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

September 20, 2007

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Mary Dolan, Acting Chief MD
County-wide Planning Division

Dan Hardy, Acting Chief DKH
Transportation Planning

FROM: Larry Cole: 301-495-4528 and LC
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Montgomery County Planning Department

DISCUSSION: Road Code Section 49-31: Definition of Urban Areas

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

We recommend that the Planning Board:

- Recommend to the County Council that they designate the following additional areas as urban:
    - Silver Spring Parking Lot District, Flower Village and Westbard
    - Clarksburg Town Center, the White Flint Sector Plan area, and the mixed-use and commercially zoned area of North Bethesda bounded by the northern White Flint Sector Plan boundary, Executive Boulevard, the City of Rockville, the Twinbrook Metro Station Policy Area, and Nebel Street
    - Damascus Town Center and Olney Town Center. (See Exhibit 1)

- Endorse requiring that sidewalks along major highways and arterials be eight feet wide (minimum) in suburban commercial and high-density residential areas and six feet wide (minimum) in rural commercial areas, and direct staff to promote this position as part of the Road Code working group.

BACKGROUND

A significant rewrite of County Code Chapter 49, the Road Code, and a revision to Chapter 50, the Subdivision Ordinance, were approved by the County Council on July 3, 2007 and signed into law by the County Executive on July 15, 2007. Staff's summary of the significant Road Code changes is included for Board members only as Appendix A.

Section 49-31 of the approved legislation states that:

1. An 'urban' road is a road segment in or abutting a Metro Station Policy Area, Town Center Policy Area, or other urban area expressly identified in a Council resolution.

2. A 'rural' road is a road segment located in a rural policy area as defined in the County Growth Policy.

3. A 'suburban' road is a road segment located elsewhere in the county.

The wording of this legislation means that the 'rural' area of the county is set, but that the dividing line between the 'urban' and 'suburban' may be changed to designate additional areas as 'urban'.

What is considered "urban" in the law now?

The areas the law now designates as urban are: the Silver Spring, Wheaton, Glenmont, Friendship Heights, Bethesda, Grosvenor, White Flint, Twinbrook, and Shady Grove Metro Station Policy Areas, and the Germantown Town Center. The Planning Board's discussion provides an opportunity to comment on what additional areas should be defined as 'urban' in advance of the Council's anticipated resolution on this issue this fall.

The rural area of the county as defined in the Road Code is fairly consistent with the US Census definition of rural, and comprises 51% of Montgomery County's land area. The urban areas now designated in the Road Code comprise 1% of the county's land area. The remainder of the county, about 48%, is classified as suburban. (note: These percentage calculations do not reflect any separate breakout for municipalities which comprise 6.7% of the county's land area)

How does an urban designation change the road design?

The Road Code update includes a table of roadway design elements tied not just to roadway classification, but also to where the road is located- whether it is in an urban, suburban, or rural area. Designating an area as urban would mean requiring a higher level of accommodation for pedestrians and promoting lower vehicular operating speeds (see Attachment 1).

What is the schedule for revision of the County's Road Standards?

The table is in an uncodified section of the law and is intended to guide the revision of the County's roadway Design Standards. By July 2008, these standards are required by the law to be revised by the Executive with the assistance of a working group comprised of agency and non-government stakeholders. If the revised standards are not approved by the County Council by July 15, 2008 and no extension is approved, the design elements table will supersede the current roadway design standards.

The first meeting of the interagency members of the working group was held on August 31, 2007. Planning staff has been involved in the selection of non-agency stakeholder representatives in the group, and preparation of the requests for proposals for a technical consultant and for a working group meeting facilitator. The first progress report to the County Council was provided on September 20, 2007.

DISCUSSION

What does "urban" mean?

The Road Code update designated specific urban areas but did not define the term. Therefore, there is no defined baseline in the law on which to base our recommendations, and the biggest problem in achieving a consensus for this memorandum was that each person seems to have his or her own definition of what "urban" means.

The urban areas designated in the law are some of the most densely developed areas of the county, but they do not reflect all of the areas with high levels of pedestrian activity. Since making the county's roads more pedestrian-friendly and context-sensitive was the impetus behind much of the Road Code update, we recommend that additional areas be designated as urban. Although there is no definition in the law as to what "urban" means, these areas are consistent in character with those that are already in the law and consistent with zoning and intended land uses in Master Plans.

The General Plan perspective

The General Plan envisions the Urban Ring and I-270 Corridor as the most densely developed areas of the county (see Exhibit 2). While this area is too large to be designated urban for the purposes of the Road Code, a more pedestrian-friendly environment is needed on the major highways and arterials that serve as our transit corridors. We believe that there is a better way to address this topic than designating the whole of these two areas as urban, and include further discussion below under the heading Pedestrian Accommodation along Major Highways and Arterials.

Staff considerations and recommendations for designations of additional areas as "urban"

The County's designated urban areas would be treated essentially the same as business districts given the sidewalk widths that are called for in the design elements table in the Code: 15 feet wide along major highways and 10 feet wide along arterials. We must therefore take care not to designate large areas as urban for the purposes of the Road Code that would not warrant having such wide sidewalks.

Another more important concern is that it would be very difficult or impossible to achieve a target speed of 25 mph outside the most highly urbanized portions of the County because urban design helps influence motorist behavior on the major roadways running through them. This would also be undesirable from a mobility perspective.

In determining what additional areas with pedestrian activity should be designated as urban, we considered:

- Whether a significant portion of the traffic in the area is local rather than just passing through the area,
- Whether the major roads passing through these areas could be treated as Business District Streets and allow on-street parking, for example, and
- Whether there is a local street network of streets that would define it as a district rather than businesses clustered around one intersection

It is most desirable to designate additional areas with already defined boundaries to avoid going block-by-block or even lot-by-lot in a Council resolution. With the exception of the area between White Flint and Rockville, the areas recommended below for designation as urban in the Road Code are defined in Master or Sector Plans.

- Recommended additional urban areas in the General Plan's Urban Ring: Silver Spring Parking Lot District, Flower Village, and Westbard.

- Recommended additional urban areas in the I-270 Corridor: Clarksburg Town Center, the White Flint Sector Plan area, and the mixed-use and commercially zoned area of North Bethesda between the northern White Flint Sector Plan boundary, Executive Boulevard, the City of Rockville, the Twinbrook Metro Station Policy Area, and Nebel Street

- Recommended additional urban areas outside the I-270 Corridor and the Urban Ring: Damascus Town Center and Olney Town Center. The US Census classifies places with populations of 5,000 people or more as urban. Damascus's population is over 11,000; Olney's population is over 31,000. We are recommending that only the commercial centers of these areas be designated as urban.

The additional areas that we recommend be changed in designation from suburban to urban are shown on Exhibit 1 and would comprise an additional 0.3 % of the county, for

a total urban area percentage of 1.3%. All of the areas that we recommend for designation as urban already have roads that are classified as Business District Streets.

Other areas could be designated as part of future Master Plan and Sector Plan updates. Also, as part of the Zoning Code update that is anticipated to consider form-based codes, a closer relationship between buildings and street design could be examined.

We have shared these recommendations with the Department of Public Works and Transportation staff. As of the date of this memo, they had not reached a final position but their initial thinking was that several of the urban areas now defined in the law do not warrant this designation and that the additional areas recommended by Planning staff should not be designated.

We also believe that a higher level of pedestrian accommodation is needed in some areas that are not specifically designated as urban and address this issue below.

Commercial Areas in Suburban and Rural Areas and High-Density Suburban Residential Areas

The uncodified section of the Road Code includes a provision that the target speed of major highways and arterials passing through suburban and rural commercial areas is 30 mph. In the same vein as the above discussion, some design guidance is needed for pedestrian facilities along these roads since the standard five-foot-wide sidewalk does not adequately accommodate larger numbers of pedestrians going between businesses, to and from parked cars, etc. in these commercial areas. Similarly, where we have high-density residential development in suburban areas, better pedestrian accommodation is needed.

We believe that along major highways and arterials, sidewalks in suburban commercial and high-density residential areas should be eight feet wide minimum, and that sidewalks in rural commercial areas should be six feet wide minimum. The minimum widths recommended could be increased where intersecting Business District Streets have ten-foot-wide sidewalks.

Examples of such areas are:

- West Silver Spring's residential community along East West Highway - Falklands, Summit Hills and Rosemary Hills
- Montgomery Hills
- Four Corners
- Clifton Park (at University Boulevard and Piney Branch Road)
- Germantown Employment Corridor
- Clarksburg's Village Centers

We recommend that the Board endorse these recommendations and direct staff to promote this position as part of the Road Code working group.

Pedestrian Accommodation along Major Highways and Arterials

The Council's Transportation and Environment Committee during the Road Code worksessions noted that the proposed roadway changes would not apply to State highways. This was perceived by some as a weakening of the impact of the bill, but our and Council staff's response was that even though the Road Code was not binding on the State, they would likely consider County policy in making their design decisions.

What happens in regard to pedestrian and bicycle safety on State highways is important since they comprise almost all of the county's major highways and a large percentage of the high volume arterials. In addition to accommodating local pedestrian and bicycle traffic, these roads also serve as our major transit routes and the location for the great majority of transit alightings and boardings.

Most of the County's pedestrian fatalities occur within the I-270 Corridor and Urban Ring ***outside*** the areas designated and recommended for designation by staff as urban. These areas have moderate levels of pedestrian and bicycle activity, but often with poor facilities. Transit patrons crossing these roads to and from bus stops often do so without the benefit of handicap ramps and crosswalks, streetlights, and sometimes even sidewalks.

The Access 2000 legislation that was passed in 1995 allowed local governments and the State Administration to designate Bicycle and Pedestrian Priority Areas, now defined in State law as geographical areas where the enhancement of bicycle or pedestrian traffic is a priority. As State Law, the Access 2000 legislation is binding on State agencies.

On September 19, 2007 the full Commission endorsed the submission of a bill in the State Legislature to strengthen our role in regard to bicycle and pedestrian planning. If this bill is passed as it is currently worded, we would have a role equal to the County's in the determination of what a Montgomery County Bicycle and Pedestrian Priority Area would consist of. We believe that the bill's passage would improve our ability to influence the development of solutions to the county's bicycle and pedestrian safety needs.

Summary

The concept of Centers and Boulevards recognizes that we need not only to support and support the county's activity centers, but also that we need to provide good links between them. Our recommendations for the designation of additional urban areas in the Road Code and for the Board's endorsement on related topics are intended to ensure consistency in making our activity centers pedestrian- and bicyclist-friendly.

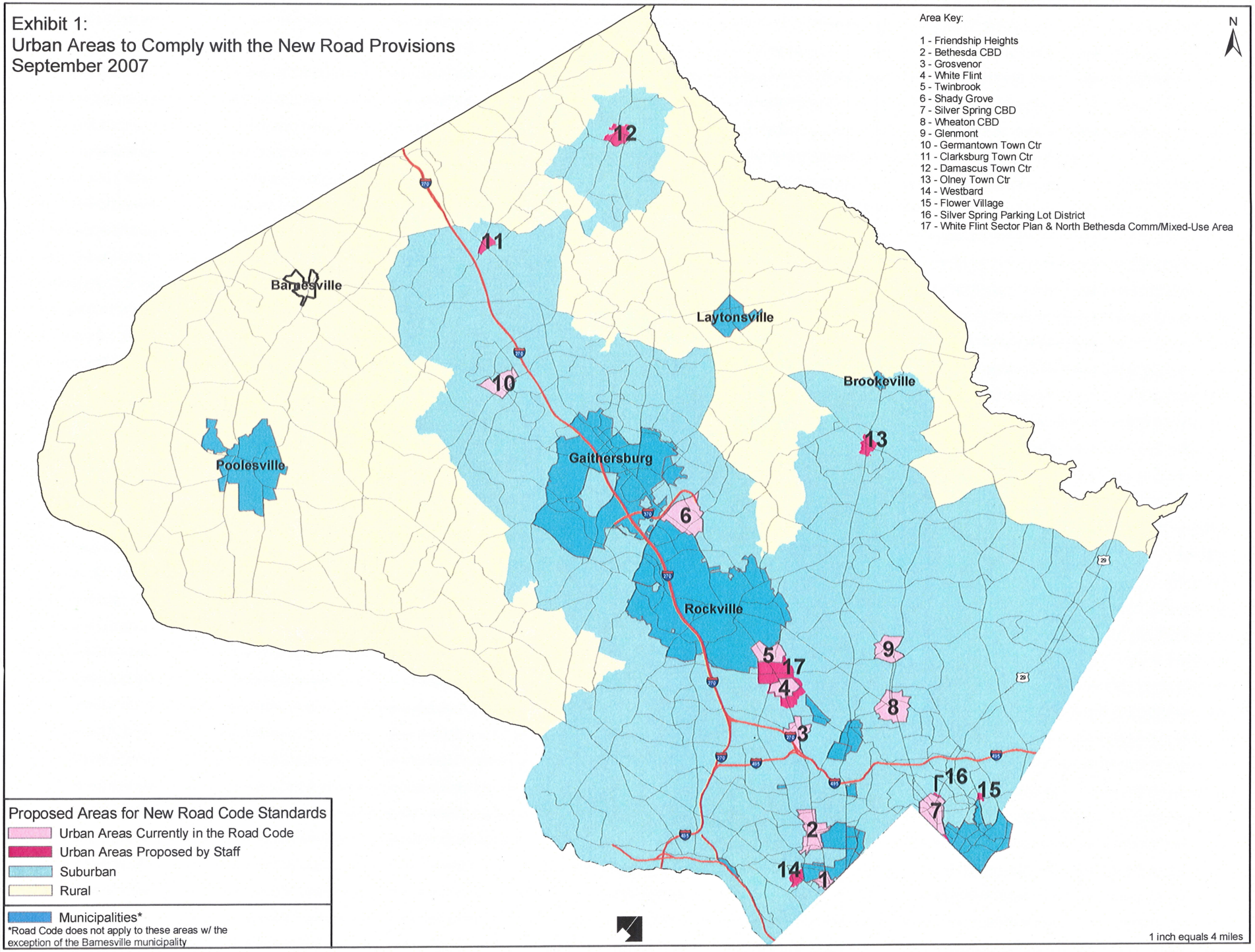
Exhibit 1:
Urban Areas to Comply with the New Road Provisions
September 2007
Area Key:
1 - Friendship Heights
2 - Bethesda CBD
3 - Grosvenor
4 - White Flint
5 - Twinbrook
6 - Shady Grove
7 - Silver Spring CBD
8 - Wheaton CBD
9 - Glenmont
10 - Germantown Town Ctr
11 - Clarksburg Town Ctr
12 - Damascus Town Ctr
13 - Olney Town Ctr
14 - Westbard
15 - Flower Village
16 - Silver Spring Parking Lot District
17 - White Flint Sector Plan & North Bethesda Comm/Mixed-Use Area
N
Barnesville
Laytonsville
Brookeville
Poolesville
Gaithersburg
Rockville
Proposed Areas for New Road Code Standards
Urban Areas Currently in the Road Code
Urban Areas Proposed by Staff
Suburban
Rural
Municipalities*
*Road Code does not apply to these areas w/ the exception of the Barnesville municipality
1 inch equals 4 miles

Exhibit 1

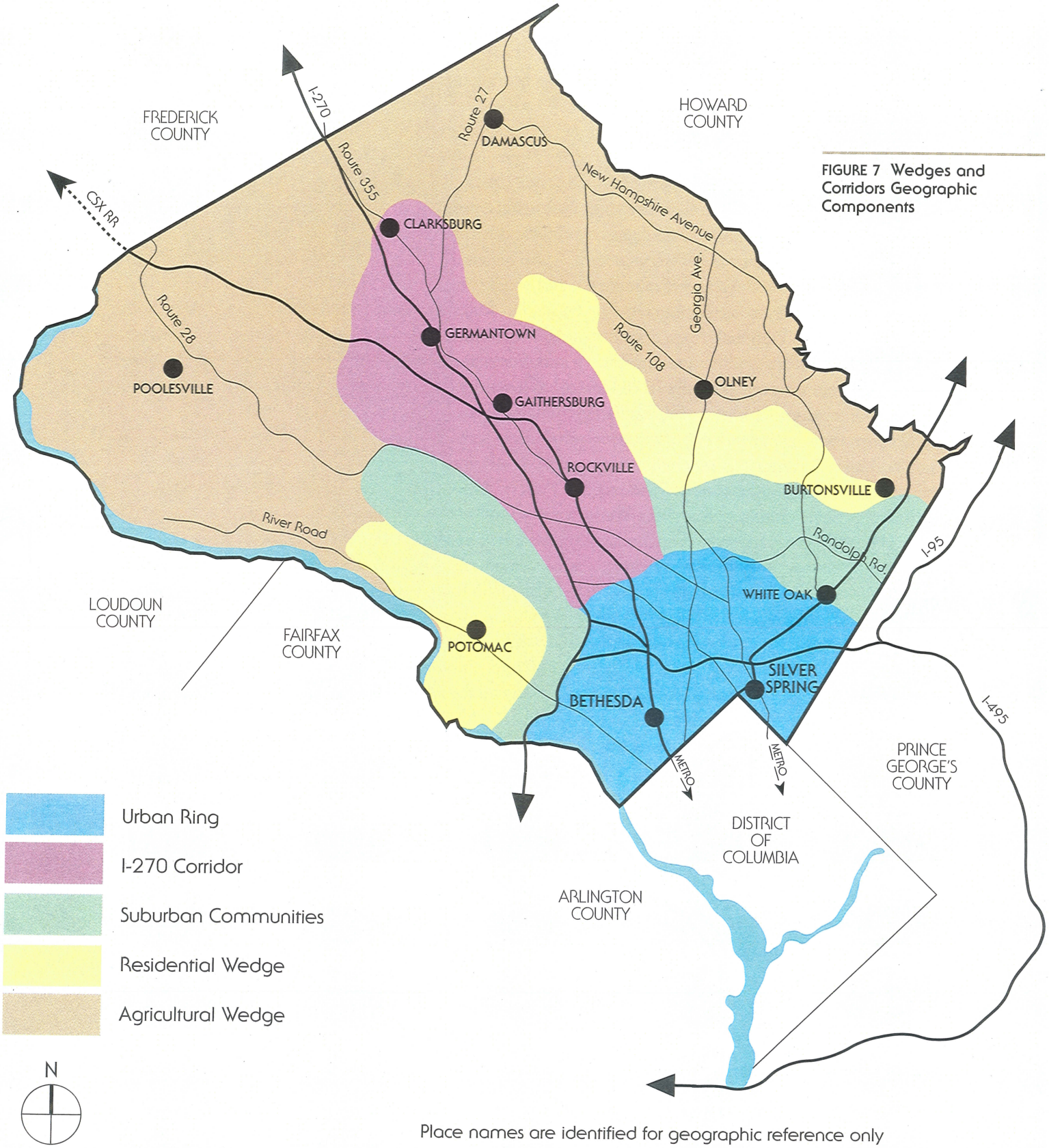

FIGURE 7 Wedges and Corridors Geographic Components

Place names are identified for geographic reference only

Exhibit 2

Attachment 1

Characteristics of Street Classifications in the New Road Code

The new Road Code establishes three areas, urban, suburban, and rural and it identifies street standards for each category that slow traffic and increase pedestrian facilities as areas become more urban in character. The difference between the standards in commercial areas is as follows:

Target Speed *

	Major Highways	Arterials	Business District Streets
Urban	25 mph	25 mph	25 mph
Suburban and Rural Commercial areas	30 mph	30 mph	"
Other Suburban	35-40 mph	35 mph	"
Other Rural	45 mph	40 mph	"

Sidewalk Width

	Major Highways	Arterials	Business District Streets
Urban	15 feet	10 feet	10 feet
Suburban and Rural	5 feet	5 feet	10 feet

Curbside Area**

	Major Highways	Arterials	Business District Streets
Urban	20 feet	15 feet	15 feet
Suburban and Rural	15 feet	15 feet	15 feet

*Target speed is the usually the posted speed.
** Curbside area describes the distance between the edge of the roadway pavement and the outer edge of the sidewalk.

LC:tc