

Why a government building at Armory Square might work

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Prince Frederick, MD - Elected officials, candidates, a former elected official and citizen activists in Calvert County are making plenty of noise about a long-range construction project. Their timing is good. When a proposed plan is in the prehistoric stages it is a great time to debate its merits and drawbacks. A proposal—touted by a majority of county commissioners, with support (albeit with a few reservations) from some of the county's Annapolis lawmakers and county government staff—to build a large governmental center is on the table. While a location has been proposed—Armory Square—there are several alternate locations that have been mentioned.

Some oppose the plan entirely and some are in favor of building the center but do not like the Armory Square location.

After giving it some thought, the project as proposed by the majority of county commissioners might actually be the best option. To draw that conclusion you have to consider what would work better long-term and consider the apparent success in a similar project located nearby.

Step one: Does Calvert County Government need a new location? Since the county courthouse is being phased out as a headquarters for local government and the three-story County Services Plaza is running out of room, the answer is yes. Additional office space is located at the building that used to be the Prince Frederick Library, which the county owns, but other office space is being leased to the county. Ownership would be preferable. You cannot refinance rent and it always increases. Unless county taxpayers would prefer to buy the leased office buildings then a new, larger space-efficient building on county land would be wise in the long-term. Having government offices in separate buildings—even if they are clustered in the Main Street area—may not be as customer-friendly as the new, larger building. However, other governments—federal and state—do not have all offices under one roof or even on the same street. One could argue that government and convenience are not two words that naturally go together.

Step two: If there is one, huge county government building in Prince Frederick, is Armory Square a good location? Isn't that envisioned as a commercial destination? Can institutional and commercial in the same location work? It apparently can and you don't even have to leave town to prove it. At the town's north end is Market Square. The busy commercial property includes several restaurants—not all of them franchises—an independent grocery store plus some retail and specialty stores. A major presence on this site is the current Prince Frederick Library, which in many ways is like the square's anchor. Office buildings are also located nearby. The people who are busy with government might find the same convenience that those individuals—and families—are finding nearby when they visit the library.

Yes, the idea of going deeper in debt to pay for a large building seems daunting but capital projects have always been pricey and they don't occur overnight. The county's recent property and income tax increases were done to shore up the operating budget. Applying the revenue from Dominion Energy to operating and post-employment benefits seems to be a good plan now and can certainly be revisited by the next board.

The planning process is in motion now. We expect the current county commissioners to have open minds about solving local government's footprint issue. We hope the citizens will offer practical suggestions in lieu of parroted criticism on the issue. Their minds should be open, too.

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