

VIEWPOINT

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor and guest columns



JOANNE S. LAWTON / WBJ

Crystal City is part of the new National Landing submarket, as are Pentagon City and Potomac Yard.

BREAKING GROUND

‘National Landing’ is fine. But it doesn’t replace Crystal City.

Ever since “National Landing” – along with Amazon.com Inc.’s second headquarters – was first introduced to the general public in November 2018 as the coagulum of Pentagon City, Crystal City and Potomac Yard, we’ve been told this new name wouldn’t replace these established neighborhoods, but rather act as a brand for the “general district” these areas encompass.

“The neighborhoods around Amazon’s new headquarters have not changed their names and don’t plan to,” Brooke Oberwetter, Amazon’s then-head of community affairs and an Arlington resident, wrote in a letter to the editor we published in February 2020.

The neighborhoods might not plan to, but a growing body of evidence suggests the area’s most powerful business interest – yes, even more powerful than Amazon – wants “Crystal City” to fade away.

On Jan. 18, JBG Smith Properties announced it has started construction on a pair of multifamily towers at 2000 and 2001 S. Bell St., a block south of the Crystal City Metro station. In, I dare say, the heart of Crystal City. But in that 750-word press release, “Crystal City” does not appear. Not once. “National Landing,” meanwhile, appears seven times. The development is in the “heart of National Landing,” it said, and will provide panoramic views of the National Landing skyline, and is a “major milestone in National Landing’s ongoing transformation.” You get the point.

JBG Smith, Crystal City’s dominant property owner and developer and Arlington’s largest property taxpayer by a wide margin, did the same thing last March when it announced it had started construction at 1900 Crystal Drive “in National Landing.” A month earlier, JBG Smith announced big investments in its Washington Housing Initiative Impact Pool, and it said this about the Crystal House apartments, the sale of which it helped to finance: “Crystal House, located at 1900 S. Eads Street, Arlington, is near Amazon’s HQ2 development in National Landing.”

Ironically, Crystal House, opened in 1961, was the inspiration for the Crystal City name.

Love it or not, Crystal City is a bona fide, 60-year-old community of more than 20,000 residents, with thousands more to come as massive developments take



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shape. As an office and retail market, it fell on hard times pre-HQ2 as the military base realignment and closure decisions shifted key tenants elsewhere and U.S. Airways took leave of Virginia as its headquarters.

Now, with seemingly better days on the horizon, largely due to the vision and work of developers like JBG Smith, there is every reason to build up Crystal City, both physically and reputationally. Repeating “National Landing” in your press releases has the opposite effect.

Developers have immense power to define their neighborhoods, for better or worse. It’s a branding exercise really – what will put more butts in office chairs, more heads on pillows, more feet on the street and more shoppers in stores. But there is a responsibility in wielding that power to strengthen, not tear down, what those before you established.

I take no issue with National Landing as a new submarket or a business improvement district. It’s just a name, and it’s ... fine. Amazon, its most important tenant, has embraced the brand (and Amazon’s Sept. 1 press release updating the status of HQ2 does mention Crystal City by name).

But no resident of Crystal City claims to live in National Landing – none that I know of, at least. And I don’t think they ever will. JBG Smith, and other developers to a lesser extent, should embrace, repair and build up Crystal City. Shout the name from your rooftops, with your panoramic views.

Brand your buildings whatever you like. Stop rebranding your neighborhoods.

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BREAKING GROUND

Without Trump hotel, Pennsylvania Avenue can be great again

From now on, let's keep politics off Pennsylvania Avenue.

On the face of it, it's a ridiculous statement, for a corridor capped on one end by the White House and on the other by the U.S. Capitol, for a 1.2-mile stretch of roadway lined by the likes of the FBI, Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Justice.

These are the quintessential corridors of power, but there's more to America's Main Street than the power brokering behind its monumental walls. It's a street, after all, and we know it could be much better. It's terribly dull in parts, excessively imposing in others. It lacks attractive retail and a strong residential component. It's not kind to pedestrians who might venture there from the National Mall or Central Business District – so they stay away.

Roughly a decade ago, we were poised to make great strides.

In 2013, The Trump Organization signed a lease with the General Services Administration to convert the historic Old Post Office at 1100 Pennsylvania Ave. NW into the Trump International Hotel. A year later, the National Capital Planning Commission launched the Pennsylvania Avenue Initiative with the ultimate goal of creating a corridor worthy of its global reputation as one of the great capital promenades.

In September 2014, in the pages of the Washington Business Journal, as its economic development reporter, I wrote that the 270-room Trump hotel "is key to Pennsylvania Avenue's resurgence."

I was so wrong. The Trump Organization spent \$200 million to build a palatial political football, one that benefited the Trump family, at least until Covid, but did little to boost the fortunes of the avenue. Its opulent rooms and decadent restaurants were the toast of GOP circles, but its economic influence ended there.

In terms of potential bang for your buck for Pennsylvania Avenue, Trump's hotel couldn't hold a candle to the anticipated relocation of the FBI headquarters. The J. Edgar Hoover Building at Ninth and Pennsylvania consumes a full square block – its demolition with the FBI's move to the suburbs would



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clean a 5.3-acre slate for an unprecedented mixed-use project of more than 2 million square feet.

That was the plan in 2014, when work on the Trump hotel was just getting started. But three years later, well after the hotel opened, the GSA declared the FBI would stay put. Democrats cried foul, claiming President Trump shut down the FBI's move to eliminate any chance a competing hotel would be constructed on the Hoover site. Trump and Republicans dismissed that allegation. Documents were demanded. Meetings were held. Strongly worded press releases were issued.

Wherever you stand politically, in this fight, Pennsylvania Avenue was the big loser. The status quo reigned, as it so often does in the nation's capital.

But we may finally be on the road to recovery.

In February, the NCPC unveiled three potential visions for the corridor – any one of them would be better than the expanse of concrete we have now. In March, Congress adopted a fiscal 2022 budget that could once again set the FBI's move to Maryland or Virginia back in motion.

Then, earlier this month, the most crucial moment arrived as the Trump Organization sold its hotel to Miami's CGI Merchant Group, clearing the way for its conversion to a decidedly less political, but equally luxurious Waldorf Astoria – and lifting a mammoth weight off the avenue's broad shoulders.

We'll never get these eight years back, but here's an opportunity for a fresh start. If Pennsylvania Avenue is to become great again, kick politics to the curb.

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RAPPAPORT

Lidl will open at Skyland Town Center, bringing a much needed supermarket to Ward 7.

BREAKING GROUND

Our community grocers avoid too much of their community. That must end.

Most of us appreciate convenience, especially as it relates to where we buy our stuff. The opportunity to walk, pedal or drive – for the suburbanites among us – a short distance to the market, pharmacy, restaurant, coffee shop, dry cleaner, whatever you need, is not to be taken for granted.

And when it comes to groceries, we appreciate options, too. Wegmans is great for premade food but doesn't carry many of the brand name items Giant does. Money may be tight: enter Aldi, Lidl or fledgling Amazon Fresh. Maybe you want organic and have money to burn – it's a Whole Foods day. Or a Trader Joe's day. Or a Safeway day. Or MOM's. Or Food Lion. Or Sprouts. Or Costco, for those days when seven pounds of chicken just isn't enough.

Developers know this: The supermarket-anchored shopping center is a gold mine. Where there is food to buy, there is usually foot traffic. Where there is foot traffic, there is every reason to charge your tenants a higher monthly rent.

This is the world I live in, and it's gotten out of hand. There are seven Giants, two Safeways, two Lidls, two Amazon Fresh stores, two Aldis, a Trader Joe's and a Wegmans within a 10-minute drive of my Northern Virginia home.

Seven Giants! One at Saratoga, one at Springfield Plaza, one at West Springfield, one at Kings Park, one at Kingstowne, one on Burke Centre Parkway and one on Huntsman Boulevard. And somehow, they'll all be out of that one item I need on any given day.

But I digress.

What I have in spades, too many communities are denied. There are four times as many grocery stores near my home as there are in all of D.C.'s wards 7 and 8, despite efforts by the District to incentivize their opening with tax credits and other benefits. It is unacceptable that upward of 200,000 people lack access to basic necessities. Food deserts are real. Food insecurity can be deadly.

German discount grocer Lidl, whose U.S. headquarters is in Arlington, is due praise for opening



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a store at Ward 7's Skyland Town Center – the mixed-use project nearly dealt a death blow by Walmart in 2016 when it bailed on its lease. Landover's Giant Food is due the same for tentatively agreeing in June to open a store on the border of D.C. and Prince George's County, at the long-delayed Capitol Gateway development, another victim of Walmart's pullback.

Supermarkets are community builders. Amenities such as theirs don't just meet the needs of the masses, they support existing centers and drive new development. When federal agencies kick off a search for a new headquarters, their requests for proposals often explicitly demand that such retailers are nearby any offered location. The lack of those amenities is partially why prime Metro-adjacent properties in D.C. and Prince George's have yet to land the big fish.

On the day the Giant deal at Capitol Gateway was announced, on Facebook, comments like this popped up: "They better put a police precinct or something near there." It was disgusting, but in the bigger picture, it perpetuated an awful stereotype and perception of communities that deserve so much better. Our dominant area grocers must see through such foulness. Want to declare yourself a vital member of the Greater Washington community? Then be part of the whole community and open stores in locations you've long avoided.

You can have one of mine.

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