



Update on the Master Plan Reality Check Study

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Description

Staff from the Research & Special Projects Division will provide an update on the Master Plan Reality Check study, with a focus on the pilot analysis of the 1989 Germantown Master Plan. The presentation will provide an explanation of the reality check analysis process, criteria used, detailed analysis of the Germantown plan, and the project’s next steps.

Overview

The Master Plan Reality Check study was funded in the FY2016 work program to analyze the degree to which select master plans have realized the vision, densities, land uses, infrastructure, and amenities called upon in their respective recommendations. By assessing the difference between a plan’s aspirations and the on-the-ground reality among a broad set of planning criteria, the study will also shed light on why some plan aspects materialized as envisioned and others didn’t. Today’s presentation will focus on the pilot analysis of one master plan, the 1989 Germantown Master Plan. The study will continue with analysis of several other master plans that differ by geography, focus, and market conditions. In analyzing these diverse master plans and noting their commonalities and differences in their abilities to execute vision to reality, this study will also provide an inventory of best-practices among master plan processes and considerations that yielded the most actualized plans, or portions of plans, as originally envisioned.

In order to establish a process for a master plan reality check and evaluate measurable elements that could be applied to subsequent plans, the 1989 Germantown Master Plan was chosen for a pilot analysis because it had reached its horizon date, or a period of about twenty years where it is reasonable to expect recommended plan elements to come to fruition; there was still staff available with first-hand knowledge of the plans development from beginning to adoption; and it was assessed to have sufficient planning elements which are measurable and for which there is data.

The planning elements, or indicators, which were analyzed fall into six categories:

- Residential development
- Non-residential development
- Community facilities for schools, parks, and the public broadly
- Urban design
- Transportation
- Environment

For each planning indicators within each category—for example the housing mix indicator in the residential development category— a quantitative analysis was done to compare the plan’s projected goal with the actual figure today. The analysis also includes baseline 1989 data for some indicators when data were available. This assessment of each indicator is included in the Master Plan Reality Check presentation, attached.

Salient findings from the analysis include the following:

- A literature review identified few examples of master plan evaluations of this nature, suggesting this effort is unique.
- While the overall development of residential uses is relatively consistent with plan goals, the amount and mix of commercial uses today are not aligned with the robust vision for these uses in 1989. The mismatch between the types and amount of commercial space developed and aspired to in the 1989 plan also impacted employment counts, which are today lower than what had been envisioned at the time of the plan’s writing. The plan might have benefited from a more detailed market analysis to better document existing conditions at the time and to guide recommendations for the locations and types of commercial space.
- The public sector played a key role in ensuring several components of the plan have been developed as envisioned. In certain commercial priority areas, non-residential development relied heavily on publicly-funded, or developer-contributed, space to catalyze private commercial development. Likewise, the provisioning of public parks as envisioned in the 1989 plan was successful because of M-NCPPC, Montgomery County, and State of Maryland actions and investments.
- The plan’s aspiration in village centers to avoid strip centers was not fully realized and suggests that the 1989 plan could have benefited from more exacting design guidelines.
- It is challenging to make plan-to-plan comparisons, such as comparing the 1989 and 2009 Germantown plans, due to differences in analytical approaches and extensive qualitative recommendations, which are subjective and hard to measure. Even within the Germantown Master Plan document, there was inconsistent data. Standardizing analytical approaches used in master plans may make comparison easier.
- It may be helpful to conduct master plan reality checks before plan horizon dates to determine if incentives or other interventions should be more aggressively considered to stimulate development and achieve public policy objectives.