



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT
THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

MCPB
Item #8
4/16/09

April 8, 2009

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

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

Khalid Afzal, Team Leader *KA*
East Central Planning Team
Vision Division

FROM: Frederick Vernon Boyd, Community Planner (301.495.4654)
East Central Planning Team *FVB*
Vision Division

SUBJECT: Kensington Sector Plan Preliminary Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION: Provide guidance to the staff on the direction of the Plan and the preliminary recommendations

The attached paper presents preliminary recommendations for the Kensington Sector Plan. The staff seeks direction from the Planning Board on the approach undertaken for the Plan and the scope of the recommendations offered for consideration.

Once the Board's guidance is in hand, planning staff will prepare a draft Sector Plan for Planning Board review. The current schedule for the Sector Plan contemplates preparation of a Public Hearing Draft in late May and early June, with a Planning Board public hearing in July.

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Attachment

Kensington Sector Plan Preliminary Recommendations

BACKGROUND

Purpose

This comprehensive update of the 1978 Sector Plan for the Town of Kensington and Vicinity will promote the creation of a mixed-use Town Center in an area now exclusively commercial. The revitalized Town Center will be a lively and active place with street environments that are welcoming and comfortable for residents, workers, and visitors. It will be easily reachable on foot or by bicycle from Kensington's neighborhoods, which can reduce vehicle miles travelled, conserve energy, and reduce carbon emissions. The new district will also broaden housing choices for a wide array of ages and incomes. The Sector Plan will set the stage for revitalization consistent with County policies for sustainable development, design excellence, and diversity of housing choice.

Geography

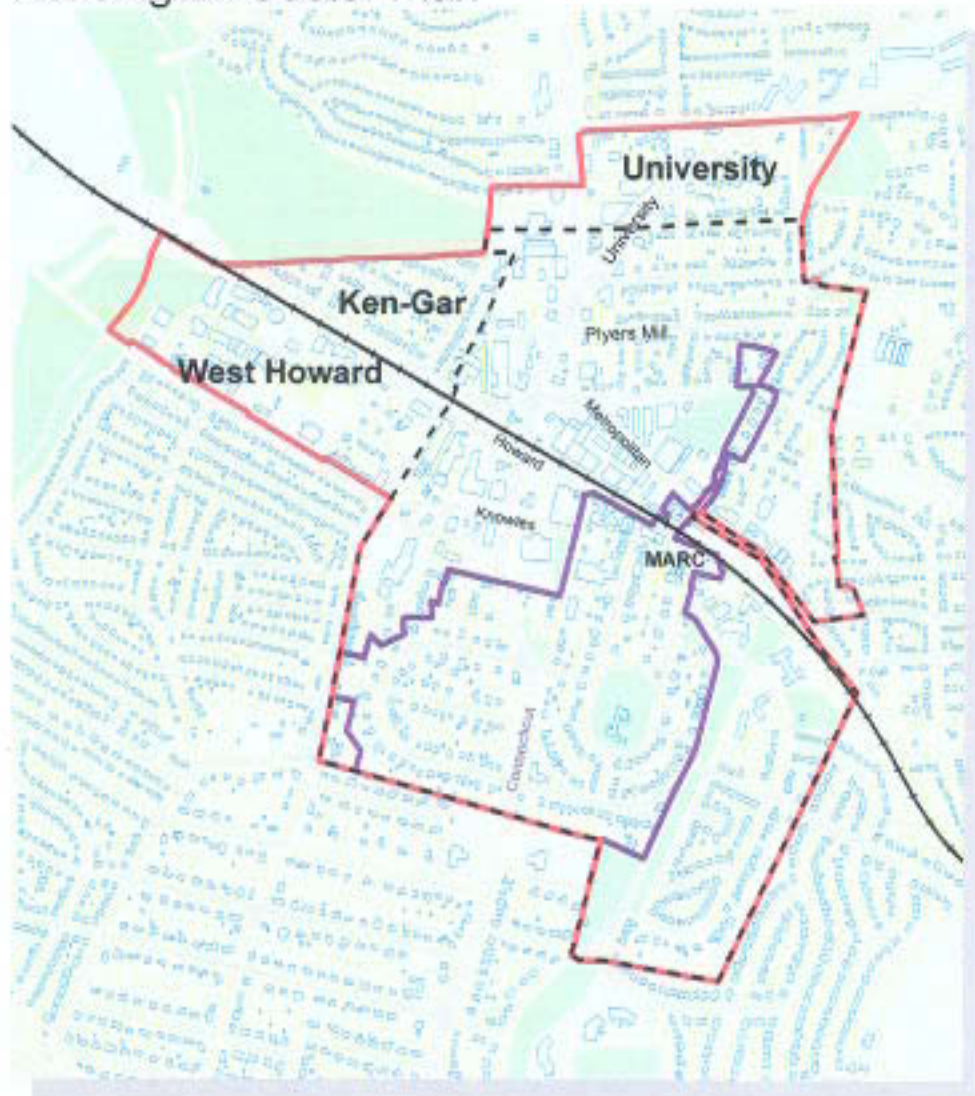
The proposed Sector Plan area includes the Town and three areas outside it: the West Howard Antiques District, the Ken-Gar neighborhood west of Connecticut Avenue and the neighborhood commercial district at Connecticut Avenue and University Boulevard. Inside the town, the Sector Plan will focus on the commercial areas along Connecticut, Knowles, Metropolitan and east Howard avenues. The Sector Plan area totals approximately 400 acres.

Planning Framework

The 1978 Sector Plan recognized Kensington's existing scale and character and recommended limited "infill" development on the edge of commercial areas. It offered a renewal plan for Ken-Gar and made recommendations for transitional development on several specific properties. It made recommendations for limited road widening and intersection improvements and, in an accompanying appendix, offered an urban design study for the town.

The 1993 *General Plan Refinement* includes Kensington in the Urban Ring. Like other Urban Ring places, Kensington is an established community with densities that are higher than more suburban communities like Aspen Hill. In addition, much of the town's residential district is designated on the County's Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Historic status gives Kensington a distinct character and a clearly defined image. While a major objective of the General Plan Refinement focused future growth to the Urban Ring, it primarily directed that growth to areas with Metro stations.

Kensington Sector Plan



- - Kensington boundary
- - Sector Plan boundary
- ▭ Historic District



Outreach

Throughout development of the Sector Plan, staff has worked closely with a broad range of groups and individuals interested in land use issues. Because Kensington is an incorporated municipality, its Mayor and Council have been closely involved in the planning process.

Planning staff has offered progress reports at the town's regular Mayor and Council meetings and conducted larger meetings for community residents in March 2007, June 2008 and March 2009, which afforded opportunities to review and discuss evolving land use, zoning, transportation and environmental issues. Planning staff also introduced "office hours," smaller sessions held every two weeks at Kensington's town offices, at which individuals could bring specific questions and concerns to the attention of planners.

A Technical Assistance Panel from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) visited Kensington in November 2008. Planning staff assisted with the visit and participated in ULI's formal presentation to the Town in February 2009. The panel recommendations have been evaluated as part of the development of the Sector Plan.

Civic associations representing residents in the town and its adjoining neighborhoods have banded together to form the Coalition of Kensington Communities. Coalition representatives have been part of all outreach activities, attending community meetings, visiting staff's office hours and attending Mayor and Council meetings. Planning staff has also met with the Coalition's executive committee and received written responses from Coalition member groups highlighting issues of interest.

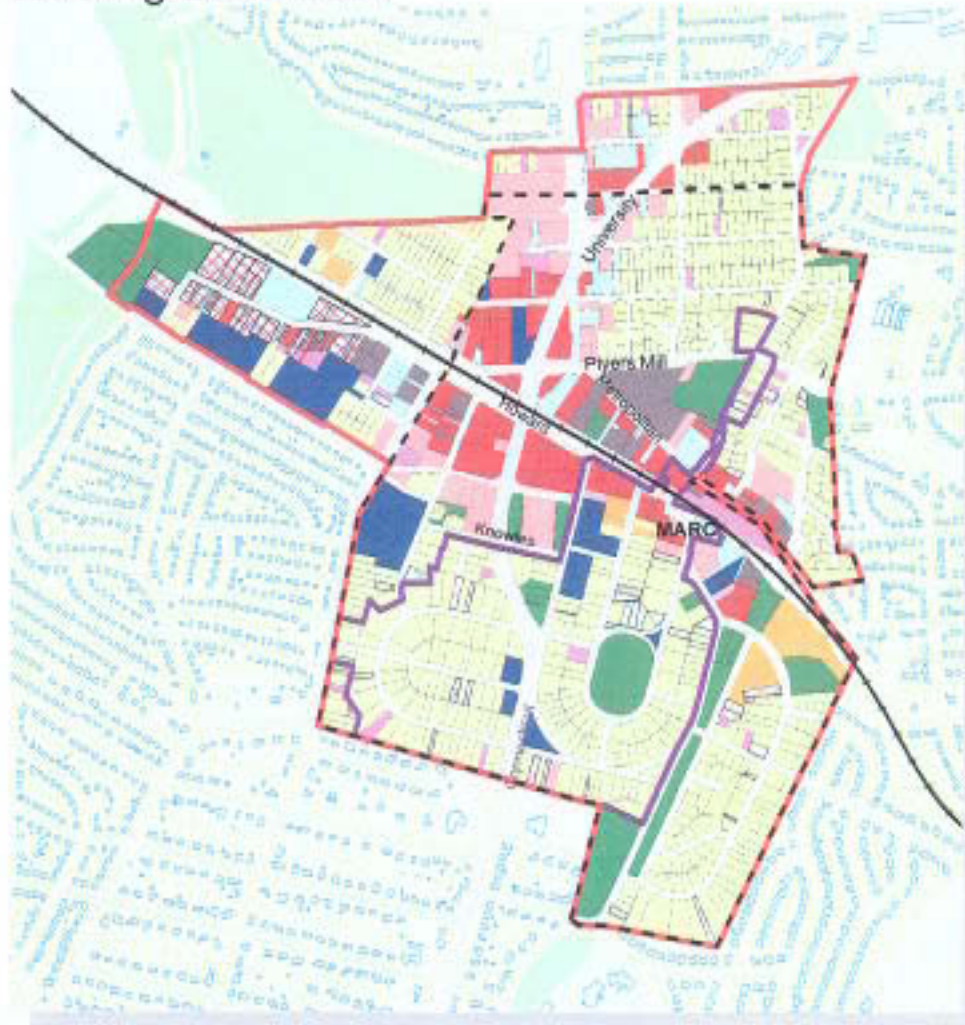
Kensington in Context

Kensington is located between the Metro-related development nodes of Wheaton and White Flint. The town is about two miles from Wheaton's Metro station and about three miles from White Flint's. Commuter rail serves the town, but service is limited, compared to Metro's frequent headways and extensive rail network. Inbound trains travel to Silver Spring and Union Station during the weekday morning peak period; outbound trains from the District stop in Kensington during the evening peak.

Kensington is largely self-sufficient. The Sector Plan area offers a full range of neighborhood service and retail opportunities. Two important neighborhood shopping destinations—Safeway and the Kensington Shopping Center—sit opposite each other at Connecticut and Knowles avenues. A third, smaller neighborhood center lies near the junction of Connecticut Avenue and University Boulevard. To the east of Connecticut Avenue, along Kensington Parkway and Montgomery Avenue, there are banks, drycleaners and other businesses. On Howard Avenue west of Connecticut, there are auto repair businesses as well as plumbers, landscapers and craft workers.

Kensington is also home to a number of antiques and furnishings businesses that attract shoppers from all of metropolitan Washington. On Howard Avenue east of Connecticut Avenue is historic Antique Row. Other antique retailers have located among the warehouses and services on West Howard Avenue.

Existing Land Uses



0 250 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 Feet



Kensington provides housing for a full range of ages and incomes, ranging from small apartments near Antique Row to stately single-family houses in the historic district to housing targeted to older residents. In the main, however, Kensington is a residential community.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The planning process focused on determining the combination of land uses and development standards that will meet the Plan's goal of enabling revitalization in designated areas without compromising the fundamental attributes that make Kensington an attractive place to live. This report makes preliminary recommendations for four main places in the Sector Plan area—the Town Center, Crafts/Services areas, places immediately adjacent to those districts along Metropolitan Avenue, and the Connecticut/University commercial area. It recommends development and design standards that will create clearly defined places that are animated by activity for pedestrians along streets. The uses and standards outlined in the following sections can be implemented with the new use districts currently in preparation.

These are the key recommendations in land use, urban design, transportation, environment and historic preservation:

- Introduce housing into the exclusively commercial center of Kensington to enliven streets and enhance housing diversity;
- Establish design standards that improve the public realm by managing the relationship between buildings and the streets on which they are located;
- Use a combination of road classifications, roadway design initiatives, pedestrian enhancements and road network improvements to enhance connections between neighborhoods and the Town Center while accommodating through traffic;
- Promote sustainable revitalization through land use recommendations, innovative low intensity development techniques for managing stormwater, increasing pervious surfaces and increasing tree cover and environmentally sensitive building and construction standards;
- Maintain the scale and character of residential neighborhoods and examine additions to the inventory of historic places.

Study Areas



- - - Kensington boundary
- Sector Plan boundary
- Town Center
- Crafts/Services
- Connecticut/University
- Metropolitan Avenue
- Historic District
- Parks

0 250 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 Feet



Land Use and Urban Design Recommendations

For the *Town Center, Connecticut/University and Metropolitan Avenue* areas, these uses are appropriate:

Housing, multifamily

General retail, excluding big-box department stores and with standards for ground floor activities that encourage active streets

Dining and entertainment—restaurants, delicatessens, small theaters

Offices

Neighborhood services, like dry cleaners, grocery stores, pharmacies, banks

For the *Crafts/Services* areas, these uses are appropriate:

Skilled craftwork/artisans, like cabinetmakers and custom carpenters

Service craftwork, like electricians, plumbers and auto services

Warehousing and light manufacturing

This report recommends the following standards for the four areas:

Density—single total FAR, with residential and non-residential uses included

Form—defined maximum building heights

Setbacks—expressed as sidewalk widths, curb to building wall

Frontage—requirements for windows and direct entrances from the street

Open Space—requirements for provision of open public use space as part of development projects and as part of pedestrian-centered improvements on public streets

Parking—reduced program of requirements along with a requirement that parking be to the rear of properties

Residential and non-residential uses can occur together, up to the recommended FAR. The proposed new CR district will set limits on residential and non-residential FAR so that achieving maximum allowable FAR requires mixing uses. The new district will also offer additional density when sustainable development techniques, affordable housing and other measures are included in a project. These density “bonuses” will provide incentives to property owners to consider redevelopment with mixed uses. As the CR district and its regime of density incentives continue to evolve, planning staff will be able to finalize density recommendations in Kensington. The recommended density shown is a target and includes potential bonuses.

The preliminary recommendations place higher densities in the Town Center, which is also recommended for a broader mix of retail, entertainment, office and housing uses. This report also recommends taller buildings along Connecticut Avenue in this area, to enhance the Town Center’s distinct sense of place.

Land Use and Urban Design Recommendations—Individual Districts

Town Center, Connecticut/University, Metropolitan Avenue

Uses

General retail, housing, dining and entertainment, offices, neighborhood services

Target Density

2.0 FAR

Form

50 feet maximum building height (60 feet along Connecticut Avenue and at Connecticut/University to create visual interest and enhance Town Center atmosphere)

Setbacks

15 feet, curb to building wall, to provide activity space for pedestrians

Frontage

Requirements for windows and direct entrances from the street to intensify activity levels on streets

Parking

Reduced program of requirements along with preferred parking to the rear of properties

Open Space

Maintain existing parks, gardens and gathering places, and create new public use and green spaces as part of individual revitalization projects

Crafts/Services Area

Uses

Light manufacturing, warehousing, light industrial, skilled craftwork/artisans and service craftwork

Target Density

1.5 FAR

Form

50 feet maximum

Setbacks

35 feet, curb to building wall, to allow some parking where needed

Frontage

Requirements for windows or transparent loading doors and direct entrances from the street to intensify activity levels on streets

Parking

Reduced program of requirements; parking to the rear of structures, where possible; explore use of state-owned property on west Howard Avenue for additional parking

Open Space

Create small green spaces where possible in existing rights-of-way; explore use of state-owned property on west Howard Avenue for additional green space

Transportation

Kensington is located at a critical bottleneck in the area's road network. An informal, but important east-west road system crosses Connecticut Avenue, a vital north-south artery, in the center of town. The east-west network includes University Boulevard, Plyers Mill Road, Metropolitan, Knowles and Strathmore avenues. The east-west crossing requires travelers to use Connecticut Avenue between Plyers Mill Road and Knowles Avenue in order to complete their east- or westbound journey. For this short segment, east-west travelers and north-south travelers must use the same roadway.

Street grids in Kensington's neighborhoods generally provide good access and circulation for pedestrians. Many, but not all, have sidewalks, and there are paths and trails connecting the neighborhoods to parkland east and west of Kensington. Connecticut Avenue and the CSX rail right-of-way pose significant barriers to pedestrian and bicyclist movement through the Sector Plan area. There are only three pedestrian connections across the tracks between the north and south sections of the Town – Summit Avenue, Connecticut Avenue, and the at-grade track crossing at Kensington Station. The first two are barely adequate; the track crossing is hazardous. The nearest crossings of the tracks outside the Sector Plan area are Beach Drive and the Rock Creek Trail, almost a half-mile to the west of Summit Avenue, and Stoneybrook Drive, about 2/3 of a mile to the east. With its focus on through movement of vehicles, Connecticut Avenue's pedestrian atmosphere is unfriendly. There are few refuges, and the absence of green space along the street brings pedestrians uncomfortably close to traffic.

Finally, along West Howard Avenue, the lack of sidewalks and curbs leads to a merging of the public and private realms, so that visitors do not know where the street ends and private property begins.

Transportation–Area-wide Recommendations

- Refrain from widening roadway intersections to accommodate through-vehicle traffic;
- Upgrade lighting along major highways and arterials to provide continuous lighting for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Transportation–District Recommendations

Streets–Town Center

- Reduce the design speed of Connecticut Avenue in Kensington to 30 MPH to enhance pedestrian comfort and safety;
- Use urban road cross sections from the County code to reduce road cross sections and maintain lower design speeds, matching the character of the Town Center.

Streets–Metropolitan Avenue

- Classify Metropolitan Avenue as a Business District Street with a 70-foot right-of-way and two travel lanes to bring its classification into line with its function;

- Connect Metropolitan Avenue and Plyers Mill Road with a new one-way northbound street east of the current intersection, which would enhance connections for pedestrians; allow on street parking on the remainder of Metropolitan Avenue.

Streets-Crafts/Services District

- Support efforts to refine the right-of-way on Howard Avenue west of Summit Avenue, to define the pedestrian area and accommodate stormwater quantity and quality. Confirm the number of travel lanes on this arterial as two;
- Consider an extension of Summit Avenue to connect to Connecticut Avenue north of University Boulevard. Such an improvement would provide an alternative to Connecticut for local access and for pedestrians and bicyclists; would allow for turning movements at intersections other than central ‘wagon hub’ of Connecticut/Plyers Mill road to keep that intersection from needing to be widened to accommodate congestion; and would allow imposition of no-turn restrictions at intersections on Connecticut.

Pedestrians and Bicyclists-Town Center, Metropolitan Avenue

- Formalize the pedestrian underpass of the CSX tracks at the Kensington MARC station. A minimum twelve-foot-wide grade-separated crossing under the tracks should be built to the east of the existing grade crossing, generally in line with Wheatley Street;
- Provide a pedestrian path along the southern boundary of the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) headquarters along Summit Avenue to improve pedestrian connectivity. No other route exists along the east side of Summit in the quarter-mile distance between Mitchell and Prospect Streets.

Several of these recommendations raise issues. Any proposal for a pedestrian underpass at the train station will require the cooperation of both the Maryland Transit Administration and CSX, which controls the right-of-way. The route for an extension of Summit Avenue passes through an existing area of active businesses, many of which provide necessary neighborhood services like auto repair. The businesses now occupying this area would have to be relocated and the properties acquired. A new intersection would have to be designed for the already complicated junction of Connecticut Avenue and University Boulevard. Any reconfiguration at Summit Avenue and Plyers Mill Road also would have an impact on the Ken-Gar community, for which the intersection is the only access. This report recommends further study of this potential improvement and alternative improvements in the same area.



Environment

The Sector Plan area straddles two subwatersheds of Rock Creek. One carries flows from east to west from Wheaton through Kensington Heights and into a stream that town residents call Silver Creek. Stormwater from the Westfield shopping mall in Wheaton is directed west as well. Silver Creek must absorb some of this flow. The other subwatershed includes a small tributary that rises near the Kaiser Permanente medical building and flows west into the mainstem of the creek.

While Kensington's residential communities have tree-lined streets and wooded lots, imperviousness is high, particularly in the commercial core. In addition, the area largely developed without regard to managing stormwater and without extensive concern for the integrity of existing streams.

Within the Sector Plan boundary, 93.76 acres or 23.91 percent, is in tree canopy cover. The majority of canopy cover is from street trees and landscaping, with the exception of 2.81 acres of forested parkland. The preponderance of trees is within the residential neighborhoods, with approximately 21 percent canopy cover; commercial and industrial areas have only 2 percent. In general, Kensington lacks a stratified complex of mixed species, mature trees, understory, and herbaceous plant life. The lack of vegetation in combination with the intensive impervious cover contributes to increased temperatures, heat island effect, reduced water quality, minimal carbon sequestration capacity, increased energy consumption, and lack of an aesthetic sensibility.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency has reported that Montgomery County does not meet the minimum standards for ground level ozone and fine particulate matter. In fact, the County's air quality rating was downgraded from serious to severe for ground level ozone. In response to this and other factors, the County Council passed a law requiring a Climate Protection Plan be developed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2010 and reduce them by 80 percent of 2005 levels by 2050.

Environment—Area-wide Recommendations

The environmental recommendations in the Sector Plan are twofold; to restore, enhance and preserve the natural resources; and to infuse sustainable practices into all future redevelopment and site planning. This report makes the following area-wide general recommendations for sustainable and environmentally sound revitalization:

- Apply neighborhood and building standards that meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) or similar rating system;

- Reduce energy consumption by maximizing energy efficiency for lighting, heating and cooling;
- Use alternative energy sources such as photovoltaics, geothermal, passive solar systems, and wind energy;
- Use innovative and effective stormwater control and treatment measures such as Low Impact Development/Environmental Site Design (LID/ESD) techniques to promote groundwater recharge;
- Promote the planting of street and neighborhood trees to increase canopy cover and connect greenways. Plantings should be closely spaced to reduce heat island effects, lessen thermal impacts, provide shade, and cool buildings;
- Increase tree canopy cover in commercial and industrial areas to at least 15 percent and increase canopy cover to at least 30 percent in residential areas by planting native trees on streets, in stream buffers and in street medians;
- Use canopy and understory native species, where possible, in urban stormwater management structures;
- Include the Silver Creek and Rock Creek stream valleys as part of the comprehensive network in the draft Green Infrastructure Plan. Native tree plantings should be promoted along the streams as buffers and to reconnect ecologically significant natural resources through linkages in the landscape. Street tree planting should provide canopy connection to green spaces, trail networks, walkways, parkland, public spaces, neighborhoods and commercial areas;
- Locate retail, residential, and commercial areas in proximity to each other to reduce traffic, carbon emissions, shorten commute time, and improve quality of place;
- Consider the following options for properties undergoing redevelopment:
 - adaptive re-use of existing buildings
 - design for adaptability and longevity of new buildings
 - re-use building elements/assemblies
 - re-use building components
 - apply deconstruction practices
- Expand the use of alternative modes of transportation such as public transit, carpooling, car-sharing, bicycling, pedestrian sidewalks;
- Increase pervious surface areas to maximize infiltration and reduce runoff. Where development contains extensive areas of impervious surfaces, employ porous pavement;
- Support the use of electric and hybrid-electric transportation technologies, hydrogen, and other clean transportation fuels;
- Encourage the use of zoning that rewards green space and renewable energy production. This approach could use a scoring system to encourage the installation of vegetative layering along streets and other visible areas and renewable energy production. A variety of techniques include but are not limited to permeable pavement, green roofs, rainwater harvesting, LID/ESD practices, and vegetated walls;
- In addition to greening the community, encourage the use of reflective paving and roofing materials to reduce local heat island effect and building temperatures.

Environment–District Recommendations

Town Center, Metropolitan Avenue

Silver Creek, the only stream within the Kensington Sector Plan boundaries, has poor water quality and stream conditions, as determined by the 2003 Countywide Stream Protection Strategy. The natural stream bed previously was converted to a concrete channel or piped underground in order to transport water swiftly from one location to another. During larger storm events, the culvert at the base of Oberon Street exceeds capacity, causing flooding to many neighborhood residents. This report makes these recommendations:

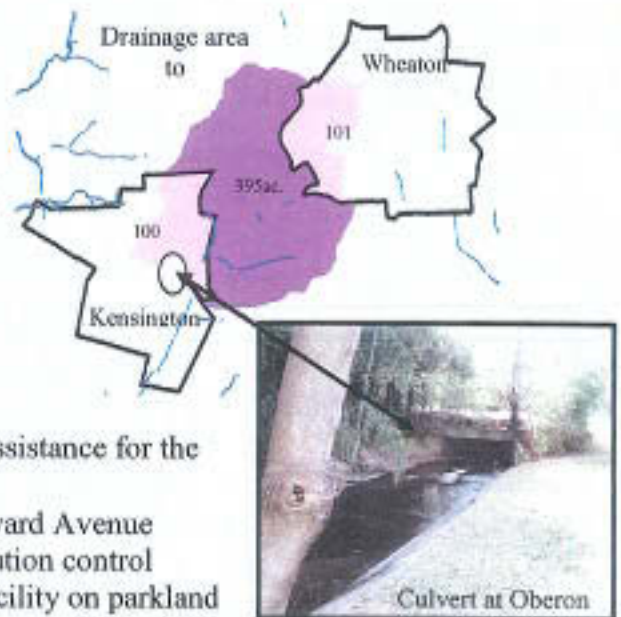
- As properties in the Town Center and along Metropolitan Avenue redevelop, apply a variety of LID/ESD practices supported by the State’s proposed 2008 Stormwater Design Manual. These practices are designed to mimic predevelopment site conditions by using site design techniques that store, infiltrate, evaporate, and detain runoff. These techniques help reduce off-site runoff, promote groundwater recharge, improve water quality, filter pollutants, slow velocity at discharge points, improve neighborhood aesthetics, and provide wildlife habitat. LID/ESD practices include some of the following:
 - Bioswales
 - Bioretention
 - Green roofs
 - Permeable pavers
 - Cisterns
 - Rain gardens
 - Shallow wetlands
 - Tree wells
- Reduce impervious surfaces to promote groundwater recharge, and apply green site principles to reduce stormwater runoff to Silver Creek.
- Use LID/ESD practices and impervious reduction measures recommended by DPS to promote groundwater recharge and reduce flow rates to stormwater outfalls in the drainage areas outside the Sector Plan boundaries.
- Provide additional storm drain capacity at Oberon Street, allowing for the passage of stormwater surges.
- Conduct a feasibility study for the removal of the concrete stream channel replacing the streambed with a natural substrate. This may help reduce and slow the flow rate to the Oberon Street culvert, provide groundwater recharge, improved oxygen levels and water chemistry, provide aquatic habitat, and cool water temperatures.

Crafts/Services District

West Howard Avenue is burdened by nearly 76 percent impervious cover and it entirely lacks stormwater management. Uncontrolled stormwater cascades down the street slope from the top of West Howard Avenue to parkland at the base of the avenue. At the discharge point, runoff undercuts the forested slope and severely erodes the asphalt and stream buffer.

This report makes these recommendations:

- Provide stormwater management through the use of innovative LID/ESD quality and quantity control measures to encourage groundwater recharge. Some techniques include a combination of one or more of the following: infiltration trench, bioretention, bioswales, permeable pavement, extended retention;
- Where possible, provide onsite quantity control of roof runoff by installing French drains, cisterns, vaults, planting well, and/or green roofs. Explore opportunities for local, state and federal assistance for the installation of green roofs;
- Protect forest on parkland at the base of West Howard Avenue through impervious reduction techniques and pollution control measures. A stormwater management treatment facility on parkland is not recommended;
- Include tree planting in LID/ESD treatment areas where feasible.



Historic Preservation

Kensington has a substantial historic district that has been designated on the County's Master Plan for Historic Preservation. The Historic Preservation Commission reviews proposed exterior changes for structures in the district and has developed guidelines for new construction in areas that are part of the existing district.

Historic Preservation—Area-wide Recommendations

This report recommends that

- The existing district be reevaluated for potential additions, such as
 - North Kensington
 - Kensington Estates
 - Howard Avenue
- The Kensington Cabin and the Kensington Fire House be evaluated for inclusion as individual sites;
- Urban Design guidelines for the Sector Plan area include elements to ensure that development adjacent to the historic district recognizes the historic character of the town and is in keeping with that character.

Selected Opportunities

These Town Center properties are suitable for mixed uses:

Burka

Size: 138,000 square feet
Current Zone: C2
Existing Use: commercial retail
Potential Use: mixed



Huggins

Size: 46,100 square feet
Current Zone: C2
Existing Use: commercial retail
Potential Use: mixed



This Connecticut/University property is in single ownership and is suitable for mixed uses:

Stubbs property

Size: 52,800 square feet
Current Zone: C1
Existing Use: commercial retail
Potential Use: mixed



This Metropolitan Avenue property is suitable for development with a significant residential component:

Metropolitan Avenue Self-Storage

Size: 156,500 square feet
Current Zone: C2
Existing Use: commercial self-storage
Potential Use: mixed



Implementation

Recommendations for the Town Center, Metropolitan Avenue and University/Connecticut districts will be implemented through use of the Commercial-Residential (CR) District, a still-developing zoning tool that will encourage mixed-use development and will promote increased diversity of housing choice, environmentally sound buildings, active streets that connect communities and innovative design. The Crafts/Services District may be considered for this District or for an as-yet undeveloped district for light industrial uses.

The Sector Plan will be accompanied by a separate set of Urban Design Guidelines that will be provide detailed information on street classifications, types and functions; building form, orientation and massing; and open space.

The Montgomery County Department of Housing and Community Affairs is currently exploring streetscape, building façade and stormwater management improvements for West Howard Avenue, in the Crafts/Services area. Capital Improvement Projects may be created to put the Department's recommendations and initiatives into place.

The Town of Kensington may consider a parking district.