



July 24, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Glenn Kreger, Acting Chief *GK*
Vision Division
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Vision Division

FROM: Frederick Vernon Boyd, Planner Coordinator (301.495.4654)
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SUBJECT: Worksession 1—Kensington and Vicinity Sector Plan: Transportation, Land Use,
Community Facilities, Historic Preservation

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

1. Review and approve transportation recommendations
2. Review and approve densities and building heights for Town Center, Crafts Services District
3. Review for schools; forecasts; determine impact of added development on schools; review Plan recommendation for recreation facilities
4. Discuss timing for historic resource evaluation and review Plan language of historic resource strategies

PROCESS AND SCHEDULE

The July 30 worksession will concentrate on mobility, land uses and proposed densities. It will review and amplify the Sector Plan sections on schools and other community facilities. Finally, it will review Sector Plan recommendations on historic preservation and provide a recommendation for subsequent evaluation of proposed resources.

The second worksession, scheduled for September 10, will review sustainability/environmental issues. Staff will also present a draft set of Urban Design Guidelines for Kensington.

The work program calls for approval of the Planning Board Draft on October 1.

INTRODUCTION

This staff report is organized to highlight the issues the Planning Board should address, which are posed as questions. A staff recommendation for Board action concludes each issue section.

Vision

The Sector Plan envisions a mixed-use Town Center that builds on the Town's history and character, is pedestrian-centered and connected to Kensington's residential neighborhoods. The Sector Plan's broad goal is to reinvigorate the Town Center while preserving the overall scale and character of the community.

Mobility

How should the Sector Plan incorporate its transportation analysis?

The Sector Plan makes areawide and specific recommendations for connectivity, including roadway classifications, street extensions, pedestrian connections and bikeways. These recommendations are based on detailed analyses of mobility and congestion. The analyses evaluate a broad array of strategies for managing travel demand, enhancing transit service, improving local streets and changing land use policies.

The analysis for Kensington determined that increases in traffic from potential future development in Kensington would result in traffic increases of about 15 percent over the life of the Sector Plan. Locally, the analysis determined that most intersections would meet congestion standards set for the area, with the exception of the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and Plyers Mill Road. This finding led to the Sector Plan recommendation for extending Summit Avenue, discussed below.

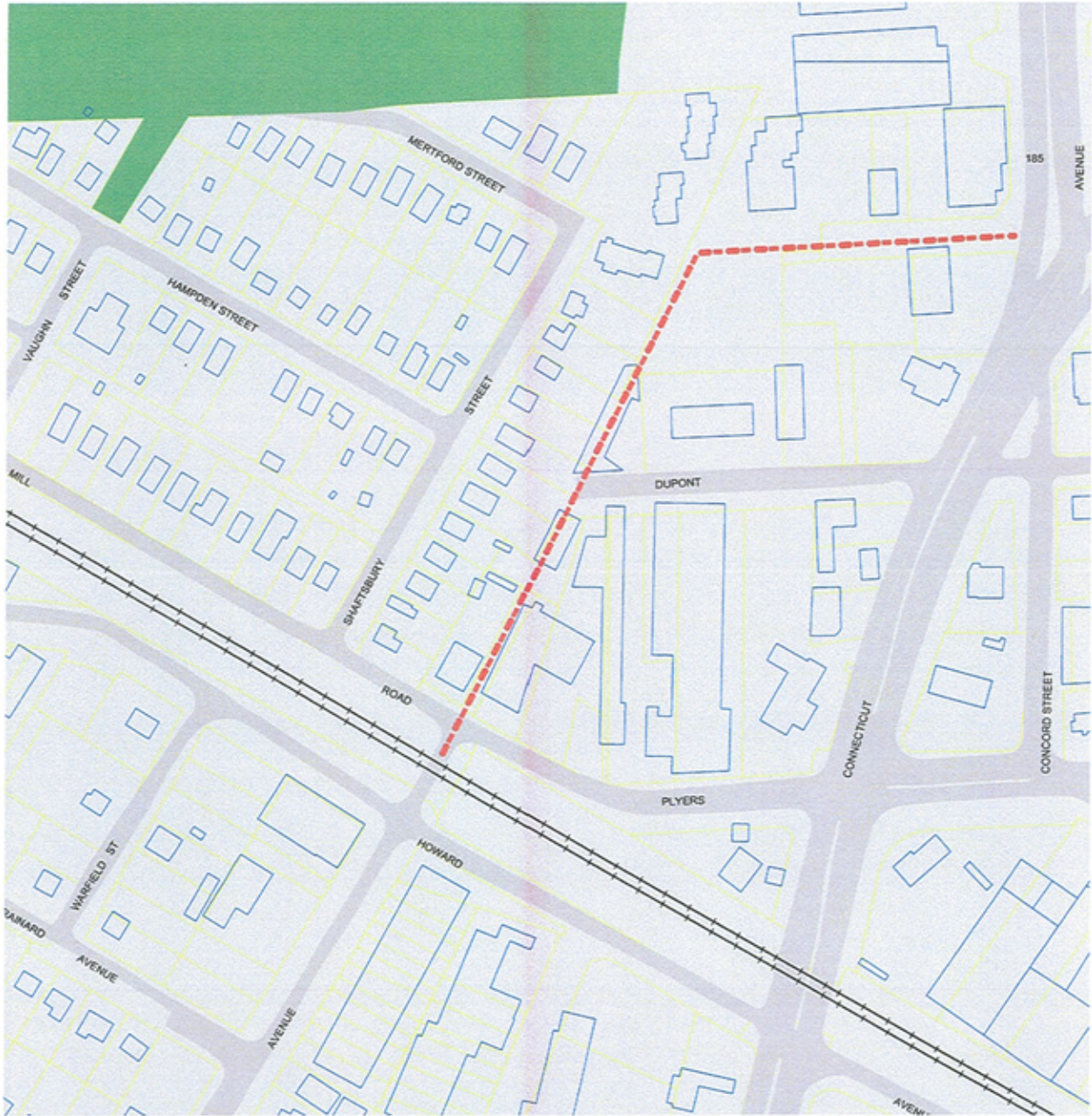
Detailed discussion of the analyses that support the recommendations is proposed to be included as one of a series of Appendices that will accompany the Plan, instead of in the Sector Plan itself. Public Hearing comments, however, indicate that some Plan readers have assumed that the absence of a discussion of traffic analysis in the Plan itself means that no analysis has been done.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that a brief summary of transportation analyses be included in the body of the Sector Plan.

How should Summit Avenue connect to Connecticut Avenue?

The Plan recommends an extension of Summit Avenue from Plyers Mill Road to Connecticut Avenue via Farragut Avenue. Public Hearing testimony from landowners on the west side of Connecticut Avenue suggested using Dupont Avenue for the connection and creating a full intersection at Connecticut and Dupont. (A median currently prevents through movement across Connecticut Avenue at Dupont.) This testimony asserted that a new intersection at Dupont would enhance pedestrian access between the east and west sides of Connecticut Avenue, connecting new development along Dupont Avenue to activity centers on the east side of Connecticut Avenue, including Metropolitan Avenue and the train station.



Public Hearing Draft Recommendation for Summit Avenue Extended

An enhanced intersection at Connecticut and Dupont could provide a safe pedestrian crossing of Connecticut Avenue north of the rail tracks. The Sector Plan recommends a continuous pedestrian environment along Howard Avenue, which includes creation of a safe pedestrian crossing at Connecticut Avenue. Enhanced pedestrian refuges at Knowles and Connecticut Avenues help create a greatly enhanced pedestrian circulation system.

A proposed extension of Summit Avenue would require an extensive feasibility study and project planning, which would most likely evaluate a variety of possible points of connection for Summit and Connecticut Avenues. It is therefore appropriate to revise the Sector Plan recommendation to reflect the likely planning process.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff therefore recommends that the Sector Plan retain the recommendation for extending Summit Avenue and state that the actual alignment will be determined through project planning studies, which would analyze connection alternatives and the land use, urban design and pedestrian circulation impacts of all options.

How should the Plan characterize commuter rail service through Kensington?

The Sector Plan notes that Kensington is located between Wheaton and White Flint, both of which are served by Metro. Implicit in the Plan's land use recommendations is the idea that Kensington's location away from Metro makes the kind of densities proposed for Metro station areas inappropriate. The recommendations recognize that Kensington's location on a commuter rail line does not justify significant increases in density.

Testimony at the Public Hearing recommended that the Sector Plan "coordinate with planned MARC expansion," and noted that expansion of commuter rail service could result in redesign of the Connecticut Avenue CSX crossing. Other comments called for more extended discussion of commuter rail's role in Kensington's future revitalization.

The Sector Plan recommends consideration of a pedestrian underpass of the rail tracks at the train station, and states that a 12-foot wide underpass east of the existing at-grade crossing is appropriate. The Plan also notes, in its discussion of the Konterra Limited Partnership property, that the Town plans to use a portion of the property for additional commuter parking. The draft Transportation Appendix for the Sector Plan includes a discussion of MARC.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that the Sector Plan include language recognizing and endorsing ongoing state plans to expand commuter rail service through Montgomery County. The Plan should also emphasize the need to insure that expansion through Kensington is sensitive to the Town's scale, character and history. The Plan's recommendation for a pedestrian underpass should state that, while the current level of commuter service does not warrant a grade separated pedestrian crossing, such a crossing creates a needed connection across the rail tracks for local residents and should be considered on that basis. The recommendation should also note that commuter service expansion should trigger evaluation of the project.

Diversity/Land Uses

The overall rationale for proposed mixed-use development in the Town Center is the desirability of lively and active streets as a means of revitalizing the area. Introducing housing into the Town Center creates a critical mass of people to live on well-designed streets and make use of the shops, public spaces, and other neighborhood services that will be located there. It also adheres to clearly articulated County policies to increase housing choice for the broadest possible range of ages and incomes.

What are the appropriate densities and building heights for the Town Center and the Crafts/Services District?

The Sector Plan generally recommends densities consistent with those available in the existing exclusively non-residential office and commercial zones now in place in the Town Center. For three areas, it recommends modestly higher densities to create a clearly defined and distinctive central core. For these same areas, the Plan recommends additional height, which will, combined with attentive regulatory controls, allow relatively small, but centrally located properties in Kensington to redevelop in the proposed CR use district while providing significant public benefits in the areas of design, connectivity, diversity and sustainability. Where commercial areas directly abut residential communities, the Plan adjusts residential densities and reduces building heights to create smooth transitions.

The Sector Plan makes recommendations for the Town Center, which includes Kensington's commercial areas, and for the Crafts/Services Districts, the mixed retail and industrial services areas on West Howard and Metropolitan Avenues. The Sector Plan recommends the CR use district for both the Town Center and the Crafts/Services District. The table below provides four distinct recommendations for sub-areas in the Town Center and Crafts/Services District: overall floor area ratio; commercial FAR; residential FAR; and building height. These recommendations meet the requirements of the CR use district. The table also offers a rationale for each sub-area recommendation.

Zoning Recommendations

Maximum Total FAR	Commercial FAR	Residential FAR	Building Height	Application	Rationale
CR 2.0	1.5	1.5	75	Town Center Core, Connecticut/University South	Maximum density at Town Center core and major intersection; does not favor single use
CR 2.0	1.0	1.5	60	Town Center 3700 Plyers Mill	Location makes property suitable for mixed use with substantial residential component to provide transition
CR 1.5	1.5	1.0	60	Town Center Concord, Crafts/Services Metropolitan, Crafts/Services West Howard	Non-residential focus reflects location (Concord), desirability of preserving existing uses (Crafts/Services)
CR 1.5	1.0	1.0	45	Town Center East, TC Howard	Does not favor single use; proximity to neighborhoods (East) and historic status (Howard) constrain height
CR 1.5	1.0	0.5	60	Town Center Near West, Connecticut/University Northeast	Non-residential focus reflects location away from Core (Near West), or in self-contained area at edge of plan area (Northeast)
CR 1.0	0.5	1.0	45	Connecticut/University Northwest	Location adjacent to existing neighborhood suggests lower density and residential focus
CR 1.0	0.5	0.5	45	Town Center West	Does not favor single use; location adjacent to existing neighborhood suggests lower density



TC Core



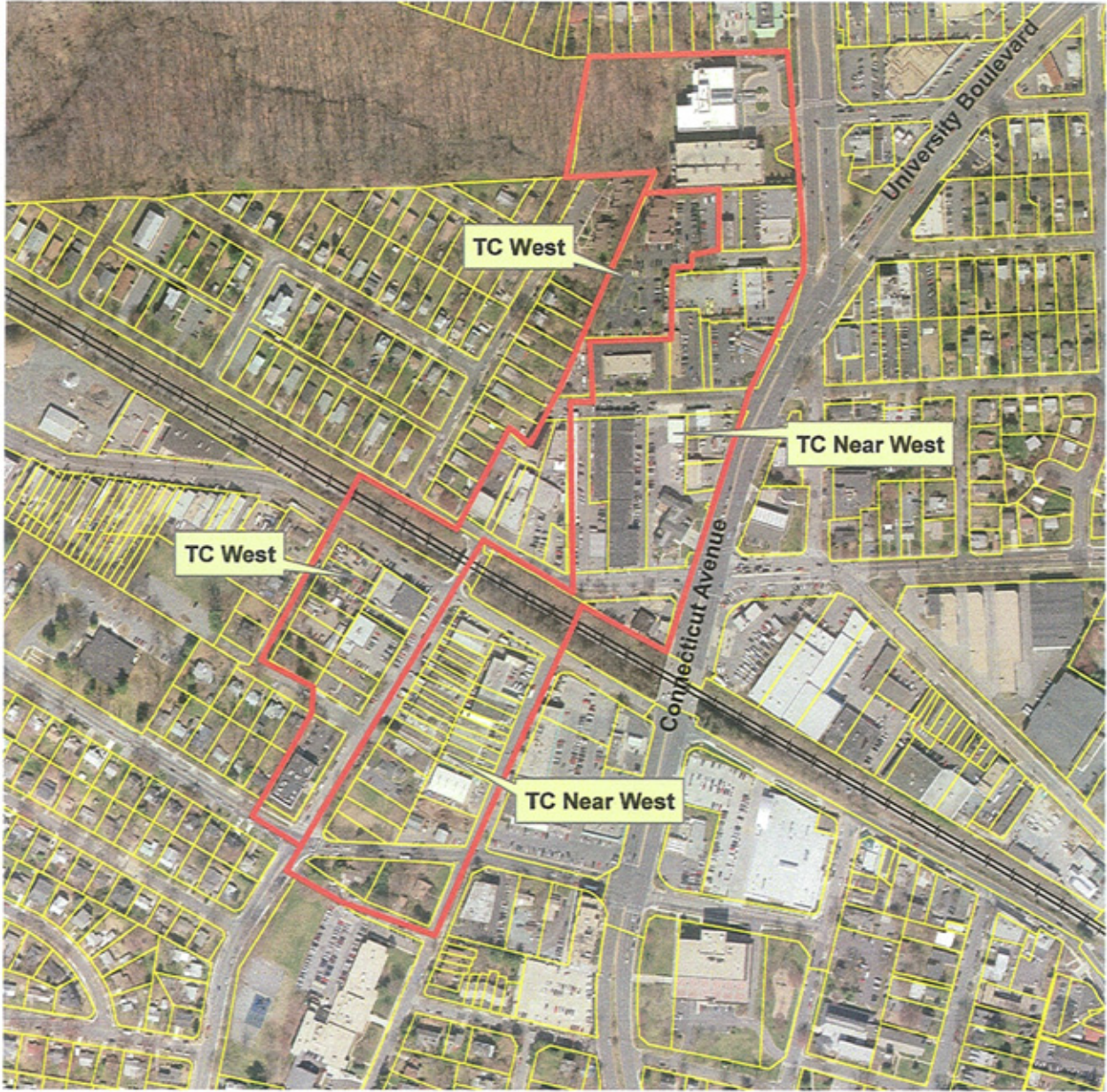
Town Center 3700 Plyers Mill



TC Concord, TC East



Town Center Howard, Town Center East



Town Center Near West, Town Center West



Crafts/Services Metropolitan



Crafts/Services West Howard



Connecticut/University

Individual properties—Burka

The Sector Plan recommends mixed-use development on this property, with street level shops along Connecticut, Knowles and Howard avenues, with office or residential uses above. The Sector Plan recommends public open space at the corner of Connecticut and Knowles and public use space in the form of widened sidewalks.

Representatives of the Burka family argued at the public hearing for additional overall density—to 2.5 FAR—and increased residential and commercial densities of 2.0 FAR while supporting the Sector Plan’s recommended building heights. Because development of the property is not imminent, it was argued, equivalent residential and commercial densities would preserve the owners’ options for creating a mix of uses that would respond to market forces at the time of development.

The primary goal of the Sector Plan is the creation of a lively and pedestrian-oriented Town Center that builds on Kensington’s historic scale and character. Mixed-use development can achieve this goal, but only if there is a true mix of uses. In this case, the proposed recommendations for the Town Center Core are designed to make mixed uses more attractive than a single use residential or commercial project, which, higher residential and commercial densities would encourage. It should also be noted that neither the Urban Land Institute, whose Technical Assistance Panel evaluated market potential in Kensington, nor planning staff, which also inventoried and examined market conditions, indicated that the area could support the levels of commercial development represented by the Burka proposal.

Planning staff also believes that a 2.5 FAR on this property, with a 75-foot height limit encourages additional height across the entire property, creating a development “box” that is out of character with Kensington’s scale. The proposed combination of FAR and building height, with urban design guidelines that can be applied through the regulatory process, can create a project with varied height and mass that can enhance the visual impact of the Town Center.

Individual properties—Antique Village

Antique Village is located on Howard Avenue’s Antique Row, and is in the Kensington Historic District. The Sector Plan recognizes the importance of Antique Row to Kensington’s character and proposes overall densities equivalent to those now allowed in the existing C-2 Zone.

Representatives of the owners also argued at the public hearing for additional overall density and building height. The owners proposed an FAR of 2.0 to 2.5 and building heights of 50 feet. These maximums, the owners argued, would provide the needed incentive for redevelopment and allow options to accommodate market conditions at the time of redevelopment.

This property poses the same issues as the Burka property, and planning staff takes the same position. In addition, this property’s location in the historic district, (although the property is a secondary resource) makes compatible design a vital element in any redevelopment. The Sector Plan’s recommendations for this area acknowledge the preponderance of commercial uses in this area, while preserving the option to include residential development. This could reestablish the historic concept of residential uses above commercial space, which was reasonably common during Kensington’s development.



Burka Property



Antique Village

An FAR greater than 1.5, conflicts with the scale and character of the historic business district.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends the overall, residential and commercial floor area ratios contained in the accompanying table. To convey an individual rationale for each case, it may be appropriate to include the table in the Planning Board Draft of the Sector Plan.

Historic Preservation

The Sector Plan section on Historic Preservation identifies three neighborhoods—North Kensington, Kensington Estates and Ken-Gar—and three individual sites—Kensington Cabin, Kensington Fire Station, and the Ken-Gar Rosenwald School—that should be evaluated for inclusion on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The Plan also recommends reevaluating the boundaries of the existing Kensington Historic District, in part to reconcile discrepancies between the County and National Register districts. Finally, the Plan also recommends the creation of guidelines for evaluating properties on the edges of the existing district, so that scale, massing, and setback issues can be reviewed. Testimony at the Public Hearing endorsed the proposed resource and district evaluations; others urged concurrent review of historic resources and the Sector Plan.

Should the Sector Plan be delayed to allow concurrent review of historic resources?

The County Council has clearly indicated that it wants to approve the Kensington Sector Plan and SMA before the November 2010 election. Worksessions for the Sector Plan have been scheduled to allow an early October transmittal to the Executive and Council, which would allow the Council to begin its work in December. Approval of the Sector Plan in the spring will allow the SMA to be approved before the election cut-off.

At the same time, the Council has directed historic preservation staff to concentrate staff resources on evaluation of resources on the County's *Locational Atlas & Index of Historic Sites*. The historic preservation staff is devoting most of its resources to this directive. Historic preservation staff estimates that it would take more than six months to evaluate the resources and sites proposed for inclusion in the Historic District and would take staff away from the *Locational Atlas* review.

The Town of Kensington has created a task force comprised of local historic preservation activists, town officials, historic district residents, and historic preservation staff to undertake cooperatively the background research and other tasks associated with resource evaluation. Its first meeting was July 22, 2009.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that review and approval of the Sector Plan continue on the schedule approved at the April 2009 Semi-Annual Report and reaffirmed in the budget. Evaluation of proposed historic resources should be completed on a timely, but separate schedule.

Should specific recommendations of the 1992 consultant's report, Vision of Kensington, be added to the Sector Plan?

Testimony from the Kensington Historical Society urged the inclusion of several strategies from the report that would strengthen the review of areas adjacent to the historic district “which are part of the viewshed and physical environment affecting the appearance of the district.” The proposed strategies would expand the district to allow review by the Historic Preservation Commission of construction activity in these adjacent areas; create a revitalization plan for incompatible or deteriorated properties in adjacent areas; and extend historic area pedestrian street improvements into adjacent areas.

As noted above, the proposed Sector Plan specifically recommends design guidelines for crosswalks, medians, and streetscape on Connecticut Avenue that will build on Kensington’s historic scale and character, in addition to guidelines for development in areas adjacent to the district. The first strategy proposed by the Kensington Historical Society represents a significant expansion of the HPC’s purview, and, as such, is outside the scope of this Sector Plan (Note: the HPC has recently affirmed, pursuant to Council Resolution 16-875, that its regulatory jurisdiction does not extend beyond the designated boundary of a historic district). Mixed-use revitalization in adjacent areas will be subject to detailed regulatory review in the CR use district; infill residential projects can be evaluated under already proposed sector plan guidelines.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff concludes that already proposed Sector Plan guidelines can accomplish those recommendations from the *Vision* that are within the purview of the Plan. Staff recommends that existing language in the Historic Preservation section remain as written.

Should the list of resources identified for further historic preservation evaluation in the Sector Plan be expanded to include additional resources identified by the community?

Public testimony confirmed interest in re-evaluating the boundaries of the existing historic district for potential expansion, and in evaluating additional resources. In addition, testimony supports evaluation of 10115 Connecticut Avenue and a potential historic district on Frederick Avenue. Testimony also requested that more detailed information be provided on the historic district map to accurately depict categories of resources in the district.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that the Sector Plan be amended to include these potential resources and a more detailed historic district map.

Schools

The Sector Plan notes that Kensington and the surrounding neighborhoods are located in the Walter Johnson Cluster. Kensington-Parkwood Elementary School and North Bethesda Middle School serve area residents. Several residents expressed concern at the Public Hearing about the impacts of development on existing capacities at schools in the Walter Johnson Cluster. The cluster is currently burdened with overcrowding at the elementary level; at Kensington-Parkwood, moderately crowded conditions are expected for the life of the current Capital Improvements Program. In addition, residential development in White Flint will generate sufficient students to warrant construction of a new school. The White Flint Sector Plan identifies a site for a new school, although it is not in the sector plan area. The White Flint Sector Plan also indicates that that Montgomery County Public Schools could reopen a currently closed elementary school somewhere in the cluster area. Kensington Elementary School, now used by the Housing Opportunities Commission as its administrative offices, is one such school.

Is school capacity sufficient to support proposed development in Kensington?

Sector plans determine whether proposed development is likely to create the need for additional schools and, if it does, plans recommend locations for them. To project student enrollment, MCPS demographers use a series of factors that are based on types of development. In Kensington, the forecast assumes that new development will be in the form of multifamily development in three- to five-story buildings with structured parking. The Sector Plan's proposals for redevelopment using the CR use districts would produce this form of development.

The accompanying summary table forecasts the yield of elementary, middle and high school students from potential redevelopment in Kensington. The assumptions underlying this forecast are optimistic; it assumes that the five properties highlighted in the Sector Plan, as well as other relatively large properties in the Town Center, will develop as mixed-use projects to the maximum recommended overall density.

Units	Elementary	Middle	High
822	35	32	27

Source: Montgomery County Public Schools Division of Long Range Planning

Yield rates: K-5—0.042 students per unit; 6-8—0.039 students per unit; 9-12—0.033 students per unit

The table shows that, over the life of the Sector Plan, even a complete mixed-use redevelopment of major properties in Kensington's commercial areas at the recommended residential densities (an unlikely prospect) does not yield enough students to warrant an additional school. In the near term, redevelopment is likely to have minimal if any impact on existing conditions in the Walter Johnson Cluster, because it is unlikely that redevelopment projects will be completed and occupied during the life of the current schools Capital Improvements Program. As MCPS moves through its CIP cycles and as redevelopment occurs in Kensington, the County's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance is best able to evaluate the adequacy of school capacity to support development and can require schools facility payments or impose moratoria if warranted.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff therefore recommends that the Planning Board consider school capacity adequate to support the densities recommended in the master plan; no additional schools are needed in the cluster. Staff also recommends the addition of language in the Sector Plan recognizing the possibility of reopening Kensington Elementary School, should MCPS consider that the most appropriate response to demand resulting from White Flint development.

Recreation

In response to concerns raised by local residents during the Plan's development, the Sector Plan includes language indicating that the closed Kensington Elementary School, currently HOC's administrative offices, is suitable for other public uses, including recreation. Testimony from the Coalition of Kensington Communities and several of its constituent groups reflects residents' strong belief that a County recreation center should serve Kensington and Vicinity. Planning staff has also determined that the approved FY09-14 CIP includes facility planning funds for site selection of a Kensington Community Recreation Center.

Staff Recommendation

Planning staff recommends that the Planning Board add language to the Sector Plan strengthening formal support for a Kensington Community Center and endorsing the use of Kensington Elementary School for that purpose, should HOC elect to move its administrative offices.

Libraries

The Sector Plan does not include a section on Libraries, and the Executive's comments recommend inclusion of such a section.

Staff Recommendation

To achieve a more complete section on community facilities, planning staff concurs with the Executive's recommendations that the Plan include a short, descriptive section on library services to the Sector Plan area.