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Tyson's Corner: The building of an American city

By Jonathan O'Connell | Published: September 24

Imagine, it's a shivery January morning in 2014 and you are riding one of the first of Metro's Silver Line cars to Tyson's Corner.

After you step aboard downtown, the train runs west out of the District and into Arlington County. It passes through the East Falls Church station, just as the Orange Line does, but then hangs a right away from the Dulles Toll Road and soars onto newly built tracks 50 feet in the air. It zips past the [Capital One](#) headquarters, rumbles over the icy Capital Beltway — check out the cars creeping along below! — and [passes the two shopping malls](#) and through two more stations before pulling onto the platform at Tyson's West. It's about 40 minutes after you boarded.

As you step onto the platform five stories above Leesburg Pike, you look out over an area that [Fairfax County officials imagine](#) as a modern American city — a “walkable, sustainable, urban center.”

In other words, nothing like Tyson's Corner circa 2011.

If all goes to plan by 2014, [a 400-unit apartment building](#) twice the height of buildings in downtown Washington is under construction beyond the tracks on one side. It's next to [an Exxon](#) station, a [McDonald's](#) and other single-use buildings surrounded by parking lots. Off the other direction, [a new Wal-Mart](#) sells fresh groceries. Still, when you get off one of those first trains, reaching either side requires shuffling along a pedestrian walkway above six lanes of traffic. And keep in mind that a "block" in Tysons can be a quarter-mile or more, lined with auto dealerships and strip malls. That next street is a long way off, and the only shopping you can expect to do between here and there is for a Honda or a Mercedes.

Tysons Corner today is unincorporated. It has no government of its own, and it didn't even have an associated Zip code until April.

And yet, there is much to make it the envy of major American cities.

Tysons has [26.7 million square feet of office space](#), more than the metropolitan areas of San Antonio or Jacksonville, Fla. Five Fortune 500 firms call it home.

With its two malls, Tysons draws crowds of shoppers from the Mid-Atlantic region. There is a Gucci store, Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus and Tiffany's. If you have a young daughter, you probably know that it has one of the country's 11 American Girl stores.

Care to dine at the Palm? Tysons has one. Want to stay at the Ritz-Carlton afterward? No problem.

But as the tiny rural crossroads has grown into one of the country's top corporate destinations, in one sense it's also become a monstrosity: It is teeming — just absolutely bursting — with traffic. Traffic that carries people from cookie-cutter strip malls to sprawling office parks and past acres of parking lots in between. For each of the 19,627 people who live in Tysons, more than four others drive there each day, which explains all those parking lots.

Enter Metro, which by way of more than \$6 billion worth of tracks and cars will connect Tysons with Washington on one end and [Dulles International Airport](#) on the other.

When [the funding was approved in 2008](#), Fairfax County seized on the opportunity to encourage an urban landscape. Real estate developers jumped onboard, submitting plans for more than 20 million square feet of buildings in Tysons. Now, county officials anticipate the number of residents to increase fivefold by 2050, to 100,000.

From a rural crossroads

Tysons Corner "was a challenge to everything that I had been taught: that what this world needed was More Planning; that cars were inherently Evil and our attachment to them

Inexplicable,” Joel Garreau, who was a longtime reporter and editor for The Washington Post, wrote in his 1991 book, [“Edge City: Life on the New Frontier.”](#)

Two key events steered Tysons in that direction.

Fifty years ago, Tysons was a rural crossroads marked by a general store and an Exxon station. Then, in 1961, the federal government completed construction of a headquarters facility for a new security outfit, the Central Intelligence Agency, in Langley, which is now part of McLean. Over the next generation, as the U.S. defense budget ballooned from \$381.5 billion in 1955 to \$713.2 billion in 2010 (in today’s dollars), contractors doing business with the CIA and the Pentagon began looking for office space nearby.

A year later, Fairfax County approved the plans of an up-and-coming developer named Theodore Lerner (who would go on to buy the Washington Nationals) to build a shopping mall. When it opened six years later, Lerner hailed Tysons Corner Center, featuring air conditioning, mechanized coat racks and decorative fountains, as one of the largest enclosed malls in the country. In its coverage of the opening, The Post listed every one of its 35 stores, which included the Hecht Co., Woodward & Lothrop and F.W. Woolworth.

Tysons quickly zipped along a path to becoming a regional shopping destination and a bastion of the “Beltway bandit” firms of the defense industry.

Real estate developers with land in Tysons entered a golden era. Gerald T. Halpin bought more than 100 acres in Tysons in 1962 and — with legendary land-use lawyer John T. “Til” Hazel at his side — his WestGroup firm got the green light to build two office parks, WestGate and WestPark. Defense contractors opened offices there; other developers followed suit; and the state and county expanded roads to meet the growing capacity.

Developer Stephen Cumbie founded his [real estate firm, NVCommercial](#), in 1983, when Tysons provided easy access to the malls, two airports and the District.

“It was a regional destination,” he said. “I mean, people were coming from Maryland and all points west, not only for their jobs but for the shopping.”

Tysons grew more specialized, catering to businessmen and luxury shoppers. Little housing was built; few people moved there, and many institutions that typically shape communities — parks, churches, schools, libraries and the like — simply never arrived.

When you step off the Silver Line in 2014, Tysons in all likelihood will still be a spectacle of imbalance, a place with the same number of Macy’s department stores (two) as grocery stores, where a glut of restaurants offer steak to the suit-and-tie crowd — the Palm, Fleming’s, Ruth’s Chris, Shula’s, Morton’s — but an apple can be hard to find.

Into a major city

Can a major American city — a place of authenticity, culture and even grit — evolve out of a 50-year-old place built with none of that in mind? More than 20 years into planning, it is unclear. But paramount to that effort [will be sidewalks](#).

“In my view, it’s the quality of the pedestrian experience that makes people say, ‘I like this city; I like this place; I want to be here’ — or not, and they’ll say, ‘Oh, I hate Tysons.’ And it’s going to be one way or the other,” said Patrick L. Phillips, chief executive of the [Urban Land Institute](#).

Budget constraints and a sagging economy have undermined the plans, Phillips said, in ways that will be felt for decades.

“There was the concession that the rail would be aboveground, and then a concession that the [Dulles station would be aboveground](#),” he said. “And the fiscal realities are real, but these places are durable; they’re going to be around for a long time, and these decisions are important.

“I think it comes back to the issue of scale and the nature of public and private decisions and the big moves that shaped American cities, whether it’s the street grid in Manhattan or the Burnham plan in Chicago that shaped the parks and public places there. I mean, these are the big public investments that define these places.”

Retrofitting Tysons into an urban street grid is a challenge on a scale that urban planners and academics say they have never seen.

Rolf Pendall, director of the [Metropolitan Housing & Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute](#), said twisting the bones of Tysons into a grid will probably be more difficult and expensive than it was to build places such as Philadelphia and Manhattan from scratch.

“When you have streets and storm water and sewer and electric and all of the utilities and infrastructure you need to build 27 million square feet of office space in a suburban or even exurban area, turning that around is something new,” Pendall said. “It’s probably not quite as hard as turning around steel mills in Pittsburgh and Buffalo, because you don’t have the issues of toxic pollution, but it’s like a machine that was built for one thing. You have to repurpose it.”

To avoid building something resembling a monster Crystal City, officials and landowners also must provide for a street grid of small blocks, which will add to their cost. This will mean that the original developers of Tysons will need to rip up lots and buildings they painstakingly designed for a car culture a generation ago.

Cumbie, of NVCommercial, is attempting to navigate these issues on the ground right now. His company has proposed a 1.3 million-square-foot mixed-use project near the Tysons Central Metro stop.

“We’re starting at a difficult place because, creating a grid of streets in a place with as much development as Tysons has, it’s inevitable for the grid of streets to run into existing buildings,” he said. “Most places that have 25 million or more square feet of office space are 200 or more years old, and Tysons is only maybe 50 years old. So it does make it difficult.”

‘Santa Fe-ing of America’

With the Metro stations two to three years off, the city of Tysons Corner is starting to take shape. The new [Wal-Mart](#), for instance, will open inside an old parking garage — an adaptation of existing infrastructure that shows the chain’s interest in more urban design.

Private developers are pitching thousands of new apartment and condominium units and integrating their plans with parks, sidewalks and pedestrian connections to the Metro stations.

But some developers are not so focused on walkability.

Take Lerner, owner of 20 million square feet of real estate and estimated by Forbes to have a net worth of \$3 billion. His firm is sticking with its original plans, approved before the new guidelines came through, for an office building near a Metro stop. The county’s new blueprint for Tysons, [approved in 2010](#), encourages more density but requires builders to contribute to public amenities such as parks, fire stations and libraries.

Another Tysons landowner, the defense contractor Mitre, is proposing 1.4 million square feet of construction but appears to ignore walkability and mixed-use principles emphasized in the new plan.

And the largest property owner in Tysons, Cityline Partners, recently sued a neighbor, Capital One, in a possible attempt to prevent it from proceeding with a dense urban plan next door. Capital One countersued last month.

The jostling for position, however, also shows a fundamental strength that economic and real estate analysts say is likely to carry Tysons. Investors are aggressively seeking and signing deals there, said John Sikaitis, senior vice president for research at the brokerage firm [Jones Lang LaSalle](#), and spending millions of dollars on engineers, architects, lawyers and consultants to advance their plans.

Sikaitis said the federal government and its related industries have been such a dependable source of jobs and growth for the region that Washington — and Tysons in particular — has better long-term prospects than perhaps any other market in the country.

“You haven’t seen a lot of urbanized new cities pop up because the demographic shifts in patterns just aren’t there in the regions,” Sikaitis said. “D.C. actually has those demographic shifts that are promising for Tysons.”

But according to Garreau, the author, none of that will matter. He has new ideas about American communities in a post-“Edge City” world. They are based on the same fundamental theory: Civilizations form according to the day’s optimal form of transportation.

“The state-of-the-art transportation device today is the automobile, the jet plane and the network computer,” he said.

With broadband, employees no longer need to physically be transported to work. He sees Americans moving to scenic, ideal locations such as the mountains of Montana or the hills of Santa Fe. Garreau splits his time between Fauquier County and Arizona.

“What you’re seeing now is what I call the Santa Fe-ing of the world, or the Santa Fe-ing of America,” he said. “The fastest growth you’re seeing is in small urban areas in beautiful places, because now you’ve got e-mail and Web and laptops and iPhones and all that jazz.”

As that dynamic grows, Garreau said, face-to-face contact on the street is more critical than ever to the success of cities. He calls it “the one and only reason for cities in the future: face-to-face contact. Period. Full Stop.”

“Are they good places for face-to-face contact?” he said. “Because if they are, they’ll thrive. If they’re not, they’ll die.”

Will Tysons get there? When you get off the Metro in 2014 — or 2024 or 2054 — you will know.

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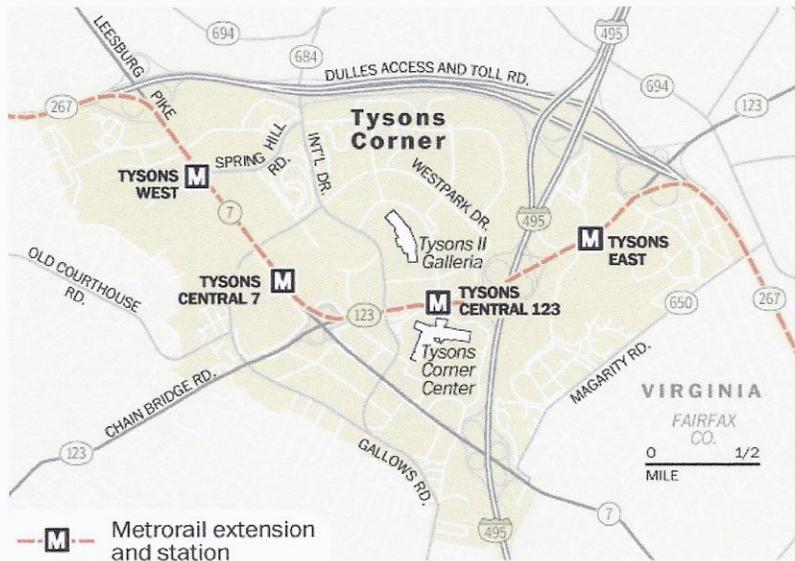
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Tysons Corner

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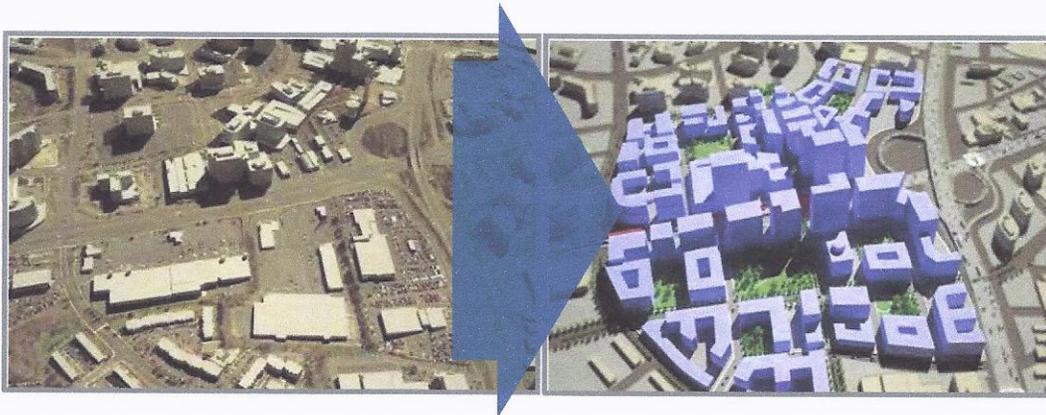
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I: INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s, Tysons was a rural area of Fairfax County, marked by the crossroads of Routes 7 and 123 and a general store. In the 1960s, the Tysons Corner Center, a large regional mall, was opened, beginning the area's transformation into a major commercial center. Later Tysons attracted a second regional mall, the Galleria at Tysons II, and the County's largest concentration of hotel rooms, including those at the Ritz Carlton and the Sheraton Premiere. Tysons has also become home to several Fortune 500 headquarters and many other prominent national firms, and in 2010 had around one-quarter of all of the office space in Fairfax County.

The construction of the Capital Beltway and the Dulles Airport Access Road in the 1960s improved Tysons' access to highway and air transportation. This made Tysons one of the region's most strategic locations for capturing suburban office and retail development. The subsequent transformation of Tysons was part of a nationwide phenomenon that shifted many traditional business functions from downtowns to the suburbs. Tysons was at the forefront of this trend, and, in fact, was identified as the archetypical "Edge City" by Joel Garreau in his 1991 book of the same name.

Tysons, with its large concentration of office and retail development, is well positioned to take advantage of the coming of Metrorail's Silver Line. This line will run from the East Falls Church station and ultimately extend beyond the Washington Dulles International Airport into Loudoun County. Four Metro stations are planned to open in the Tysons Corner Urban Center by 2014: Tysons East, Tysons Central 123, Tysons Central 7, and Tysons West. The arrival of Metrorail service provides an opportunity to transform Tysons yet again, from an "edge city" into a true urban downtown for Fairfax County. The remade Tysons should provide a better balance of housing and jobs, a transportation system that includes facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists, and a green network that links existing stream valley parks with open space and urban parks located throughout the area.

Map 1 shows the boundaries of the Tysons Corner urban center, and the locations of the four future Metrorail stations.

LOCATION AND BOUNDARY

Tysons encompasses approximately 2,100 acres (including road rights-of-way) in northeastern Fairfax County, about halfway between downtown Washington, D.C. and Dulles International Airport. It is located at the confluence of Interstate 495 (the Capital Beltway) with the Dulles Airport Access and Toll Roads, Route 7 and Route 123.

Tysons is roughly triangular in shape and contains the highest natural elevations in Fairfax County. It is bounded on the southeastern side by Magarity Road and on the southwestern side generally by the limit of commercial development along Gallows and Old Courthouse Roads and the natural areas of Old Courthouse Stream Branch. The residential areas on the western side of Gosnell Road flanking Old Courthouse Road are also part of the Tysons Corner area. The Dulles Airport Access and Toll Roads form the northern boundary of Tysons.

The residential communities surrounding Tysons, which include McLean, Vienna and Falls Church, help to make Tysons a good business location. These communities provide a wide range of housing types and a relatively large supply of housing near Tysons' employers. The communities surrounding Tysons also have many outstanding features, such as excellent public schools and one of the best educated and highly trained labor pools in the nation.

PLANNING HISTORY

As Tysons grew in the 1960s and early 1970s, its evolution as a dynamic and complex business center required re-study by County planners every few years. In August of 1975, the Board of Supervisors adopted the Area II portion of the Comprehensive Plan, which established the Tysons Corner Complex Area as "... a special study area requiring continual monitoring and restudy" In September of 1975, the Board commissioned a special study and created a broad-based task force with representation from large and small businesses in the area, landowners of major undeveloped tracts, and residents of the area, as well as citizen leaders from the surrounding McLean and Vienna communities. As a result of this study, a revised Comprehensive Plan was adopted in June of 1978. The detailed land use recommendations that were provided by this amendment were the primary guide for land use and zoning decisions through 1993.

After 1978, the Tysons plan was amended by means of the Area Plan Review or Out-of-Turn Plan Amendment processes. The most significant change was the addition of building height guidelines as a result of the 1984 Tysons Corner Height Study. These guidelines established maximum building heights to be considered during the zoning process, along with building mass, architectural interest and other features, in order to achieve the Plan's urban design objectives.

Between 1989 and 1991, the County's Comprehensive Plan underwent a major review known as the Fairfax Planning Horizons process. The first phase of Fairfax Planning Horizons resulted in the creation of the Policy Plan, which was adopted by the Board of Supervisors in August of 1990. At the same time, the Board adopted The Concept for Future Development and Land Classification System as a guide for the second phase of the Planning Horizons process, the update of the Area Plans. The Concept for Future Development designated Tysons Corner as the County's Urban Center, and set forth a need for a Tysons Corner special study to identify

- Parking management
- Phasing to transportation improvements and programs
- Traffic impact analysis evaluating three time periods: first phase, interim phase, and Plan build-out
- Urban design
 - Achievement of the building, site design, and public realm design guidelines to achieve the urban aesthetic vision for Tysons
 - A variety of buildings heights with the tallest buildings in the ranges specified by the building height map
 - Shadow and wind studies demonstrating that the design creates an inviting environment and does not cause a canyon effect
- Urban park standards
- Active recreation facilities
- Public facilities
- Demonstrating how other properties in the subdistrict and in the general vicinity of the proposal can develop in conformance with the Plan

DISTRICTS WITHIN TYSONS

The transformed Tysons will be organized around eight districts, each with a mix of land uses. The transit-oriented developments (TODs) around the four Metrorail stations will resemble intense and busy downtowns. The four Non-TOD Districts will include lively neighborhoods leading to the edges of Tysons. Closer to the neighborhoods outside of Tysons, the pattern of development will carefully transition down to a scale and use that respects the adjacent communities. Map 2 shows the boundaries of the eight districts in Tysons.

Each of the eight districts in Tysons is envisioned to have a different mix of land uses and intensities. Within these districts there will be places, to work, to live, to shop, and to play. Collectively, the districts of the transformed Tysons will work together to create an urban center or downtown for Fairfax County. All of the districts within Tysons will be equally important to its overall success.

Each TOD and Non-TOD District will have a different character, as described briefly below. People who live and work in Tysons will use all of these places, and each district will be connected to the others. Boundaries between the districts will be blurred as people move seamlessly from one place to the next. The connectedness and uniqueness of each place will be mutually supportive, creating a 24-hour urban center of great vitality.

TOD Districts

Each of the four station areas is considered a TOD District, and is described briefly below.

Tysons West: Tysons West should be a signature gateway to the urban center. Streets leading to and from the Metro station are expected to redevelop with retail uses, drawing people off Metrorail and into the neighborhoods. In addition, Tysons West is an optimal location for an arts

and entertainment district, including restaurants and entertainment options that stay open after the workday ends.

Tysons Central 7: Tysons Central 7 District has two subdistricts, separated by Route 7. The North Subdistrict is oriented towards Greensboro Drive and is envisioned to be a vibrant 24-hour mixed use center with a high concentration of office space. The South Subdistrict is oriented towards Route 7 and is envisioned as a civic center with a mix of public, residential and commercial uses.

Tysons Central 123: Tysons Central 123 will remain the region's signature shopping destination. Redevelopment is expected to add street-front, ground floor retail and entertainment, and high-rise residential buildings. In addition, high-rise hotel and conference facilities will provide services to local residents and will be a short walk from the office concentration in the Tysons Central 7 District.

Tysons East: Tysons East serves as a signature gateway for those entering the urban center from the east. The defining focus of Tysons East will be Scotts Run, which is envisioned to transform into a great urban park surrounded by mixed use development, including office, residential, hotel, support retail and service uses. In addition, the area could include institutional and public uses, such as educational and recreational facilities.

Non-TOD Districts

The four Non-TOD Districts are generally located between TOD Districts and the edges of Tysons that are adjacent to surrounding residential communities. Each is described briefly below.

West Side: The West Side District is developed with two residential neighborhoods and includes the Old Courthouse Spring Branch stream valley park as a key feature. Because of its location on the edge of the urban center, this district serves as a transition from planned high intensity mixed use in the Tysons West and Tysons Central 7 TOD Districts to the single family neighborhoods just outside of Tysons.

Old Courthouse: The Old Courthouse District will have smaller scale office buildings and residential developments than TOD Districts and will serve as a transition area between the Tysons Central 123 District and the neighboring communities. With additional infill and redevelopment, portions of this district will evolve into a neighborhood that supports an active 24-hour environment where people go to restaurants or stores after work.

North Central: The land use pattern in the North Central District will allow for a transition between Tysons Central 123 and communities north of Tysons. Office uses would be mostly located adjacent to the Dulles Toll Road, while residential land uses could be the focus around the proposed circulator route. Future development along this route could result in vibrant, mixed use residential neighborhoods, with local-serving retail, dedicated parks and civic uses, and a pedestrian-friendly street network.

East Side: The East Side District serves as a transition area between higher intensity TOD Districts and the adjacent Pimmit Hills neighborhood abutting Tysons. Portions of this district will redevelop into urban residential neighborhoods, including limited retail and office uses serving the local residential population and providing Tysons with some live-work opportunities.

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