

Montgomery Planning
University Boulevard Corridor Plan



Description

Staff will brief the Planning Board on existing land use, market analysis, and transportation conditions as well as outreach and engagement efforts completed to date for the University Boulevard Corridor Plan.



Nkosi Yearwood, Planner III, Midcounty Planning
Nkosi.Yearwood@montgomeryplanning.org, 301-495-1332



Jessica McVary, Master Planner Supervisor, Midcounty Planning
Jessica.McVary@montgomeryplanning.org, 301-495-4723



Carrie Sanders, Chief, Midcounty Planning
Carrie.Sanders@montgomeryplanning.org, 301-495-4653

SUMMARY

Staff will present the Planning Board with an update on the University Boulevard Corridor Plan, including existing land use, market analysis, and transportation conditions, as well as outreach and engagement efforts completed to date. The Planning Board approved the Scope of Work for the University Boulevard Corridor Plan on February 16, 2023.

MASTER PLAN INFORMATION

Draft

University Boulevard Corridor Plan

Date

9-29-2023

Lead Planner

Nkosi Yearwood

Planning Division

Midcounty Planning

Staff Contact

Nkosi.Yearwood@montgomeryplanning.org

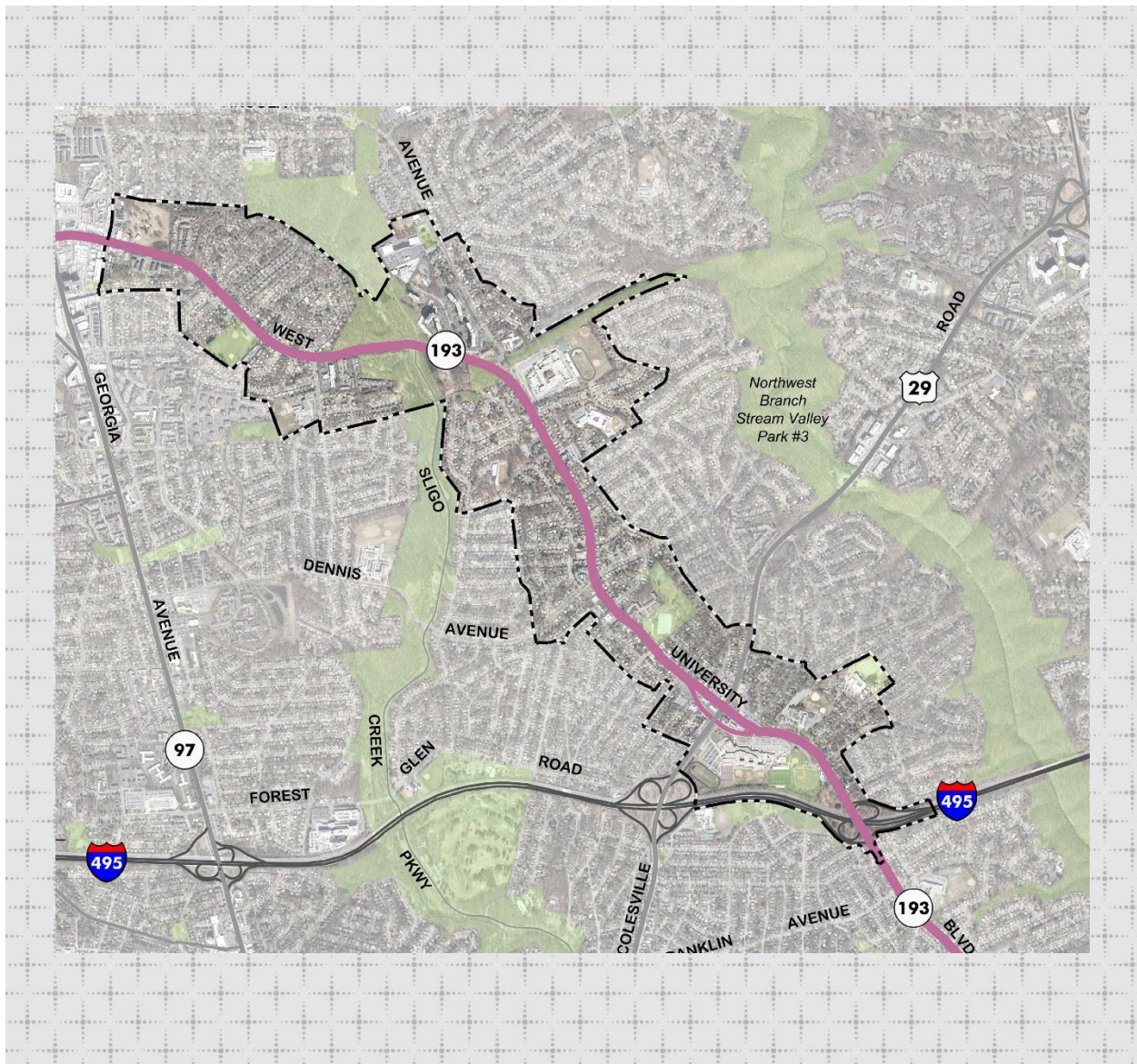
301-495-1332

Planning Board Information

MCPB

Item No. 6

10-5-2023



INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The University Boulevard Corridor Plan is a comprehensive corridor plan between the Capital Beltway (I-495) and Amherst Avenue in Wheaton (Figure 1). The plan will amend several existing plans, including the 2012 *Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan*, the 1989 *Master Plan for the Communities of Kensington-Wheaton*, the 1996 *Four Corners Master Plan*, and the 2001 *Kemp Mill Master Plan*. University Boulevard (MD 193) is identified as a future Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Corridor in the 2013 *Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan*. The plan explores opportunities for new development, bikeways, and bus rapid transit (BRT), as well as the creation of a complete street with wider sidewalks, comfortable public transportation stops, and safe access. The University Boulevard Corridor Plan is part of a larger vision for compact growth, supported by an excellent transit system and a safe, appealing network for walking, biking, and rolling.

The Planning Board approved the Scope of Work for the University Boulevard Corridor Plan in February 2023. Since the approval of the Scope of Work, staff have evaluated existing conditions, initiated detailed analyses of market conditions and transportation, and advanced community outreach and engagement. Planning staff will begin to develop draft recommendations this fall on the project.

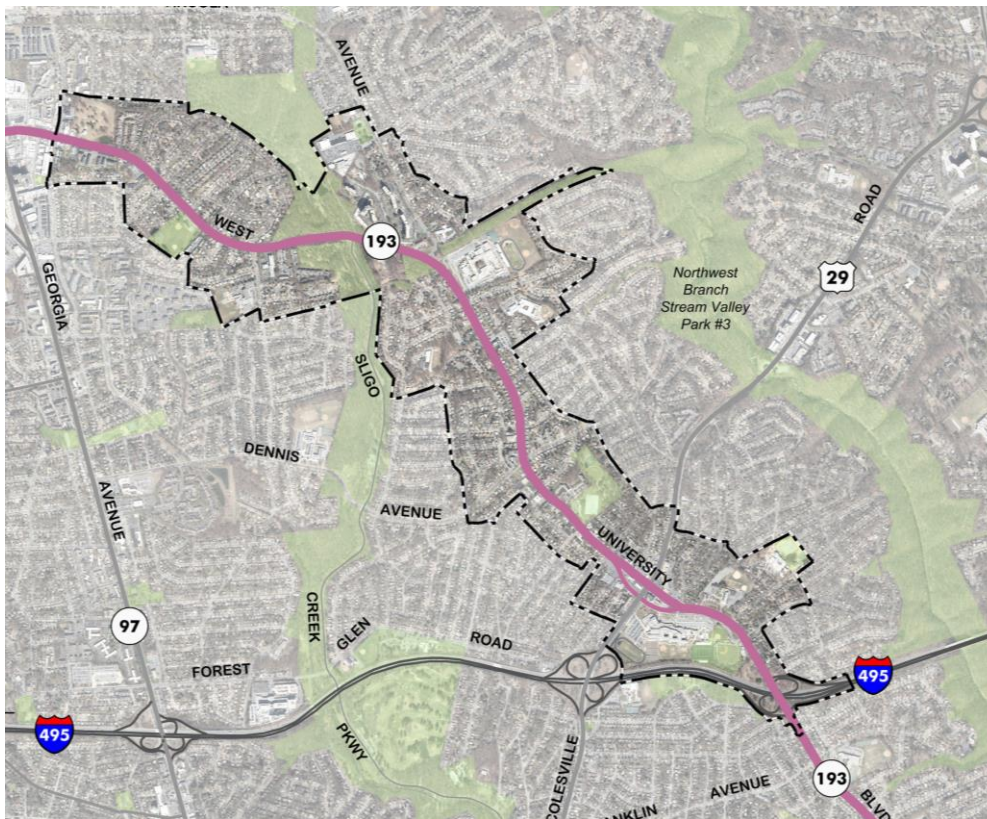


Figure 1: The University Corridor Plan area

EXISTING DEVELOPMENT

OVERVIEW

Residential development and institutional uses, including public schools, are the primary land use features within the plan area. These uses were built prior to or following World War II, consistent with the type of suburban growth that occurred nationally in the mid-20th century. Non-residential uses, including retail and office, have a smaller presence in the plan area and are primarily focused on the edge of the Wheaton Central Business District, in the Kemp Mill Shopping Center, and in the Four Corners area.

RESIDENTIAL

Residential development is the primary land use in the plan area, including single-family detached, residential townhouses, and multifamily residential buildings (Figure 2). The collection of high-rise multifamily residential developments, including University Towers and The Warwick Apartments, near the intersection of Arcola Avenue and University Boulevard, were built in the late 1960s. There are 402 units at the Warwick and 535 units at University Towers. All the residential townhouses in the plan area were built either in the 1980s or 1990s. For example, the Westchester (Berkeley Court) development, adjacent to the WTOP radio towers property, was built in 1992.

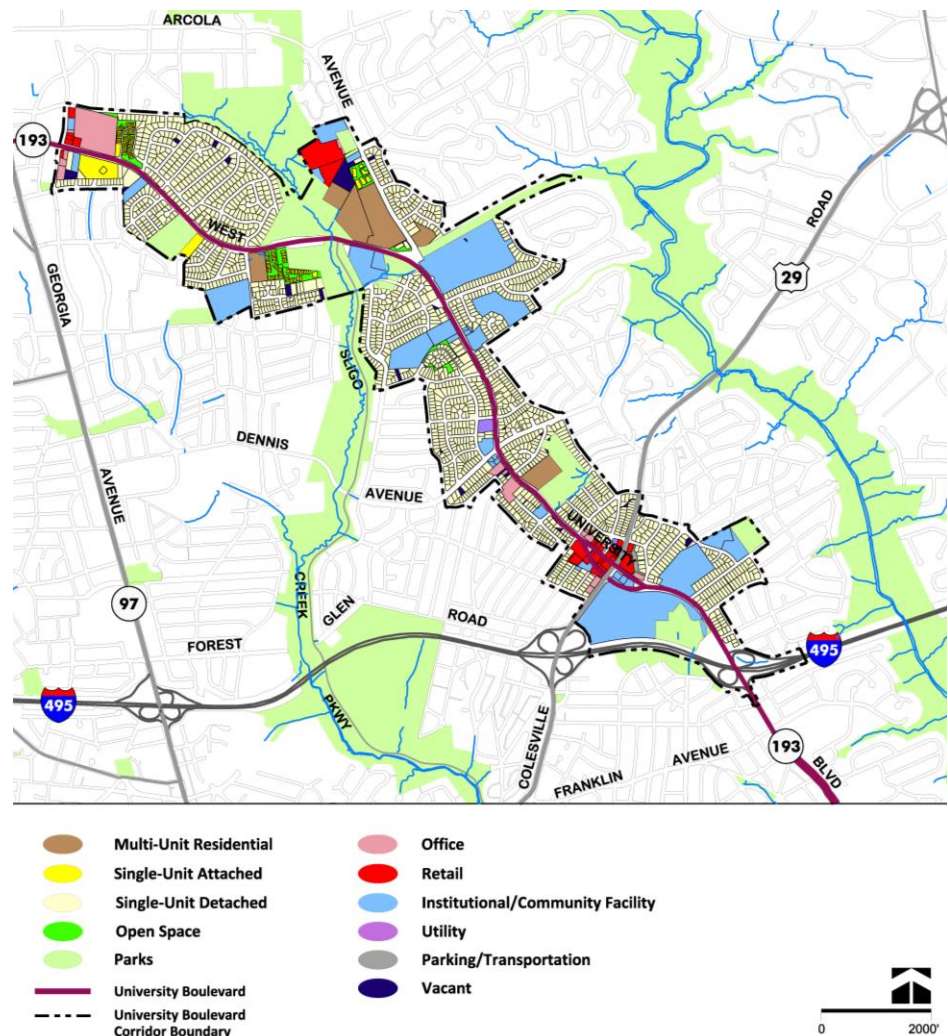


Figure 2: Existing land uses

SPECIALIZED HOUSING

The Inwood House, Arcola Towers and The Oaks at Four Corners are three specialized housing developments in the plan area. Built in 1979, the Inwood House is a 150-unit residential building located at the intersection of Inwood Avenue and University Boulevard that provides affordable housing for residents with specialized accessibility needs.

Arcola Towers, which is owned by the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC), is a traditional senior housing high-rise building with 141 units. This development is adjacent to The Warwick Apartments and University Towers, at the intersection of Arcola Avenue and University Boulevard West. The Oaks at Four Corners is another senior housing development owned by HOC. Built in 1986, The Oaks at Four Corners is located on University Boulevard adjacent to the North Four Corners Local Park.

RETAIL

Most of the retail development in the plan area is concentrated in the Four Corners area at the intersection of University Boulevard and Colesville Road (US 29) where retail businesses occupy three of the four quadrants.

The Woodmoor Shopping Center is the largest retail property in the Four Corners area. The approximately 67,000 square foot shopping center, located in the northeastern quadrant of Four Corners, includes tenants such as CVS Pharmacy, Choi Supermarket, and Bank of America, as well as several neighborhood serving retail uses and food service establishments. There are additional retail properties in the northeast quadrant opposite the Woodmoor Shopping Center, including the 4 Corners Pub and additional restaurants and neighborhood services. The southwestern quadrant includes a Safeway grocery store, U.S. Postal Service office, and auto-oriented uses. Most of the retail uses in Four Corners are in the Commercial Residential Town (CRT) zone.

Another cluster of retail development is located at Arcola Avenue and Lamberton Drive, including the Kemp Mill Shopping Center. Built in 1971, this shopping center has a market focus on the Jewish community and is anchored by the Shalom Kosher grocery store. Adjacent to the shopping center are additional retail businesses, including Ben Yehuda Pizza and Kosher Pastry Café. The retail businesses at this shopping center are in the Neighborhood Retail (NR) zone.

There are additional retail businesses along Amherst Avenue, which is the edge of the Wheaton Central Business District (CBD). Restaurants, a U.S. Postal Service office, and a 7-Eleven convenience store are located on the eastern side of the roadway. These retail properties are in the Commercial Residential (CR) zone.

OFFICE

The plan area has a small amount of office development, approximately 113,000 square feet. Most of the office buildings were developed in the 1980s. Mary’s Center (Four Corners Medical Center), located at 116 University Boulevard West, is one of the few stand-alone office properties in the plan area.

Two small office condominiums are in the plan area, including in the northwestern quadrant of University Boulevard and US 29 and along Amherst Avenue, south of the intersection with University Boulevard West. The second level at Woodmoor Shopping Center also has a small amount of office space. There is no traditional Class A office building in the plan area.

INSTITUTIONAL USES

Public schools and religious institutions have a large presence in the plan area, including Montgomery Blair High School in Four Corners and Northwood High School at the center of the plan area. Forest Knolls Elementary School and Pine Crest Elementary School are in the Northwood Forest and Woodmoor neighborhoods, respectively (Figure 3).

There are several religious institutions along the corridor, including Canaan

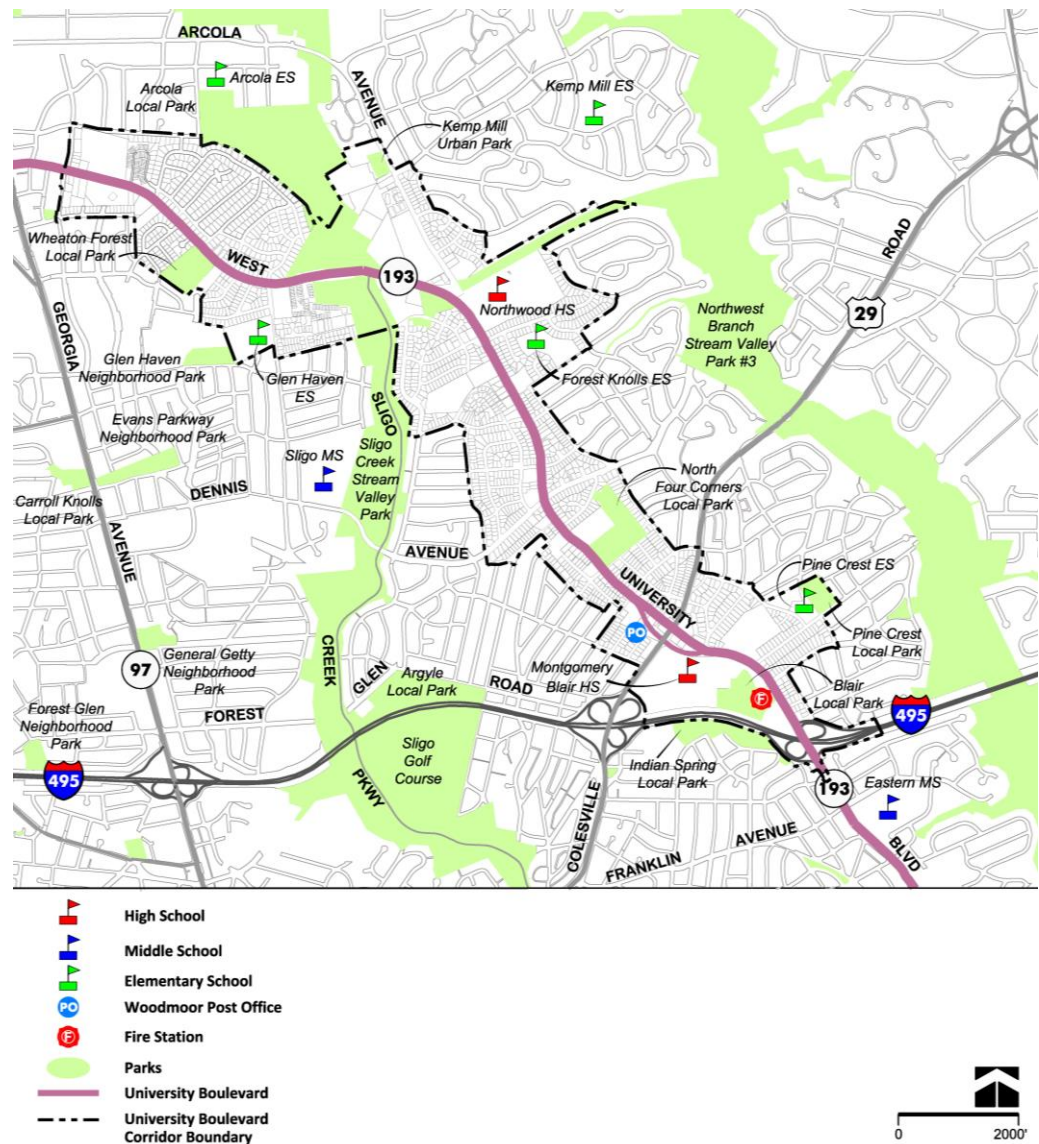


Figure 3: Existing public facilities

Christian Church, Luther Rice Memorial Baptist Church, Northwood Presbyterian Church, Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Har Tzeon-Agudath Achim Congregation, Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist Temple and Saint Bernadette Catholic Church. Additional institutional uses are located along Arcola Avenue, including the Young Israel Shomrai Emunah of Greater Washington and the Yeshiva of Greater Washington (Boys Campus).

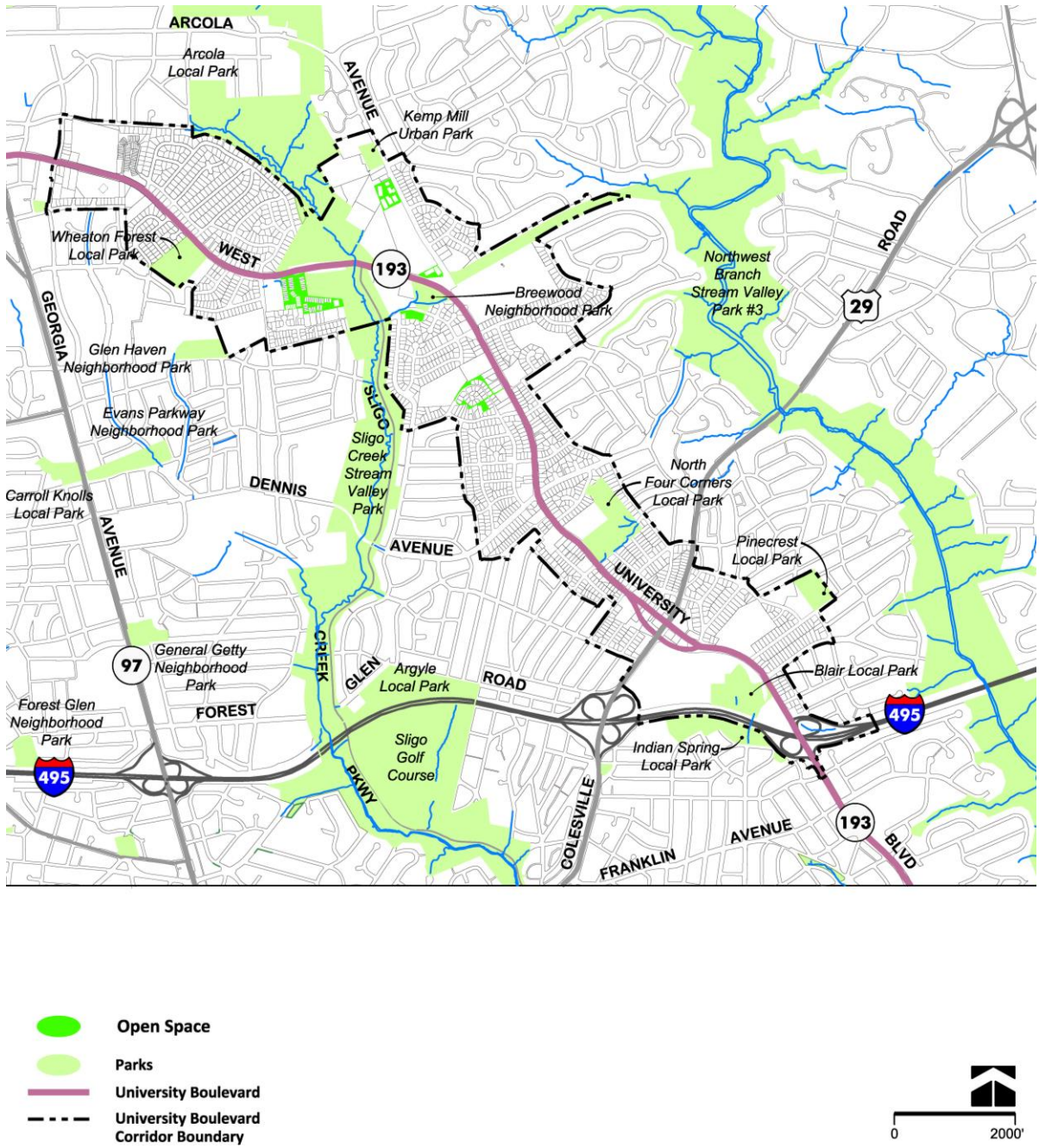


Figure 4: Existing public parks

PUBLIC PARKS

The corridor plan area has six public parks that provide opportunities for different forms of recreation, including Wheaton Forest Local Park, Breewood Neighborhood Park, Kemp Mill Urban Park, North Four Corners Local Park, Blair Local Park and Pinecrest Local Park (Figure 4). A portion of Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park is included in the plan area and the Northwest Branch Stream Valley Park is east of the plan area. Several parks, such as North Four Corners and Wheaton Forest, front onto University Boulevard.

MARKET ANALYSIS

RESIDENTIAL

The residential market offers many opportunities and challenges, reflecting both the broader economic landscape and specific local dynamics. The plan area, characterized by its suburban housing mix, comprises approximately 3,400 residential housing units. Interestingly, the rental vacancy rate stands at a modest 6.3 percent (mostly due to the Warwick's relatively high vacancy rate at 12 percent). A deeper dive into the housing structure reveals that a significant portion, nearly half, consists of single-family detached units. Multi-family buildings with 50 or more units per structure account for 30 percent of the total. The plan area is unique regarding its lack of diversity of housing types in comparison to the overall county, with nearly 85 percent being either single-family detached units or apartments in buildings with 50 or more units (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Housing Types in Plan Area, 2022

SINGLE FAMILY DETACHED	50.9%
TOWNHOUSES	9.1%
DUPLEX/QUADPLEX	1.2%
SMALL MULTIFAMILY (5 TO 49 UNITS)	8.1%
LARGE MULTIFAMILY (50+ UNITS)	30.7%

CONTEXT: MOBILITY AND STABILITY

The residential neighborhoods along University Boulevard are well-established. The median year of construction for houses in the plan area is 1963. In comparison, the countywide median year is 1979, indicating the longstanding nature of the study area's housing. This context provides both a sense of stability along with a potential need for modernization.

The median year when householders moved into their current residence is 2008, three years earlier than the county's median of 2011. This lower mobility suggests a settled resident base, the reasons for which can be hard to pinpoint but worth investigating. This indicates overall community cohesion, but without new investment opportunities could potentially lead to some stagnation or lack of mobility.

HOUSING: SALES DYNAMICS

Data from Redfin for a 12-month period ending on October 14, 2022, highlighted 359 home sales in Kemp Hill and other residential areas. The median sales price for single-family detached units in the plan area stands at \$585,000, which is higher than nearby submarkets like White Oak (\$402,250), but lower than the county median of \$719,950.

RENTAL HOUSING

The plan area's rental housing segment is characterized by a mix of affordability and variety. The rental landscape is diverse in several properties, including The Warwick Apartments, Arcola Towers, Inwood House, and The Oaks at Four Corners. There are also some rental homes at University Towers, which is a condominium property, and it is assumed that some single-family detached units are part of the rental market. However, data on these rental units is limited and difficult to obtain.

Some of the rental properties are designated as affordable, with some, such as The Oaks at Four Corners, specifically catering to seniors. The average monthly rent is \$1,682 at \$1.48 per square foot. Despite this relative affordability, the rental market has faced challenges. Vacancy rates peaked at 11.2 percent in 2021, largely attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. Vacancies have now fallen to 6.3 percent, still slightly higher than the 5.0-percent rate typically seen as an indicator of a healthy balance between supply and demand.

Overall, the residential market presents some opportunities. While the stability and historical context provides a solid foundation, the evolving dynamics in both the ownership and rental segments indicate the potential for growth, diversification, and innovation.

RETAIL

The plan area boasts a retail inventory of approximately 246,000 square feet, concentrated in Four Corners and Kemp Mill. There is a diverse mix of retailers, ranging from food outlets to convenience stores and service providers. The average asking rent is \$31.48 per square foot, which is in line with county averages. The retail establishments in Four Corners are particularly noteworthy, occupying three of the four quadrants of the University Boulevard/Colesville Road intersection.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND INVENTORY

Woodmoor Shopping Center, established in 1954, stands as a testament to the area's rich retail history. Over the decades, it has witnessed some changes in its retail composition. While it continues to house longstanding establishments like Woodmoor Bakery, recent years have seen the addition of modern food outlets such as Chipotle, Tropical Smoothie Café, Starbucks, and SweetFrog frozen yogurt. Clusters of food outlets, services, convenience goods, and restaurants characterize the retail supply in the plan area. Notable establishments include CVS Pharmacy and Woodmoor Market.

CHALLENGES

One of the key challenges faced by retailers in the plan area, especially in Four Corners, is the complex access for customers, especially pedestrians. The median splitting University Boulevard, coupled with high traffic volumes, has necessitated restrictions on left turns. This, in turn, impacts the ease of access to retail establishments, potentially affecting sales.

Despite the existing challenges, the retail market in the plan area holds significant potential. The outflow of grocery dollars to areas like Downtown Wheaton and Burnt Mills suggests an untapped market that could support the expansion of existing establishments, such as Safeway. The retail market in the plan area, while rooted in history, is at a pivotal juncture.

OFFICE

There is a very limited office market in the plan area. The total office space amounts to approximately 113,000 square feet. When considering the second-floor space at Woodmoor Shopping Center, this inventory expands to 129,700 square feet.

The office buildings in the plan area, such as 1398 Lamberton Drive in Kemp Mill and the Four Corners Office Park, were developed in the mid-1980s, indicating a mature market with established participants. The plan area's office market is geared towards local-serving businesses with a particular emphasis on medical services.

CLASSIFICATIONS AND CONVERSIONS

Most of the office spaces in the area are classified as older Class C spaces, which typically come with fewer amenities. However, Four Corners Office Park and the Four Corners Medical Center are categorized as Class B spaces. These distinctions are crucial for potential tenants, as they often dictate rental rates, amenities, and overall building quality.

A unique aspect of the office landscape in the plan area is the presence of former residential properties, which have been converted into office spaces. Such conversions often offer a distinct ambiance, potentially attracting niche businesses looking for this office environment.

COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE AND CHALLENGES

The Kemp Mill office spaces, for example, face competition from areas like Downtown Wheaton, which boasts 67,000 square feet of vacant office space available at competitive rents ranging from \$24 to \$31.50 per square foot. This competition, coupled with the availability of more modern office spaces in nearby areas, poses challenges for the new office development in the plan area.

MARKET ANALYSIS CONCLUSION

The UBC plan area with its Residential, Retail, and Office markets has a delicate balance between historical richness and modern evolution. The residential sector underscores the importance of community and stability, hinting at the potential for growth through affordable housing solutions. The retail landscape has a blend of tradition and modernity. Some retail destinations, such as Woodmoor Shopping Center, have challenging pedestrian access issues. The office market, while small, has a niche focus.

For stakeholders, the plan area offers a plethora of opportunities. Strategic investments, infrastructural enhancements, and a keen understanding of the local demographics can pave the way for sustainable growth.

TRANSPORTATION

OVERVIEW

University Boulevard (MD 193) is a Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration (MDOT SHA) managed roadway. Within the plan area, the roadway is classified as a Downtown Boulevard between Amherst Avenue and Dayton Street and as a Boulevard between Dayton Street and East Indian Spring Drive, with minimum rights-of-way between 120 feet and 150 feet.

Based on MDOT SHA information from 2022, annual average daily traffic on University Boulevard ranges from 25,000 vehicles near Georgia Avenue (MD 97) to more than 39,000 near Colesville Road (US 29). Colesville Road (US 29) is another Boulevard that intersects with the plan area in the Four Corners area. Most other streets in the plan area are two-lane roadways, such as Dennis Avenue and Arcola Avenue that provide additional local connectivity and access to existing residential neighborhoods.

EXISTING BUSES

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's C2 and C4 Metrobus routes run along University Boulevard and provide service between Greenbelt and Twinbrook and Hyattsville Crossing and Wheaton, respectively, average more than 6,000 riders per weekday. These routes have the highest bus ridership in Maryland. Ride On has several routes that service the plan area, including routes 7, 8 and 9. The average daily ridership for route 9 is more than 1,500 riders.

PEDESTRIANS AND BICYCLISTS

Most of the walking environment along University Boulevard is directly adjacent to vehicular travel lanes with no separation. The frontages of Blair High School, along University Boulevard and US 29, are some of the few areas where existing sidewalks are separated from travel lanes by a landscaped buffer. Based on the Pedestrian Level of Comfort (PLOC) metric, most of University Boulevard is considered undesirable. The walking environment is better away from University Boulevard because several residential neighborhoods have sidewalks that are protected with a landscaped or treed buffer.

There is no designated bikeway accommodation along University Boulevard. The State of Maryland does permit bicyclists to ride in a travel lane, which does occur periodically. MDOT SHA implemented a



SHA Temporary Bikelane

temporary protected bike lane project between June and December 2021 as part of MDOT SHA’s Multimodal Shared Street Pilot Project. The pilot bike project was installed between Amherst Avenue and Arcola Avenue.

VISION ZERO

University Boulevard, between Georgia Avenue (MD 97) and US 29, is one of the highest High Injury Network (HIN) roadways for state-controlled roadways in the county. From 2015 to 2022, motor vehicle crashes resulted in 39 severe injuries and three fatalities within the plan area.

BUS RAPID TRANSIT

University Boulevard (MD 193) is identified as a future Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Corridor in the 2013 *Countywide Transit Corridors Functional Master Plan*. The Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) implemented the county’s first BRT service on US 29 between Silver Spring and Burtonsville (Figure 5) in 2020.



Figure 5: Existing and proposed Bus Rapid Transit stations

PILOT BUS ONLY LANE

The Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) has proposed pilot dedicated bus lanes between Amherst Avenue and Dennis Avenue. The proposed project’s main goal is to improve services and travel times along the corridor. MCDOT anticipates that this project will be implemented later this year or next year. An illustrative image of the bus only lanes is shown below (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Illustrative image of pilot project with bus lanes and bicyclist use

PUBLIC OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

OVERVIEW

The public outreach and community engagement has pursued a broad and inclusive approach to inform the public about this corridor plan. Montgomery Planning has not conducted a comprehensive plan within the communities affected by the corridor plan since the 2001 *Kemp Mill Master Plan*.

The community outreach and engagement conducted to date for this plan spanned a wide spectrum of activities, including a public open house, pop-up events, workshops, door-knocking campaigns, and online surveys. Most of the in-person public meetings were followed by Zoom virtual meetings. An interactive website was created that allowed the public to submit bike connection, sidewalk, and roadway ideas (Figure 7).



Photographs from several events, including the public open house and community workshop.

Highlights of the overall activities are noted below:

- 10 In-Person or Virtual Meetings and Workshops
- 13 In-Community Events
- 2,454+ Mailers Sent
- 166 Questionnaire Responses Collected

To establish relationships with Hispanic/Latino community members and other traditionally underrepresented individuals, the project team has collaborated with Impact Silver Spring and Action in Montgomery. The project team also collaborated with Council Member Natali Fani-Gonzalez (District 6) to host a Spanish language meeting on the plan.

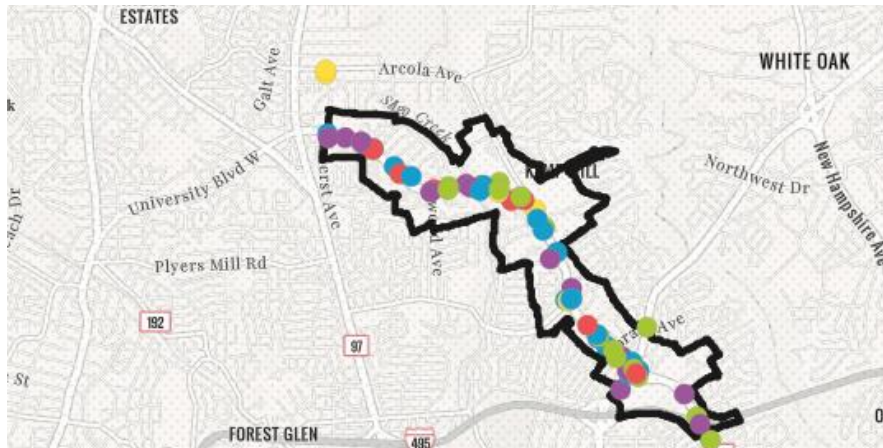


Figure 7: Location of comments submitted via the interactive website.

To engage with Four Corners business owners, staff worked with the Montgomery County Business Center liaisons, including Ms. Patrice Cheatham and Mr. Daniel Koroma, to visit and listen to the issues and concerns of business owners.

Our engagement initiatives have been multifaceted to capture a holistic view of the community's sentiment. Community engagement was not limited to meetings and surveys but extended to a presence in local events such as the Wheaton Arts Parade, North Four Corners Local Park events, and Earth Day events.

Staff also attended civic and homeowners' associations meetings, including Sligo Woods Civic Association, Kemp Mill Civic Association, University Towers Board, and Northwood Four Corners Civic Association. Additionally, staff also met with the residents at the Inwood House.



Top 50 words used in community feedback.

On-the-ground efforts like bus-stop interactions, neighborhood canvassing, and targeted workshops provided in-depth understanding of the daily experiences of residents. We also deployed informational tools tailored to the community's needs, including interactive maps, informative videos, and questionnaires. Moreover, professional engagements like collaborations with organizations such as the Urban Land Institute provided expert insights to inform our strategies.

Montgomery Planning hired Everyday Canvassing, who along with their staff, volunteers, and planning staff knocked on and canvassed over a thousand households which led to more than 230 one-on-one conversations. Everyday Canvassing's primary mandate was to help reach traditionally hard-to-reach populations in multifamily homes. This also served as a proxy to reach renters and African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos and others. This outreach helped ensure that the demographics of the plan area were represented meaningfully in the demographics of the persons engaged during the outreach.

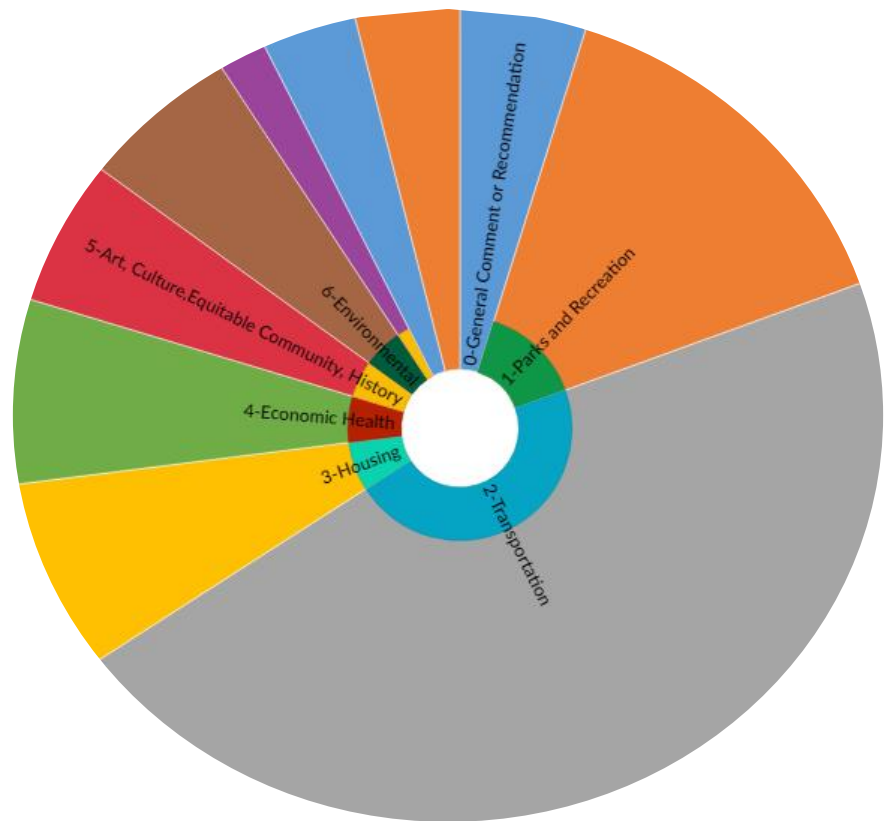


Figure 8: Data analysis from submitted comments.

Data played a central role in converting these extensive outreach efforts into actionable insights. Using the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) approach, community feedback was examined, and categorized to reveal patterns, sentiments, and needs (Figure 8). The NVivo software streamlined this complex process, enabling efficient organization and analysis of close to 20,000 words of feedback. The themes emerging from this analysis painted a vivid picture of community sentiment. Key among these was an appreciation for neighborhood diversity, coupled with pressing concerns about pedestrian safety and the need for improved biking infrastructure. Access to local amenities, especially the cherished Sligo Creek Park, emerged as important. Additionally, the quality, affordability, and availability of housing loomed large in community canvassing feedback.

Additional mobility themes from community feedback, includes the following:

- A sizable portion of the feedback revolved around transportation, with speeding and pedestrian safety being the dominant concerns.
- The community's need for better biking infrastructure, enhanced pedestrian environments, and broader accessibility stood out.
- Residents expressed a strong desire for more signaled intersections, wider sidewalks, and increased accessibility to community amenities.
- Bus users provided critical feedback, emphasizing the need for better-lit shelters with real-time bus arrival information.

Nevertheless, amidst the concerns was praise that highlighted what the community cherishes most. The plan area's diversity, proximity to local parks, natural surroundings, local businesses, and access to transit were frequently lauded.

As the plan moves forward, it is evident that community feedback remains essential. All comments, suggestions, and insights are building blocks in our mission to develop a plan that meets the aspirations of the public.

NEXT STEPS

Planning staff will continue to work toward developing preliminary recommendations for this plan during the upcoming fall and will continue to engage the public, including property owners, residents, and other stakeholders. Staff anticipates presenting preliminary recommendations to the Planning Board in winter 2024 and a working draft plan in spring 2024.