

WHEATON DOWNTOWN STUDY



Description

Briefing to update the Planning Board on the Study's progress, and seek guidance.



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SUMMARY

The Wheaton Downtown Study was initiated to further the implementation of the 2012 *Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan*, which encouraged investment while building on Wheaton's strengths and maintaining its special character. Planning Staff will brief the Planning Board on the Study's progress to date to update the vision for Wheaton as a connected and diversified center; to reflect changes in the area while building on the recommendations of the Sector Plan and Design Guidelines; to incorporate recommendations of recent planning efforts; and to identify growth opportunities and resources for small property owners and businesses.

The Study is organized by four broad topics, and the progress to date on each of these topics is discussed in greater detail in this report:

- Evaluate Development Progress
- Promote Complete Communities
- Improve Multimodal Safety
- Establish a Fine-Grained Urban Design Vision for Wheaton

PROJECT INFORMATION

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Planning Board Briefing

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AREAS OF STUDY

Since the approval of the Wheaton Downtown Study Scope of Work on October 21, 2021, Planning staff have advanced work on each of the Study’s topic areas through a combination of research, analysis, outreach, engagement, and consultant support. Outreach to and engagement with stakeholders throughout the Wheaton downtown area have been critical to understanding challenges and opportunities to redevelopment; gaining familiarity with several parallel county-sponsored initiatives in Wheaton; and confirming community priorities.

OUTREACH

To identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the Wheaton downtown area, staff:

- Interviewed property owners, public agencies, Council staff, and stakeholders active in the Wheaton area.
- Gathered input from staff from the Mid-County Regional Services Center, the Wheaton Urban District, and the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee.
- Connected with groups offering support to businesses such as the Latino Economic Development Center and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation.
- Conducted a public open house on June 14, 2022, to invite community feedback. All meeting materials were made available on the Planning Department website ([visit our feedback page here](#)) to invite further comment. A virtual open house was also held on June 27, 2022.

DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

The Sector Plan's principal strategy to attract public benefits to the area is redevelopment. In the ten years since Sector Plan approval, less than a handful of properties have developed, but fragmented ownership patterns in certain clusters and local market limitations have prevented further development from occurring. However, clusters of smaller properties are home to both long established and recently created small businesses operating in affordably leased spaces, leading to the Study's focus on improving the public domain by focusing on the potential for small individual improvement and evolution of smaller properties. This focus is supportive of the goals and recommendations of the *Retail in Diverse Communities Study*, completed by the Planning Department in 2021. As discussed in greater detail in the Complete Communities section of this report, Staff has engaged consultant support to evaluate the market feasibility and potential for small-scale development, while retaining small businesses.

While the Study's primary focus is on the potential for improvement of smaller properties, the Study acknowledges that significant redevelopment potential remains on a few sites, including:

- Wheaton Gateway: The Planning Board approved a Sketch Plan on May 26, 2022. The approved Sketch Plan includes 895,222 sf of mixed-use development at the corner of Veirs Mill Road and University Boulevard.
- Montgomery Housing Partnership: Proposed a future land exchange with the Parks Department to deliver affordable units within a mixed-use development north of Blueridge Avenue, between Georgia Avenue and Elkin Street, and an urban park located between Elkin Street and Amherst Avenue. This land exchange concept was approved by the Planning Board on July 18, 2019. The timeline for this development has not been established.

Staff has also been in contact with other large landowners in the area to assess how potential development of larger properties can be advanced, including the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) and Westfield Wheaton.

- WMATA is currently exploring the development potential of their properties around the Wheaton Metrorail Station. Staff is assisting to identify alternatives to meet development requirements that may make development unfeasible, such as parking requirements and delivery of public open space.
- Westfield continues to explore development ideas along their Veirs Mill Road frontage but does not have immediate plans for development. Staff will continue to work with them to assess public benefit and development standards alternatives as they identify potential hurdles to development.

COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

Complete communities provide for all resident's needs within a limited geographic area. With its combination of residential, retail, and office development Wheaton could be considered a complete community today, but this concept could be furthered by exploring potential mixed uses in smaller properties. Planning staff have engaged consultants to:

- Perform a market analysis to further the concept of complete communities within the Wheaton core, by exploring the potential for mixed-use small-scale development in the area and identifying ways to incentivize it. This work is ongoing, with completion anticipated in October 2022.
- Develop architectural case studies working with property owners, to illustrate the potential for small scale development in the area to further Wheaton as a complete community, to identify regulatory hurdles for small development and offer alternatives, and to provide guidance to implement the upcoming Façade Improvement Program by the Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA). This work is ongoing, with completion anticipated in October 2022.

In addition, Staff has been in contact with the Department of General Services (DGS), as they explore introducing other land uses to further diversify the area, including:

- Affordable Housing: The County Executive issued a request for letters of interest to develop affordable housing on county-owned undeveloped land. In Wheaton, this included public parking lots 14, 17, 33, and 34. Given the small size of these properties, Staff discussed with DGS the potential to consolidate open space requirements from these potential developments in one location to achieve another significant open space in the Wheaton core. These conversations are ongoing and include Montgomery County Department of Transportation Division of Parking Management staff.
- Wheaton Arts Center: DGS is exploring location alternatives for this proposed facility. Planning staff has been in contact with DGS staff to gauge the destination impact this facility could have in the Wheaton core. No decision is available yet.

MULTIMODAL SAFETY

Improving the area for pedestrians is a principal goal of the Study. Staff has coordinated with the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) and the Maryland State Highway Administration (MDOT SHA) to identify current projects in the area to assess their impact on the local transportation network. The following projects are underway, in various stages:

- Amherst Avenue separated bikeway: Two-way cycle track between Arcola Avenue and Windham Lane.

- Grandview Avenue separated bikeway: Between Reddie Drive and Dawson Avenue.
- Veirs Mill Road Busway: Dedicated bus lanes to Wheaton Metrorail Bus Terminal (pilot).
- Signalized Intersection: New traffic signal at the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Price Avenue.

In addition to the above projects, Planning staff has engaged a consultant to update to the Wheaton Streetscape Standards in support of the improved walkability goals of the Study. The updated Standards will consolidate the above projects as well as street safety and design guidance produced since the Sector Plan approval. The consultant team convened a stakeholder meeting on April 26, 2022, including transportation agencies and local county representatives to discuss area priorities. While this work is also ongoing, a draft of the updated Standards is anticipated later this month for review.

URBAN DESIGN

A fine-grained urban design framework will provide a strategic vision for the physical development of Wheaton to assist in the creation of supportive local action plans and initiatives. Recommendations will focus in providing guidance for key areas in need of near-term improvement, to potentially spur other improvements in these areas. To date, improvement areas being considered are:

- Price Street Streetery: Given the county’s decision to retain the Streetery, Planning staff will include recommendations in the Study for interim and long-term treatments to transform the area into a destination for the Price District. Recommendations will include a residential and commercial shared street concept, as described in the Montgomery County Complete Streets Design Guide (p. 50-51).
- Wheaton Veterans Urban Park: The Study will include recommendations to include additional permanent seating and passive recreation areas in the periphery of the park to benefit surrounding communities.
- Georgia Avenue frontage between Reddie Drive and Ennalls Avenue: The west side of Georgia Avenue is possibly the most pedestrian safety challenged location in the Wheaton core. Redevelopment along this frontage appears unlikely in the foreseeable future; the Study will provide guidance on how to improve the area in the near term including buffered sidewalks.

Community feedback received to date includes several suggestions to connect surrounding communities with the center of Wheaton; the Study will also recommend some of these connections be improved. Other areas of improvement may also be identified as the Study progresses.

PLANNING BOARD INPUT

Based on research, analysis and outreach, several issues have emerged as potential recommendations by the Study. Other issues and potential recommendations may emerge as the work progresses, but Staff welcomes input on the following:

- Funding for critical sidewalk improvements and conflicts with overhead utilities;
- Potential for promoting public open space on publicly owned properties; and
- Assisting larger development opportunities by providing flexibility on public benefit delivery and development requirements such as parking.

Staff invites suggestions on other issues the Planning Board may consider relevant to explore.

NEXT STEPS

Staff will continue to work with consultants to complete the market analysis and will engage property owners to produce illustrative case studies for small-scale development to discover potential barriers and define guidance suitable for the upcoming Façade Improvement Program by DHCA. Staff anticipates returning to the Planning Board with a draft study this fall.