

**MCPB**  
Item No.  
Date: 10-21-21

## Wheaton Downtown Study – Proposed Scope of Work

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**Completed: 10/14/21**

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### Summary

The *2012 Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan* encouraged investment while building on Wheaton's strengths and maintaining its special character. The Wheaton Downtown Study will learn from the central business district community how to better integrate ongoing large-scale redevelopment with the expansion of individually owned properties and businesses alongside public improvements (like streetscape, parks and community spaces) into a coherent and seamless walkable downtown.

This study is envisioned as a Montgomery Planning work product, with a 12-month timeline. Following the presentation of the Scope of Work, Planning staff will update the Planning Board in spring 2022 and deliver a final briefing in late summer 2022. Mid-County Planning Division staff will collaborate with staff from the Countywide Planning and Policy and Research and Strategic Projects Divisions to identify solutions and implementable projects and respond to the community's continued interest in implementing the vision of the Sector Plan.

### Staff requests feedback from the Planning Board on the Proposed Scope of Work

## Introduction

The Wheaton Downtown Study is an effort to identify opportunities to create a cohesive downtown that integrates recent development with Wheaton's small-scale character while meeting the needs and aspirations of small businesses, property owners, and residents of the Wheaton Central Business District. The Study builds upon the vision of the *2012 Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan*, which is already advancing physical redevelopment and adaptive reuse of the downtown in ways that enrich the community economically while preserving Wheaton's unique character. The Study will complement the 2012 Sector Plan and integrate guidance from recently adopted plans and policies to explore how larger redevelopment can support smaller properties' potential to evolve and contribute to a growing Wheaton, provide clear paths for small businesses and property owners to participate in community redevelopment opportunities, and share the creation of public benefits. The Study will focus on the following key goals:

- **Evaluate Development Progress:** Evaluate downtown Wheaton's development progress to date and identify challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned in furthering the 2012 Sector Plan's vision.
- **Promote Complete Communities:** Explore the adaptive reuse and expansion of existing structures to promote existing small business preservation, local job retention and creation, provide services and amenities, and introduce additional residential uses.
- **Improve Multimodal Safety:** Update the 2002 *Wheaton Central Business District Streetscape Standards* and establish goals compatible with actual redevelopment opportunities and with Wheaton's unique character to further Montgomery County's Vision Zero policy.
- **Establish Fine-Grained Urban Design Vision for Wheaton:** Create an urban design development framework that builds on the relationship between redeveloped and adaptively reused properties and focuses on how small-scale redevelopment can help retain Wheaton's unique character.

## Background

The 2012 Sector Plan envisioned Wheaton as a major mixed-use center for the Georgia Avenue corridor and eastern Montgomery County, building on the area's strengths to encourage investment while maintaining its special character. Wheaton is a specialized urban center, serving local and regional retail demand. Its small, post-World War II housing makes it a draw for newcomers to the community. It is a transit hub and crossroads, in a compact geographic area. Its dense retail clusters have over the years attracted a diverse group of businesses which, with the presence of regional retail in Westfield Wheaton Mall, offer a concentration of retail options widely supported by adjacent, socio-economically diverse communities. Together with wide availability of arts and entertainment opportunities, Wheaton's character has significant appeal to surrounding communities.



*Downtown Wheaton, Looking North*

The Plan's recommendations also capitalize on the role of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's Metrorail station and Wheaton as a regional transit hub to promote high-density, high-quality growth and redevelopment in the business core.

### Wheaton Today

The Wheaton downtown and the areas surrounding it are today among the most socio-economically diverse areas of the county and are growing more diverse.

- Wheaton's non-Hispanic white population decreased, moving from 37 percent to 33 percent.
- The Wheaton area now has a Hispanic concentration 11 percent higher than the county's concentration at 31 percent, and two census tracts are over 40 percent Hispanic.
- Wheaton's share of Black and African American population has stayed fairly constant at 20 percent since 2010, slightly above the county's rate of 18 percent.
- Wheaton's Asian concentration has also remained unchanged at 12 percent since 2010 and remains slightly lower than the county's overall.

Wheaton businesses are overwhelmingly small, with 84 percent having nine or fewer employees. The average business size is 7.4 employees, and the average business is roughly 12.4 years old.

### Purpose

The core of Wheaton's urban fabric consists of small commercial properties that provide affordable entry level space for many diverse small businesses. Several larger properties in the vicinity where large-scale mixed-use redevelopment is possible have already developed, in keeping with the Sector Plan's vision for substantial redevelopment. Other larger properties within the core such as the Westfield Wheaton Mall and WMATA's Metro properties still have significant capacity for redevelopment, particularly along their Veirs Mill Road frontages.



*Wheaton recent development, from left: Solaire Wheaton, The Exchange, The George, AVA Wheaton, M-NCPPC HQ*

This Study will explore how to further Wheaton’s economic diversity by strategically leveraging new investment and economic benefits created by large scale redevelopment, while fostering the successful and entrepreneurial nature of the existing small property owners and businesses looking to evolve in place individually. The Wheaton Downtown Study will look for opportunities to:

- Achieve synergies between developments of various scales, both physically and economically,
- Retain prospects made available by the area’s small properties for a growing base of small and diverse businesses, coupled with opportunities for larger businesses to locate or expand through large scale redevelopment,
- Diversify the use mix within the core to further Wheaton as a complete community,
- Identify how public domain enhancements needed to improve quality, safety, and access can be delivered from a combination of development efforts, and
- Organize longer-term partnerships between local groups and county stakeholders to promote the area, identify needs and implement solutions.

### **Study Scope**

The Study will use the approved boundary for the 2012 Sector Plan (Attachment 1) and will build on the Plan’s vision, which is further supported by several plans and policies adopted over the last decade, including the *2013 Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan*, *2018 Bicycle Master Plan*, and Vision Zero. In addition, the ongoing Complete Streets Design Guide, Pedestrian Master Plan, Planning Board Draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050, and the county’s Climate Action Plan. Staff will also draw from the recently completed *Retail in Diverse Communities Study*, which presented findings and strategies to support minority-owned and serving retailers in retail clusters that include Wheaton.

In 2018 the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) hosted the *What’s Next for Wheaton* event to identify priorities for the area. A community survey was followed by a community input session, followed by a Decision Maker’s Forum with county officials who were part of a moderated panel. A public presentation was made to outline survey results and summarize issues (Attachment 2), followed by a white paper that outlined the priorities resulting from the effort (Attachment 3). These priorities will also inform the explorations of this Study.

Planning Staff will focus on the following areas of analysis to address stated goals.

### Promote Complete Communities

Promoting complete communities is an important element of the Planning Board Draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050. To further the Wheaton core as a complete community that includes a variety of land uses, amenities, and services, the Study will:

- Staff from the Research and Strategic Projects Division will conduct a market assessment to determine the feasibility of small property redevelopment, identify potential barriers, and explore strategies to promote reinvestment.
- Staff will engage an architectural consultant to work with property owners to develop case studies to illustrate conceptual and cost-effective alternatives to reposition properties to attract a wider market. The case studies will identify development barriers for long-time property owners and tenants to enable the improvement of smaller properties, to preserve small business diversity and allow for beautification and infrastructure updates.
- Explore how to capitalize on the public benefits created by larger redevelopment efforts to support small businesses and individually owned properties that enrich the community as they evolve alongside those larger-scale projects.

### Multimodal Safety and Connectivity

Wheaton is a complex urban district with many unique streetscape environments that must be understood to improve pedestrian, bicycle, micro mobility, and transit access while improving safety and connectivity. Staff will:

- Assess the area with a Vision Zero lens to identify and prioritize areas for improvement.
- Coordinate with the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) and the Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration (MDOT SHA) to identify and integrate improvements by ongoing and future projects within the public right-of-way.
- Incorporate guidance from countywide planning efforts completed after the 2012 Sector Plan adoption to improve transit access, reduce traffic fatalities and severe injuries, and address climate change.
- Evaluate alternatives to safely improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity between the Central Business District's core and surrounding residential communities and amenities such as Wheaton Regional Park.
- Develop a comprehensive and implementable update to the 2002 *Wheaton Central Business District Streetscape Standards* that identifies near and long-term improvements for sidewalks and streets, and integrates the guidance described above.

### Urban Design

A fine-grained urban design framework will organize the Study's findings into a useful resource to serve residents, property owners, and Planning staff into the future. The framework will provide a strategic design vision for the physical development of Wheaton to assist in the creation of supportive local action plans and initiatives.

- This framework will consider Wheaton’s uniqueness and explore how to:
  - Improve the public realm to reflect a mix of new development and adaptively reused or improved existing structures,
  - Enhance pedestrian areas, and create access to public open space,
  - Explore ways to expand tree canopy,
  - Explore opportunities to expand the public open space network within Wheaton’s core, and
  - Provide guidance for improvements to the public domain based on a complete streets approach.
- The process will include community consultation, research, and analysis, and will produce detailed key principles to allow continuous review and assessment of the Sector Plan’s design vision as the area evolves.

## Outreach and Engagement

Outreach will follow the Equity Agenda for Planning developed by Montgomery Planning to apply an equity lens to our plans, policies, and practices. This work follows the County Council’s recent legislation on its [Racial Equity and Social Justice Act, 27-19](#), which was signed into law in December 2019 to actively address racial disparities within the county.

The Wheaton Downtown Study team will work with Montgomery Planning’s Equity Peer Review Group to implement and promote an equitable process. The team is also drafting a communications plan with Montgomery Planning’s Communications Division that will define the goals, audiences, approach, and strategies for the Study’s public outreach and community engagement.

## Organization

Planning staff will use a multi-pronged approach to engagement by seeking opportunities to meet one-on-one with neighborhood leaders, build working partnerships with civic groups, and connect with community advocates to identify and define community supported solutions for local challenges. Planning staff will also engage with the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, county stakeholders, advisory committees, major property owners, and residents to develop a cohesive design vision and framework. Bringing together stakeholders from all sectors to become proactive participants will:

- Refine the Sector Plan’s **Vision** based on market realities and broad community engagement,
- Identify **Strategies** that prioritize direction for revitalization efforts,
- Promote **Economic Vitality** that capitalizes on Wheaton’s uniqueness to further economic diversity by promoting investment and fostering entrepreneurship, and
- Foster **Design** approaches that enhance downtown while capitalizing on its unique assets.

Planning staff will rely on Wheaton’s already strong organizational foundation to identify stakeholders, needs, and strategies to continue to position the area as a hub of economic activity while promoting a positive image that showcases its unique characteristics.

Montgomery Planning has had a longstanding presence in Wheaton. Planning staff intends to continue using our relationships and knowledge of the community to ensure that the downtown's many constituencies have the opportunity to be part of the Study process. As we move forward, Planning staff will continue to identify ways to reach all community members and make it easier for stakeholders to participate.

## **Schedule**

Following the presentation of the Scope of Work, staff will update the Planning Board in spring 2022 and deliver a final briefing in late summer 2022. Following the final briefing, Planning staff will present the study to the County Council for their consideration.

Planning staff will engage architectural and landscape consultants to:

- Work with interested owners of commercial properties within the Sector Plan area to produce a set of conceptual and cost-effective improvements for selected properties to explore potential near-term improvements and enhance the area as a unique shopping and dining destination.
- Work with stakeholders and Planning staff to develop an update to the current Wheaton Streetscape Standards.

These efforts will produce deliverables that will be released as they are completed. Time to brief the Planning Board on these will be scheduled as needed.

## **Anticipated Deliverables**

Summer 2022 - Updated Streetscape Standards, to include:

- List of streetscape details from recently approved documents
- Concept Streetscape Configuration Diagram
- One illustrative section for each design framework type
- Vignettes and supportive illustrative imagery

Summer 2022 - Wheaton Downtown Study, to include:

- Development Progress Summary
- Considerations for Adaptive Reuse/Expansion of Small Individually Owned Properties (an effort which will include a market analysis as well as site-specific case studies)
- Urban Design Framework

The final report will serve as an implementation resource to assist near and longer-term development and capital improvements in the Central Business District.

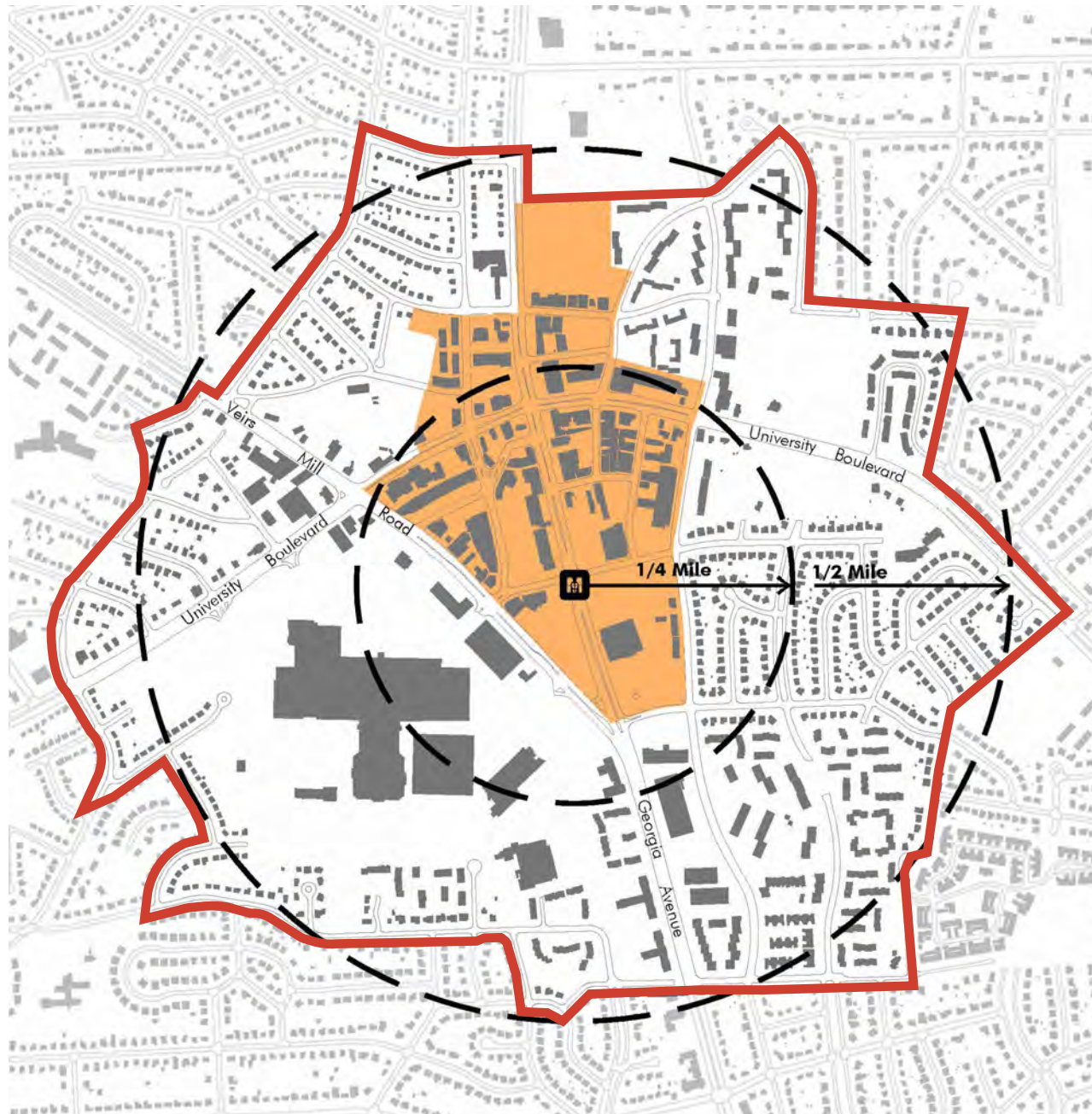
## **ATTACHMENTS:**

1. 2012 Sector Plan Boundary
2. What's Next For Wheaton – WUDAC Presentation July 18, 2018
3. What's Next For Wheaton – Issues Summary



# ATTACHMENT 1

Map 1 Sector Plan Area



- M** Wheaton Metro Station
- Wheaton Sector Plan Boundary
- Central Business District



# Welcome to “What’s Next for Wheaton”

## A Community & Decision-Makers Forum

Organized by the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee

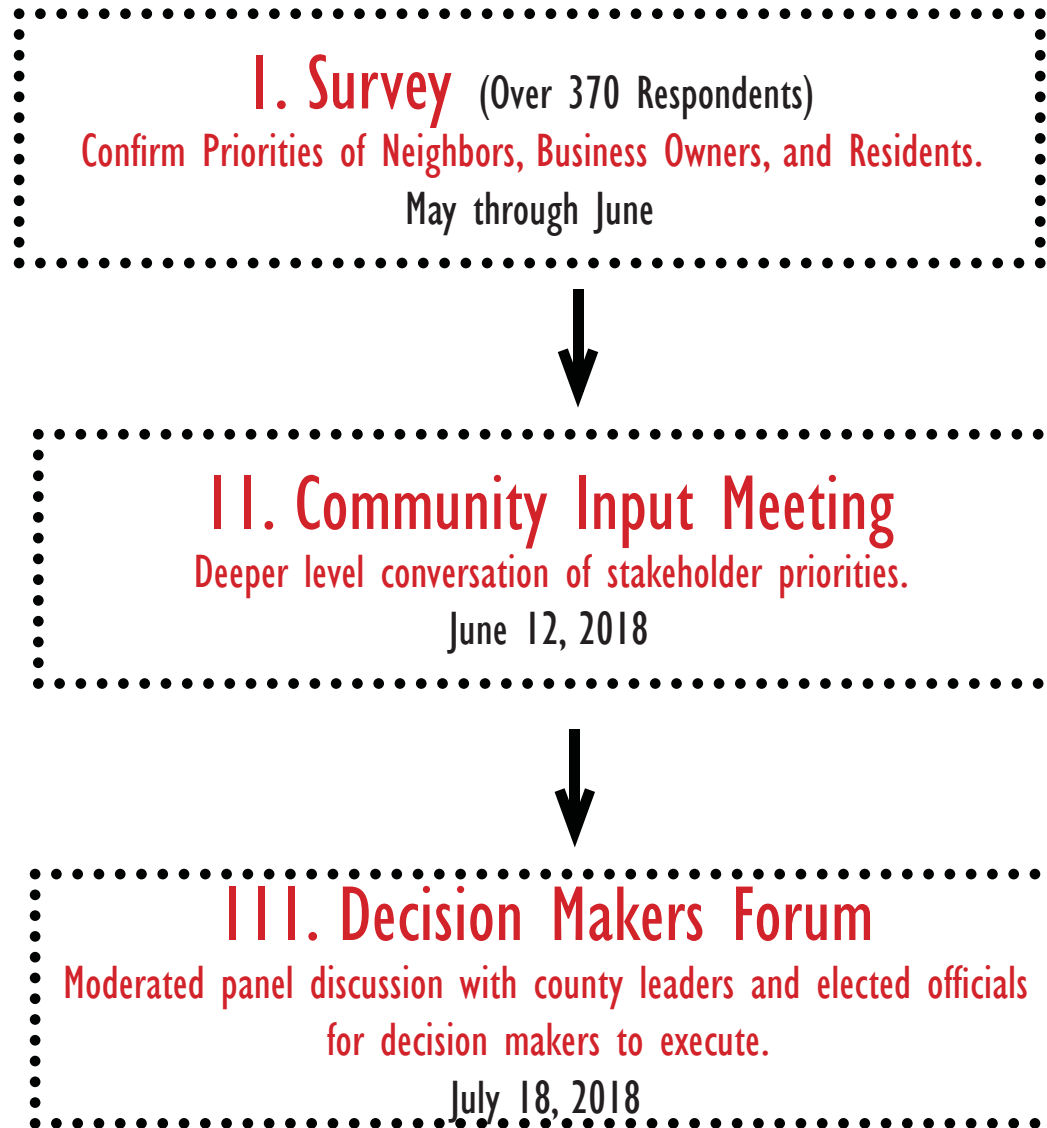


### ENGAGE-CONNECT-PARTICIPATE-SERVE

The Wheaton Urban District invites you to its monthly meetings held on the Second Tuesdays of each month (except August) from 6:30 — 8:00 pm at the Wheaton Volunteer Rescue Squad, 2400 Arcola Ave.

# WHEATON

# Process



# Forum Format

Community Topics - 30 Minutes Each

## 1. ADMINISTRATION & ACCOUNTABILITY

Ensuring continued progress

## 2. CONNECTIVITY - PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL:

Making Wheaton more than the sum of its parts

## 3. CREATING CIVIC SPACES IN THE URBAN CENTER:

Toward a more walkable Wheaton



# WHEATON



# ADMINISTRATION & ACCOUNTABILITY

1. The Wheaton sector planning boundaries and possibly the Urban District should be expanded to include the new library and community center. [76.1% Agree and Strongly Agree]

2. Accountability and resources need to be established to implement the vision of the Wheaton Sector Plan.  
[82.0% Agree and Strongly Agree]

3. The County should consider how to encourage, through incentives and a streamlined site planning process, longtime property owners and tenants to improve properties at smaller scales; as opposed to land owners holding and waiting for the next big development.  
[77.5% Agree and Strongly Agree]

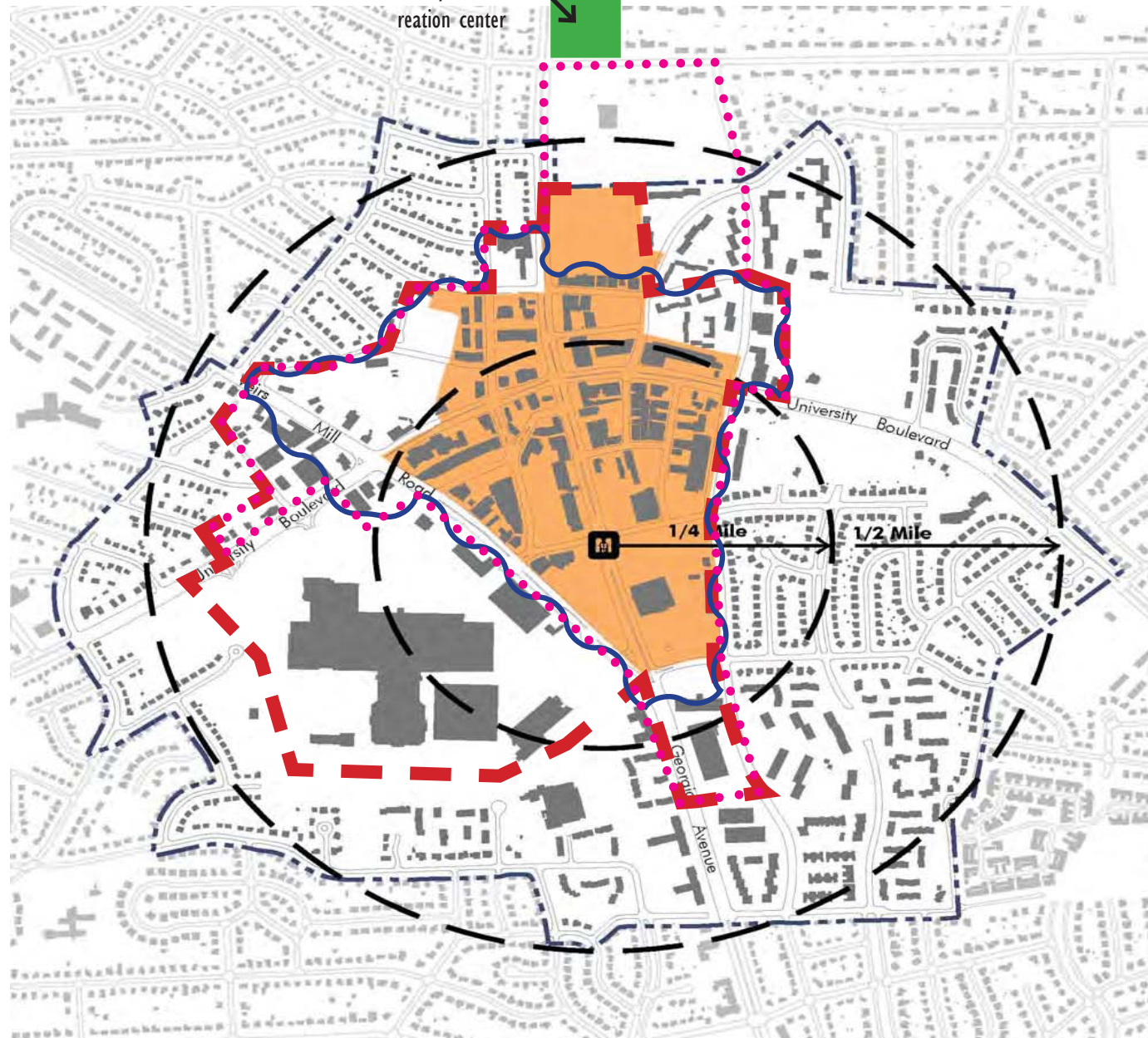
4. The county needs a plan to preserve, as much as possible, Wheaton's diverse small business character recognizing that redevelopment will increase real estate values and rents. [83.9% Agree and Strongly Agree]

5. Additional staff/resources are needed to fulfill Wheaton's potential as an Art and Entertainment District.  
[66.9% Agree and Strongly Agree]



Map 1 Sector Plan Area

New Wheaton  
library and rec-  
reation center



-  Wheaton Metro Station
-  Wheaton Sector Plan Boundary
-  Central Business District
-  Wheaton Urban District
-  Parking Lot District
-  Arts and Entertainment District



# CONNECTIVITY

1. A pedestrian connection between the mall and the Urban District needs to be developed. This will involve capital improvements by the county and Westfield and will need to involve WMATA so that the parking garage is not an obstruction. [86.9% Agree and Strongly Agree]

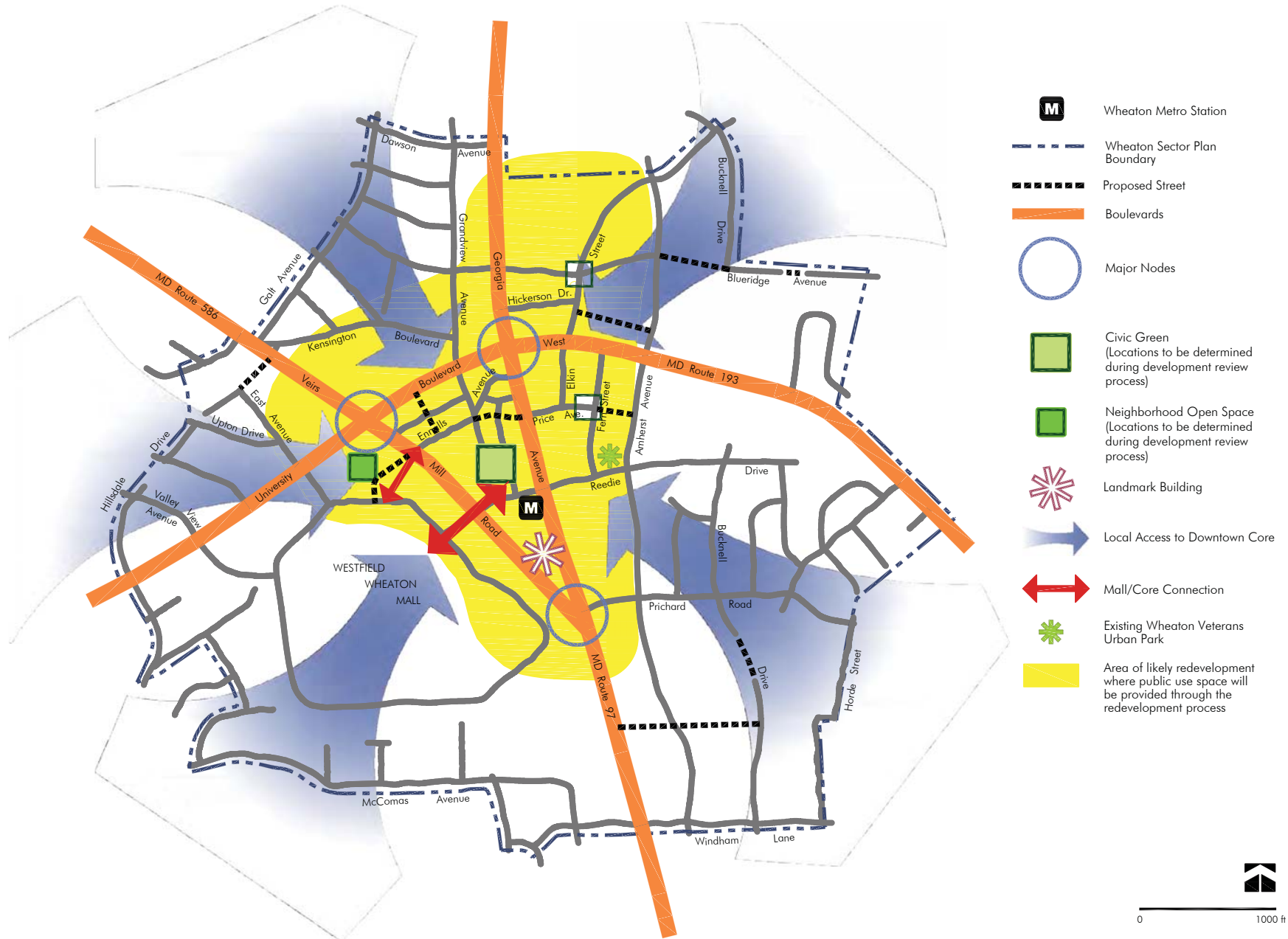
2. Coordinated, master planning for multi-modal transportation in Wheaton is needed to reduce congestion and coordinate public transportation and travel by foot, bicycle and car. [88.4% Agree and Strongly Agree]

3. The county should get the State Highway Administration to present to the public its timetable and funding for improvements to the three state highways and intersections in the Urban District so that the county can widen sidewalks and to upgrade median strips to discourage jaywalking and panhandling. [83.1% Agree and Strongly Agree]

4. Improvements to the University Blvd/Georgia Ave intersection need to be made a priority so that state highway traffic is no longer funneled on to inadequate local roads Grandview and Blueridge. [76.5% Agree and Strongly Agree]

5. Montgomery County Parks should work with Ride On to establish a shuttle service to Wheaton Regional Park/Brookside Gardens via the new Recreation Center/Library. Parks should encourage mass transit and pedestrian access to its facilities. [59.2% Agree and Strongly Agree]

# CONNECTIVITY



# WHEATON

# CREATING CIVIC SPACES IN THE URBAN CENTER

1. The planned Arts and Cultural center should be funded and located in the urban center, that is, in or around the Wheaton Triangle.  
[79.9% Agree and Strongly Agree]

2. Reddie Drive should be permanently closed where it crosses the town plaza, remaining open from Georgia Ave to Triangle Lane to allow access to businesses, with egress on to Grandview. [51.3% Agree and Strongly Agree]

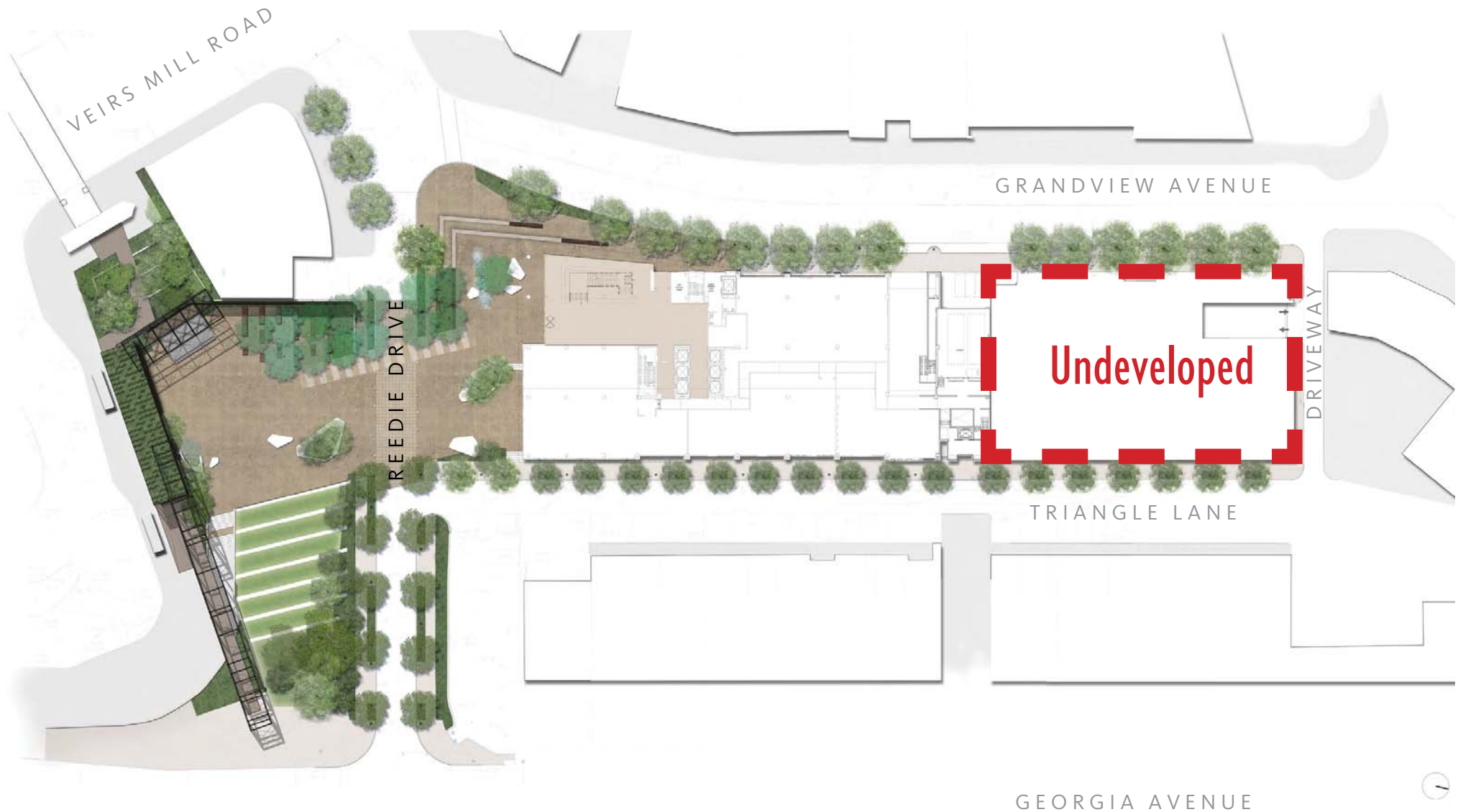
3. Wheaton should have a plan for additional multi-functional open spaces (playgrounds, plazas, etc.). There should be a public process to identify and preserve as much urban open space as possible, including identifying which county parking lots should be designated as future parks. [79.5% Agree and Strongly Agree]

4. The undeveloped portion of Lot 13 (between the new county building and Ennalls and between Grandview and Triangle Lane) should become a park until it is developed. [67.9% Agree and Strongly Agree]

5. Montgomery County should improve and upgrade sidewalks and intersections ahead of redevelopment. Improvements should not have to wait for private investment. [84.3% agree and strongly agree]



# CREATING CIVIC SPACES IN THE URBAN CENTER









WHEATON

Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC)  
What's next for Wheaton - July 18, 2018



## Opportunities

-  Wheaton Metro Station
-  Ride On
-  WMATA
-  County-Owned Parcels
  - 1. Mid-County Regional Services Center
  - 2. Parking Lot 13
  - 3. Parking Lot 34
  - 4. Parking Lot 33
  - 5. Parking Lot 14
  - 6. Parking Lot 17
  - 7. Parking Garage 45
-  M-NCPPC-Owned Parcel
  - 8. Wheaton Veterans Urban Park
-  WMATA-Owned Parcels
  - 9. Bus Bays
  - 10. WMATA Garage



# Thank You

**ENGAGE — CONNECT — PARTICIPATE — SERVE**

## Wheaton Urban District Invites you to Monthly Meetings

6:30 — 8:00 pm

Second Tuesdays of each month (except August)

Wheaton Volunteer Rescue Squad, 2400 Arcola Ave

The Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) consists of 11 members appointed by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council to provide advice on all matters affecting the Wheaton Urban District area (downtown). Members represent businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, residents, and the Mid-County Citizens Advisory Board (MCCAB).

# WHEATON

Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC)  
What's next for Wheaton - July 18, 2018

# ATTACHMENT 3

## What's Next for Wheaton Issues in our Community

Wheaton is a vibrant regional commercial hub with a growing urban residential population. However, Wheaton faces some unique issues and challenges that the community would like to see addressed. The Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) has organized a public decision makers forum to be held July 18, 2018. To prepare for the forum, WUDAC drafted a statement of key issues, conducted a survey and held a public meeting to get input from the community. This revised issue paper incorporates the community's comments. Wheaton's issues and challenges are categorized below under the headings: **Civic Spaces**, **Connectivity**, and **Accountability**.

### **CREATING CIVIC SPACES IN THE URBAN CENTER**

Urban communities need central spaces where people can gather and share experiences. We are excited about the Montgomery County office building and town plaza that is under construction in Wheaton Triangle on the former Parking Lot 13. WUDAC has recommended in the past that Reddie Drive be closed between Triangle Lane and Grandview Ave. However, community members have expressed concern about maintaining access to the stores on Triangle Lane and about having a connection between Georgia Ave and Veirs Mill Rd and the Westfield Wheaton Mall. The community needs to better understand planned traffic and pedestrian patterns and how potential conflicts will be managed at the center of the plaza between people and cars if Reddie Drive remains open between Triangle Lane and Grandview. We need to ensure that the plaza fulfills its potential as a public community space and is not compromised by Reddie Drive.

The undeveloped portion of Lot 13 where an apartment building was planned (but will not be built) should be turned into a park until the county decides what to do with it. Surface parking will not be needed once the underground lot is open.

Throughout Wheaton, there is a dearth of open areas and green space, despite the Master Plan identifying this as a major deficiency of our Urban District. We would like to see development of multi-functional open spaces: playgrounds, plazas, pocket parks, temporary urban installations, and green areas that incorporate environmental infrastructure to improve Wheaton's sustainability. All existing publicly-owned open spaces, parking lots, etc. should be assessed for their potential as parks – not only as development sites. We need a public process to identify and preserve urban open spaces.

Wheaton needs to continue to develop its urban core around the Metro station. Therefore, the proposed arts and cultural center currently being studied should be located in the triangle, within walking distance of the Metro. This is the most important capital improvement the county could make toward fulfilling Wheaton's promise as an A&E district. Officials should commit now to making this more than a feasibility study, and to supporting a center all the way through the planning and funding stages.

There are many lots in the Wheaton sector that will not be developed in the next 10-20 years. We would like to see capital investment in updating streetscapes, i.e. sidewalks, to help lay the groundwork for adjacent development. Improvements are needed to make Wheaton more walkable. The public had

more comments about walkability than any other issue, noting that Wheaton needed wider sidewalks that are set back from the roadways, crosswalks that are ADA compliant, and utility poles moved underground. The second largest number of comments called for Wheaton to maintain its “small business character,” while recognizing that the buildings that house these businesses are in disrepair and unattractive.

## **CONNECTIVITY – PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL**

Almost half of the perimeter of the Wheaton Urban District is formed by the Westfield shopping mall. However, accessing the mall on foot from the Urban District, from the Metro and bus bays, and from the surrounding neighborhoods is a challenge. We would like to see a process put in place to mitigate this issue. This requires county planners to collaborate with Westfield and WMATA to work toward the common goal of establishing an attractive connection between the mall and the Urban District that functions well for people on foot, on bicycles and in cars. This collaboration should be part of the current redevelopment project. Wheaton residents are concerned about any plan that requires them to access the mall by walking through the WMATA parking garage.

The three state highways intersecting to form the heart of the Wheaton Urban District are both our reason for being and our curse. Likewise, Westfield mall attracts commerce to Wheaton, but also attracts cars and causes traffic congestion, one of the community’s greatest concerns. Increasingly, all three Mall entrances back up with cars, blocking the flow of traffic on the state highways. The Wheaton community needs a comprehensive timeline for improving traffic flow and the pedestrian experience in the Urban District particularly along the three state highways. This requires county DOT to “connect” with the Maryland State Highway Administration to expedite improvements to the three major intersections. It is unacceptable to have traffic on the state highways routed through local roads because of an inadequate intersection at University Boulevard and Georgia Ave.

We are also concerned about the impact that planned developments such as Bus Rapid Transit and bike paths will have on traffic patterns and congestion in the Urban District. With the draft bike master plan on the verge of approval, we would like to know how this will interface with and be complemented by other sidewalk and street parking improvements. The community would like to see coordinated, master planning for multi-modal transportation in Wheaton.

Despite the dearth of parks in the Urban District, Wheaton is surrounded by acres of parkland and miles of trails and a regional attraction at Brookside Gardens, but these lack connectivity via connector trails and signage and access to mass transit. WUDAC has asked Montgomery Parks to work with Ride On or WMATA to establish shuttle service to Brookside Gardens for the Wings of Fancy and Garden of Lights, but currently only cars or pedestrians can access these park features. This is a barrier to greater use of these gems and increases car traffic at a time when we want to encourage bikes, Metro, buses, and walking.

## **ADMINISTRATION & ACCOUNTABILITY**

With the closure of the Wheaton Development Office as the lead entity representing Wheaton’s interests in development decisions, there seems to be a void in accountability for achieving the vision

set out in the Wheaton Sector Plan. The staff of the Urban District and Mid-County Regional Services Center have been decimated over the past decade and the county needs to find a way to support this office to better enable the county to coordinate development efforts, including outreach to local businesses and citizens.

The Wheaton sector planning boundaries do not include the new library and community recreation center currently being constructed. The Montgomery County Council should consider expanding the boundary of the planning area and perhaps the Urban District to include these facilities so that Wheaton can grow as a fully thought out connected urban area.

As development proceeds, the County needs to consider how to reduce the barrier of entry (development costs) for long-time property owners and tenants to enable them to redevelop properties on a micro scale, thereby preserving our small business diversity and allowing for needed beautification and infrastructure updates.

If Wheaton is to fulfill its promise as an A&E District, arts and entertainment in Wheaton need resources and active management. Additional staff, funding, or some means of drawing upon the community's resources are needed to ensure effective management of the A&E District.