

A Planning Framework Report

WORKING DRAFT

Revitalizing Centers...

Reshaping Boulevards...

Creating Great Public Spaces

The intent of this Framework Report is fourfold:

- to respond to the Planning Board and County Council's request to explore the growth and market dynamics of our mature commercial centers;
- to chronicle some of the key development trends and emerging land-use and market changes as the County nears residential build-out;
- to offer a new planning perspective that captures future development potential through a more focused pattern of sustainable growth: and
- to recognize the critical importance of engaging the community by creating broad opportunity for dialogue, guidance, and good counsel regarding key issues, community visions and needs, and implementation approaches.

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Attachment #1, Work Program and Community Outreach Schedule

Attachment #2, Addressing the Job/Housing Imbalance

In February 2005, more than 300 regional leaders from 22 jurisdictions convened in a visioning exercise, Reality Check, to take stock of the pace and growth confronting the Washington region. Reality Check began a dialogue about our region's future and set the framework for implementation work to continue at the local level. The Department will take many of the principles formed in the Reality Check and evaluate how they align with the new Centers, Boulevards, and Public Spaces Planning initiative.

Introduction

A planning framework focused on *Revitalizing Centers, Reshaping Boulevards, and Creating Great Public Spaces* is the logical next step for Montgomery County, given our planning objectives, development history, and future expectations.

- **Greenfield development is almost over.** In past decades, “growth” meant the development of large tracts of vacant land. Although some large vacant tracts remain, most of Montgomery County’s future growth will be located within the development envelope in the form of infill and redevelopment. This approach will differ from greenfield development and require more intensive community participation, detailed planning and collaborative implementation approaches.
- **With the exception of transit, outward expansion of infrastructure is no longer a priority.** The County does not want to develop the Agricultural Reserve, nor does it envision redeveloping established residential neighborhoods. Instead, new infrastructure will focus on reinforcing existing centers through transit-oriented (e.g., Silver Spring, Wheaton) or transit-ready (e.g., Gaithersburg, Tacoma/Langley, Kentlands, Clarksburg) development.
- **In the next 25 years, the County will add 170,000 jobs, 94,000 housing units, and 213,800 people.** That’s an average of 19 jobs, 10 housing units, and 23 people per day. All of the job growth and most of the housing and population growth is permitted under the zoning and master plans that have already been adopted.
- **Some of the County’s existing commercial centers have potential for absorbing additional growth.** The County has over 1,500 areas of commercially zoned land that, under current zoning, could be redeveloped into more than 29 million square feet of commercial space. In many of these areas, a mix of jobs and housing could be a preferable alternative to commercial development alone. Housing is not currently permitted on these parcels, but if rezoned to allow 15 residential units per acre, 9,200 housing units could be added to the County’s housing stock.¹
- **The County needs more affordable housing.** Home prices are increasing faster than wages in Montgomery County. In addition, there are about 50 years of commercial development in currently approved plans,

¹ It is by no means a forgone conclusion that meeting critical housing needs will require higher densities than currently permitted. Currently permitted densities, reallocated among a broader mix of uses (trading commercial density for residential density), may be sufficient to achieve the goal of increased housing within our commercial centers while also accommodating the needs of the surrounding neighborhoods.

but only about 25 years of housing development. This will put further pressure on housing costs. The County needs more housing choices that are affordable to a wider range of families.

While the need for housing exists throughout the County, the biggest imbalance is in existing commercial centers that are job-rich and housing-poor. Multi-family units, built at densities sensitive to surrounding areas, are appropriate for redeveloped centers and along some transportation routes.

- **The planning focus will change from large-scale master plans to smaller area planning.** There is an ever-increasing public demand for public spaces in more intensely developed areas. The Department needs a planning process that focuses on small-area planning to better assure that every piece of public space functions well. Management and programming of public spaces through well-planned street furniture, amenities, shared uses, tree-plantings, etc., will also be an increased priority. It is not only the public spaces, but also the diversity of activities that they accommodate, that create the affection for place needed to develop vital community-scaled centers.
- **Two keys to successfully accommodating growth in existing commercial centers: vitality and quality-of-life.** The County will seek both: (1) remove the impediments to desirable infill development and redevelopment, and (2) support community-scaled mixed-use, multifamily development and adjacent residential neighborhoods with amenity and infrastructure improvements that enhance livability, walkability, and overall quality of life.
- **Sustaining the quality of life in areas not planned for additional growth or significant redevelopment will be emphasized throughout the entire planning program.** The planning focus will change from managing outward expansion and the overall pace of growth toward managing for a *specific type* of sustainable development within the existing development envelope: centers, boulevards, and public spaces. However, this focus on redevelopment should not diminish the commitment to sustaining and enhancing the quality of life in communities not planned for growth or substantial redevelopment, including the Agricultural Reserve. The Department will look for ways to improve the economic linkages between these two areas so that overall quality of life improves across the entire landscape of Montgomery County.
- **A planning framework that puts less emphasis on large-area master plans means that other tools, such as the growth policy, will need to be strengthened to stage planned development.** The major demographic, economic and livability issues that compel a new planning

focus also oblige the County to reinvigorate how we regulate the pace of growth and assure residents and workers that roads, schools and other public facilities will be adequate at the local level.

- **The Chesapeake Bay Agreement calls for the reduction of *harmful sprawl* within the Bay's watershed.** To achieve this goal, the County should concentrate its development in areas zoned for more than two houses per acre and served by existing public sewer. Concentrated development will lead to a greater reliance on renewable resources by reducing dependence on cars and taking advantage of transit. Transit is fuel-efficient and reduces air pollution. In addition, buildings themselves can be highly energy efficient. *Green buildings* can make a difference in exactly how environmentally sustainable our future will be.

The transition to a mature, more developed County will represent a conceptual change in County's approach to planning: from the general to the specific. The General Plan framework will continue to be the general planning platform for the County. However, that framework, which succeeded in avoiding the general disorder of sprawl so prevalent in other suburban jurisdictions, is now set.

Success going forward will depend on guiding the County toward a specific form of development, one that provides the greatest improvement in the quality of life for all our citizens in the context of a mature, more urbanized landscape. This is the vision behind the new focus on Revitalizing Centers, Reshaping Boulevards, and Creating Great Public Spaces.

I. Executive Summary

For more than 40 years, Montgomery County has been a national leader in creating quality living environments for its residents.

We've also seen our population double, our number of housing units triple, and our jobs quadruple. Within two generations, the County's character has changed dramatically from a bedroom community with a few employment centers to a major employment, commercial, and population center--home to more of Maryland's population and economic activity than any other jurisdiction in the State. Montgomery County has grown into a major urbanized area.

Thanks to a long-term commitment to principled land use planning, backed by strong political leadership, this growth has also enhanced the quality of life for our residents. The creation and continued preservation of the 93,000-acre Agricultural Reserve in the northern and western region of the County has avoided unacceptable loss of farmland and parkland.

Much of our natural heritage is being preserved through an extensive 33,000-acre park system and an innovative land conservation program, Legacy Open Space. At the same time, the County has created a stable market environment that offers a large range of residential and business growth choices.

The major trends that will be faced by Montgomery County in the next 25 years are:

- Growth will continue. Montgomery County is forecast to add at least 170,000 new jobs and 94,000 new housing units by 2030. This is like adding the combined development in Rockville and Gaithersburg. Most of this growth is already permitted under the zoning and master plans that have already been adopted.
- While suburban areas will see the most job growth, many of the parcels where additional housing can be built involve infill development or redevelopment. The I-270 Corridor has the planned capacity for the majority of new jobs, led by Rockville and followed by Germantown, North Bethesda, Clarksburg, and Gaithersburg. Some of the County's planned capacity for new housing is located in the northern part of the corridor and adjacent to the northern portion of the Agricultural Reserve, but most of it consists of redevelopment and infill opportunities in down-County areas such as Bethesda, North Bethesda, Silver Spring, and Wheaton.
- As a result, future growth in Montgomery County will be more urban than in the past. According to our adopted plans, most new housing units--approximately 60 percent -- will be condominiums and apartments; many offices, stores, and other commercial activities will be clustered around existing and proposed transit stations.

- Regional trends will have an even greater impact on the County. As the region expands (by an estimated 2 million people and 1.6 million jobs over the next 25 years) inner suburbs like Montgomery County are increasingly affected by the cumulative impacts of decisions made in the surrounding jurisdictions.

Forty years ago our population was small--but growing rapidly. Planners focused on answering the following questions: Which areas of the County should be developed? How will use *greenfields* to our advantage? Where ought major transportation facilities be located? How can we provide a park system and open space network to serve the needs of a growing population?

Answers to the questions came in the form of the County-wide General Plan, “...*On Wedges and Corridors*”—adopted in 1964. The Department of Park and Planning has applied the principles of the Plan to guide the County’s pattern of development over the years.

Today most large landholdings outside the Agricultural Reserve are developed. The Department believes that our planning focus should change; we need a new planning paradigm that includes:

- shifting the focus from large master and sector plans to small-area plans aimed at directing growth inward and, to some extent, upward.
- identifying and addressing redevelopment opportunities within existing commercial centers to serve surrounding communities, enhance housing options for County residents and workers and support the County’s role in the regional economy.
- shaping segments of some major transportation routes into boulevards so that they become community assets.
- reaffirming the commitment to protect the Agricultural Reserve and the natural/cultural heritage of the County.
- creating accessible public gathering places where we can socialize, recreate, shop in open-air markets, learn, or simply take a walk.
- sustaining the quality of life within our neighborhoods, including those not planned for additional growth or significant redevelopment.

Together with community stakeholders, government agencies and public leaders, the Department of Park and Planning wants to begin to refine our planning focus with the goal of building communities through vibrant, mixed-use centers; attractive, shared-use boulevards; and great public spaces.

At the same time, the Department will continue to address affordable and workforce housing opportunities, while preserving the integrity of the Agricultural Reserve, and ensuring livable environments worthy of a world-class metropolitan area.

The Department proposes to refocus its planning agenda in response to the changing pattern of development and needs of our residents. A planning agenda developed with active community participation with focus on creating vibrant community-scaled centers, grand boulevards, and quality open space can guide our vision for creating a livable, beautiful, affordable, and prosperous community for all our citizens. (Attachment #1. Work Program and Community Outreach Schedule)

The major demographic, economic and livability issues that compel a new planning focus also oblige the County to reinvigorate how we regulate the pace of growth and assure residents and workers that roads, schools and other public facilities will be adequate at both the local level and on a countywide basis. A planning framework that puts less emphasis on large-area master plans means that other tools, such as the growth policy, will need to be strengthened to stage planned development.

The Department's new strategy will capture the County's future development potential through a more focused pattern of sustainable growth that conserves land and energy. This effort will help reduce pressure to expand the development envelope into the Agricultural Reserve by focusing on community-scaled redevelopment and reinvestment within the existing communities to protect quality of life.

Throughout the country, other inner ring counties and communities are also rediscovering the economic benefits of nurturing their own unique "sense of place". Inner-ring suburbs are transitioning from a traditional suburban development model servicing a central core to a more distributed urbanized model characterized by multiple local commercial centers connected by boulevards and neighborhoods with multiple public gathering places.

In the process, major arterials designed to transport traffic into the commercial areas and support big box malls are being transformed into grand boulevards with mixed-use centers served by transit or express bus. The pedestrian access has become essential in promoting social, recreational, and economic activities.

Plazas, squares, and civic centers are increasingly important as public gathering areas. Neighborhood centers and main streets are replacing strip developments as primary retail centers.

Our residents are demonstrating a greater interest in living in unique places with unique characteristics. We know that people are attracted to, and have affection for, communities that provide a sense of comfort, safety and sociability.

II. Background

In 1964, Montgomery County adopted one of the most progressive Countywide general plans of its day that continues to be a source of inspiration for localities throughout the country. That plan, "...*On Wedges and Corridors*" embraced the principle that growth should be contained within areas well served by public facilities, that persons of every background and income should have a place in the County to live and work, that every generation must act as the steward of the County's natural resources for the next generation, and that the County's farming heritage should be preserved with economically viable agriculture.

Thanks to strong political leadership, backed by active citizen oversight, the General Plan, "...*On Wedges and Corridors*" has remained the guiding principle for new development:

- Growth has been largely contained along the main arterial routes into the urban core and the I-270 Corridor, while "wedge" areas between these radiating routes have been developed as neighborhoods or protected open space, including the County's 33,000 acre park system.
- Adoption of the Agricultural Reserve in 1980, which limited development to one unit per 25 acres over more than one-third of the land area of the County, has focused development via transferable development rights, along existing down-County infrastructure.
- The County was a pioneer in promoting Smart Growth objectives and continues its commitment to Smart Growth principles that focus on an appropriate mix of density, design, and diversity of uses to create sustainable and sociable communities.
- Montgomery County's economy is one of the healthiest in the country and is the economic engine of the State of Maryland.
- Our investment underground in Metro is paying off above ground by attracting the smartest of Smart Growth elements: housing, jobs, services, and public spaces in a well-designed urban setting.
- Tens of thousands of affordable housing units have been created. These are dispersed throughout the County and provide an array of housing choices. Nevertheless, the number of jobs is growing faster than available housing and the need for more, and more affordable housing remains a significant planning challenge.
- A diverse population from around the world is coming to Montgomery County to work, raise families, and create communities.

These successes have not diminished the challenges to the vision of the General Plan "... *On Wedges and Corridors*;" they have intensified them. Today, residents and employers are still moving to Montgomery County, attracted to the services and quality of life here. As a result, undeveloped land is growing scarcer. With the County's strong commitment to preserving the integrity of the Agricultural Reserve, expanding the development envelope into the agricultural and rural open spaces is not an option.

Instead, the Department will look for exciting, new opportunities within already-developed areas. The reshaping of our growth model from new development to redevelopment is the core idea behind this *Centers, Boulevards and Public Spaces* planning initiative.

III. ... *On Wedges and Corridors*: Our Firm Foundation

As Montgomery County transitions into this new growth paradigm, we will not forget the collected wisdom of past planning efforts. This is not about rejecting a well established planning framework, it is about refining it. As Montgomery County matures, the planning focus will continue to evolve. In particular:

- **Remaining committed to the principles of the General Plan.** These principles provide the framework to channel new development to growth areas; safeguard the quality of life in established neighborhoods; preserve the Agricultural Reserve; and plan, acquire, and develop public spaces to provide passive and active recreation opportunities.
- **Securing adequate and affordable housing for our citizens as directed by our *moderately-priced dwelling unit* legislation is still a priority.** Indeed, our new focus on redevelopment around transit centers can make housing more affordable to moderate-income families by reducing their travel costs. With transportation costs now averaging more than 20% of total household income, increasing the availability of transportation options is critical. But because homebuyers value quality transportation options, home prices in areas well served by transit are often high. Montgomery County will continue to explore ways to make centers more affordable to transit-dependent families.
- **Reducing protection of the Agricultural Reserve is not an option.** Montgomery County will continue to protect the Agricultural Reserve through zoning, regulation, continuation of the still innovative *transfer of development rights* (TDR) process, and protection of open space. The Reserve provides many public benefits such as: (1) control of public costs and prevention of urban sprawl, (2) preservation of regional food supplies, (3) energy conservation through promotion of efficient food systems and smarter growth patterns, (4) protection of the environment and water quality, (5) maintenance of rural open space, and (6) preservation of rural lifestyles and cultural heritage. Thanks to the existence of the Reserve, the County is well positioned to take advantage of the

fast-growing interest in public fresh farm markets as community gathering places. This creates a “virtuous circle” where public markets supplied by local farms serve vibrant centers, thus reducing development pressure on the Reserve itself.

- **Assurance of adequate public infrastructure will continue.** The County’s Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance, which requires that new development be served by adequate transportation, schools, and other services, has been a principal implementation strategy for the County’s Smart Growth policy. While the County’s overall pace of growth will continue to slow, pressures on the adequacy of public services in many areas of the County will remain high. Because adequacy of public facilities is a key component of quality of life, this planning focus for the new centers, boulevards, and public spaces must continually look for opportunities to strengthen this principle:

- by realistically assessing the affect of redevelopment on public facilities,

- by assuring that the pace of redevelopment is matched by the provision of all necessary supporting facilities,

- by strategically enhancing public facilities in redeveloped centers with additional public amenities such as pocket parks, plazas, streetscape improvements etc.

- by exploring public/private partnerships that can combine public services such as public reading rooms, metro stops, post offices, etc. with private conveniences such as day-care centers, coffee shops, small kiosks, and laundry services.

- **The County will continue to transition from a focus on bedroom communities to a focus on a more compactly developed urban future.**

Forecasts indicate that much of future residential development will be infill such as townhouses, condominiums and apartments; offices, stores, and other commercial activities will be clustered around existing and proposed transit service. This responds to a growing demand among our citizens for accessible, affordable, efficient, and attractive places to live, shop and socialize. As an increasingly complex urban landscape puts additional demands on our time we need places that serve our many needs without excessive travel. In addition, at least 143 acres or 24% of the County’s commercial centers are ripe for redevelopment, a natural process that occurs when land has become more valuable than the development that sits on it. The centers are where the action is, and mixed- use (commercial and residential) development is the most efficient form of redevelopment. This trend will continue.

In summary, Montgomery County will continue its transition to a more urbanized but also a more human-scale development model where our citizens can easily accomplish daily tasks; where random encounters with friends and neighbors brighten our spirits; where our more urbanized landscape is connected by greenways, pathways and public

gathering places, and where we feel safe, comfortable, stimulated, and, yes, attracted to our community and each other.

IV. Pathways to Placemaking: Centers, Boulevards, and Public Spaces

Commercial centers, major travel routes, and open spaces have historically characterized the County's pattern of development. All planning relates to their form and function.

Early travel and development, moving northward from Washington, D.C., were shaped by Montgomery County's topography, stream valleys, and rail lines. Travel, trade, and development followed wide north-south paths along Colesville Road, Georgia Avenue, Connecticut Avenue, Rockville Pike, Frederick Road, and River Road; and east-west paths along Norbeck Road, Western Avenue, East-West Highway, Randolph Road, Montrose Road, and University Boulevard.

These travel routes created a web of intersecting crossroads that spawned vibrant centers of activity. These early commercial centers provided services to the evolving rural, then suburban communities.

A center was defined most often by a post office, church, schoolhouse, mill, tavern, or a general store. Then the center evolved to include a grocery store, drug store, gasoline station, sometimes a neighborhood theater, and residential development along many road frontages near trolleys and railroads. As time passed and lifestyles continued to change, a broader spectrum of services was provided by centers. Centers evolved to include restaurants, dry cleaners, childcare, and entertainment.

By the late 1960's, a pattern of concentrated centers, linked by transportation routes, and separated by open spaces, was firmly established and articulated in the General Plan. They were, and remain, the places that create and sustain a sense of community for County residents and workers. Exploiting their potential to build communities of choice is the focus of this new planning initiative. The Department proposes to do this by engaging the people of Montgomery County in a community-based planning process called Placemaking.

*Placemaking can be defined as the engagement and empowerment of a community to identify the broadest possible set of solutions in developing their shared physical spaces as community assets. Placemaking encourages all participants to focus on *common community aspirations* as opposed to narrow stakeholder interests. It urges us to use the intuitive knowledge gained from living in and experiencing our County, in cooperation with the professional disciplines, to make the important decisions about how our public realm should be designed, built and managed.*

In short, Placemaking challenges us all to roll up our sleeves and actively create our common future, rather than simply comment on alternatives futures developed by

consultants or even the agencies themselves. Here is how the we plan to use our common community assets to make Montgomery County a truly great place to live, work, love, and learn.

A. Centers as Destinations

Montgomery County's future is, literally, at its crossroads. Many of the County's existing commercial centers, often at the intersection of major transportation routes, are now ripe for redevelopment. Unless we take proactive measures, these centers could be redeveloped much more intensively. The most efficient way to maintain our quality of life is to redevelop these centers, directing growth inward and, to some extent, upward. Strong centers are also essential to the continuing vitality of the County and the livability of our neighborhoods.

Most commercial centers go through development cycles of growth and decline. To remain a viable and vibrant part of any community, commercial centers must renew themselves over time. Centers built around small stores and gas stations, for example, are inefficient for the large, mixed-use development needed to support transit. Center uses that supported suburban development in the late 1940's and 1950's cannot create the *hip and urban* atmosphere needed to attract younger families.

A wide range of activities, safety, utility, sociability, access--these are all values that characterize great centers as great places. While these values don't change as centers grow and mature, the way centers accommodate these values does. This requires good planning.

Reinvestment and redevelopment should be encouraged as a way to reverse obsolescence and deterioration of many existing centers. If nurtured by the right infrastructure, quality design, a favorable regulatory structure, and great public space management, many centers can support mixed-use, neighborhood commercial and residential re-growth.

Center redevelopment must do more than add or accommodate density. Some centers are small, others large; some centers are focused primarily around commercial space; others are composed of a mix of retail and residences. In all cases, however, our centers should be places that residents and workers from around the region can identify with and be proud of. These centers should be accessible not just by car, but also by transit, foot and bicycle. They should provide services and facilities that residents and workers want and need, such as, libraries, post offices, government offices and local retail. These centers, finally, should include vibrant public spaces--parks, plazas, with wide, inviting sidewalks -- that a range of people can enjoy.

Focusing on our centers will help to further the four core values laid out by the General Plan 40 years ago:

- maximize the value of our public investments