




Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment, Scope of Work

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Completed: 7.15.13

Description

Present Scope of Work.

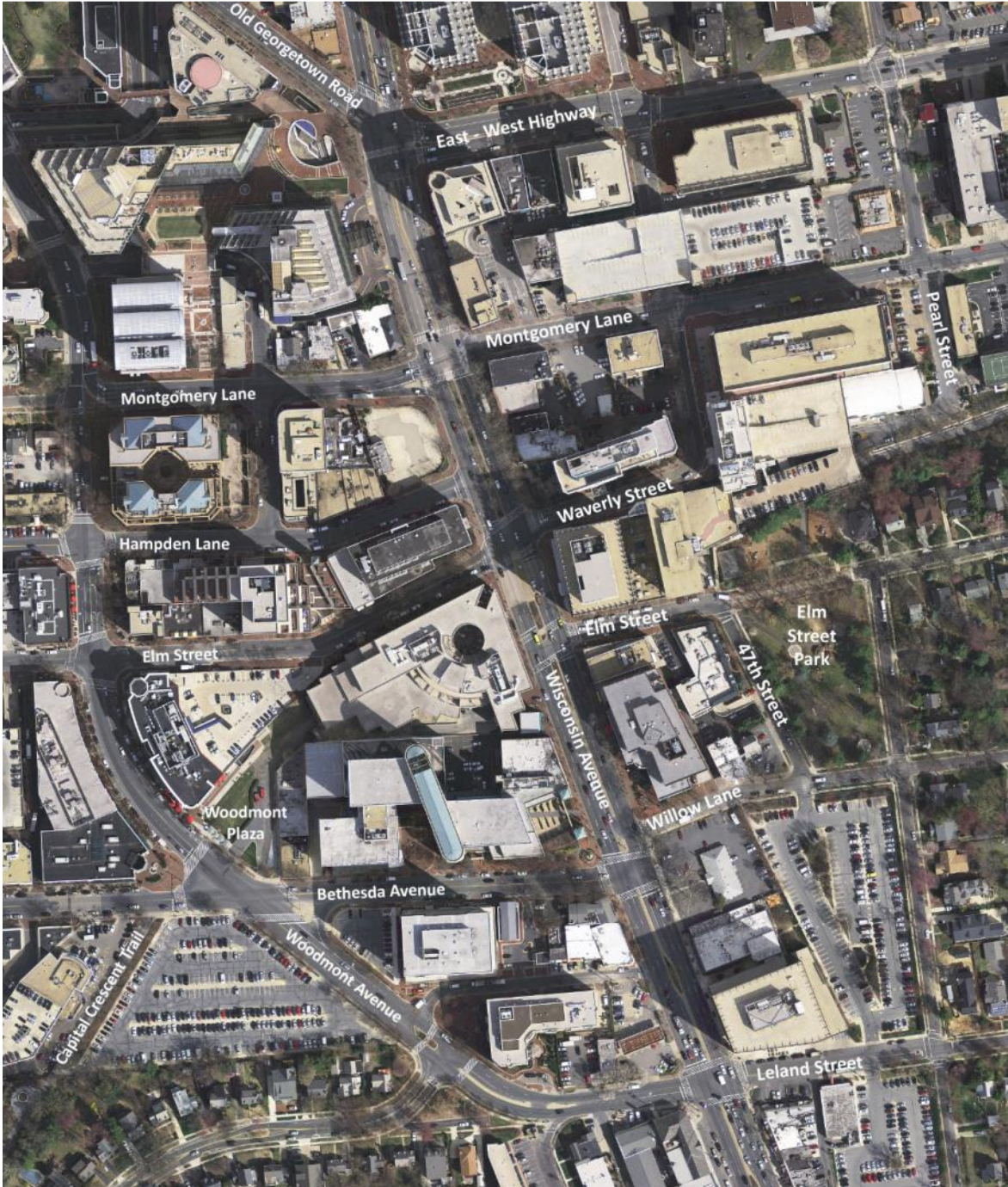
Staff recommendation: approve scope of work

Summary

This memorandum presents the scope of work for the Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment, including background information, planning framework, purpose of the plan, schedule, resources, outreach, and next steps.

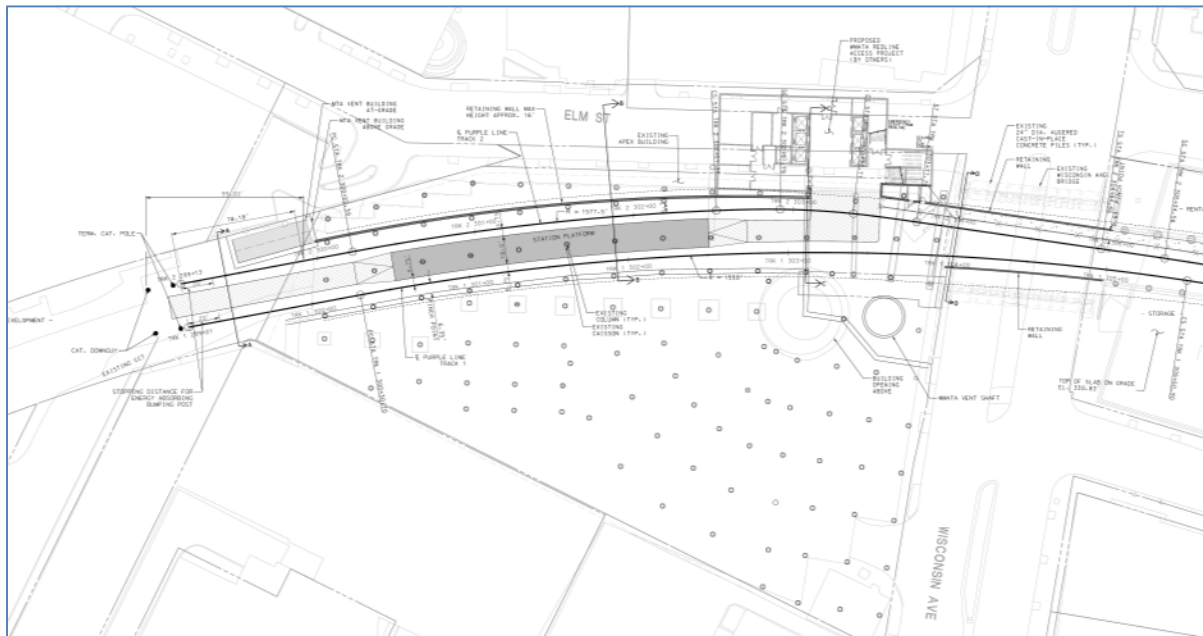
Introduction

The Purple Line is a planned light rail route in Montgomery County that will be located within the existing Georgetown Branch rail right-of-way, presently the location of the Georgetown Branch Interim Trail. During Purple Line construction, the existing trail will be replaced by the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT). The western terminus of the Purple Line will be located in Bethesda, in the existing tunnel beneath the Apex Building at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Elm Street.



Aerial Context Map

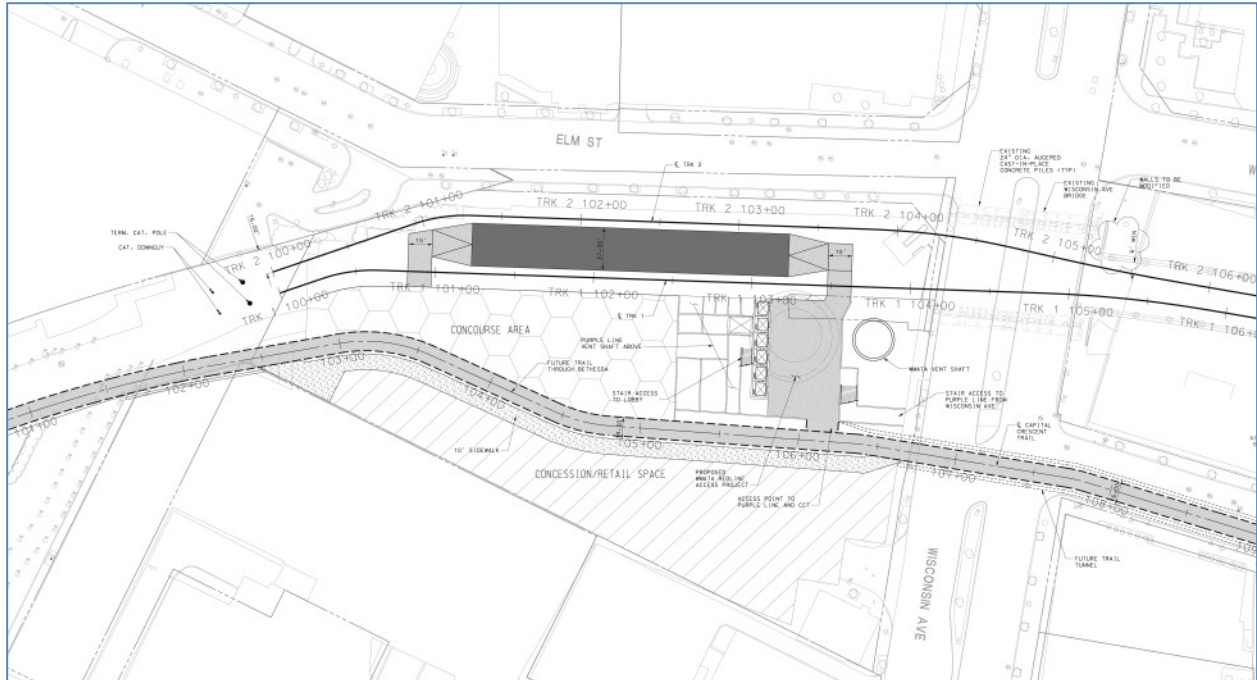
The Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) developed preliminary engineering concept designs to accommodate the Bethesda Purple Line Station, the CCT, and associated infrastructure within that existing tunnel. Originally, this design included the train and the trail in the same space. Further study revealed, however, that both the train and the trail could not be accommodated within the existing space without incurring significant unanticipated additional cost and posing a potential structural hazard to the buildings above. As a result, the County Council determined that the Capital Crescent trail would have to be limited to the surface connection on street.



Preliminary Engineering Concept Design

In the preliminary concept design, the station is built around the existing structure of the building above. This yields a design with a number of challenges:

- structural columns from the existing building will impede pedestrian movement on the platform;
- a curved platform that creates gaps between the platform and the train;
- a single central platform that requires a wider tunnel to accommodate trains;
- maintenance “tail tracks” that extend about 100’ into Woodmont Plaza, a central public gathering space;
- a large ventilation tower, 18’x40’x90’, located in Woodmont Plaza (as adjacent approved development proceeds, the tower will need to grow taller still)
- the planned connection between the Purple Line Station and the forthcoming Bethesda Metro Station south entrance must be accommodated under the Elm Street right-of-way, necessitating elevators on the Elm Street sidewalk.



Alternative Station Concept Design

In April 2013, MTA released an alternative station design that would improve upon this design. This alternative design is premised on the timely redevelopment of the Apex Building. There are numerous public benefits to the alternative design:

- a dedicated tunnel for the Capital Crescent Trail under Wisconsin Avenue;
- a more efficient dual-platform configuration free of impediments to pedestrian movement on the platform;
- straight platforms without gaps between the train and platform;
- maintenance “tail tracks” that extend only about 30’ into Woodmont Plaza;
- the incorporation of the ventilation tower into the building design; and
- relocation of the Red Line south entrance from the Elm Street right-of-way into the design for the new building.

Implementation of the alternative design would provide an improved user experience for pedestrians, commuters, and cyclists and creates numerous efficiencies that will save the County and State both time and money.

Planning Framework

The 1990 Approved and Adopted *Georgetown Branch Master Plan Amendment* identifies the Georgetown Branch right-of-way as the location for both the Silver Spring & Bethesda Trolley and the Capital Crescent Trail, and the Apex Building (nee “Embassy Plaza Building”) site as the location of the Bethesda trolley station. The Plan recommends the connection of the Bethesda trolley station and the Bethesda Metro station south entrance, and includes specific design recommendations for the design and function of the various station elements.

The 1994 Approved and Adopted *Bethesda CBD Sector Plan* includes the Purple Line station within the “Metro Core District”, with Woodmont and Bethesda Avenues forming the western and southern boundaries of the district. The Sector Plan recommends for this district the highest intensity development, focusing primarily on commercial uses and employment, but not precluding residential development. For the station block, the Sector Plan recommends medium- to high-density office development, with retail and service uses along Woodmont Plaza, and CBD-2 zoning. The Plan “recommends optional method employment uses on most CBD-2 sites, at 4 FAR. Optional method residential use is also allowed at 5 FAR.”(p.58) The Sector Plan also makes design recommendations for the portion of the block along Woodmont Avenue. The Sector Plan does not make specific recommendations regarding development of the eastern portion of the block.

The *Bethesda CBD Sector Plan* highlights the need to “integrate the Silver Spring-Bethesda Trolley into the transportation and land use pattern” (p. 143) and supports “connection of a light rail to the Silver Spring CBD using the Georgetown Branch right-of-way, with a terminal located near the south entrance to Metro in the Bethesda CBD Metro Core.” (p. 146). The Sector Plan acknowledges the complexity of the planned connection between the Metro station south entrance and the trolley station and recommends alternative station locations within the Georgetown Branch right-of-way.

The 2010 Approved and Adopted *Purple Line Functional Plan* reconfirms the location of the Bethesda terminal station under the Apex Building and reinforces as key features of the station the pedestrian connections to the Bethesda Metro station south entrance, Elm Street, and Woodmont Plaza.

Purpose of the Plan

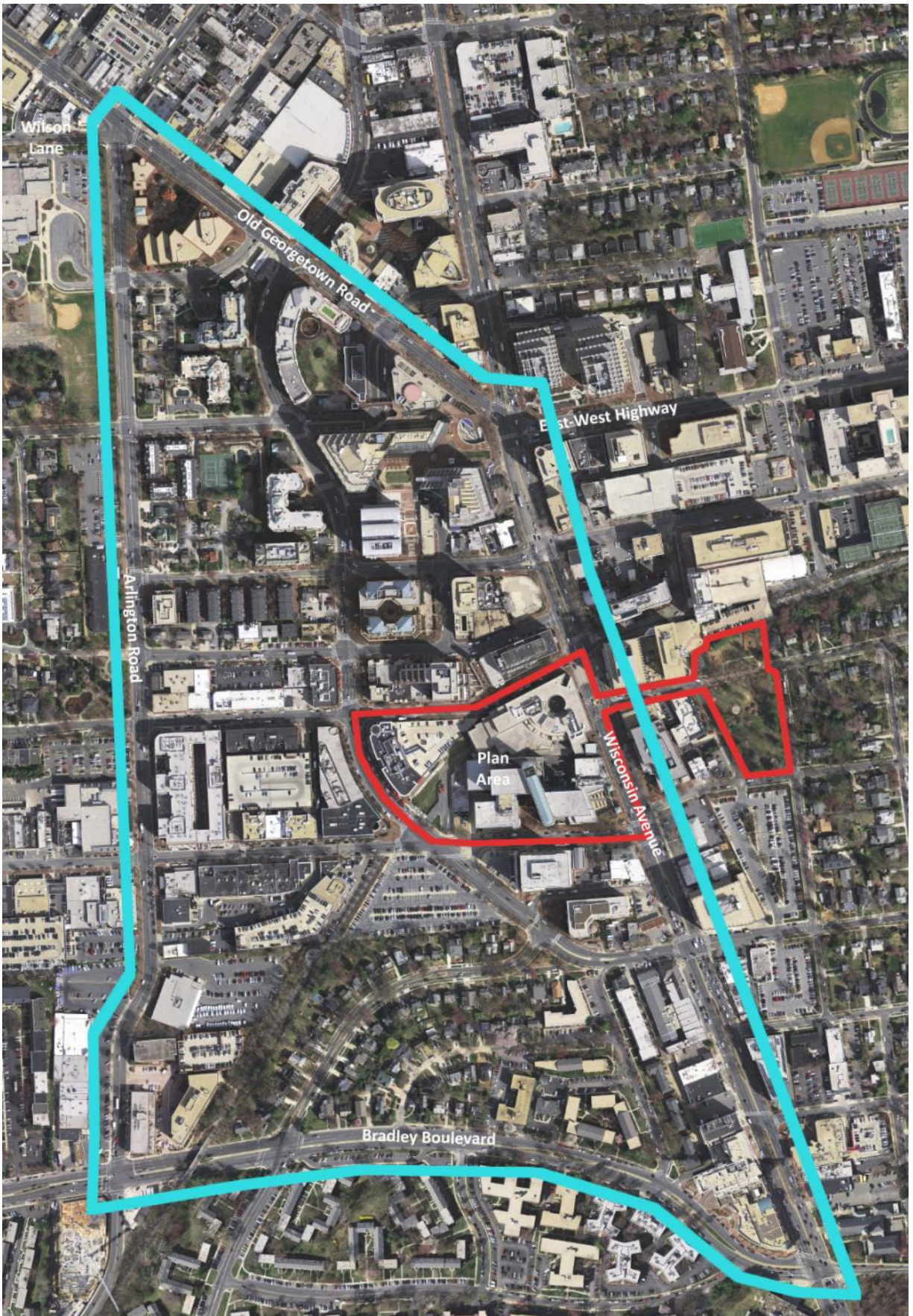
The Bethesda Purple Line Minor Master Plan Amendment will look at options to realize the significant public benefits of the alternative station design. This review will consider existing capacities in the zoning, *Bethesda CBD Sector Plan*, and the transportation network, and compare those with the economic considerations for the potential redevelopment of the Apex Building and a broader analysis of the station and trail design and use.

In placing this Minor Master Plan Amendment into the Planning Department’s work program, the County Council limited the specific geographic area for this review to the block where the station will be located – bound by Elm Street to the north, Wisconsin Avenue to the east, Bethesda Avenue to the south, and Woodmont Avenue to the east – as well as the Elm Street right-of-way between Wisconsin Avenue and Elm Street Park and Elm Street Park itself.



Minor Master Plan Amendment Plan Area

For traffic analysis purposes, this review will cover a larger area, shown below, to assess potential traffic impacts.



Traffic Analysis Area

In addition to this Minor Master Plan Amendment, the County Council also placed into the Department’s work program the update of the full *Bethesda CBD* Sector Plan, an effort that staff has recently begun. While the Minor Amendment has a narrower focus and a shorter timeline, as described below, these two distinct but related planning efforts will proceed side-by-side, each to one degree or another informing the other.

Project Schedule

The MTA has set two deadlines that this Minor Master Plan Amendment is working with:

- December 31, 2013: written commitment to redevelop the Apex Building;
- December 31, 2015: demolition of the Apex Building to allow construction of the station to commence with general expected construction of the Purple Line.

Staff has presented to the Planning Board its view that the Planning Department is but one member of the larger team necessary to meet MTA’s schedule and to realize the great public benefits that would come with an improved Bethesda Purple Line Station design. As part of a larger coordinated effort to meet the deadlines established by MTA and supported by the County Council, this Minor Master Plan Amendment must meet key milestones on the following schedule:

July 22, 2013	Present Scope of Work to Planning Board
September 26, 2013	Present Staff Draft Minor Master Plan Amendment to Planning Board for approval as Public Hearing Draft
November 7, 2013	Planning Board Public Hearing
November 21, 2013	Planning Board Worksession
December 5, 2013	Approval of Planning Board Draft Minor Master Plan Amendment
December 6, 2013	Transmit Planning Board Draft to County Council and County Executive to allow County Council to notice Public Hearing before Winter break.

Resources

In placing this Minor Master Plan Amendment into the Department’s work program, the County Council provided \$100,000 to hire consultants to assist staff with the review.

Staff has contracted with an economic consultant to determine the minimum amount of redevelopment necessary under current market conditions to profitably redevelop the Apex Building in keeping with the MTA’s 2015 deadline. Building on staff analysis of redevelopment potential under the existing zoning, master plan recommendations, and other considerations, these consultants will work with staff to analyze what, if any, additional incentive options are appropriate.

Staff is also working with a consultant to analyze the alternative Bethesda Purple Line Station designs and their impact on the Capital Crescent Trail user experience. This analysis is intended to ensure that the efficiencies, improved services, and function of the station are optimized.

Outreach

The narrow scope and schedule of this Minor Master Plan Amendment focuses on the function and feasibility of the Bethesda Purple Line Station design. Any potential land use, zoning, or transportation considerations will be made within that limited context. Larger questions as to how the future development of this block fits into the larger Bethesda CBD will be taken up as part of the CBD Sector Plan update.

In accordance with the narrow focus of the Minor Master Plan Amendment, and the truncated schedule's associated difficulties with scheduling outreach efforts during the summer months, the Amendment will focus outreach efforts, with an ongoing online component and a face-to-face component after school begins.

The online component will include the following elements:

- Regular e-mail, social media, and website updates;
- Web-based tool to enable the public to provide insights and recommendations about how the station ought to work for users and neighbors alike, including pedestrian and bike circulation, impacts on Woodmont Plaza and Elm Street Park, and other issues.
- Dedicated website with archival information, resources, and updates.

The face-to-face component will include:

- Staff participation in community and civic meetings and events;
- An open-house-style preview of the staff recommendations before they go to the Planning Board;
- Citizen comment at Planning Board worksessions; and
- Citizen testimony at the Planning Board Public Hearing.

Next Steps

Staff will initiate the online component of our outreach strategy and continue to work towards the development of the staff draft recommendations for presentation to the public and Planning Board in September.