



During planning discussion, Gus Beall, senior at Wilde Lake High School, shows students a drawing he made of his neighborhood.

CHRISTOPHER T. ASSAF [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Long overlooked, youth speak out about Columbia's future

## Students urge caution on downtown planning

[BY A SUN REPORTER]

Hundreds of Columbia residents have weighed in over the past year with often conflicting proposals for the future of downtown, ranging from doing nothing, or very little, to converting it into a dense, urban center with thousands of new homes.

One segment noticeably overlooked — until now — was the youth.

"As we go through the planning process, we have to address the young people of this community, because they are the future of Columbia," said Douglas

M. Godine, vice president and general manager of the Mid-Atlantic operations of General Growth Properties Inc., the primary landowner and developer of Columbia.

Hoping to tap into their minds, GGP retained Ann Forsyth, a nationally known urban planner, to meet with a sociology class and other students at Wilde Lake High School to discuss their perceptions of Columbia as it is now and their views of what it should be like tomorrow.

Some concepts, to be sure, reflected a decided generational gap: the need for an arcade parlor, more free concerts, a [Please see DOWNTOWN, 5G]

## FROM THE COVER

# Youths offer their vision of downtown's future

**DOWNTOWN** [From Page 1G]

casino and expansion of the mall to serve those with an insatiable desire to shop. One student at a recent discussion even suggested — twice — that there be a prohibition downtown on housing for the elderly.

But many other suggestions mirrored those advanced in the last year by county officials and residents: mass transit, an improved pedestrian network, nighttime entertainment venues and better parking facilities.

Godine said he found the exercise "useful" and said GGP plans to schedule additional brainstorming sessions with students, in and outside of Howard County.

The views of the students were as diverse as those expressed by the adult community over the past year. Nor was there casual acquiescence to the notion of permitting significantly higher density in downtown Columbia.

"I don't think there should be much more housing in there," 17-year-old senior Jessica Gold-

stein said after Forsyth completed her brainstorming exercise with the students. "It's nice to be able to get away from everything."

That position, echoed by other students, reflects the pressure on GGP and the county to find an acceptable balance to the critical question of how many housing units may be permitted downtown.

The current plan, advanced by the Department of Planning and Zoning, would, among other things, allow 5,500 additional housing units, 3 million square feet of new commercial offices and 750,000 square feet for retail.

The county is expected to unveil another draft of the plan early next year — Godine said GGP expects to have its plan ready by early April — and housing density is widely considered to be the key to whatever form the final plan takes.

At the recent discussion, Forsyth — director of the Metropolitan Design Center, chairwoman of Urban Design at the University of Minnesota and author of three

books — seemed in favor of transforming downtown into an urban center.

The Wilde Lake students appeared to take a go-slow view toward downtown development, particularly regarding housing.

"I think adding so many people and so many houses would take away from what I've always known Columbia as," said senior Kevin Duff, 17. "I've always thought of it as safe, smaller place where there's not going to be too much trouble. Adding so many people would change that."

Duff said he has always planned on returning to Columbia after college, but the development of downtown could change that.

Goldstein and Duff said they and their friends use the lakefront frequently and oppose changing its character.

"The lakefront is really one of my favorite places in Columbia,"



Urban planner Ann Forsyth discusses potential changes to Columbia Town Center with students at Wilde Lake High School, many of whom expressed concern about overdevelopment.

CHRISTOPHER T. ASSAF [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Goldstein said. "Even if I go to the mall, I usually end up down there, because it's so nice. It's really calm and you can have

some quality time.

"Leave it that way... Backyards are getting smaller and smaller as they try to fit more people in, and

everyone needs that little touch of [open space]. If you can't have that in your backyard, you should have it at the lakefront."