

MCPB
Item No.
Date: 10-21-21

Wheaton Downtown Study – Proposed Scope of Work

- Luis R. Estrada Cepero, Planner Coordinator, Mid-County Planning, Luis.Estrada@montgomeryplanning.org, 301.495.4641
- Jessica McVary, Supervisor, Mid-County Planning, Jessica.McVary@montgomeryplanning.org, 301.495.4723
- Carrie Sanders, Chief, Mid-County Planning, Carrie.Sanders@montgomeryplanning.org, 301.495.4653

Completed: 10/14/21

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