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End the dissonance over a music hall

Controversy has accompanied efforts to rejuvenate Silver Spring's central business district for decades.

The arrival of Metrorail's Red Line in the 1970s was expected to boost a once-thriving retail center that had faded as shoppers were drawn to suburban malls. There were various fits-and-starts in the 1980s as the County Council sought to define the proper mix of stores and offices. In the 1990s, an ambitious "megamall" known as American Dream never got off the ground and some began to question whether the area would ever become more than an antiseptic concrete canyon of office buildings, with little nightlife after office workers bolted for their homes.

Following the move of the world headquarters of Discovery Communications from Bethesda and the opening of the American Film Institute's Silver Theatre and Cultural Center, and new shops, restaurants and housing, there has been a palpable rebound in recent years.

Later this month the County Council is expected to vote on a change in zoning rules that would push another controversial project closer to the finish line.

County Executive Isiah Leggett last year signed a deal to bring Live Nation, a large concert promoter, to a music hall that would be built by a private developer on a Colesville Road parcel that once was home to a J.C. Penney department store.

Leggett's move came after the county couldn't reach an accord with another music-hall operator that had been negotiations for years, and after the state and county agreed to provide up to \$4 million apiece to build a hall, which the county would own.

As part of the development deal, Lee Development Group, the property's owner, would donate land for the music hall and get rights to build on the rest of its property under special terms. The County Council would have to ease zoning rules governing the amount of "public use space" on the property. The county would give Live Nation breaks on taxes and other regulations.

Early criticism, swift to arrive, was stinging. One nightclub owner decried the lack of a bidding process for other suitors and said "they are giving the place away." A council member complained of a "faulty process and faulty project." The county's top planner cautioned the deal could actually slow development, not stimulate revitalization. Others have said the deal is too sweet for Live Nation and the Lee Development Group.

Leggett's team has been cautious and thorough. Safeguards are in place to cover any cost overruns without soaking taxpayers, the hall will be available at free or discounted rates for community events at least 36 times a year and there will be restrictions on performance times and alcohol sales. The site, which has been vacant for nearly two decades, is a brief stroll from the Silver Spring transit center and nearby parking garages are adequate to handle after-hours traffic.

The developers, too, are taking a gamble with this project, albeit one with favorable odds.

While this is an odd type of "economic development" project, its potential as a catalyst for other businesses – restaurants, galleries and other mixed uses – is attractive.

Live Nation, a billion-dollar publicly traded company with diverse entertainment offerings, appears to enjoy a solid reputation in the industry and has familiarity with the regional market.

After many months of complex analysis and debate, a basic question emerges: Does Silver Spring get a great benefit from a music hall?

We think it will, without putting at risk other projects or supplanting broader, one-size-fits-all public policies on land use.

Building a music hall in Silver Spring, tailored to this property, will enhance the area's reputation as an arts-and-entertainment district and set a bright tone for an upbeat urban center.