

Eldersburg doesn't need 7th grocer

LES COHEN OTHER VOICES

Someone — it could have been George Bernard Shaw, the famous Irish playwright — is said to have approached an attractive woman at a party. He asks her if she'll sleep with him for some outrageous fee. To his pleasant surprise, she smiles, flirtatiously, and appears to be considering the proposal, but then he revises his offer downward. "Sir," she tells him indignantly, "what kind of woman do you think I am?!" "Miss," he answers, "we've already established what you are. All we're doing now is quibbling over terms."

The other day at a meeting of the Carroll County Planning and Zoning Commission, one of the members made the point that it was not the business of the planning and zoning board to dictate precisely what a property owner could or couldn't build on his or her property — as long as it was a use permitted by zoning.

The property the commission member was talking about is vacant lot in Eldersburg where the owner wants to build a Lidl (pronounced: leedle) grocery store. That will be the seventh full-size grocery store near the intersection of Sykesville and Liberty roads.

The member's argument was that, in a free market economy, it's not the business of government to tell a property owner that he or she should or shouldn't build anything in particular. Unfortunately, there's nothing free about the market for the more significant properties in a given community.

For one thing, zoning restricts competition by limiting what property owners can do with their land.

For another, the more prominent the property, the higher the costs of entry. Major project developers with the millions of dollars necessary to acquire and build out their properties are few and far between.

The more developed an area — such as at the intersection of Sykesville and Liberty roads — the fewer major properties there are left to develop. For all intents and purposes, the owners of these special properties — like the 22.6 acres we're talking about along Liberty Road between Georgetown Boulevard and Homeland Drive — have a limited monopoly on what goes next in "downtown" Eldersburg.

So the planning commission, which we respect and believe to be both astute and well-meaning, can drop any pretense that there is a free market for major real estate projects that would be offended if the commission were to restrict a specific use on a specific

property. They can do it. It's not uncommon or illegal or unAmerican.

The commission is already in the business of controlling land use. We're just quibbling over the specifics of that authority.

In fact, given the objectives of the county's master plan and the Freedom Community Comprehensive Plan, it is the duty of county government to make sure major development in Eldersburg is kind. Major development must improve the quality of life in a given community. It can't just be about new retail locations that can only succeed at the expense of established commerce. Creating new jobs, while other people lose their jobs, is just plain hurtful.

Population growth in Eldersburg is basically flat. Everybody is already buying their groceries somewhere. The five existing grocery stores — and soon six including the new ALDI — are almost certainly more than Eldersburg can support. That's a common sense assumption of course, but one that a simple, relatively inexpensive market study will confirm — or not.

Nothing against Lidl, but their store adds no products, services or pricing that are not available in an already over-crowded market for groceries. Lidl's marketing strategy is predatory. Pick a successful community with an established retail grocery market, open a large store and spend whatever it takes to pull customers away from your competitors. That said, Lidl is not the bad guy in this little ditty about planning and zoning. Lidl is just the seventh grocery store, if its site plan is approved, in a relatively small community of 30,000-plus people that may already have one or two grocery stores too many.

The Planning and Zoning Commission needs to step up, respect the objectives of the master and comprehensive plans, and encourage the property owner to consider one of the many other, equally or even more profitable options for this special property.

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