Statement of Justification
7200 Wisconsin Avenue – Artery Plaza
Application for Site Plan Amendment
June 28, 2018

I. Project Summary and Proposed Amendment

JBG/7200 Wisconsin Avenue, LLC (the “Applicant”), an affiliate of JBG Smith, is the owner of the property located at 7200 Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda, Maryland (the “Property”). The Property is zoned CR-5.0, C-5.0, R-5.0, H-250.

The Applicant is submitting an application for a minor amendment to Site Plan (No. 81984002B) for the Property for improvements to the plaza located at the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and Bethesda Avenue. The redevelopment of the plaza at this time is triggered in large measure by the Department of Transportation’s (“DOT”) plans to construct a portion of the Capital Crescent Trail (“CCT”) across the southeast corner of the plaza, which will require a certain level of coordination with the Applicant to ensure that the grade of the plaza adjacent to the CCT ties in appropriately. The Applicant’s previously proposed improvements to the plaza included additional development in the northern portion of the plaza for restaurant use. Staff expressed concern that the additional development would obstruct the building entrance and diminish the building’s relationship to the street. In response to staff’s concerns, the current Application does not include any additional development.

While the subject Site Plan includes the improvements proposed by DOT to accommodate the CCT, the Site Plan delineates this portion of the Property (in which DOT will obtain a legal interest) and notes that the improvements will be conducted by DOT.

II. Design Objectives

The 7200 Wisconsin Avenue building, known as Artery Plaza, was constructed almost 35 years ago. While the design of the associated plaza at the time was well regarded, it has now run its course. The brutalist design, with imposing columns and pavilion, a trellis, and a multi-level terrace, decreases the visibility of the building, minimizes the building’s relationship to the street, obstructs accessibility and discourages the use of this valuable open space. Over the years the dated plaza has become increasingly underutilized. It is the Applicant’s intent to redevelop the plaza to achieve the following goals:

1. Provide a more up to date, relevant design to refresh this corner of the Property;
2. Encourage use of the plaza;
3. Provide desired outdoor dining opportunities;
4. Coordinate the design of the plaza with the construction of the CCT; and
5. Physically integrate the CCT into the overall plaza design.

Proposed Development

The revisions to the plaza are intended to make the plaza more useable, accessible and attractive to the general public and upgrade the plaza to current design standards. In particular, the Applicant intends to create more of a physical and visual “gateway” to Bethesda Row located to the west of the plaza, and to connect the Women’s Market Co-op and other public amenities across Wisconsin Avenue to Bethesda Row. Accordingly, visibility of and accessibility to the plaza as one moves eastward on Bethesda Avenue is important.

The proposed redesign will create a three-level plaza from Bethesda Avenue to the primary building entrance to the north. The new plaza is positioned to be a multi-functional gathering space and is designed to simultaneously accommodate separate uses, provide a variety of experiences, and improve pedestrian circulation. The upper level of the plaza will function as a welcoming and open circulation route to the existing office lobby of the building, provide two designated outdoor dining areas for new restaurants, and provide open space for the general public. The middle level will become the core gathering space in the plaza with a variety of integrated and flexible seating elements and will include a small stage. The lower level of the plaza at the southern end of the Property will provide a transition from the CCT, an artistic bike rack, landscaping and seating areas.

To this end, the Applicant is proposing the following revisions to the plaza:

1. Remove existing arcade, trellis and pavilion;
2. Remove two art pieces – Drinking Fountain and Column;
   Note: A third art piece, the Artery Sunwork, is located within the area to be acquired and improved by DOT to accommodate the CCT. DOT will be responsible for the removal of the Artery Sunwork.
3. Designate two private outdoor dining areas;
4. Regrade southern portion of plaza to transition to Bethesda Avenue;
5. Add shade trees to plaza;
6. Provide “stadium seating” and platforms;
7. Provide planter beds to transition grade immediately north of CCT;
8. Provide new landscaping in southern portion of plaza;
9. Install bike rack immediately north of Bethesda Avenue sidewalk;
10. Construct ramp from Bethesda Avenue to first level of plaza; and
11. Provide lighting.

III. Removal of Art Pieces

The Applicant appeared before the Art Review Panel on June 13, 2018 in connection with the proposed removal of the Drinking Fountain and the Column (the actual supporting column will remain, but the art work cladding is proposed to be removed).

The Applicant conveyed the following to the Art Review Panel:

1. The original Project Plan approval for the Property included an art requirement, but the Project Plan was superseded by the 2016 Sketch Plan approval. The Applicant’s required public benefit points did not include an art component;

2. All of the other art pieces provided in connection with the Project Plan approval will remain;

3. The proposed renovations to the plaza are intended to make the plaza more open, contemporary and accessible and the aesthetic of the Drinking Fountain and the Column is very inconsistent with the proposed design;

4. The removal of the sundial (the construction of the CCT necessitates the removal) and elimination of the trellis, arcade and pavilion eliminates the context for the Drinking Fountain and Column;

5. The construction of the CCT and the renovation of the plaza provides a public benefit; and

6. The renovation of the plaza was intended to help integrate the CCT into the overall plaza design.

The Art Review Panel recommended that the two art pieces not be removed unless some type of art form is reinstated in the plaza.

Note: DOT also appeared before the Art Panel on June 13 and explained that the construction of the CCT will require the removal of Artery Sunwork. DOT further explained that the provision of the much needed bike path provided a public benefit in place of the art work.

IV. Master Plan Conformance

The proposed development conforms with the recently adopted Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan, as well as the objectives of the Bethesda Downtown Plan Design Guidelines (the “Design Guidelines”).

The Downtown Sector Plan provides that “[g]reat public spaces serve to define a downtown by enhancing quality of life, improving social interaction and bolstering economic
opportunities. A well-connected public space network with a range of inviting streets, parks and plazas is crucial to fostering a walkable, bikeable and livable downtown environment.” (page 68). To this end, the Downtown Sector Plan includes the following recommendations:

- Foster community enrichment by encouraging public and private gathering places. (Page 8)
- Re-imagine under-performing public spaces to revitalize them as community assets. (Page 8)
- Enhance specific aspects of the public realm that support retail and office development where applicable. (Page 8)

While the Design Guidelines do not designate the plaza as open space, the renovation nonetheless follows many of the recommendations set forth in the Design Guidelines, by providing the following:

- Openness/welcome spaces
- Large species shade trees
- Performance area to be used for programming
- Provides grade transitions
- Night lighting
- Park furniture
- Clear entries
- Accessibility

The proposed redesign of the plaza will respond to these recommendations by creating a multi-use open space that accommodates the CCT, extends the existing streetscape of Bethesda Avenue, and provides a core gathering space. In addition, the revisions will generate pedestrian activity by enhancing the space with the outdoor seating for the proposed restaurant(s). The revisions will also increase visibility and create a more open, transparent layout by eliminating the dated existing colonnade and trellis arrangement currently on the plaza. Opening the plaza to the street will improve view corridors in and around the plaza and, particularly notable, the view from the plaza of the historic Farm Women's Market building at the southeast corner of Wisconsin and Bethesda Avenues. The plaza renovations will transform a dated, underutilized plaza into a vibrant, welcoming public space.

V. Open Space

Pursuant to Zoning Ordinance Section 4.5.4.B the proposed overall development (7200 Wisconsin Avenue as well as 4747 and 4749 Bethesda Avenue) is providing 10,395 square feet
of open space and thus satisfies the 10 percent Open Space requirement. In addition, the redeveloped plaza area will provide 35 percent green cover, as recommended in the Design Guidelines.

VI. Site Plan Findings Required for Approval

The Site Plan Amendment satisfies the findings required for approval provided in Section 7.3.4.E of the Zoning Ordinance as follows:

1. The proposed development satisfies any previous approval that applies to the site, including any development plan or schematic development plan in effect on October 29, 2014.

No change.

2. The proposed development satisfies applicable use standards, development standards, and general requirements in the Zoning Ordinance.

The plaza revisions will comply with the ten percent open space requirement.

3. The proposed development satisfies the applicable requirements of Chapter 19, Erosion, Sediment Control, and Stormwater Management, and Chapter 22A, Forest Conservation.

No change.

4. The proposed development provides safe, well-integrated parking, circulation patterns, building massing and, where required, open spaces and site amenities.

As discussed above, the Amendment will improve pedestrian circulation and activate the plaza. The plaza improvements accommodate the CCT, which will improve the bicycle circulation along this important cycling route. Site features such as paving, lighting, and signage have been programmed to accent the space.

5. The proposed development substantially conforms with the recommendations of the applicable master plan and any guidelines approved by the Planning Board that implement the applicable plan.

As discussed in Section IV above, the Amendment conforms with the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan.

6. The proposed development will be served by adequate public services and facilities, including schools, police and fire protection, water, sanitary sewer, public roads, storm drainage, and other public facilities.
The plaza renovations, which do not include any additional density, will not impact the adequate public facilities serving the Property.

7. *Proposed development on a property in a Rural Residential or Residential zone, is compatible with the character of the residential neighborhood.*

N/A

8. *The proposed development is compatible with the existing and approved or pending adjacent development.*

The plaza renovation was designed to complement the surrounding development. The proposed plaza redevelopment, which is minimal in nature compared to the development proposed around the property, will be compatible with the surrounding area.

In connection with the plaza redevelopment, the Applicant has reviewed the proposed adjacent development to the south of the Property (a 225 foot high mixed use residential project) and to the southeast across Wisconsin Avenue adjacent to the Women’s Farmer’s Market Coop site (a 175 foot high mixed use residential project). These surrounding developments will cast shadows on the plaza and thus there will be less light on the plaza once these buildings are developed than there is currently. These changes thus make the renovation of the plaza more important than ever. The proposed design is appropriate in that it eliminates the current structures on the plaza that promote a dark, enclosed environment. In contrast, the new design will make the plaza lighter and airier and more accessible, which will be important given the surrounding development.

VII. Conclusion

For all of the reasons discussed above, the Site Plan Amendment Application will improve the existing plaza and enhance the pedestrian network and open public space on the Property. The project will continue to comply with the requirements of the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations, and it conforms with the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan and Design Guidelines. Accordingly, we respectfully request that the Planning Board approve the Site Plan Application as proposed.