

M-NCPPC



MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARK AND PLANNING

THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL
PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION


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September 9, 2005

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

FROM: John A. Carter, Chief 
Community-Based Planning Division

Kathleen A. Reilly, AICP, Coordinator (301/495-4614) 
Community-Based Planning Division

SUBJECT: Improving Mature Commercial Centers: Creating a Sense of Place in
Montgomery County, Maryland – Presentation and Report by the
Technical Assistance Panel of the Urban Land Institute – Washington

RECOMMENDATION – Discussion

The Urban Land Institute will present the findings of their report at the hearing of the Planning Board on September 15, 2005.

INTRODUCTION

Montgomery County has been recognized for fostering the revitalization of older commercial areas through the master plan and sector plan process. Downtown Silver Spring and the Bethesda Row are recent, nationally recognized examples of commercial revitalization. The recent focus on South Silver Spring, Woodmont Triangle, and Twinbrook represent on-going commercial revitalization efforts.

The enclosed report from the Urban Land Institute identifies a variety of methods to improve existing mature commercial centers in Montgomery County. This new and innovative effort is intended to address the issues and opportunities that could be addressed to improve the commercial centers located outside of central business districts.

DISCUSSION

Montgomery County contains many mature commercial centers that have not kept pace with market demands and changing lifestyles of county residents. These commercial centers are often located at prominent intersections that often create an undesirable impression of Montgomery County. These centers often lack adequate pedestrian connections and amenities. The existing commercial zones have limited development controls. As the county matures, vacant sites for commercial and residential development become less available and existing mature commercial centers will have significant pressure for over development in established county neighborhoods.

The Community-Based Planning Division requested assistance from the Urban Land Institute (ULI)-Washington in examining the future of mature commercial centers. The ULI agreed to assemble a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to examine the planning issues and opportunities for these mature commercial centers. On July 12 and 13, 2005, a one-and a half-day TAP convened.

List of Characteristics

The mature commercial centers in Montgomery County include the following characteristics.

- **Quantity** – Over 100 mature commercial centers are found throughout the county.
- **Redevelopment Potential** – The total acreage for C-1, C-2, C-3, and C-4 zoned land is approximately 1,550 acres.
- **Potential for Over Development** – If the land were to be developed at a FAR of 1.5, it would yield approximately 101.3 million square feet of commercial space with limited development controls.
- **Potential for New Housing** – If housing were permitted at 6 units per acre, about 9,300 units could be constructed; of which 1,395 units would be affordable units. If housing were permitted at 15 units to the acre, about 23,250 units could be constructed, of which 3,480 units would be affordable units.
- **Redevelopment Potential** – Approximately 143 acres or 24 percent of the mature commercial centers are ripe for redevelopment. Properties are likely candidates for redevelopment when the land becomes more valuable than the existing development.
- **Compatibility** – Requirements for green space, setbacks, and community amenities are extremely limited.
- **Zoning** – The commercial zones of C-1, C-2, C-3, and C-4 allow specific uses, which are no longer appropriate while other uses such as housing, which may be appropriate for these zones, are excluded.
- **Corridors** – Many commercial centers are located on major highways providing high visibility and lasting first impressions of the county.

The challenge for the ULI panel was to take the existing mature commercial centers and provide a vision for future development which would change these centers into thriving neighborhood centers with an identifiable sense of community. The following key tasks were given to the ULI panel to address:

- Provide a justification for redeveloping mature commercial centers
- Create a vision for this redevelopment
- Offer successful principles for redevelopment
- Outline challenges that must be overcome
- Create prototypes for this redevelopment
- Provide the M-NCPPC with the tools and actions necessary to achieve this vision

Hierarchy of Centers

The attached report is the product of the efforts of the panel and contains their recommendations and findings. One of the more salient points set forth by the panel was the identification of a hierarchy of commercial centers. The panel found that the existing mature commercial centers could be grouped into the following categories:

- **Small Centers** – Less than five acres.
- **Medium Centers** – Between 5 to 15 acres and have between 50,000 to 150,000 square feet of commercial space.
- **Large Centers** – Over 15 acres and have over 150,000 square feet of commercial space.
- **Transit-Influenced Centers** – Medium and large centers located within 2,000 feet of a Metro rail station.
- **Regional Centers** – Commercial centers with two or more large department stores.

The panel also developed a set of criteria that would determine whether a commercial center is ready for new uses or development. The criteria include: location on transportation corridors, civic identity, economic life, neighborhood transition, accessibility and visibility, connections, configuration and depth of parcel, catalysts, and relation to other centers. Planning and design guidelines were also defined as gleaned from national examples. Tools and actions necessary to achieve the vision of thriving neighborhood commercial centers include creating a county-wide functional master plan, providing housing, creating infrastructure incentives, and including transfer of development rights.

CONCLUSION

One of the goals of the M-NCPPC has been to plan and guide reinvestment and redevelopment into existing communities. The mature commercial centers project offers a unique opportunity to accomplish this goal. The work produced by the ULI-Washington TAP can be applied in the following:

- **Damascus and Olney Master Plans** – The recently approved Damascus and Olney Master Plans recommend new or revitalized town centers.
- **Future Master Plans** – Future master plans such as Kensington, Langley Park, and Westbard can benefit from the recommendations contained in this report, especially with regard to small and medium centers.
- **Zoning Applications** – Any future zoning applications seeking to redevelop a commercial center would be well served by reviewing and incorporating some of the suggested planning recommendations including residential over retail, providing amenities, establishing street orientation and creating green development.
- **Hierarchy of Commercial Zones** – The existing hierarchy of commercial zones could be improved by removing outdated uses, permitting housing in appropriate areas, adding requirements for green space and amenities, and providing additional standards for density, building height and setback.

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