



Ladies and gentlemen of the Council,

Our community's trust in this planning process hinges upon a foundational tenet of our democracy: the right to due process, as enshrined in our Constitution. At our last hearing, while the applicant's legal representation was heard, our voices, reflecting legitimate community concerns, were silenced. Today, we are appealing for an equitable and comprehensive hearing.

I speak to you not just as a resident, but also as a representative of the South Laurel Civic Association. We, alongside local HOAs, are stewards of our tranquil environment, now under threat from an imposing and grandiose development. The proposed development stands in stark contrast to our residential homes character in our overwhelmingly rural neighborhood. Moreover, being adjacent to the Patuxent Research Refuge, we carry a profound responsibility to protect our environment. The current trajectory, marked by habitat disturbance, light, and noise pollution, is deeply troubling.

Our lands have been in families for generations. We've felt the brunt of unauthorized actions, especially previous unpermitted landscaping of old growth trees, that have upset our ecological balance, damaged homes, and lead to a mosquito surge, a daily challenge for residents. The proposed stormwater management plan, with potential standing water, heightens our health concerns. I firmly advocate for a 40-foot setback from my property and those along both Laurel Bowie and Snowden roads to mitigate further risks and request a storm water management design that does not rely on additional standing water.

Our commitment to religious freedom is unwavering. However, this community respect should be mutual. We do not feel peace or stress-relief from their actions. For individuals like myself, who suffer from PTSD and anxiety, and my son, who experiences seizures, the increased noise, disturbances, and stressors have tangible and severe health repercussions. The surge in nuisances—littering, parking and traffic violations, trespassing—by their parishioners is palpable, and a larger development would intensify these challenges. During a meeting with the lawyer representing the temple, we were told we should leave our homes and head to the beach to find solace. This casual suggestion overlooks the medical and emotional realities many of us grapple with daily.

Equally concerning is the possibility of construction on land that may not wholly belong to the applicant, coupled with what appears to be an oversight in the staff's due diligence process. On slides submitted by the applicant, it clearly shows boundaries they currently occupy outside of their boundaries. Additionally, they already had a permit to build an addition that was not followed and is several hundred square feet larger than the board approved. These are not trivial matters; they underscore the importance of thoroughness and integrity in this review process.

Furthermore, our concerns extend to our real property values. The very essence of our homes and our community's residential character plays a pivotal role in property valuation. The potential degradation from this development, combined with the nuisances experienced, jeopardizes our community's fabric and, consequently, our property values.

We acknowledge RLUIPA's protections for religious institutions. However, differentiating between substantial religious burdens and community well-being is paramount. This proposal isn't a mere inconvenience—it threatens our community's core identity as a residential neighborhood.

In conclusion, our stance is not against religious expression, but for the harmonious coexistence of all community members. We are advocating for mutual respect and least harm. We beseech the Board to balance religious freedoms with our rights, environmental obligations, and property values. Your judicious consideration will resonate with the democratic principles that define our great nation.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to justice.

Sincerely,  
Gabrielle Masten  
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