



May 15, 2008

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Montgomery County Planning Board

**VIA:** Glenn Kreger, Acting Chief, Community-Based Planning Division *gk*

**FROM:** Khalid Afzal, Team Leader, Georgia Avenue/Rural East Corridor  
Community-Based Planning Division (301.495.4650) *KA*

**SUBJECT:** Georgia Avenue Concept Study Status Report and Preliminary Recommendations

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**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** Approval to proceed with draft report.

On May 29, the staff will update the Planning Board regarding the Georgia Avenue Concept Study. We will request the Planning Board's comments regarding our preliminary recommendations (pp. 6-8 of this staff report). We will then request the Board's approval to proceed with preparation of the Concept Study, which will follow the same general outline as this staff report.

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Since the initiation of the study in October 2007, staff has held three major community forums with different presentation formats. These meetings were advertised through direct mail to all civic and homeowners associations in the study area, an email distribution list developed specifically for this project, the Planning Department's Infoshare e-newsletter, the project's web page, and the Gazette. Staff also met with individual homeowners associations as requested, and received numerous comments through emails, letters and phone calls.

## **OVERVIEW/OUTLINE FOR GEORGIA AVENUE CONCEPT STUDY**

### **Introduction**

Georgia Avenue is one of the two major north-south corridors in Montgomery County. Starting in the District of Columbia as 7<sup>th</sup> Street, it enters Montgomery County at Eastern Avenue and continues north to the County line crossing into Howard County as MD 97. The approximately 18-mile stretch through Montgomery County has historically connected the small towns, estates, and farming communities of Silver Spring, Sligo, Leesboro, Mitchell's Crossroads (Wheaton), Norbeck, Mechanicsville (Olney), Brookeville, and Sunshine—to the District of Columbia.

Georgia Avenue has grown into a six-lane major road in the southern part of Montgomery County, and the suburban development pattern of the last 50 years and the related traffic have turned it into mainly a carrier of through traffic. Nevertheless, Georgia Avenue is still a main street and home to many communities along the way.

Today the entire corridor is home to approximately 142,000 people in some 54,600 housing units. The major employment centers are the Silver Spring and Wheaton downtowns, Holy Cross and Montgomery General Hospitals, and the Olney Town Center. It is served by the eastern segment of the Metro Red Line and by seven bus routes – three Metrobus routes and four Ride-On routes. It has varied character ranging from urban in Silver Spring and Wheaton, to suburban in the middle section, to rural and agricultural in the northern part.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to:

- a. Create a comprehensive vision for the entire corridor in keeping with the best practices and recent plans and policies of the County;
- b. Develop a planning and urban design framework to guide future master and sector plans in the corridor; and
- c. Identify improvements along the road right-way that can be implemented through the Capital Improvements Program (CIP), development review process, and other means.

### **Study Area**

The study area includes the entire stretch of Georgia Avenue from the District of Columbia to the County boundary in the north (see Attachment 1).

### **Georgia Avenue Today – Major Issues**

The draft Georgia Avenue Concept Study will address the planning framework for the study; the Georgia Avenue corridor in its regional context; current zoning and development pattern; traffic volumes and hot spots; some demographics including housing types and housing values to illustrate the residential focus of the corridor; and how the growth has impacted the communities along the corridor. This information will provide the context for the three major issue areas that are the focus of this study:

## **1. Character of the Roadway**

As a major thoroughfare, Georgia Avenue carries a heavy load of peak hour traffic. It is also the gateway to numerous communities along the way. Its physical appearance reflects on the quality of life of these communities. The emphasis on moving traffic efficiently has resulted in a six-lane highway in the down-County area with additional left and right turning lanes at major intersections and a reversible lane in Montgomery Hills. A combination of road widening focused mainly on adding more traffic capacity, lack of proper attention to non-motorized mobility and landscaping, and a lack of maintenance on some private properties has resulted in a degraded visual quality and character of the roadway. This impact is more acutely felt in the residential areas along the road between the Beltway and Bel Pre Road where single-family houses along the road are close to the road with substandard sidewalks, no trees in the median or roadside, very little landscaping and vegetation in the front yards.

## **2. Pedestrian Environment**

Communities along the roadway, from Silver Spring to Olney, are experiencing significant degradation in the pedestrian environment, and the causes are the same almost everywhere: lack of green panels that buffer pedestrians from the roadway, inadequate pedestrian refuges, trees, and landscaping; high speed traffic and driver negligence; long crosswalks with insufficient crossing time for pedestrians at traffic lights; and substandard sidewalks. Georgia Avenue is increasingly becoming a divider of communities on the two sides of the roadway due to unsafe pedestrian crossings. Pedestrian safety issues ranked highest among the comments staff received from residents and workers as part of the community outreach process.

The County Executive's *Pedestrian Safety Initiative*, December 2007, has identified four areas of high pedestrian-vehicular collisions to be audited for safety and to have improvements to reduce accidents. Two of the four segments are on Georgia Avenue: from Thayer Avenue to Spring Street in Silver Spring; and from Arcola Avenue to Glenallan Avenue in Wheaton/Glenmont. A third, Colesville Road from East-West Highway to Spring Street, includes the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road.

## **3. Single-family Detached Houses**

The current state, and the future, of single-family detached houses along the roadway south of Bel Pre Road is one of the concerns of this study. These properties are the ones most severely impacted by Georgia Avenue's high traffic volume resulting in lower housing values. These lower values make such houses affordable compared with properties in the interior of the neighborhood. In some cases these are starter houses for a low or middle-income, young, or immigrant family who can build equity and to move to a more expensive house. The pressure on these properties also results in conversions to non-residential special exceptions with design changes (e.g., paved front yards) that contribute to the visual degradation of the corridor. (Sometimes these conversions generate a concern regarding the intrusion of non-residential uses into the neighborhood.) Recommendations in the approved master plans vary from plan to plan regarding the future of these "edge" properties.

## **Vision and Planning Framework**

Any vision must be grounded in reality or it runs the risk of never being implemented. The challenge for Georgia Avenue is to balance the need for through-traffic with the needs of adjoining communities for a safer, attractive environment. A future planning framework for Georgia Avenue must address the road's other functions including non-motorized mobility, sustainability, and the character and visual quality of the corridor.

There are essentially three scenarios for the Georgia Avenue corridor:

1. Keep it the way it is and let it grow over time as the market dictates;
2. Rezone residential areas along the roadway to higher-density commercial and/or multifamily residential; or
3. Direct all major growth to the transit station nodes but limit the residential areas between the nodes to low-density residential and reinforce the idea of a green boulevard.

The first option would continue degradation of the public realm and residential properties facing the road, exacerbate the unsafe pedestrian environment, and generally erode the quality of life of the communities along the roadway.

The second option would be unrealistic due to the lack of large properties that could be assembled or developed in a reasonable time frame. At best, a few assemblages would lead to an undesirable mix of single-family and higher density development incompatible with their surroundings. The traffic impacts of this option would add further congestion to the road undermining transit use and mixed-use centers at Metro stations.

The third option has the most potential for creating an attractive vision grounded in reality and taking advantage of the transit infrastructure in the corridor. Wheaton and Glenmont in particular have significant unrealized development potential that could serve the growth needs of the corridor in a sustainable development pattern supported by transit.

The Concept Study will therefore envision Georgia Avenue as a transit corridor with a series of mixed-use centers connected by a green boulevard.

- **A Transit Corridor**

Although vehicular traffic will still be a dominant factor, future growth in the corridor would be oriented to the transit infrastructure, primarily the Metro stations of Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Glenmont. The east leg of the Metro Red Line and Metrobus and Ride-On bus routes will form the spine of this transit infrastructure. A proposed Georgia Avenue busway will connect communities north of Glenmont to the Glenmont Metro Station, and a proposed express busway on Veirs Mill Road will connect Wheaton to Rockville. This transit should be supplemented by shuttle buses that will connect the Metro stations to major employment centers, such as Holy Cross and Montgomery General Hospitals, and other smaller commercial centers in the corridor.

- **A Series of Mixed-use Centers**

The proposed land use concept of Georgia Avenue comprises a series of compact mixed-use, walkable centers where a majority of future growth will be located to take advantage of the corridor's current and planned transit infrastructure. The Metro stations at Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Glenmont will be the focus of future growth planned in the corridor while the existing commercially zoned areas at Seminary Road, Shorefield Road, Connecticut Avenue, and the Olney Town Center will be transformed into mixed-use, walkable centers for the adjoining local communities.

- **A Green Boulevard**

The proposed vision of a green Georgia Avenue goes beyond a tree-lined boulevard as outlined in the existing master plans of Kensington/Wheaton, Aspen Hill, and Olney. On a broader scale, it encompasses the concept of sustainability as an overall framework and a guiding principal for all planning and development efforts in the corridor. On a more local level, it envisions Georgia Avenue to have as much vegetation—trees, shrubs, smaller plants—as possible so that the predominant view along the roadway is greenery and plants rather than just roadway, buildings, and signage as currently exists.

### **Goals and Objectives**

The proposed future planning framework for Georgia Avenue has four overall goals:

1. Major growth at Metro station areas.
  - a. High-density, mixed-use developments at Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Glenmont.
  - b. Potential low to mid-density mixed use centers at commercial nodes.
  - c. No new rezonings to townhouse or other higher density zones outside Metro station areas.
  - d. No new non-residential special exceptions on single-family houses fronting the roadway.
2. Georgia Avenue corridor as a housing resource.
  - a. Retention of residential zoning for existing single-family properties along the roadway.
  - b. Housing affordability through high-density residential developments at Metro stations.
3. Focus on transit and non-motorized mobility in the corridor.
  - a. Improved accessibility to Metro stations
  - b. Georgia Avenue busway and Veirs Mill Road Bus Rapid Transit (BRT)
  - c. Safe and attractive pedestrian environment
  - d. Improved connectivity to area stores, schools, parks/recreation, and other facilities.

4. Design excellence for all public and private developments along the roadway with sustainability as the overall guiding principal.
  - a. Better design of the public realm along the roadway. (This will be illustrated/ incorporated in the Study through a series of urban design concepts for various segments of the roadway. These will reflect the overall vision for the corridor and the changing land use, density, and character of various communities along the corridor from high density in the south to low-density and rural in the north.
  - b. Expansion of existing special exceptions only if they improve the visual quality of the road frontage.
  - c. Specific design guidance for special exceptions to make sure they are consistent with the overall concept as well as the urban design concept for various parts of the roadway.

### **Specific Recommendations**

- **Land Use and Zoning**

1. Direct all new future growth in the corridor to Metro station areas of Silver Spring, Wheaton and Glenmont. Do not support new density increases outside the Metro station sector plans through rezonings unless specifically recommended in the area master plan.
2. Limit all new special exceptions on R-60 and R-90 zoned properties facing the Georgia Avenue roadway to accessory apartments with a prohibition on any new parking spaces, limits on front yard impervious areas, and out-of-scale additions. Require landscaping and screening in front yards for all special exception uses to protect and enhance the visual appearance of the roadway frontage.
3. Existing large special exception uses (medical offices, day care centers, elderly housing), should be allowed to continue, and modify and expand only if they increase transit ridership (reduced parking), improve the pedestrian environment along Georgia Avenue, reduce imperviousness, and provide visual enhancements to meet the planned objective of a “green boulevard”.

- **Access and Mobility**

4. All sidewalks along Georgia Avenue must have a green panel (the new road code) to separate the roadway from the sidewalk, especially in neighborhoods within walking distance of Metro stations.
5. Provide adequate pedestrian crossing time at all signalized crossings of Georgia Avenue at the rate of a minimum of four feet per second but preferably at 3.5 feet per second. Provide adequate pedestrian refuges in the median.
6. The State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Montgomery County Department of Public Works and Transportation (DPWT) should investigate the feasibility of installing mid-block crosswalks on long blocks that have parks or other facilities on one side of the road.
7. Study the feasibility of a pedestrian tunnel under Forest Glen Road to access the Metro station from the east side of Georgia Avenue.
8. Implement a bikeway plan to connect the entire Georgia Avenue Corridor to existing trails, bikeways, and community facilities (Sligo Creek, Rock Creek, etc.).

9. Run express buses from Glenmont to Olney and from Wheaton to Rockville on existing roadways to assess ridership before the full funding of the proposed Georgia Avenue Busway and Veirs Mill Road Bus Rapid Transit is in place.
10. The County should explore alternatives to building a new 1200-space garage on the east side of Georgia Avenue in Glenmont instead of the west side as currently planned.
11. Fill in gaps in the roads parallel to Georgia Avenue to increase bicycle and pedestrian connectivity. Do not support further abandonment of parallel routes that may be needed for vehicular, bicycle, or pedestrian connections.
12. Modify the mitigation requirements of Policy Area Mobility Review (PAMR) to give priority to filling in sidewalk gaps in the corridor or to upgrading substandard sidewalks along Georgia Avenue when requiring development projects to provide pedestrian improvements as mitigation measures.

- **Natural and Historic Resources**

13. Explore ways to improve stream quality through retrofitting and redevelopment using measures such as rain gardens and daylighting of streams.
14. Expand the County's tree planting program to add trees in available space in the road right-of-way, and encourage homeowners to plant trees and other plants on their properties.
15. Explore the feasibility of providing an underpass for equestrian use at Rachel Carson Conservation Park.
16. Expedite the Brookville Bypass project to help save this historic town from the negative impacts of through traffic.
17. Construct Harmony Hills Neighborhood Park, which fronts on Georgia Avenue, to provide needed playgrounds with direct access to Georgia Avenue.
18. Consider expansion of Strathmore Local Park to provide a playground and possibly a "skate spot" in this dense apartment area.
19. Consider combining the Wheaton Community Center with a renovated Rafferty Center, and adding an urban landscaping/park-like component. Analyze alternatives for the entire area of the community center, Rafferty Center and library site, in the event the library moves to "downtown" Wheaton.

- **Future Studies**

20. A future amendment to the Aspen Hill Master Plan should explore the feasibility of creating a compact mixed-use center on the existing commercially zoned area around the intersection of Georgia and Connecticut Avenues to create a compact, walkable center with local retail, community facilities, and additional affordable housing.
21. Future master plans in the area should provide detailed design guidelines for existing and new special exceptions for properties facing Georgia Avenue.
22. The Wheaton CBD Sector Plan effort should explore potential improvements to the Georgia Avenue/Veirs Mill Road intersection to provide more efficient circulation; make it more pedestrian friendly; and provide a gateway feature.
23. Future master plans in the corridor should develop a more comprehensive way to measure accessibility to parks and recreation facilities instead of simply using the distance of a facility from the surrounding neighborhood.

24. The State Highway Administration (SHA) should program the long-awaited project planning study for Montgomery Hills. The Study should consider removal of the reversible lane, potential (re)installation of a median/pedestrian refuge, the introduction of a northbound left turn at Seminary Road, and three northbound and four southbound lanes in this section of Georgia Avenue.

### **Implementation**

The recommendations of the study would be implemented through the following:

1. Upcoming master and sector plans
2. CIP projects
3. PAMR mitigation of private development projects and implementation of the revised road code

A matrix on the next page shows how the implementation of each of the study's recommendations will help achieve various elements of the vision outlined in the study.



		Benefits/Objectives												
	Recommendation	Ped safety	Walkability/ health	Connectivity	Transit	Street character	Stream quality	Tree canopy	Air quality	Reduced VMT	Livable communities	Affordable housing	Property values	Improved Public Realm
1	Major growth at Metro stations		x		x				x	x		x		
2	Limit new special exceptions to accessory apartments				x	x						x	x	
3	Existing special exception expansions to provide improvements	x	x		x	x		x	x				x	x
4	Green panels along sidewalks	x	x		x	x		x	x		x		x	x
5	Adequate crossing time at signals	x	x								x			
6	Mid-block crossings	x	x											
7	Forest Glen Metro pedestrian tunnel	x			x									
8	Bikeway connectivity			x							x			
9	Express bus service			x	x	x				x				
10	Metro garage on the east side of Georgia Avenue				x	x		x			x		x	x
11	Fill in gaps on parallel roads	x	x	x										
12	Modify PAMR mitigation selection criteria										x			
13	Improve stream quality						x							
14	Expand tree planting program					x					x			x
15	Equestrian underpass at Rachel Carson Park			x										
16	Expedite Brookville Bypass					x			x		x			
17	Harmony Hill neighborhood park							x	x					
18	Skateboarding at Strathmore local park		x								x			
19	Wheaton recreation facilities										x			
20	Mixed-use center at Georgia-Connecticut		x	x		x		x		x	x	x		x
21	Design guidance in future master plans													x
22	Veirs Mill Road intersection	x	x	x							x			
23	Expand criteria for assessing park needs		x	x									x	
24	Montgomery Hills study	x	x								x			

## Next Steps

After receiving the Planning Board's comments and approval on the preliminary recommendations and the report outline, staff will begin preparing the draft report, which is tentatively scheduled to be presented to the Board in June 2008.

## Georgia Avenue Concept Study Staff Team

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KA:ha: g:/Afzal/Georgia Avenue Concept Study to MCPB on 5-29-08

Attachment 1: Study Area Map

