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## Update on MARC Rail Communities Plan

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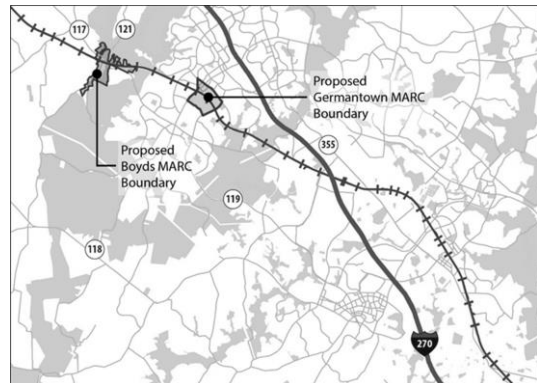
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### Description

Update on MARC Rail Communities Plan

### Staff Recommendation

Discussion



### Summary

The staff will provide a status report and update on the MARC Rail Communities Plan. This briefing will highlight the planning team's outreach efforts, including a Design Workshop, held in March in the community; the work of the transportation consultants looking at Boyds roadway realignment alternatives and a road diet in Germantown; work undertaken by an Urban Land Institute advisory panel; and the proposed schedule for plan development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The MARC Rail Communities Plan focuses on two MARC rail stations in the Upcounty area, Boyds and Germantown; both are historic communities centered on the railroad stations.

The purpose of the Plan is to develop recommendations that will:

- protect and enhance valued activities and places;
- evaluate land uses and zoning near each station area;
- ensure compatibility with each historic district;
- improve pedestrian, bicyclist and public transit access to each station; and
- address any additional concerns raised during the planning process.

The Planning Board reviewed and approved the Scope of Work for this Plan on January 28, 2016. Since then, staff efforts have focused on obtaining input from community members, and examining some of the technical aspects of the communities' ideas with consultants.

## **OUTREACH**

Since the master plan kickoff last fall, local residents have been engaged in the master plan process in a variety of times, places and ways:

- Planning staff has made presentations and distributed surveys to community groups, including the Boyds Civic Association and the Upcounty Citizens Advisory Committee;
- Planning staff, working with the Communications group, designed and built a master plan's website ([montgomeryplanning.org/marcrailplan](http://montgomeryplanning.org/marcrailplan)), which contains background on the plan, keeps the community abreast of progress;
- Residents and other stakeholders may review an interactive feedback map that collects comments on issues of interest;
- Informational posters were placed at the Upcounty Regional Services Center;
- Posters were placed in bus shelters in Germantown; In March, planning staff organized and conducted a four-day community design workshop in Germantown, with both day and evening activities to allow for the broadest possible participation. Plan updates and announcements are included in Upcounty Regional Services Center's weekly e-newsletter, Upcounty Today.

### **Community Meetings and Outreach**

Planning staff have sought local residents' views in a number of community settings. The Upcounty Citizens Advisory Board invited staff to their meeting on Monday, April 18, 2016 to provide an update on the master plan. Along with the briefing, staff distributed a short questionnaire to the board and attendees to obtain feedback. The Boyds Civic Association also invited staff to return to their quarterly meeting for a briefing on Thursday, April 21, 2016, and the questionnaire was likewise distributed to this group.

As noted above, the website continues to collect comments on an interactive map developed by

Information Technology staff. The map allows comments on any topic in any location, and then allows others to respond to the comments. This format has enabled conversations about a variety of locations and topics in both Germantown and Boyds. Residents have noted areas in need of attention due to speeding and traffic (such as speeding on Barnesville and Clarksburg Roads, and the inhospitable location of the Germantown Urban Park at Middlebrook and Germantown Roads), made suggestions for recreation, including expanding the boating season on Little Seneca Lake and including an archery range at Boyds Local Park, suggested ideas for placemaking such as a mural about Boyds history near the MARC platform. In Germantown, the map provided the opportunity for thoughtful conversations between people about whether the MARC parking lots are appropriate for transit-oriented development, and multiple suggestions for the Boyds area relating to traffic calming and redirecting, and where to locate additional parking to support the Boyds MARC station.

### **MARC Rail Communities Design Workshop**

Planning staff developed the MARC Rail Communities Design Workshop to begin an in-depth conversation with the community that would help create a future vision for each station area. Staff, agency representatives, community members, property owners, business owners and development team members met over four days, March 7, and March 14-16, 2016, at the Upcounty Regional Services Center:

#### Monday, March 7, 2016: Ask the Experts and Community Visioning

On the first day of the workshop, fifteen Ask the Specialist sessions enabled participants to learn about existing conditions and projects being undertaken. Morning sessions focused on places, with topics including land use and zoning, historic resources, parks, schools, and the environment. Afternoon sessions focused on connections, with sessions on roads, bikeways and pedestrian facilities, and MARC and Ride On facilities and service. Project presentations included a Montgomery County Department of Transportation Ride On study, examining options for connecting Clarksburg residents to the MARC station at Boyds, a new traffic light proposal in Boyds by the Maryland State Highway Administration at Clarksburg and Clopper Roads, and a stormwater facility retrofit project by the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection in the Germantown MARC station parking lots.

That evening, a Visioning Session provided an opportunity for residents and property owners to articulate their hopes for the future. The Boyds community expressed interest in locations for additional MARC parking and a relocation of the Boyds MARC station, and the Germantown community noted historic sites beyond the identified resources and then discussed community-supporting uses for the MARC parking lots, expanding on the current monthly flea market.

#### Monday, March 14, 2016: Focus on Boyds

Based on stakeholders' observations during the visioning session on March 7, planners began to devise alternative concept sketches for the Boyds area. Community members dropped in and provided additional feedback and ideas. In addition, a consultant brought three alternatives and a "fly-through" of a realignment of Clarksburg Road at the CSX tracks for discussion and feedback, as requested by the Boyds Civic Association prior to the workshop.

### Tuesday, March 15, 2016: Focus on Germantown

Planners began alternative concepts sketches for Germantown, similar to the sketches done for Boyds. A number of people who had not attended the March 7 visioning session dropped in to be briefed on the plan and to provide comments.

### Wednesday, March 16: Design Workshop Synthesis

Planners continued sketching during the day, and then pinned up the concept ideas and sketches in the evening to obtain feedback and additional comments from attendees.

## **CONSULTANT SERVICES**

Residents of both Boyds and Germantown have requested that the plan consider traffic issues in their communities. As discussed with the Board in January, Boyds has significant cut-through traffic from Clarksburg and locations further north. The Boyds Civic Association requested that a bypass of the low, narrow underpass at the intersection of Clarksburg and Clopper Roads be considered. In Germantown, residents brought to the Board's attention the speeding and accidents along Middlebrook Road near Seneca Valley High School, and asked that staff develop alternatives for slowing the traffic and improving safety for pedestrians and bicyclists. Consultants have been engaged to help consider these issues.

In Boyds, the consultant developed visualizations of three alternatives for discussion—two “fly-overs” and a replacement underpass—that were presented during the Design Workshop for comment. The community and a variety of agency staff, including Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA), Maryland Transit Administration (MTA), and Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) discussed the alternatives together. The consultant is currently working on preliminary engineering feasibility of the alternatives, and general estimates on costs.

As noted in January, two separate transportation projects are also underway in Boyds. The first, by MCDOT and a consultant, is examining locations for a Ride On bus turnaround and layover, and for expanded MARC parking. The goal is to reduce traffic and support the Boyds MARC station, which was threatened with closure some years ago, due to its small ridership. The second project is by SHA, and relates to the congestion at the underpass at Clarksburg and Clopper Roads. This study has determined that a traffic light at this intersection will reduce the congestion at both this intersection and the one on the north side of the underpass at Clarksburg and Barnesville Roads. A signal is now being designed by SHA.

In Germantown, M-NCPPC has hired a consultant to evaluate a “road diet” for Middlebrook Road in the vicinity of Seneca Valley High School. Currently, Middlebrook Road in the plan area is classified as a six-lane highway and is posted for 40 miles per hour and speeding is an issue along this facility. The road has overhead wires on both sides of the street, narrow sidewalks, few trees, and little grass. Along the frontage of Seneca Valley High School, the master-planned shared use path has been built, but it does not connect to the west, resulting in sharing narrow sidewalks or sharing the road. Immediately west of the plan area, Middlebrook Road is a tree-lined boulevard with four lanes and a wide, planted median. The consultant will develop alternatives to speeding, pedestrians and

bicyclists safety while maintaining an adequate level of service.

## **ULI mTAP**

Six members of the Urban Land Institute Washington's Regional Land Use Leadership Institute conducted an "mTAP" study – a mini-technical advisory panel – during the spring, and presented an extensive analysis and list of recommendations in May to the department. The Regional Land Use Leadership Institute is a nine-month program aimed at strengthening collaboration among real estate industry and business leaders to tackle the region's complex land use issues. The program includes presentations, panel discussions and tours, and culminates in an mTAP study of an issue facing a local community or organization.

Members of the Regional Land Use Leadership Institute are mid-career professionals in the area's real estate and planning professions. The six team members were:

- Benjamin Cohen, Davis Construction
- Mike Lozier, US Bank Commercial Real Estate
- Bob Mill, PN Hoffman
- Molly McKay, Willdan Financial and Economic Consulting Services
- Arlova Jackson Vonhm, Arlington County Department of Community Planning, Housing & Development
- Robin McElhenny-Smith, Real Estate and Station Planning, Metro

The team primarily focused on the area closest to the Germantown MARC station, seeking ways to address the shortage of MARC parking, and thereby supporting the community and the MARC system. They addressed the following questions:

- How can the parking situation be improved at the Germantown MARC station?
- What public/private development is possible or appropriate?
- Are there any creative options for financing?
- How can the Germantown MARC station help the County and the region?
- What lessons can be learned to apply elsewhere?

Stakeholders and local experts were interviewed, including planning, MARC and Ride-On staff, and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Germantown Historical Society, Metro, developers, civil engineers and land use planners. The team analyzed market data from CoStar, Delta Associates, and leasing and sales data from the immediate area.

Analysis of the Germantown MARC area concentrated on land use, environmental features, demographics and economic trends, connectivity and community concerns. The team found:

- Based on increasing households and incomes, the area can support 1.7 million square feet of new development by 2020;
- The Germantown station area has a walk score of 32 out of 100 (a "walk score" measures the walkability of an area based on amenities within walkable distances, population densities, block lengths, and intersection densities). Challenges include the major roadways

in the area, sidewalk gaps and auto-dominated uses. Opportunities include the ability to increase MARC usage with the existing and proposed street network, and for private development activity to help fund improvements;

- Bike rack capacity is currently available at the station, and that additional bikeway facilities as planned (such as along Germantown, Bowman Mill and Walter Johnson Roads) will enhance bicycle access to the MARC station;
- Four Ride On buses serve the Germantown MARC station with approximately 200 weekday trips in FY 2015. Additional space is needed for bus circulation;
- Community concerns include the preservation of the historic resources, retaining and improving the monthly Germantown flea market, and creation of a community amenity space adjacent to the MARC station;

In addition, the team reviewed the current and proposed MARC service at Germantown. Currently, nine trains serve the station in the morning and evening on weekdays, with approximately 900 daily boardings. Parking is at capacity, with at least 694 riders parking at the station (including carpoolers), 95 taking Ride On, and slightly more than 100 walking or biking to the station. Between 2007 and 2012, ridership increased by approximately 1.7 percent annually, and MARC anticipates that increases will continue. Future MARC plans include exploring parking expansions, lengthening trains, adding bike racks and lockers, triple tracking (there are currently two tracks), increasing service and adding reverse commute service.

The team considered the current parking situation and garage alternatives, including the feasibility of joint development opportunities to construct a parking garage. Approximately 55 percent of the current riders are driving from less than two miles away. The team developed two garage alternatives. The first garage alternative is to locate a garage where currently recommended in the master plan, on the surface lot adjacent to Germantown Road. The second alternative would locate the garage on the east side of Walter Johnson Road, between the Pumphrey-Mateny House and Wisteria Drive. Both options increase the total parking to 900-1,100 spaces, provide shelters and layover space for buses, and add bicycle storage facilities.

The team analyzed residential, retail and office uses as potential partners to aid in garage construction and financing:

- For rental apartments, the team recommended the Germantown Road lot as having greater visibility. However, structured parking would not be economically feasible, so the yield would be approximately 95 units. For townhouses, they recommended the location on the east side of Walter Johnson Road, as it is protected from the traffic on Germantown Road. That location could yield 35-40 townhouses.
- For retail uses, the Germantown Road location has visibility but insufficient size to attain critical mass with anchor tenants. A national pad chain or neighborhood retail might be a future option, but it does not “pencil out” currently.
- Office uses would fit, but current market forces may make additional office space inappropriate.

Based on their analysis, the mTAP team found that a public/private partnership was not feasible due to the cost/revenue relationship and lack of income from parking. MARC does not currently charge

for parking in lots or garages. Tax Increment Financing is not feasible due to insufficient commercial densities in the area and the potential incremental real property revenue is insufficient to meet bond repayment needs.

The mTap team offered a number of recommendations:

- Conduct a regional commuter study (including a rider intercept survey) to test potential for expanded utilization of MARC;
- Explore potential of regional commuter park and ride system;
- Promote “mode shift” from auto passengers to public transit and alternative modes;
- Target state and federal grants/partnerships to fund regional planning studies and capital requirements for the garage and associated public transit improvements (HUD Sustainable Communities, TIGER, etc);
- Add public parking at Boyds MARC station in advance to help manage overflow during construction of a garage at Germantown;
- Build a Germantown MARC garage before other private uses to maintain parking supply
- Improve access for pedestrians and bicyclists;
- Transition to paid parking (revenue from paid parking could offset costs – a \$6/day fee would equal the bond payment to construct a garage);
- Engage a broker and legal counsel to explore issuance of a private Master Developer RFP to help defray the cost of a garage; and
- Engage local residents to explore ways to address pedestrian safety while preserving historic character of nearby roads.

## NEXT STEPS

As the case studies noted above are developed, planning staff will continue to consult with residents, property owners, consultants and others. Staff will devise preliminary recommendations to be shared with the community, then refined for presentation to the Planning Board.

Proposed schedule:

Develop preliminary recommendations	July-September 2016
Present recommendations to the community	September 2016
Working draft presented to the Planning Board	October 2016
Planning Board Public Hearing	November-December 2016
Transmit to County Executive and County Council	January 2017

## Project Webpage

[http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/marc\\_rail\\_station/](http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/marc_rail_station/)

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