are not risk-taking developers, the Lees know how to play hardball. Leggett and the Lees pulled the plug on an earlier deal with the Alexandria-based Birchmere Music Hall after it had been in the works for five years under former county executive [Douglas M. Duncan](#). They got spooked in part when the Birchmere began talking about opening a restaurant and club in [Loudoun County](#). Bruce Lee moved quickly to line up Live Nation. Birchmere representatives declined to comment for this article.

The politically prominent Lee family name turned out to be a surprising liability when Leggett went searching for state money for the music hall. The cousins' grandfather, Col. E. Brooke Lee, was speaker of the [Maryland House of Delegates](#) and in 1913 their great-grandfather became the first popularly elected U.S. senator. Blair Lee ran his father's unsuccessful campaign for governor in the 1970s, and then was Montgomery's lobbyist in Annapolis.

But for years, Blair Lee has taken shots at state legislators in his weekly column, deriding Montgomery's delegation for being disorganized, weak and a laughingstock at the State House.

"Until MoCo stands up on its hind legs, it will always be shortchanged, double-crossed and pushed around," Blair Lee wrote in his assessment of the 2008 legislative session.

"I'm sure that it wasn't a plus," Del. Sheila Hixson (D), a friend and neighbor, said of the project's connection to the Lees.

In a column this month, Blair Lee blasted Baltimore's plans to use state dollars to pay for a new \$400 million sports arena: "If you need a big new arena to assuage your inferiority complex, pay for it yourself. Don't pass me the tab."

Couldn't the same be said about spending state money on Montgomery's music hall? The difference, Blair Lee said, is that the Fillmore has already signed up as a tenant, will make money for the county and relies on only \$4 million in state funds.

After six years in the works, the family could still pull out of the music hall, Blair Lee said. "But if we walk away, we lose, the county loses and Silver Spring loses."