



Morning Roundup: Solo Edition



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Like an oasis in a sea of high density development, the area around the East Falls Church metrorail station on the Orange Line features a landscape of single-family homes, parks, and low-rise commercial development. This puts the neighborhood in marked contrast to the high- and mid-rise corridor that runs from Rosslyn to Ballston and the new townhouse and condominium development springing up at West Falls Church, Dunn Loring and Vienna.



As Arlington busily builds out the remaining available land along its metrorail corridors, it only seems natural that this development activity will soon extend to the "last frontier." However, one neighborhood association near the East Falls Church station, sensing that they may be next in line for a forest of construction cranes, has taken matters into their own hands and commissioned a study by Virginia Tech planning students that examined the development potential for the area and provided a scheme that integrates development opportunities with a wish list of development from neighborhood residents.

As with most publicly-crafted development plans, the likelihood that it will come to pass in its current iteration is probably slim to none. The biggest obstacle right now is not the opposition of residents, but rather the Arlington County [General Land Use Plan](#).

In 1986, the Arlington County Board of Supervisors approved [policy guidelines](#) stipulating that the area around the East Falls Church metrorail station would remain a low-density residential area, with development restricted to the commercial corridor that lies along Route 29/Lee Highway between the station and the border with the city of Falls Church. These restrictions remain in place, and although rumor has it that the county is considering revisiting the decision, official action has yet to be taken.

In the meantime, a small flurry of development activity within a quarter mile of the East Falls Church station has given rise to questions about long-term development plans. In 2002, the county board gave approval for construction of a 23-unit townhouse community directly across Washington Boulevard from the station, on the site of an old fruit stand/overflow parking lot for the station. While the project, currently near completion, increased the housing density on several former single-family home lots, it is surrounded by other small townhouse communities and thus fits in with the character of the neighborhood.

On the other side of the station, the 128-unit [Westlee](#) mixed-use condominium project is rising at the corner of Westmoreland and Lee Highway (pictured above). The project tapped into a strong reservoir of demand, selling out all units, which ranged in price from \$300,000 to \$1 million, in a matter of weeks. Immediately adjacent to the Westlee is [18 West](#), an 18-unit townhouse project, and Hovnanian Homes has filed a site plan for a proposed 205-unit mixed-use development across the street.

Finally, with WMATA moving forward on the [Dulles Corridor Rapid Transit Project](#), the East Falls Church station is likely to come under renewed scrutiny as a transfer station, as it is the last station along the Orange Line before the new line branches off towards Tysons Corner. (Image of station area from [Stationmasters.com](#))



Alone, each element would not be cause for much thought, but the recent development in the area, the metro expansion, the Virginia Tech study, and the hot housing market has set off some people's alarms. In April, Falls Church News Press editor Nicholas Benton, citing the study and an unnamed commercial land owner, [declared](#) that the community was on the verge of massive development around the station:

Developers are buying up land by the bucket full and a recent Virginia Tech study indicates the area around the East Falls Church metrorail station, in North Arlington just outside the City of Falls Church, will explode with new development in the coming decade.

"There's going to be nothing between Lee Highway and Wilson Boulevard but high rise mixed-use developments," one commercial land owner told the News-Press last week, claiming that he's been inundated with inquiries to buy his Lee Highway parcel. You know all those single family homes blanketing the area now? They'll all be gone."

Surrounding civic and homeowners associations have taken notice as well. The [Arlington-East Falls Church Civic Association](#), which commissioned the study, is continuing to keep an eye on developments and advocate for their preferred developments. The neighboring Williamsburg Civic Association provided substantial coverage of the Virginia Tech study in its February newsletter and is planning a panel discussion of development in the area at its [September 27 meeting](#).

The Virginia Tech plan is interesting, imagining a mixed-use development on top of the current metrorail parking lot, a day care center serving both children and senior citizens on the site of the current kiss-and-ride lot, a realignment of the existing W&OD bike trail onto a more inviting path (rather than its current route, flanked by an electrical substation and an I-66 sound wall), and the creation of a park-like gateway to the neighborhood. A couple of things seem to have gotten lost in all the excitement, though. First of all, all the development proposed in the plan is to take place on WMATA-owned property. As of now, WMATA has not made any official announcement that they are seeking -- or even considering -- developing on their East Falls Church land. Second, the plan is not an official model for development being used by the county or by WMATA, but rather the result of a visioning and charrette process conducted by Virginia Tech students as part of a [studio class](#). Such measures are rarely an end result, but their greatest value is that activist citizens can use them as a ready-made model of ideas for future development when the time is right. However, the AEFCCA deserves credit for taking their destiny into their own hands and trying to become involved in shaping the development that may occur around them, rather than sitting back and reacting to other entities' plans.

So, for right now, residents near the East Falls Church station have to play a game of wait-and-see to find out if they're going to become the next Ballston, Clarendon, or Courthouse.

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