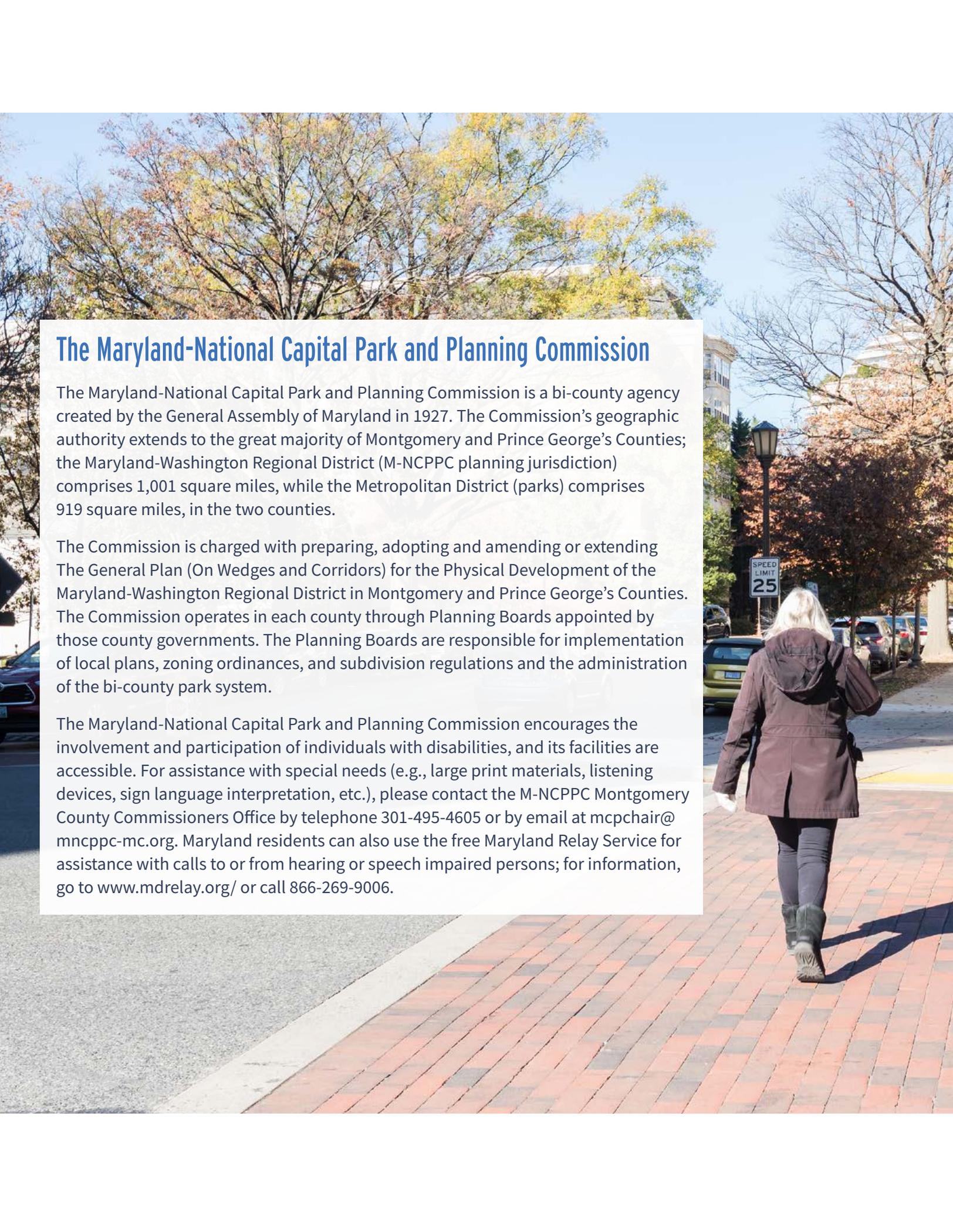




# Friendship Heights

## URBAN DESIGN STUDY



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark brown hooded jacket and dark pants, is walking away from the camera on a brick-paved sidewalk. The sidewalk is made of red and grey bricks. To the left of the sidewalk is a paved road. In the background, there are trees with autumn-colored leaves (yellow, orange, and red) and a clear blue sky. A black street lamp stands near the sidewalk, and a white speed limit sign with the number '25' is visible. A green car is parked on the street to the right. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

## The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission is a bi-county agency created by the General Assembly of Maryland in 1927. The Commission's geographic authority extends to the great majority of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties; the Maryland-Washington Regional District (M-NCPPC planning jurisdiction) comprises 1,001 square miles, while the Metropolitan District (parks) comprises 919 square miles, in the two counties.

The Commission is charged with preparing, adopting and amending or extending The General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. The Commission operates in each county through Planning Boards appointed by those county governments. The Planning Boards are responsible for implementation of local plans, zoning ordinances, and subdivision regulations and the administration of the bi-county park system.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission encourages the involvement and participation of individuals with disabilities, and its facilities are accessible. For assistance with special needs (e.g., large print materials, listening devices, sign language interpretation, etc.), please contact the M-NCPPC Montgomery County Commissioners Office by telephone 301-495-4605 or by email at [mcpchair@mncppc-mc.org](mailto:mcpchair@mncppc-mc.org). Maryland residents can also use the free Maryland Relay Service for assistance with calls to or from hearing or speech impaired persons; for information, go to [www.mdrelay.org/](http://www.mdrelay.org/) or call 866-269-9006.



# Friendship Heights

URBAN DESIGN STUDY  
DRAFT MARCH 2024

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 WHAT IS URBAN DESIGN?

Why are some cities and urban areas more dynamic, welcoming, and pleasant than others? One of the fundamental answers to this question is urban design. Urban design is the shaping of the physical form of a place so that the buildings, streets, parks, and public spaces work in harmony to create a dynamic, welcoming place that supports a thriving public life.

Successful urban design creates a strong public realm. The public realm is any space or built environment that is open and accessible for public use, regardless of ownership. It includes streets, sidewalks, plazas, parks, and open spaces.

According to renowned Danish architect and urbanist Jan Gehl, the “life between the buildings” – the activity that takes place in the public realm – is the most important part of any urban area and is the key to its success. This is where daily social interactions happen and where people are immersed in the multi-sensory experience of a place. In the most successful urban areas people are engaging not only in necessary interactions (asking for directions to the Metrorail), but also optional/recreational activities (taking a walk with a friend) or social interactions (meeting another family at a park).

The Montgomery County Planning Department, part of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPCC), completed the Friendship Heights Urban Design Study to better understand how people experience the existing open spaces and the pedestrian and transit networks in the downtown. This study identifies strengths and challenges of the existing public realm in Friendship Heights as reflected by both an urban design analysis and a months-long public engagement process.

**This summary report includes observations about how people experience Friendship Heights today and does not include recommendations for the future.**





Shops, restaurants, and apartments along Willard Avenue

# 1.1

## ABOUT FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS



View of Wisconsin Avenue looking north

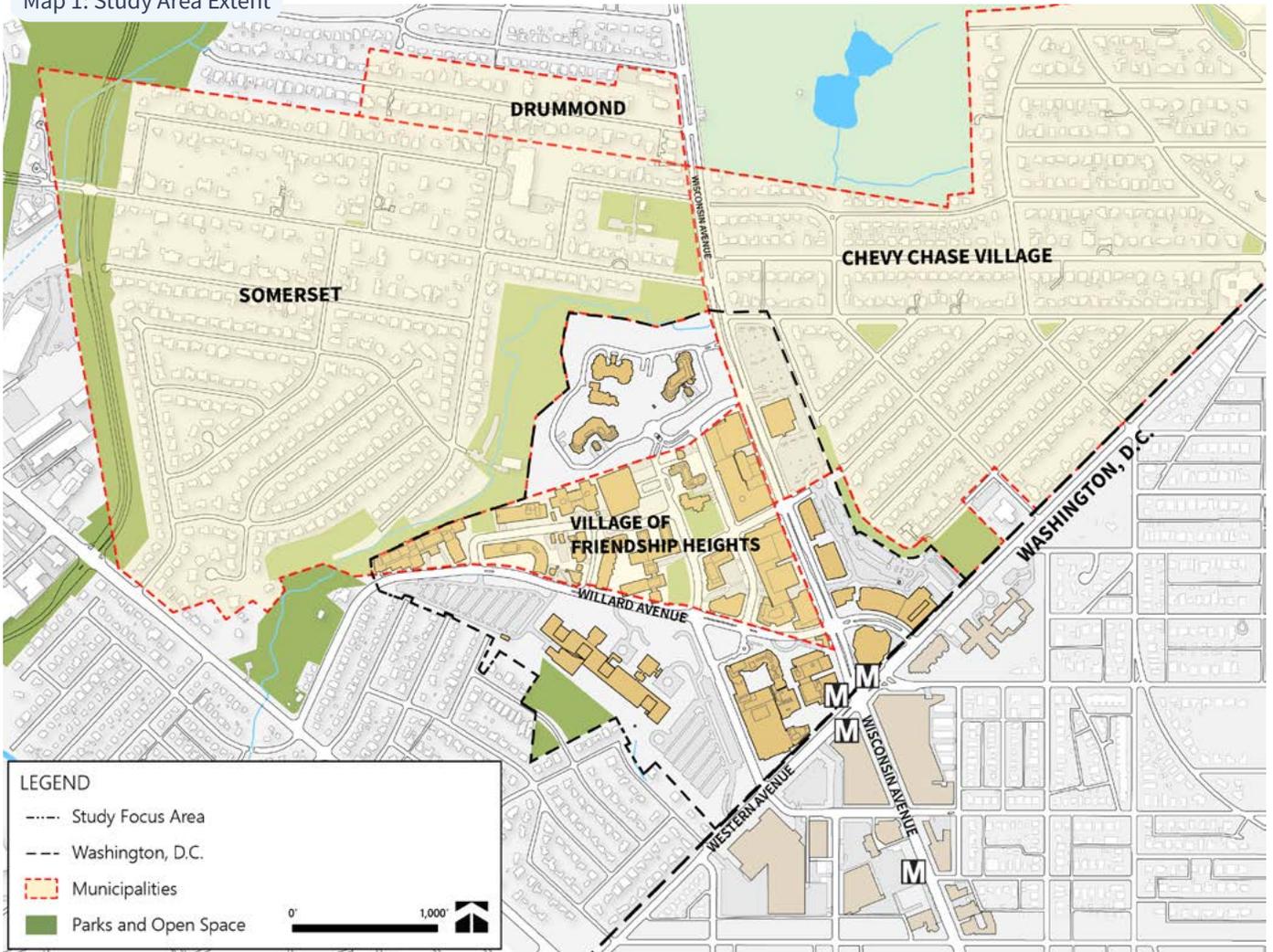
### Geography and Context

Friendship Heights is located along the Wisconsin Avenue corridor where Montgomery County meets Washington DC, a few miles south of Bethesda. It is a relatively small downtown at approximately 113 acres. Similar to Bethesda and Silver Spring, it is located at a Metrorail station and is mostly surrounded by residential neighborhoods that are predominantly comprised of single-family homes. As is common in Chevy Chase, some of these neighborhoods are incorporated municipalities or special taxing districts with their own governing bodies and regulations that apply to residents. Within the downtown is the Village of Friendship Heights, created in 1914 and home to over 5,000 residents. To the northeast of Friendship Heights is Chevy Chase Village, an incorporated municipality that includes approximately 720 single-family homes. Its western border is Wisconsin Avenue, including the Saks Fifth Avenue store site. To the northwest of the downtown is the Town of Somerset, stretching from River Road between Little Falls Parkway and the Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park to the middle of the block between Cumberland Avenue and Drummond Avenue. Somerset is made up of almost exclusively single-family homes and is buffered from Friendship Heights by a dense wooded area that is largely owned by the town.

The southwest portion of Friendship Heights is comprised entirely of the GEICO building site, which borders the Chevy Chase neighborhood of Brookdale.

The southern boundary of Friendship Heights is Western Avenue, which is in Washington DC. Wisconsin Avenue continues into Friendship Heights, DC as a commercial spine, with mostly residential uses beyond on either side of that corridor. Immediately across the street from Bloomingdales is the former Mazza Gallerie, now under redevelopment. Recently, the DC Office of Planning published a draft of the Wisconsin Avenue Development Framework. The framework focuses on strengthening the Wisconsin Avenue corridor from Friendship Heights to Tenleytown by encouraging mixed-use development, affordable housing, improved transit access and connectivity and welcoming public spaces. The draft plan identifies many opportunity sites for redevelopment along the corridor, several of which are in Friendship Heights, DC. The plan notably also discusses the planned redevelopment of the former Lord and Taylor building (on Western Avenue, opposite GEICO) to a new all-electric WMATA bus facility, replacing the existing facility in the area.

Map 1: Study Area Extent



View of Wisconsin Avenue in Washington DC

## Development History

In the first part of the 20th century, Friendship Heights was a neighborhood of single-family homes, accessible by streetcar. The Village of Friendship Heights (“the Village”) was created in 1914 as a special taxing district within the larger neighborhood of Friendship Heights by the State of Maryland and remained largely unchanged for 40 years. The Village includes most, but not all, of the residential units in Friendship Heights.

In the 1950s, Friendship Heights began the transition from residential suburb to bustling urban area. The Washington DC suburbs saw rapid growth at this time due to the population boom in the region in the years following World War II. In what was seen at the time as an unconventional move, in 1947 the Hecht Company opened a branch of its popular department store in Silver Spring, a Maryland suburb. This move inspired other department stores to do the same. Early 1950s Friendship Heights saw the opening of Woodward and Lothrop on the Maryland side of Wisconsin Avenue, and Lord and Taylor on the DC side. More retail development followed on Wisconsin Avenue and in 1959 GEICO built its headquarters on

a large piece of land one block west of the retail center that was beginning to take shape.

In the early 1960s there were repeated requests from real estate developers for rezoning to allow for multi-family buildings in Friendship Heights. The 1964 *Master Plan for West Chevy Chase and Vicinity* rezoned several blocks for multi-family high-rise development and by 1966 about 70% of the original single-family homes in the Village were under contract for redevelopment.

By the 1970s there was concern that Friendship Heights was heading for more development than the transportation network could sustain. In response, the 1974 *Friendship Heights Sector Plan* reduced the area of the recently established Central Business District (CBD) and downzoned many of the blocks that were not yet developed. This move was not without controversy and there were many debates (and lawsuits) that attempted to either change or maintain the 1974 Plan.

Even with the reduced zoning, with the opening of the Metrorail station in 1978, Friendship Heights



Photo of a house on what is now North Park Avenue before multifamily buildings were constructed.  
Credit: *Village of Friendship Heights: The First 100 Years* by White, Mansfield, Shapiro

1951



1979



2008



Aerial images of Friendship Heights between 1951 - 2008

cemented its identity as a regional retail destination, particularly for luxury goods, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

In 1998 a new sector plan was adopted which remains in place today. The *Friendship Heights Sector Plan* adjusted the CBD boundary and focused on parks and open spaces and several large sites for potential redevelopment (including GEICO). It was also the first sector plan for Friendship Heights that focused on urban design, recommending Wisconsin Avenue as a retail corridor with improved pedestrian access and urban plazas integrated into the retail development on the west side of the street.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the expansion of online retail posed challenges for brick-and-mortar stores in Friendship Heights. New commercial uses focused on restaurants and other services.

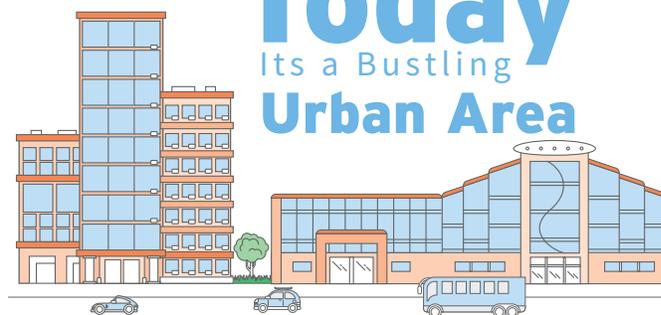
Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened an already-declining market. More shops and restaurants closed, and the high-end Mazza Gallerie shopping mall on the Washington DC side of Friendship Heights was shuttered and then demolished for mixed-use redevelopment.

Demand for housing remains high, however. In 2023, the Planning Board approved a new mixed-use, multi-family apartment building at 5500 Wisconsin Avenue.

## In The 1950s Friendship Heights Was a Residential Suburb



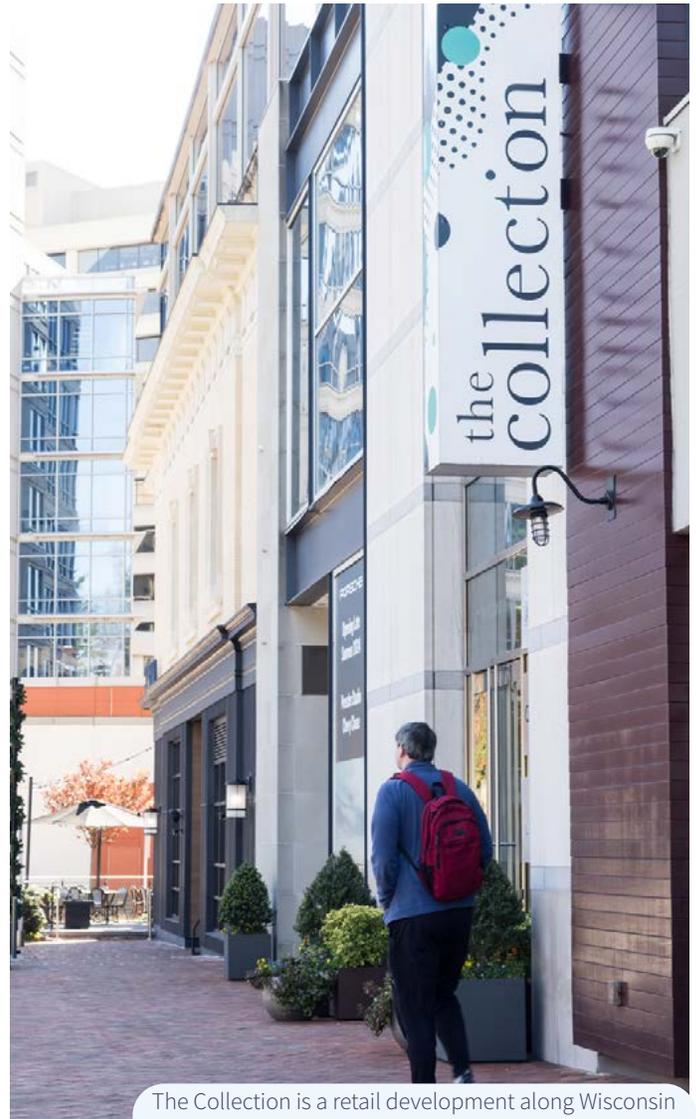
## Today Its a Bustling Urban Area



Aerial view of the Village in the 1970s  
Credit: *Village of Friendship Heights: The First 100 Years* by White, Mansfield, Shapiro

## Demographics

Residents of Friendship Heights are older, predominantly white, and well-educated when compared to the general Montgomery County population. Thirty-five percent of the approximately 6,000 residents of Friendship Heights are over 65 as compared with 16% countywide. Nearly 70% of Friendship Heights residents identify as white, compared with 42% countywide – with less than 4% identifying as Black, compared with 20% countywide. In Montgomery County almost 20% of the population identifies as non-white Hispanic/Latino, but in Friendship Heights it is only just over 10%. While 18% of county residents have completed a post-college graduate or professional degree, in Friendship Heights it is more than 60% of residents. Despite this disparity in education, Friendship Heights has a similar annual income profile to the larger county across nearly all brackets.<sup>1</sup>



The Collection is a retail development along Wisconsin Avenue with shops and restaurants.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Staff tabulation of 2017-2021 American Communities Survey, 5-year estimates, U.S. Census Bureau

# 2. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

A key component of this study was learning about how people experience the public realm in Friendship Heights, and how people feel about the urban area. The study kicked off in June 2023, and engagement began in earnest in the fall. Staff met with neighborhood groups, including the boards and/or councils of several surrounding municipalities and special taxing districts. An online questionnaire launched in October and collected 142 responses over six weeks. Planning Department Staff also held two in-person open-house events in Friendship Heights at the end of October that attracted around 75 participants. Outreach efforts also included mass emails to community stakeholders, distributing flyers to local businesses and multi-family buildings, pop-up information tables around the downtown and at community events, and partnerships with key community organizations that assisted with the outreach via their communication networks.

Both the questionnaire and the open-house events focused on the same topics: community identity, relationship to Friendship Heights, the pedestrian, transportation, and parks and open space networks, and community amenities and services. Participants responded to questions about their experiences in Friendship Heights today. It was clear from the responses that Friendship Heights stakeholders care a lot about the area, and they responded thoughtfully and in detail about specific streets, parks, and locations.

The results of the engagement efforts are summarized by topic throughout this report. Additional detail can be found in the appendix of this report.





Engagement open house event at Friendship Heights Village Community Center on October 30, 2023



Engagement open house event at Wisconsin Place Community Recreation Center on October 24, 2023.

## Who We Heard From

Tables 1 and 2 show the demographics of Friendship Heights compared with the demographic data staff collected during engagement. For a relatively small sample size (182 respondents provided demographic data), the reach of the study provides decent representation across total populations in this area. The study succeeded in reaching participants over 35, but did not reach many between 18-35. The study also struggled to reach people who identify as Hispanic/Latinx or Asian.

Table 1: Age Demographic Comparison

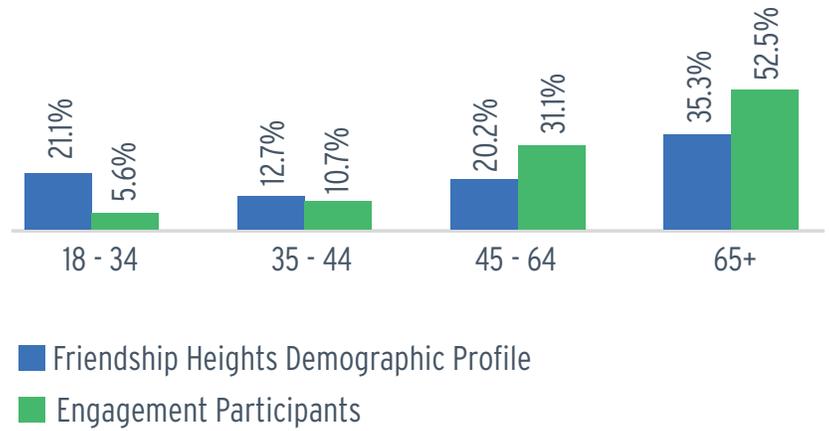
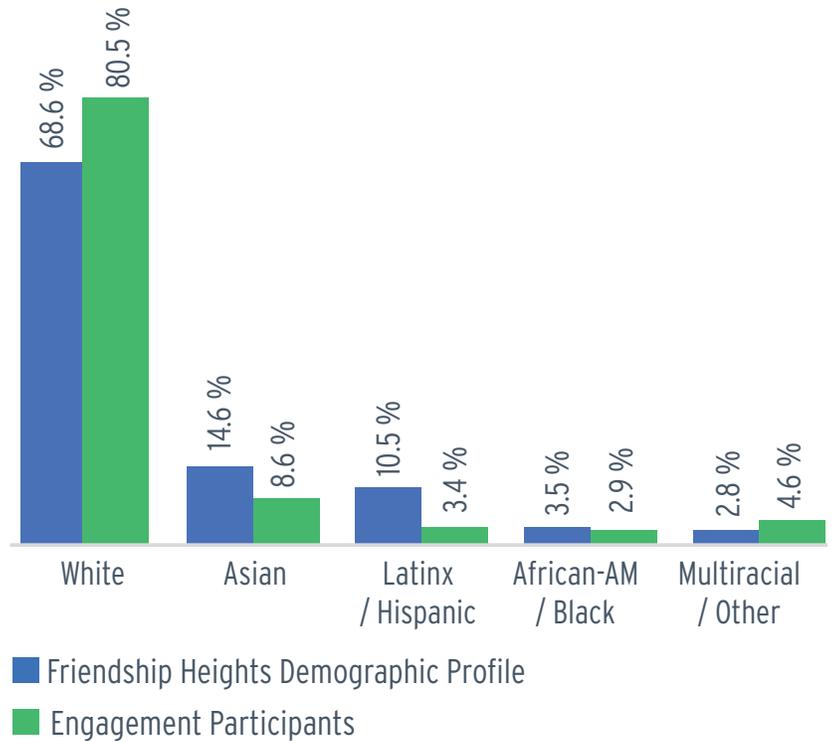


Table 2: Ethnicity/Race Demographic Comparison



## Themes and Identity

Initial engagement questions focused on what stakeholders like about Friendship Heights. Top themes included its convenience and location; its walkability; parks and green spaces; access to amenities and services; and the friendly, welcoming community atmosphere (Table 3).

Stakeholders were also asked to describe Friendship Heights using three words; the question encouraged stakeholders to reflect and share what Friendship Heights means to them. Responses were varied and often touched on similar themes. Common responses included great access to transit, the “urban within suburban” feel of Friendship Heights, and the feeling that the area is a safe, clean, and

quiet neighborhood. Other responses were more critical of the area, and described it as expensive, wealthy, and inaccessible, lacking in vibrancy and services; old, boring, deserted, and empty; and deteriorating. In contrast to these perceptions, others described Friendship Heights as having potential and undergoing a transition to reinvent itself. Interestingly, many stakeholders responded with more than one sentiment in the same comment - words like “empty,” “dying,” or similar were juxtaposed with words such as “potential,” and “promise.” Figure 1 summarizes the responses received to this engagement question. Despite the wide range of responses, there is still a strong sense of future positive change among stakeholders.

Table 3: What Do You Like About Friendship Heights?

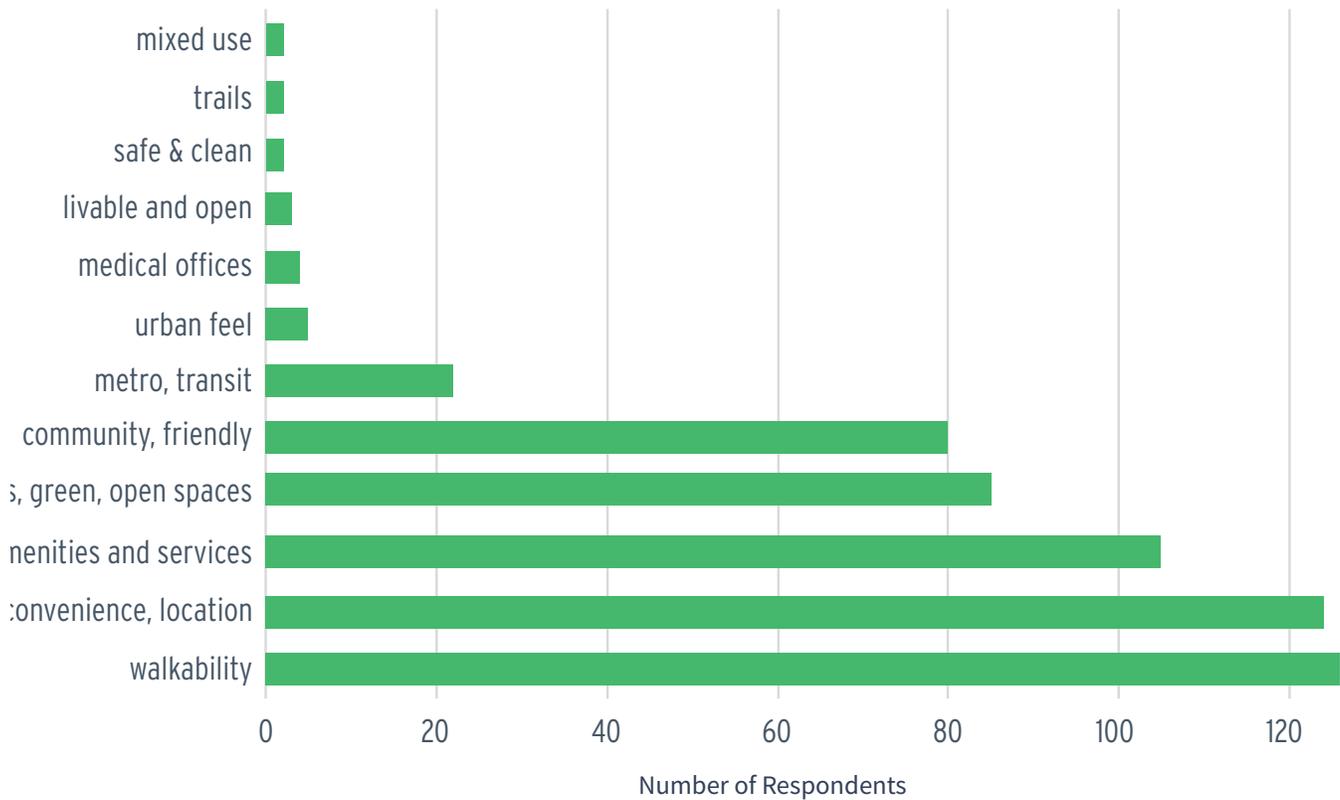
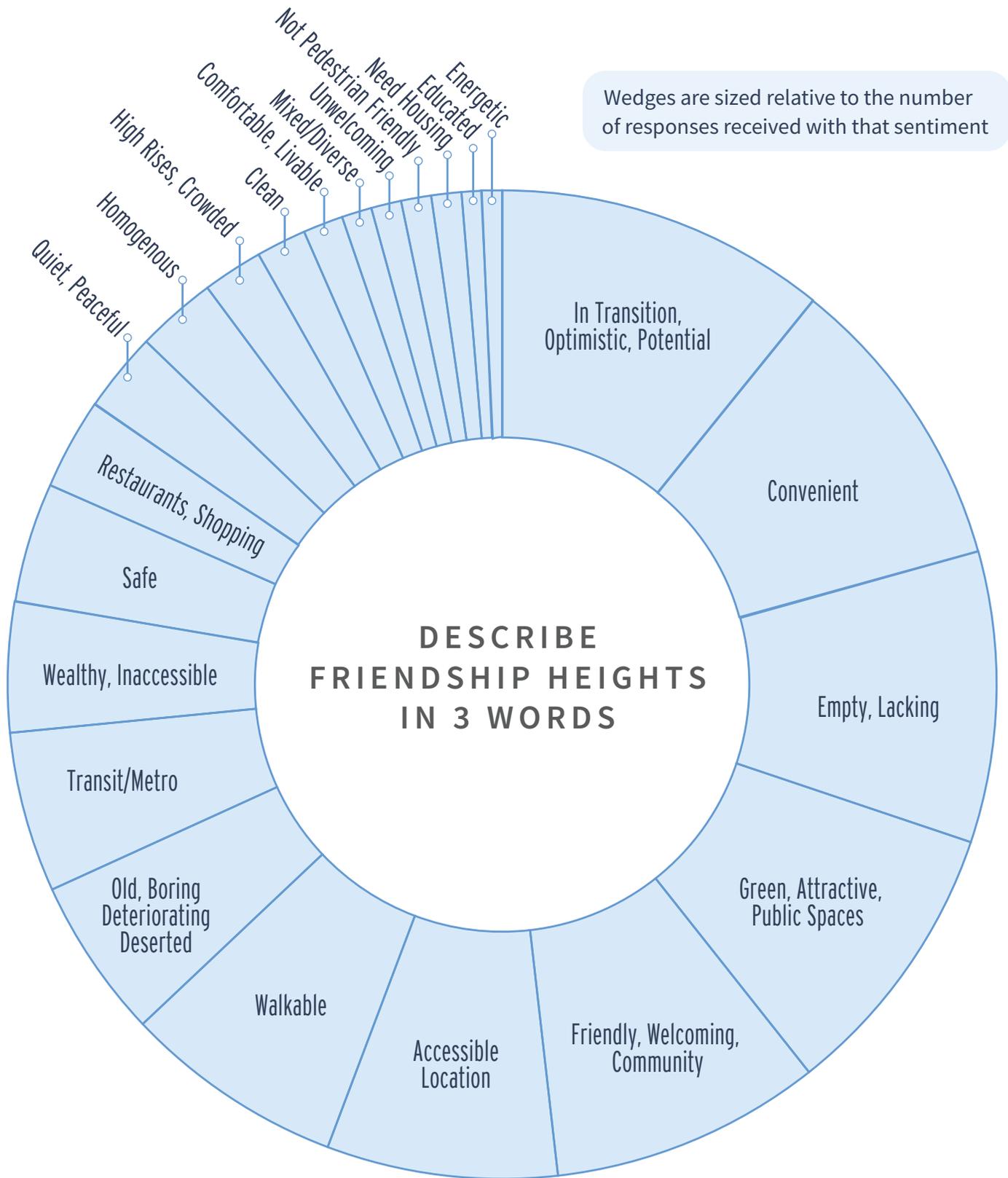


Figure 1: Describing Friendship Heights in Three Words



# 3. URBAN DESIGN ANALYSIS

The urban design analysis studies the role of Friendship Heights in the region, its relationship to its surrounding communities, and the pedestrian, transportation, and open space frameworks that comprise the public realm. The study also includes a brief analysis of community amenities and how Friendship Heights does or does not serve its stakeholders with regard to neighborhood services and needs. The study reflects observations of public life in Friendship Heights over several months in the summer and fall of 2023, research on the history of Chevy Chase and Friendship Heights, and a multi-pronged engagement effort.

This study generally focuses on the area within the 1998 *Friendship Heights Sector Plan* boundary but also considers the context around that area on all sides, including over the border with Washington DC.



Walking a dog on Wisconsin Avenue

Map 2: Base Map



# 3.1

## MONTGOMERY COUNTY "DOWNTOWNS"



Ellsworth Place in downtown Silver Spring



Shops on Bethesda Row

Friendship Heights is one of four downtowns (former Central Business Districts, or CBDs) in Montgomery County, including Silver Spring, Bethesda, and downtown Wheaton.

All four downtowns have a major road (or roads) that come through the downtown and serve as a significant spine of activity. Wisconsin Avenue is this spine for both Friendship Heights and Bethesda, and Georgia Avenue is a significant arterial that runs through both Wheaton and Silver Spring. These roads are not always centrally located in the downtown, but they tend to support activity corridors in these urban areas.

Unlike Bethesda and Wheaton, both Silver Spring and Friendship Heights border Washington DC. However, the relationship at the intersection of Montgomery County and DC is quite different at

each location. In Silver Spring, the Eastern Avenue border is at the edge of the downtown, with the apartment buildings of Silver Spring transitioning to the single-family neighborhoods of Shepherd Park in DC. The center of downtown Silver Spring with the transit hub and commercial core are further north. In Friendship Heights, the intersection of Western Avenue and Wisconsin Avenue is both the border between municipalities and the “100 percent corner,” the busiest intersection often with the highest land values, in the downtown. The Metro station is at this intersection with entrances in both jurisdictions and the overall scale of development and predominantly non-residential uses along Wisconsin Avenue is consistent on both sides of the boundary, rendering the boundary between Washington DC and Maryland all but invisible.



A street festival in downtown Wheaton

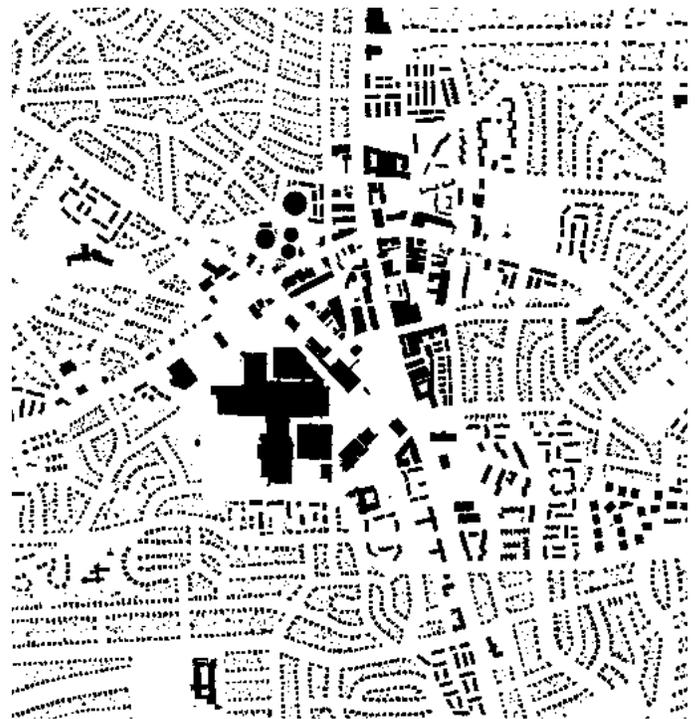
On page 20 page are black and white “figure-ground” diagrams of all four Montgomery County downtowns. A figure-ground diagram is a two-dimensional map of an urban space that shows the relationship between built and unbuilt space. The black “figures” are the buildings, and everything else (roads, parks, etc) is shown in white. These diagrams highlight differences in block sizes and overall development patterns. In the diagram for Friendship Heights, the downtown seems to be surrounded by a white buffer. This white buffer is the wooded areas to the east and north of the downtown and the large lawn and parking lots of the GEICO parcel to the west. The street and block pattern in the downtown has little relationship to that of the surrounding neighborhoods, and there are no streets other than Wisconsin Avenue and Willard Avenue that connect the fabric of the downtown to the surrounding areas on the Montgomery County side. The downtown is more connected on the Washington DC border, as the building scale and block size along the Wisconsin Avenue corridor continues seamlessly into the District.

In contrast, many streets in both Bethesda and downtown Silver Spring connect these downtowns with their surrounding neighborhoods. While the scale of the blocks and the buildings transition from larger in the downtown to smaller at the edges, the streets continuity help to integrate the downtowns into their respective contexts. Wheaton, however, has a bit of both conditions. To the north and east the street network extends from the downtown into the surrounding residential areas, but to the southeast, the large mall parcel cuts off downtown Wheaton from Kensington much like the GEICO parcel does in Friendship Heights.

Figure 2: Figure-Ground Representation of Montgomery County Downtowns



Friendship Heights



Wheaton



Silver Spring



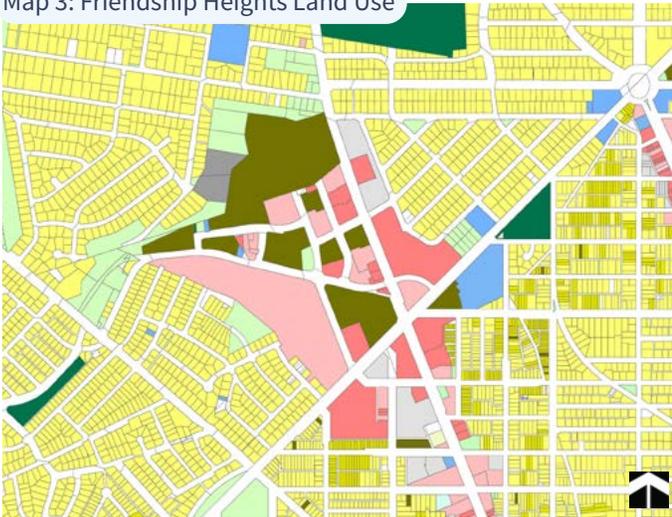
Bethesda

Comparing land use maps (page 22) can also help identify similarities and differences. All four downtowns have a mix of commercial and residential throughout, however Friendship Heights is notably missing educational or cultural uses. The parcel sizes in Friendship Heights tend to be much larger than the parcels in Silver Spring or Bethesda. One reason for this is that many of the parcels in Friendship Heights that were originally single-family homes were acquired in groups with the intention to combine parcels for large multifamily buildings in the 1960s. Silver Spring and Bethesda began developing into urban areas in the first part of the twentieth century and the sizes of many parcels and blocks were established then. All four urban areas are surrounded primarily by residential neighborhoods. Both Friendship Heights and Silver Spring border Washington DC, although the relationship at the border is quite different. Silver Spring's border with DC is characterized by an abrupt transition both in scale and land use. Multifamily buildings and commercial uses are across Eastern Avenue from single-family homes. The north-south corridor of Georgia Avenue is the only place where the commercial pattern from downtown Silver Spring extends into DC. Friendship Heights, however, has a near-invisible border between Maryland and DC as the commercial pattern continues down Wisconsin Avenue.



Station Square in downtown Silver Spring

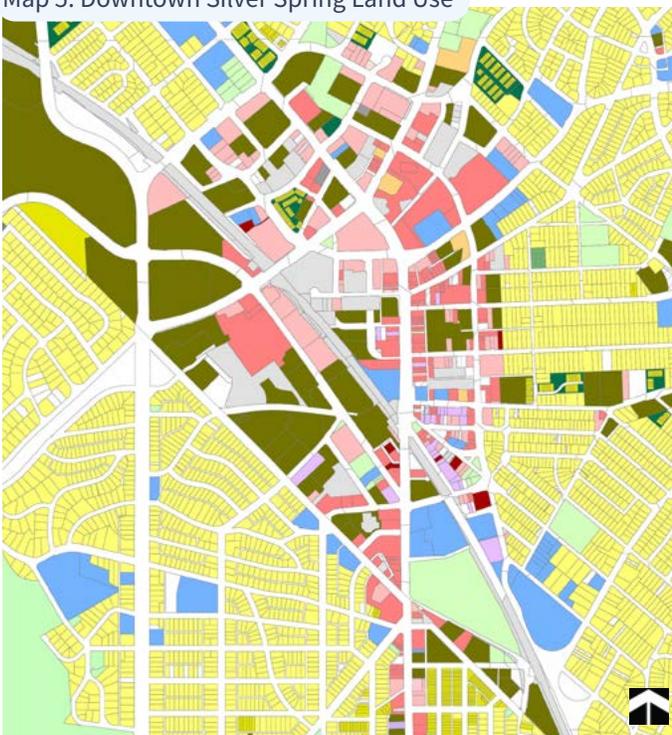
Map 3: Friendship Heights Land Use



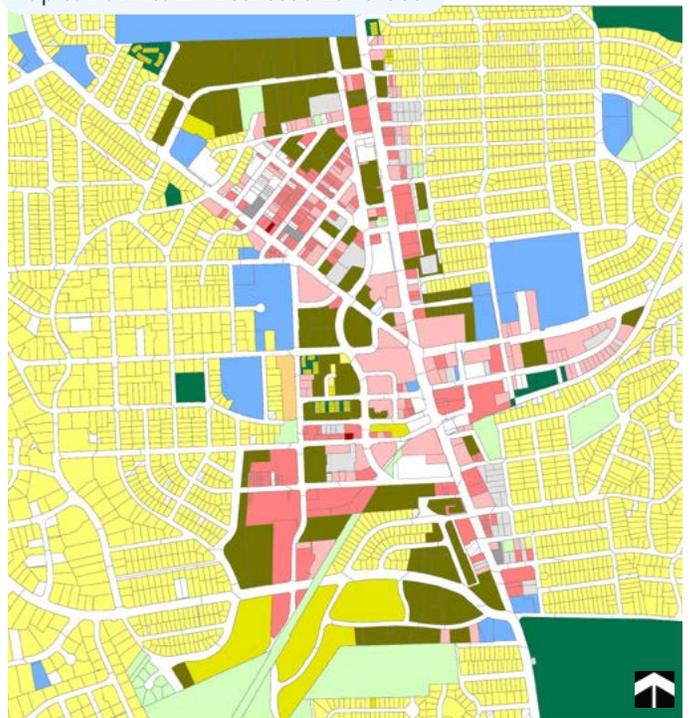
Map 4: Downtown Wheaton Land Use



Map 5: Downtown Silver Spring Land Use



Map 6: Downtown Bethesda Land Use

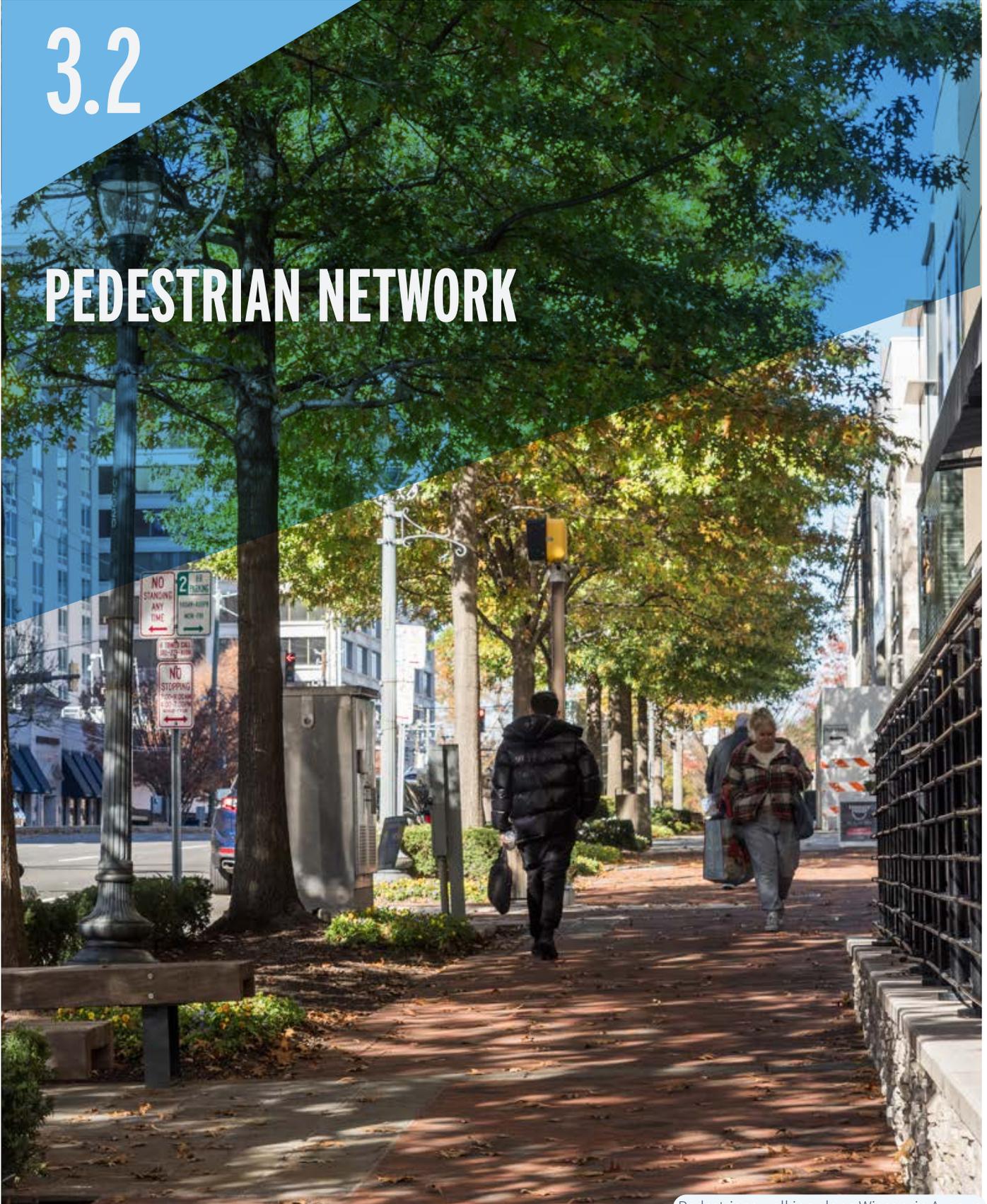


Land Use Legend

 Right-Of-Way	 Office	 Single Family Detached
 Agriculture	 Parking & Transportation	 Utility
 Parks	 Research & Development	 Warehouse
 Open Space/ Recreation	 Retail	 Vacant
 Cultural	 Multi-Family	
 Industrial	 Cooperative	
 Institutional/ Community Facility	 Single Family Attached	

# 3.2

## PEDESTRIAN NETWORK



Pedestrians walking along Wisconsin Avenue

## 3.2.1 Pedestrian Network Analysis: What We Saw

A strong pedestrian network is key to a successful urban area. Accessible sidewalks, safe pedestrian crossings, and a consistent street tree canopy for shade and cooling are key components. In addition, the level of street-facing ground-level building activity contributes to how welcoming and engaging an urban area feels.

### Sidewalks

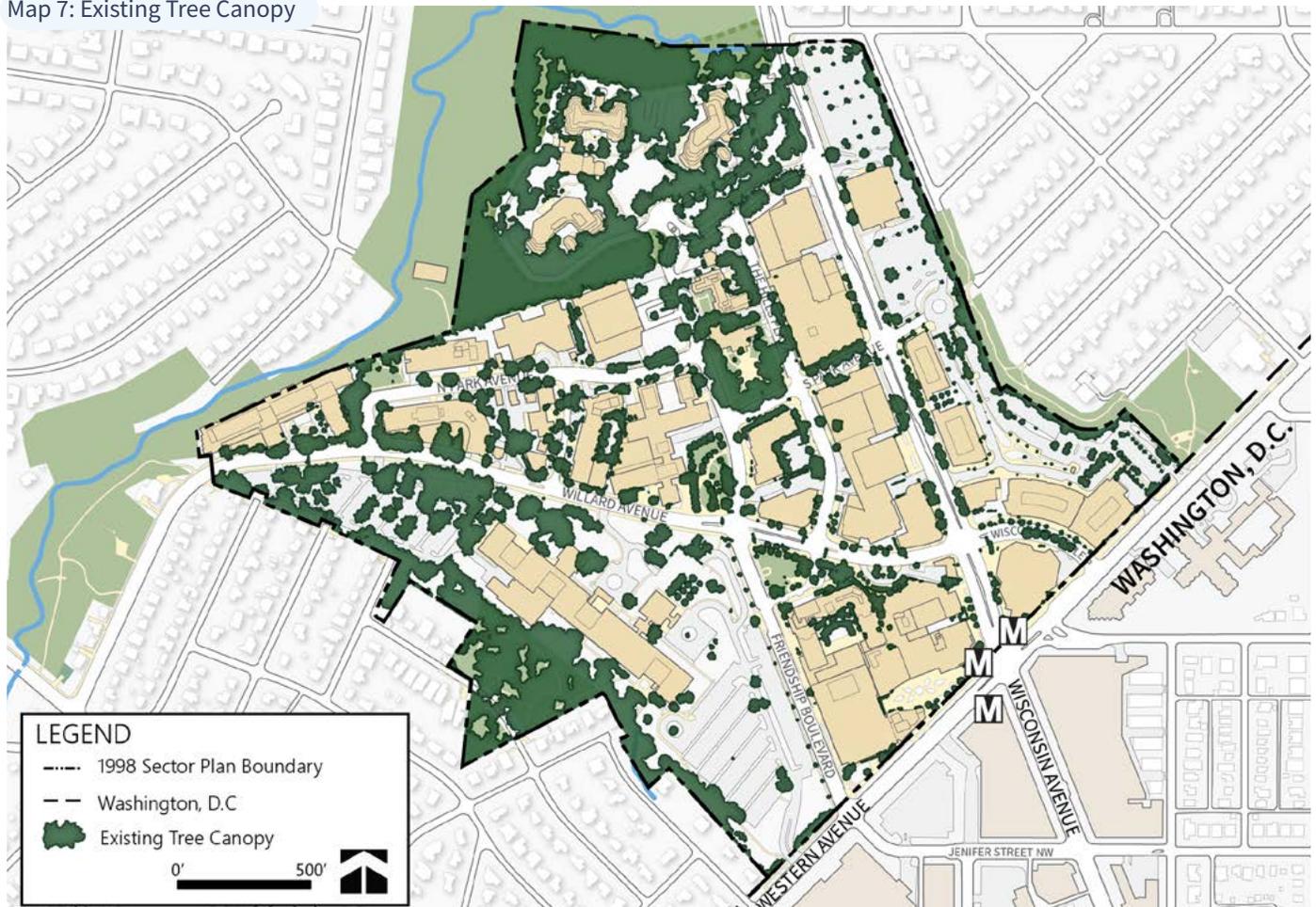
Friendship Heights has a strong pedestrian network. Every street has sidewalks, many of them wide. Nearly every street has a planted buffer with street trees and there are several streets with mature trees that provide significant shade for pedestrians (map 7). Several streets have younger trees, but in the future these streets, such as Friendship Boulevard along the GEICO site, will be shaded.

The sidewalk on Willard Avenue, between Friendship Boulevard and River Road, is not separated from the traffic with a tree buffer, although there are many trees along the road on the other side of the sidewalk. On a busy day, pedestrians may not feel protected from the traffic along this road.

Sidewalks along North Park Avenue are also adjacent to the roadway in many places, although with slower speeds and limited local traffic pedestrians may not feel uncomfortable.

Crosswalks within the Village are indicated via a change in material, usually brick pavers, which may be difficult to distinguish at night and can be a tripping hazard. Crosswalks outside of the Village are typically high-visibility crosswalks, which are generally preferred for pedestrian safety.

Map 7: Existing Tree Canopy



## Neighborhood Connections

As discussed above, Friendship Heights is surrounded on three sides by neighborhoods that are mostly comprised of single-family homes. There are not many pedestrian connections between these areas and the downtown; most of the edge of Friendship Heights is disconnected from the surrounding community via wooded areas or walls. Map 8 illustrates the access points to the downtown from the surrounding areas.

Along the eastern side of Friendship Heights, at the edge of The Collection parking lot, there is a wall and a buffer park along Belmont Avenue. There is a single-gated opening that links this side of the downtown with Chevy Chase Village. The downtown is intentionally barely visible from the side streets

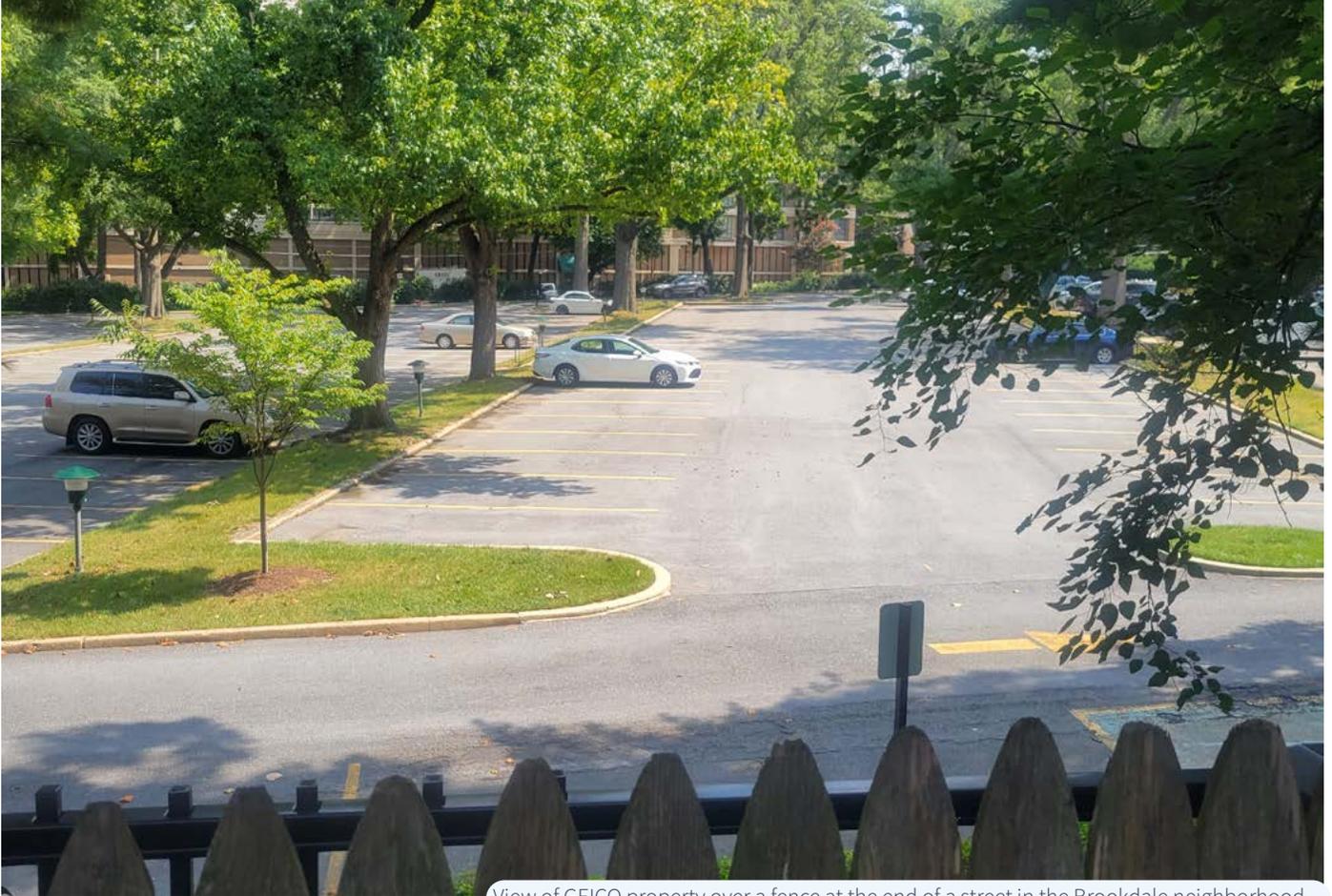
that intersect with Belmont Avenue. Along North Park Avenue within Friendship Heights, adjacent to William Page Park, there is a sidewalk that leads to a trail through the Somerset Park woods. This trail is signed, but it does not indicate that it connects to the Town of Somerset. The trail ends at the Somerset Pool and is the only connection through the heavily wooded area between the downtown and this neighborhood. In the Brookdale area, Brookdale Neighborhood Park is the main connection point to Friendship Heights, although one can also access the downtown via Willard Avenue or Western Avenue. North of the park there is a wall between the GEICO property and the local streets, while south of the park there is a landscaped swale-like area that is less of a barrier but lacks a public access point.

Map 8 : Pedestrian Network and Access to Neighborhoods





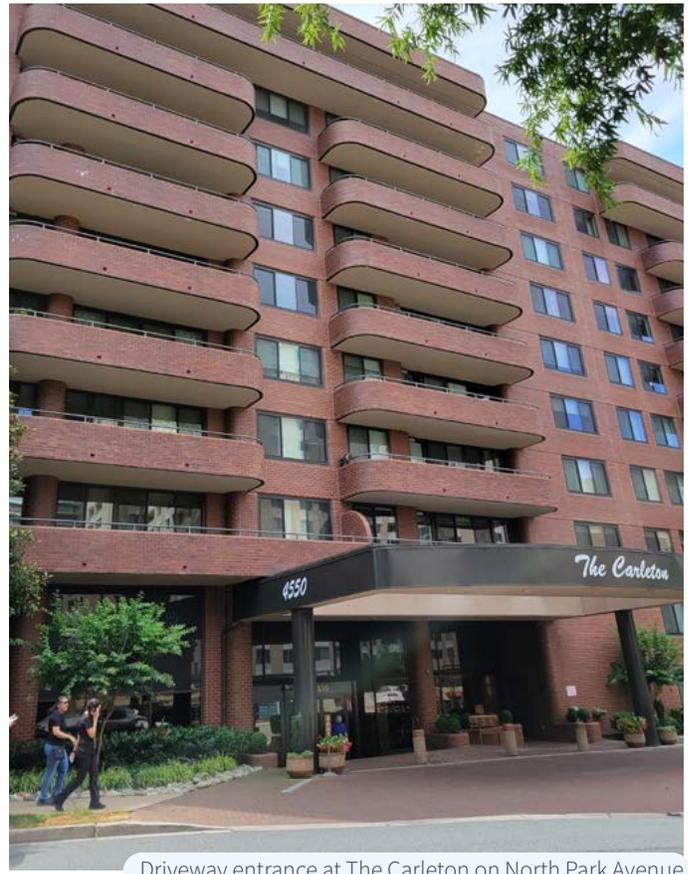
View of Friendship Heights from Chevy Chase Village



View of GEICO property over a fence at the end of a street in the Brookdale neighborhood.



Storefronts on Wisconsin Avenue



Driveway entrance at The Carleton on North Park Avenue

## Street Activation and Building Entrances

While the sidewalk network is continuous and comfortable, the level of street activation varies considerably throughout Friendship Heights. An active street is one where there is a lively interplay between the public realm and the ground floor zones of the buildings on the street.

Wisconsin Avenue is the most active street, with ground-level storefronts, multiple building entrances, public benches, café seating, and plazas with public art along the corridor, such as at The Collection. Building entrances are generally easily visible from the street. Sunken plazas that pull the buildings back from the street are not always successfully programmed, however the plaza at 5454 Wisconsin Avenue is at least partially activated by the outdoor seating in front of the Starbucks Coffee. Ground-level activity is maintained along Wisconsin Avenue until the intersection with South Park Avenue. Even though there are a number of vacant storefronts along these blocks, there is still an overall impression of a relatively active retail street.

The east side of Wisconsin Avenue north of South Park Avenue is poorly activated with the standalone Saks Fifth Avenue building surrounded by parking lots stretching to the north and south, The west side is slightly more active with some ground-floor retail and a hotel, but much of the retail on this block is vacant and slated for redevelopment.<sup>2</sup>

The other active commercial node is on Willard Avenue, from Friendship Boulevard to Wisconsin Avenue. This block includes popular eating establishments, some with outdoor seating, and Whole Foods, which is a destination grocery store in Friendship Heights.

Street activation is not limited to commercial or retail buildings. Residential buildings are designed with transparent ground-floor entrances, canopies that reach the street, welcoming landscaping and street furniture, and balconies at upper floors that face the street.

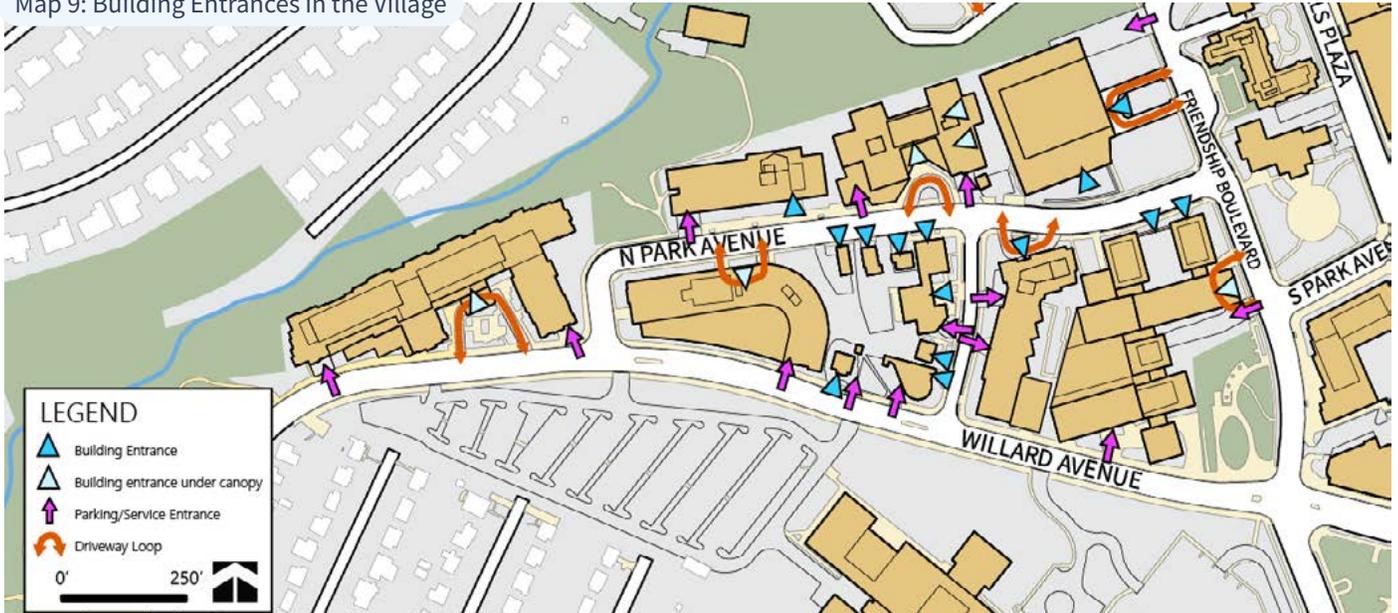
<sup>2</sup> In 2023, the Planning Board approved a redevelopment plan for 5550 Wisconsin Avenue for a new 18-story mixed-use tower with ground-floor retail and up to 300 new multi-family units, 15% of which would be affordable units

Along North Park Avenue, which is the main residential spine of the Village of Friendship Heights, there are some buildings that include these characteristics. However, most of the building entrances are pulled far back from the street due to circular entry drop-offs for vehicles. Walking along North Park Avenue means crossing many large curb cuts at each of these driveway entrances. The front canopies are often so large that the building's entrance is hard to see from the street. Despite the walkable nature of Friendship Heights, these buildings were designed to prioritize arrival by vehicle.

While all buildings have backs, even secondary facades of buildings can be designed with street activation in mind, either through windows,

balconies or even murals or public art. In Friendship Heights, there are several streets where whole blocks are dominated by blank facades of building podiums (portions of Willard Avenue), or blank brick "backs" of multi-family buildings (portions of Friendship Boulevard). In addition to blank facades, these blocks usually include multiple large curb cuts for separate entrances for parking and loading. The stretch of Friendship Boulevard between Willard Avenue and Western Avenue has little to no activation given the GEICO property on one side, and the "back" of Wisconsin Place on the other side. Even the entrance to an important community amenity, the Wisconsin Place Recreation Center, is relatively hidden from view and does not activate this frontage at all.

Map 9: Building Entrances in the Village



Building podium wall along Willard Avenue

## 3.2.2 Pedestrian Network: What We Heard

As mentioned above, a large portion of participants named “walkability” as one of Friendship Heights’ strengths. In fact, 85% of questionnaire respondents selected walkability as something they like about the area. Similarly, 30% of participants of the open houses referred to Friendship Heights’ walkability as a key word that describes the area, and it was one of the most used words used to respond to the prompt “Describe your Friendship Heights in 3 words.”

While walkability was clearly noted as a strength of the area, participants also shared areas of challenge and concern around the pedestrian network. The biggest issues expressed were speeding traffic and unsafe street crossings and lighting, while safety at night was a concern for 25% of online survey participants and noted by 15% of open-house participants.

Other safety concerns included dark garages and/or garage openings, people hanging around spaces who are experiencing homelessness or mental illness, vacant storefronts, and construction areas.

It is important to note that 21% of all participants (open house and online questionnaire) answered questions about feeling safe or welcome as “being comfortable everywhere in Friendship Heights.” However, that answer cut across demographics - there is no clear demographic pattern that correlates to those who answered that they feel safe walking everywhere in Friendship Heights.

Favorite Places to Walk in Friendship Heights

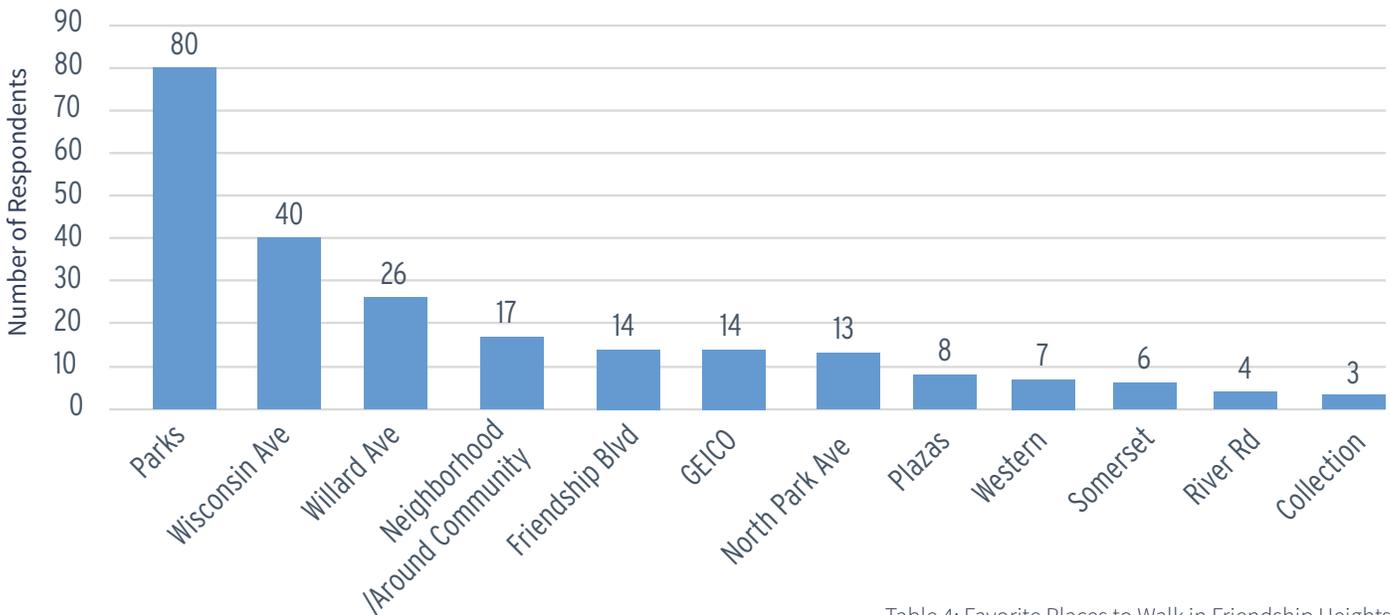


Table 4: Favorite Places to Walk in Friendship Heights



## Pedestrian Network

“I walk all over. Appreciate where we have open space, and being able to see the sky.”

“I love the woods and stream behind Willard Towers. I love the trail through the woods over to the Somerset pool and neighborhood. I love the parks on Willard Ave and look forward to the North Park park opening.”

## I like to walk....

“The trails through the woods, in neighborhoods, away from traffic”

“Wisconsin, Willard Avenue, North Park Avenue”

“[anywhere that is] Away from the noise of Wisconsin Avenue”

“Area surrounding Humphrey Park, Western Grove Urban Park and the neighborhood pathway, Livingston park, Brookdale neighborhood, wooded path behind Willard Towers towards Somerset”

“The park behind the apartment buildings that are on Willard.  
The walk behind Saks parking lot”



## It feels unsafe....

“At night, I don’t think there is sufficient lighting when I walk home from Metro. On Wisconsin and South Park.”

“Anywhere after 9PM”

“Just at night along Western Avenue from the metro stop down Western Avenue, past Lord and Taylor”

“When crossing streets such as Western and Wisconsin due to unsafe drivers”

“After dark almost anywhere, but especially on Willard Avenue or North Park. There is no street life.”



# 3.3

## TRANSPORTATION NETWORK



Biker waiting to cross Wisconsin Avenue

### 3.3.1 Transportation Network Analysis: What We Saw

Although walking is a primary means of getting around Friendship Heights, the downtown is well-served by various modes of transit. The Metrorail Red Line station at the intersection of Western Avenue and Wisconsin Avenue links Friendship Heights to Washington DC destinations to the south as well as Bethesda and Rockville to the north. Both Metrobus and Ride-On buses stop along Western Avenue, Willard Avenue, and Wisconsin Avenue. The bus station at 2 Wisconsin Circle was busy at all times of the day when Planning Staff visited Friendship Heights.

The Village of Friendship Heights operates a free shuttle from morning through evening connecting all of the multi-family buildings in the Village with the Metrorail station and the commercial/retail center of the downtown. Several times a week the shuttle runs to the Giant grocery store less than 2 miles from the Village in Westbard. Planning Staff did not observe many people taking the shuttle or waiting at the covered shuttle stops throughout the Village.



WMATA bus heading south on Wisconsin Avenue

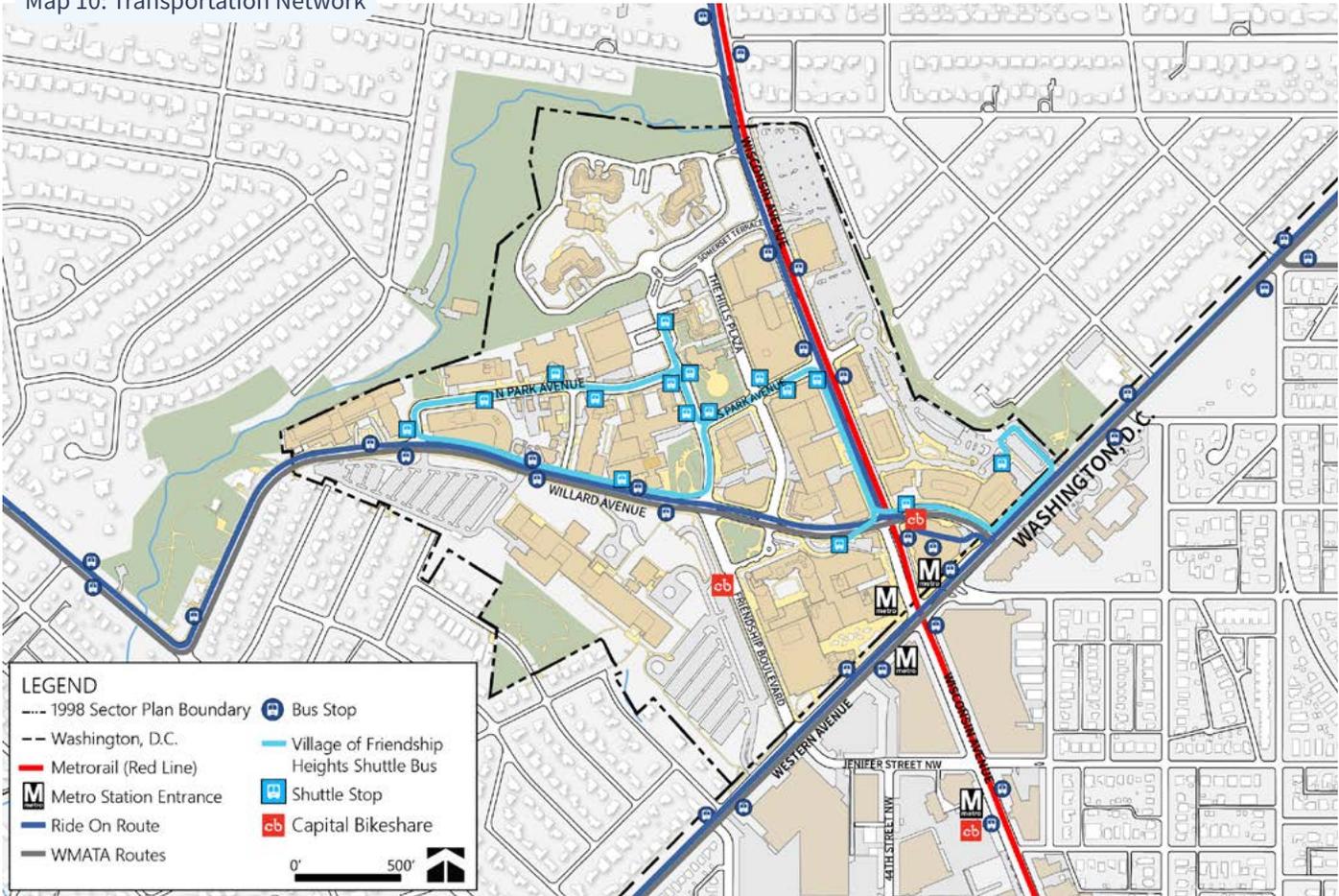


The Village runs a free circulating shuttle

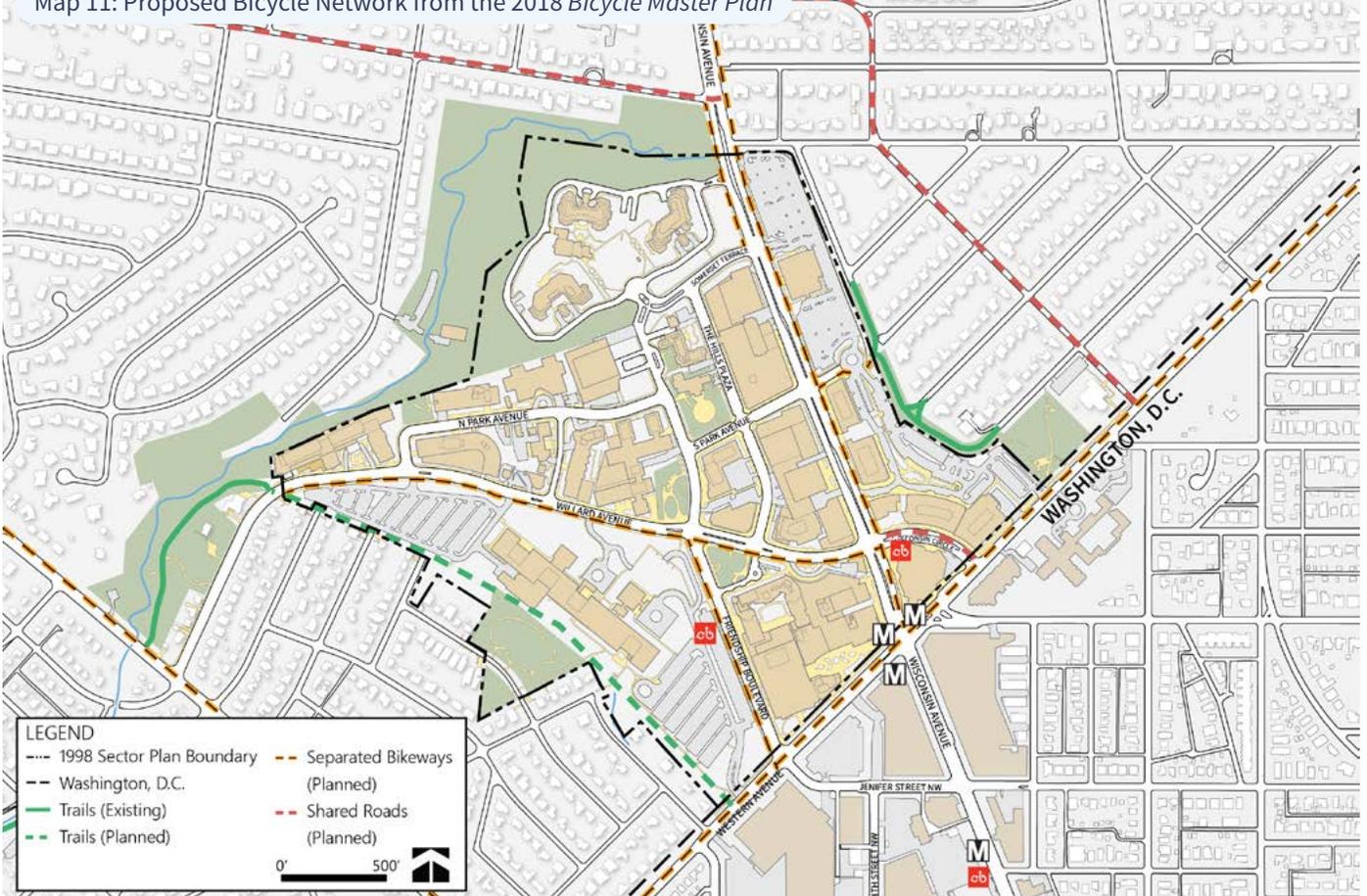


Citibike dock on Wisconsin Avenue

Map 10: Transportation Network



Map 11: Proposed Bicycle Network from the 2018 *Bicycle Master Plan*



Currently there are no separated bicycle facilities in Friendship Heights. The 2018 *Bicycle Master Plan* recommends several for Friendship Heights, but these have yet to be implemented. These can be seen in map 11. There is an existing bike path indicated with alternate paving along Bloomingdale's on Western Avenue, but it does not connect to any other dedicated bike facilities.

There are two Capital Bikeshare docking stations in Friendship Heights, one at Wisconsin Circle and the other along Friendship Boulevard at the GEICO site. Planning Staff observed people biking on streets in Friendship Heights, even without any dedicated bike facilities.

While many stakeholders noted that they mostly walk around Friendship Heights, many shared that they sometimes use their personal cars in and around Friendship Heights, as well as when they leave the neighborhood. Wisconsin Avenue and Willard Avenue have higher traffic volumes than the other smaller streets within Friendship Heights, and Planning Staff observed conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians on both streets. A particularly difficult location is in front of 5530 Wisconsin Avenue at the corner with Somerset Terrace. During business hours there are often cars dropping off, picking up, or idling at the curb, creating a potentially unsafe situation for other drivers and pedestrians at the corner.



Crossing a brick paver crosswalk at Friendship Boulevard.

## 3.3.2. Transportation Network: What We Heard

Walkability continues to be a prime asset for traveling within Friendship Heights. Responses indicate that 98% of participants (open houses and questionnaire) included walking as one of their main mobilization methods, and 53% use their personal car to get around. When asked how

people get in and out of Friendship Heights, the top three responses were using a personal car, walking, and using the Metrorail. Many stakeholders named the Metrorail as “Friendship Heights’ greatest asset.” Few respondents reported using bicycles, scooters, or rideshare services.

Table 5: How People Get Around

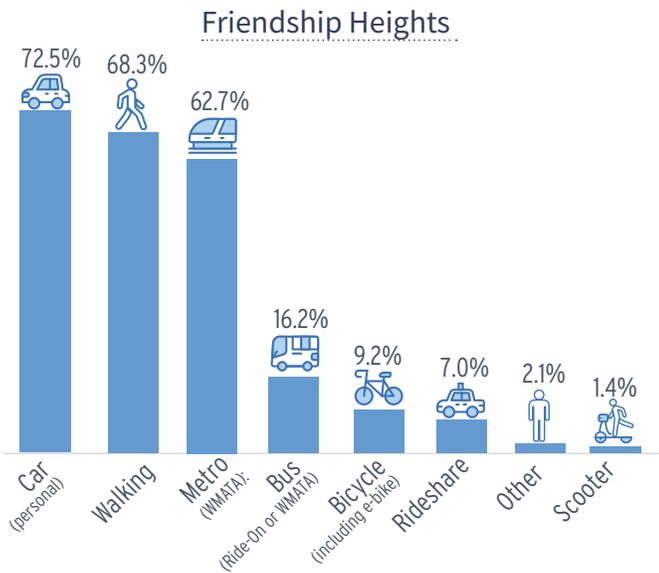
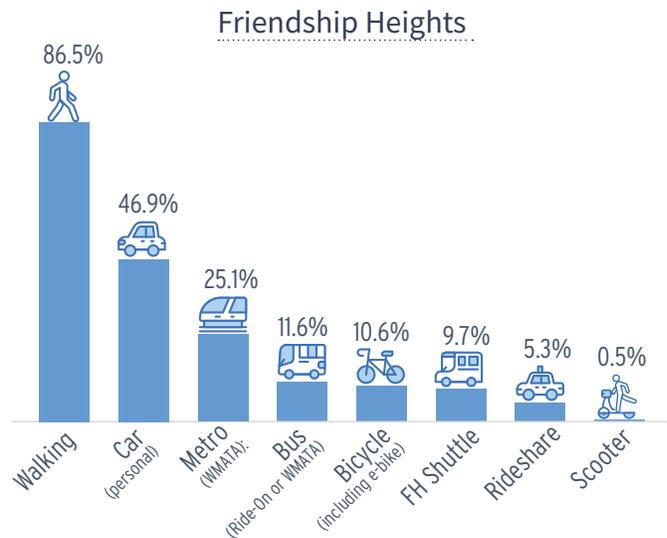


Table 6: How People Get To and From



### Transportation Network....

“I would love to feel comfortable biking from my home to Friendship Heights but there is nowhere in Friendship Heights that I would feel safe biking -- certainly not on Wisconsin or Western.”

“The shuttle bus is very important to many of us. Those who don’t drive need it to shop for groceries”

“The most important asset of Friendship Heights is Metro”

“We need more bike parking”





Pedestrian and cyclist sharing the sidewalk along Wisconsin Avenue

# 3.4

## OPEN SPACE NETWORK



Western Grove Urban Park

### 3.4.1 Open Space Network Analysis: What We Saw

Friendship Heights has an open space network that includes parks, plazas, lawns, and wooded areas. Parks are located at the center of the downtown and along the edges. These spaces provide a range of activities and experiences ranging from contemplative moments and social interactions to a handful of opportunities for active recreation. Friendship Heights is unique among the county's downtowns in that its relatively compact size means a park or public space is usually only a short walk away.

This study focuses on the spaces listed below (and shown in map 12) which include all parks and public spaces in the Study Area, two public parks at the edge of the Study Area, and two plazas. Ownership of each park is indicated in brackets following the park name.

- Brookdale Neighborhood Park (M-NCPPC)
- Hubert Humphrey Park (Village of Friendship Heights)
- Willoughby Park (privately owned public space)
- Vinton Park (wooded area between Friendship Heights and Somerset, owned by Town of Somerset)
- Western Grove Urban Park (M-NCPPC)
- Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park (M-NCPPC)
- The plaza at The Collection (private)
- Bloomingdale's Plaza (private)

The study did not include William Page Park (Village of Friendship Heights) in the analysis because it was conducted when the park was closed for renovations.

In addition to the spaces listed above, the study looked at several of the privately owned green spaces that are not included in the list above and are not traditional parks but are open spaces. These include the lawn at GEICO, the lawn at 5550 Friendship Boulevard, and several of the building courtyards that are publicly accessible.

Map 12 - Parks and Public Spaces in Friendship Heights



- ① Brookdale Neighborhood Park    ② Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park    ③ William Page Park    ④ Vinton Park and adjacent wooded area
- ⑤ Hubert Humphrey Friendship Park    ⑥ Willoughby Park    ⑦ Belmont Buffer Park    ⑧ Western Grove Urban Park

## Ownership

There is varied ownership among the parks and public spaces in this area. The public parks (M-NCPPC) are all located at the periphery of the downtown, while the green spaces in the center of the downtown are either privately owned or part of the Village of Friendship Heights. Both of the plazas are privately owned and designed to support the adjacent retail development.



Playground at Brookdale Neighborhood Park

Map 13 Parks and Public Spaces - Ownership.



- ① Brookdale Neighborhood Park
- ② Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park
- ③ William Page Park
- ④ Vinton Park and adjacent wooded area
- ⑤ Hubert Humphrey Friendship Park
- ⑥ Willoughby Park
- ⑦ Belmont Buffer Park
- ⑧ Western Grove Urban Park

## Access and Experience

As noted above, Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park, Brookdale Park, and Western Grove Urban Park are public parks located at the edges of Friendship Heights; all three are hard to access from the downtown. Brookdale Neighborhood Park is tucked into the Brookdale neighborhood and is accessible from the downtown via a path leading from the back of the GEICO site. Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park and Western Grove Urban Park are both adjacent to major thoroughfares, but neither is visible from the downtown and both are more accessible to the nearby residential neighborhoods than to Friendship Heights. Both Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park and Brookdale Neighborhood Park offer facilities for active recreation (playgrounds and courts), something that is lacking in all of the publicly accessible open spaces in the downtown. Western

Grove Urban Park is a contemplative space that serves as a green buffer from Western Avenue.

The public spaces within Friendship Heights offer a variety of experiences. Humphrey Park, adjacent to the Village Community Center, is designed as a space for social interaction and events with a central fountain, several sculptures, benches for seating, and two fixed concrete chess tables. Planning Staff often observed people sitting, reading, walking dogs, or simply strolling around. On the other hand, Willoughby Park, at the corner of Western Avenue and Friendship Boulevard, serves as a green respite in the middle of the downtown. However, during visits to Friendship Heights it did not appear to be well used. It is fenced off from the nearest property and there are no building frontages that face the



park. Stairs at the back of the park lead to a small upper plaza that is not connected to anything around it. There is an ellipse with benches along the Willard Avenue frontage, but few people were observed using this space.

Bloomington's Plaza and the plaza at The Collection were both designed to support the retail spaces and provide an opportunity for gathering and placemaking. The Bloomington's Plaza is quite large at more than half an acre. While it is filled with furniture, planters, public art and even shade structures to make it more comfortable, the plaza was mostly empty during multiple visits to Friendship Heights. At the mid-block plaza along Wisconsin Avenue at The Collection, the property owner hosts occasional events and there is some public art in this space. If all the retail spaces surrounding the plaza were occupied, it might contribute to the activation of the plaza, however that was not the case at the time of this study. The far end of the plaza connects to a space that has tiered amphitheater-like seating areas, and events are occasionally held here as well. However, it is still far from Wisconsin Avenue and adjacent to a parking lot; it feels disconnected from the rest of downtown.

At the north edge of Friendship Heights is Vinton Park, which provides access to a more natural, wooded environment. The park has trails, including the Marnie Shaul trail, which connects the Town of Somerset with Friendship Heights. This trail is signed and well-maintained, although it poses challenges for someone with mobility or accessibility issues. For example, it has two stream crossings with no bridge. Much of Vinton Park serves as a buffer between the single-family homes in Somerset and the multi-family towers in Friendship Heights, including those of Somerset House. At the narrowest point, there is only approximately 100 feet between the back of the homes on Warwick Place and the back of the apartment buildings on North Park Avenue, with a narrow strip of wooded area and stream between the two. This adjacency is challenging, particularly when there are few leaves on the trees and the visual buffer has diminished effectiveness.



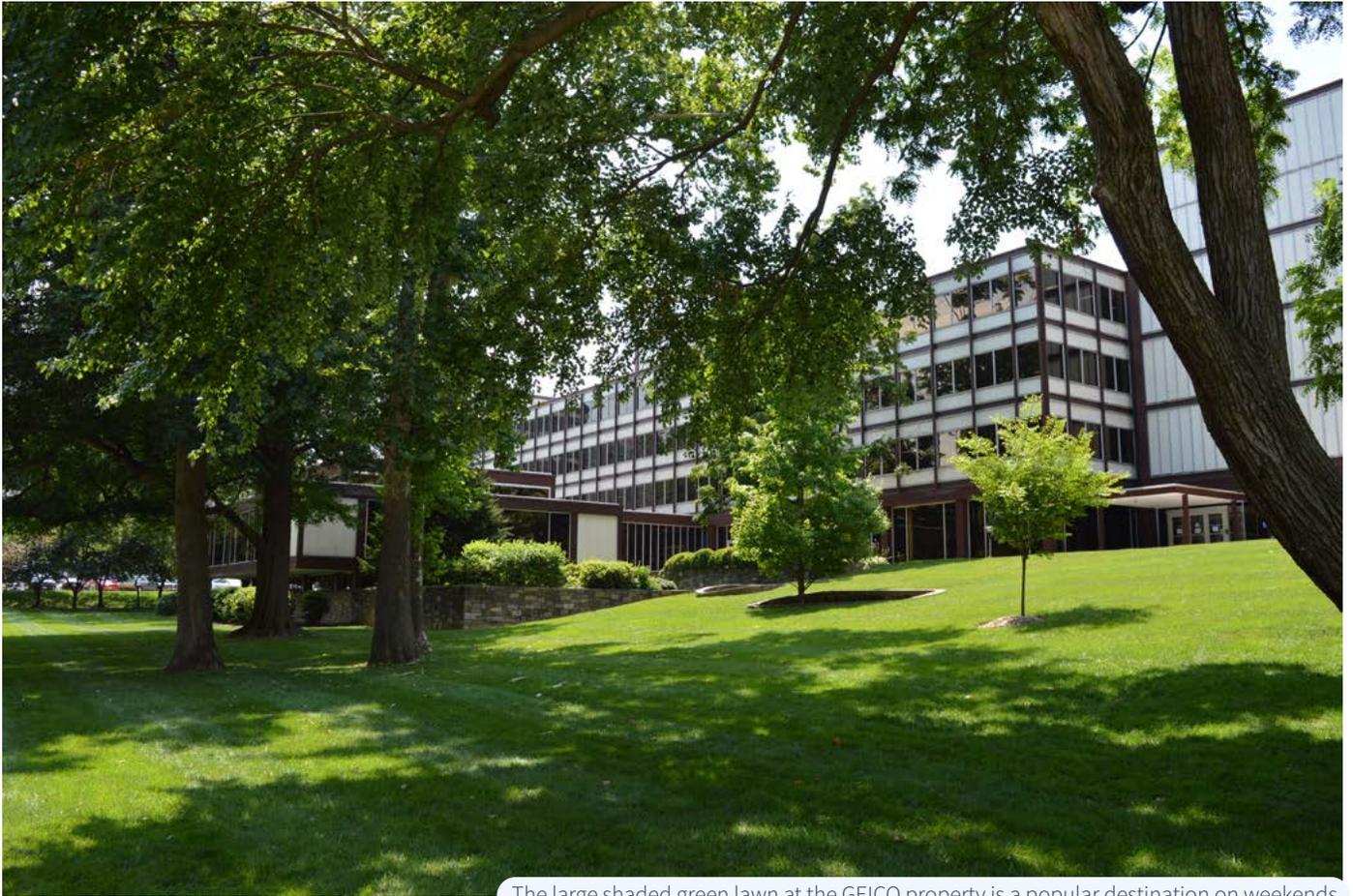
Greenery at Willoughby Park



The plaza at The Collection



Bloomington's Plaza at Wisconsin Place



The large shaded green lawn at the GEICO property is a popular destination on weekends.

### Other Private Green Spaces

In addition to the parks in Friendship Heights there are several private properties that have large grassy lawns, courtyards, or other open spaces that are not blocked or closed to the public. At Brighton Gardens, a senior facility on Friendship Boulevard, there is a sign indicating that the courtyard is for the public, even though it is tucked behind a colonnade with a lush, planted roof and is not clearly visible from the street. The GEICO site has approximately 2 acres of green lawn with trees along Willard Avenue, and 5550 Friendship Boulevard is significantly set back from the street with a long entrance driveway and a large front lawn. While these spaces are not considered public, they are not fenced off from the street and there is no visible signage discouraging the public from using the lawns.



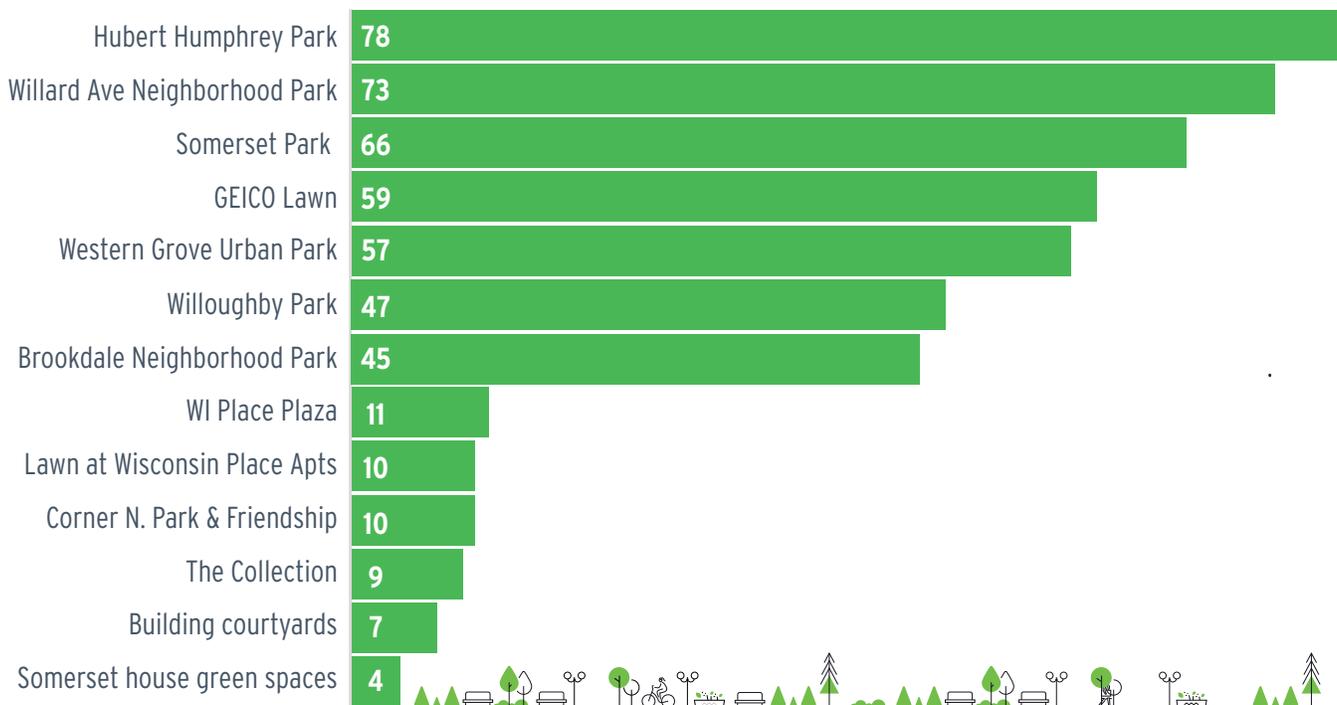
There is a sizable open lawn at 5550 Friendship Boulevard at the corner of North Park Avenue.

## 3.4.2 Parks and Public Spaces: What We Heard

The majority of open-house and questionnaire participants indicated regular use of some public and/or green spaces in Friendship Heights. In the online questionnaire, participants were given the opportunity to identify parks they visit regularly (at least once a month), parks they visit occasionally (every few months), and parks they never visit. While Humphrey Park, Willard Avenue Park, and Vinton Park<sup>2</sup> are the most regularly visited, there were also high numbers of participants who responded that they have never visited these parks.

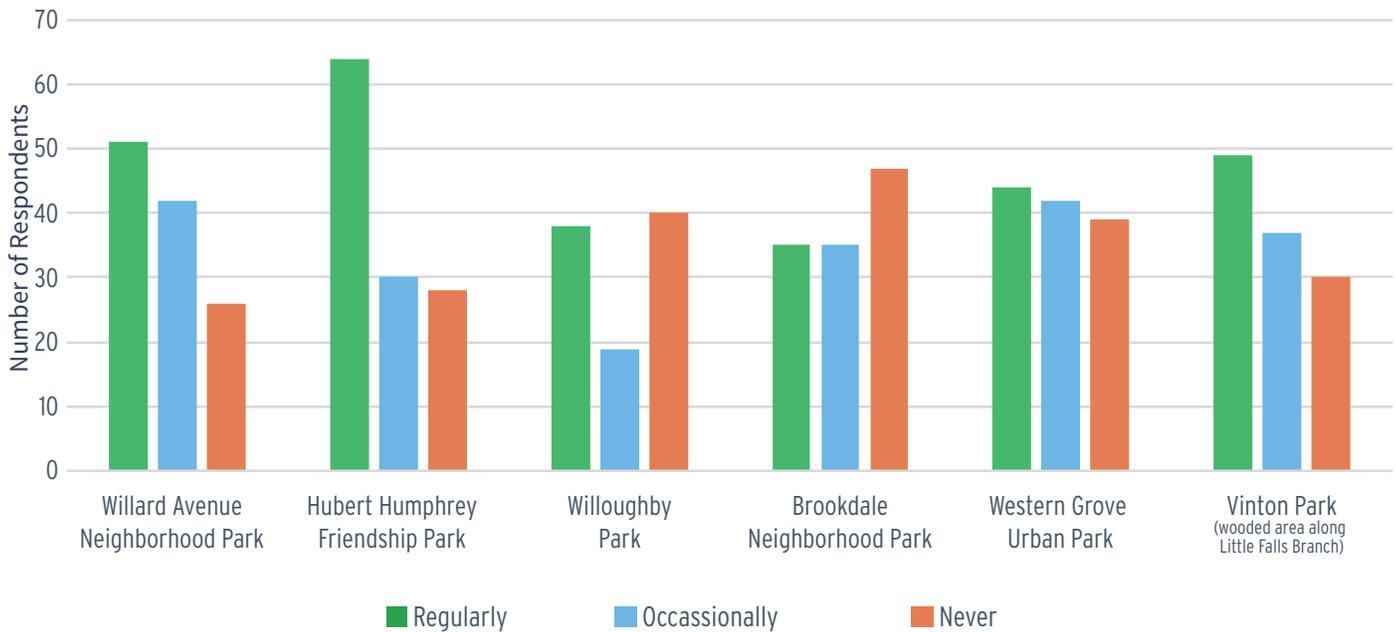
Respondents indicated that when they do not visit parks, it is largely because the parks are too far away, inconveniently located, or because people are unfamiliar with them. Participants who live outside of Friendship Heights are least likely to visit Willard Avenue and Hubert Humphrey parks regularly and are most likely to regularly visit Vinton Park and Western Grove Urban Park.

Table 7: Parks & Public Spaces People Visit Regularly



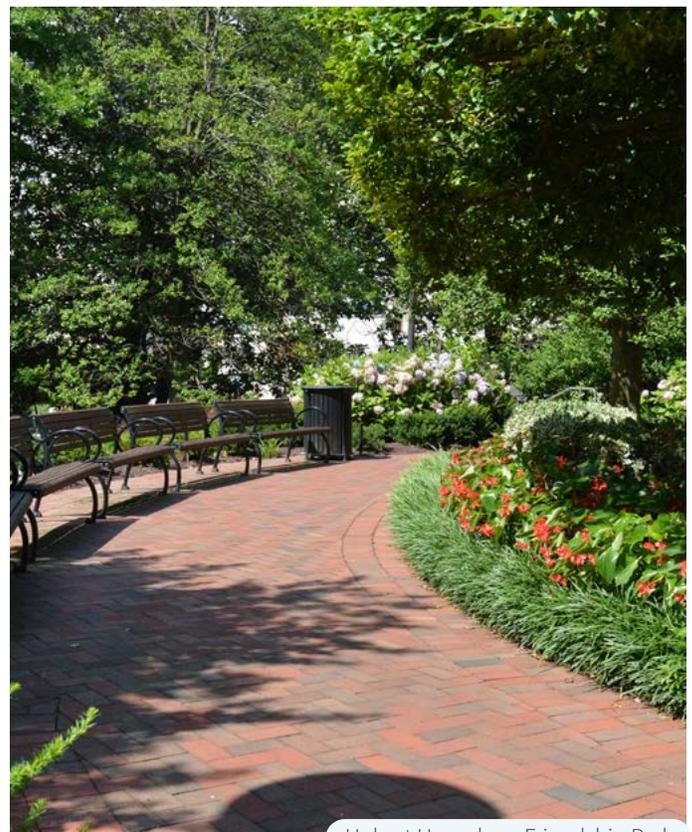
<sup>2</sup> During engagement the planning team used the name “Somerset Park” to describe the wooded area owned by the Town of Somerset that borders Friendship Heights. Since then, staff has learned that most of that wooded area (including the usable area with trails) is named Vinton Park after a former mayor of Somerset. This document refers to the park by the correct name, but “Somerset Park” still appears in quotes about the park from engagement participants.

Table 8: How Often Do You Visit Each of the Following Parks?



Participants who have at least one child in their household favor Vinton Park, Western Grove Urban Park, Hubert Humphrey Park, and Brookdale Neighborhood Park, in this order, for regular visits. In addition, 45% of participants with children in their household reported visiting the GEICO lawn regularly, compared to the 32% of overall participants who reported visiting this space. The responses show that people visit the GEICO lawn on the weekends with their dogs or children for play and recreation.

As mentioned above, only a few parks provide opportunity for active recreation in the Friendship Heights area and those do not meet the need of all stakeholders. The two parks people mentioned going to most often for active recreation outside of Friendship Heights are Rock Creek Park and the Capital Crescent Trail.



Hubert Humphrey Friendship Park



### What park is your favorite?

“Hubert Humphrey Park. Terrific landscaping with places to sit down and relax.”

“Western Grove. Not crowded. Plus, movable chairs to get into the shade when too hot.”

“I live next to Brookdale Park and I think it is very welcoming “

“Brookdale Park is convenient and has many big trees which block the view of GEICO. Both residents and GEICO employees enjoy this park.”

“Willoughby Park - There’s an area where I can let my dog run. The location is perfect to casually run into friends as well.”

“Willard Ave because it is a break from the high rises and noise.”

“Somerset Park. Feels more immersed in nature, less like a city, calming and peaceful, wildlife.”



### Why haven't you visited a certain park?

“They are not convenient and don't have enough draw to make the effort.”

“It's not on my way to anywhere and I didn't know that it was there”

“Didn't know they were there / not accessible / no playground equipment for children”

“Willoughy Park really does not seem or feel like a park!”

“I have 2 very active boys, when I look for parks I look for playgrounds, not just a nice green area”

“Sitting in a park is not part of my lifestyle”



### Many people visit the GEICO lawn as an additional green space:

“GEICO every day!!!! It is the most used green or parking lot space in Friendship Heights - I think because it is the biggest and safest! Parents often teach their kids to learn to bicycle there and little ones can bicycle safely there, people exercise and walk their dogs multiple times a day”

“We love the GEICO lawn and wish it could be more community oriented and not a temporary amenity.”



Jogging in Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park



## We like different parks & public spaces...

Respondents shared a variety of reasons why they like different parks and public spaces in Friendship Heights. Key words that describe the strengths of each park based on engagement responses are summarized below:



Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park:

- quiet and serene • dog-friendly • [a] break from the high-rises • oasis in urban area
- peaceful and beautiful.



Hubert Humphrey Friendship Park:

- well-maintained • [great for] children and elderly together • safe • [successful] park and plaza in one



Willoughby Park:

- dog friendly • accessible



Brookdale Neighborhood Park:

- kid-friendly • quiet • convenient
- well-located • inviting • dog-friendly



Western Grove Urban Park::

- relaxing • nice sitting space • not too crowded • utilized by a broad range of people • well-programmed.



Vinton Park:

- nice place to sit • natural oasis
- good for walks

## ....but also have identified some challenges.



Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park:

- need more open
- visible entrance



Hubert Humphrey Park:

- too much hardscape and brick



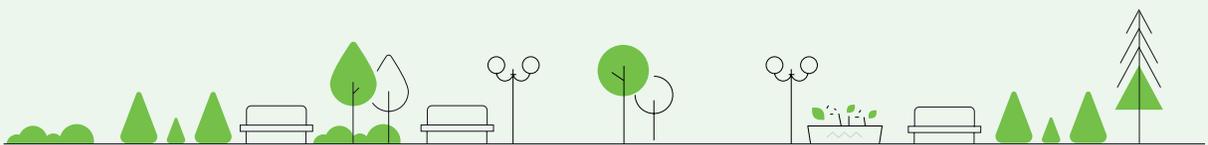
Willoughby Park:

- too industrial
- poorly designed
- wasted space
- not well-maintained



Vinton Park:

- unsafe, especially at night
- needs better signage



3.5

# COMMUNITY AMENITIES



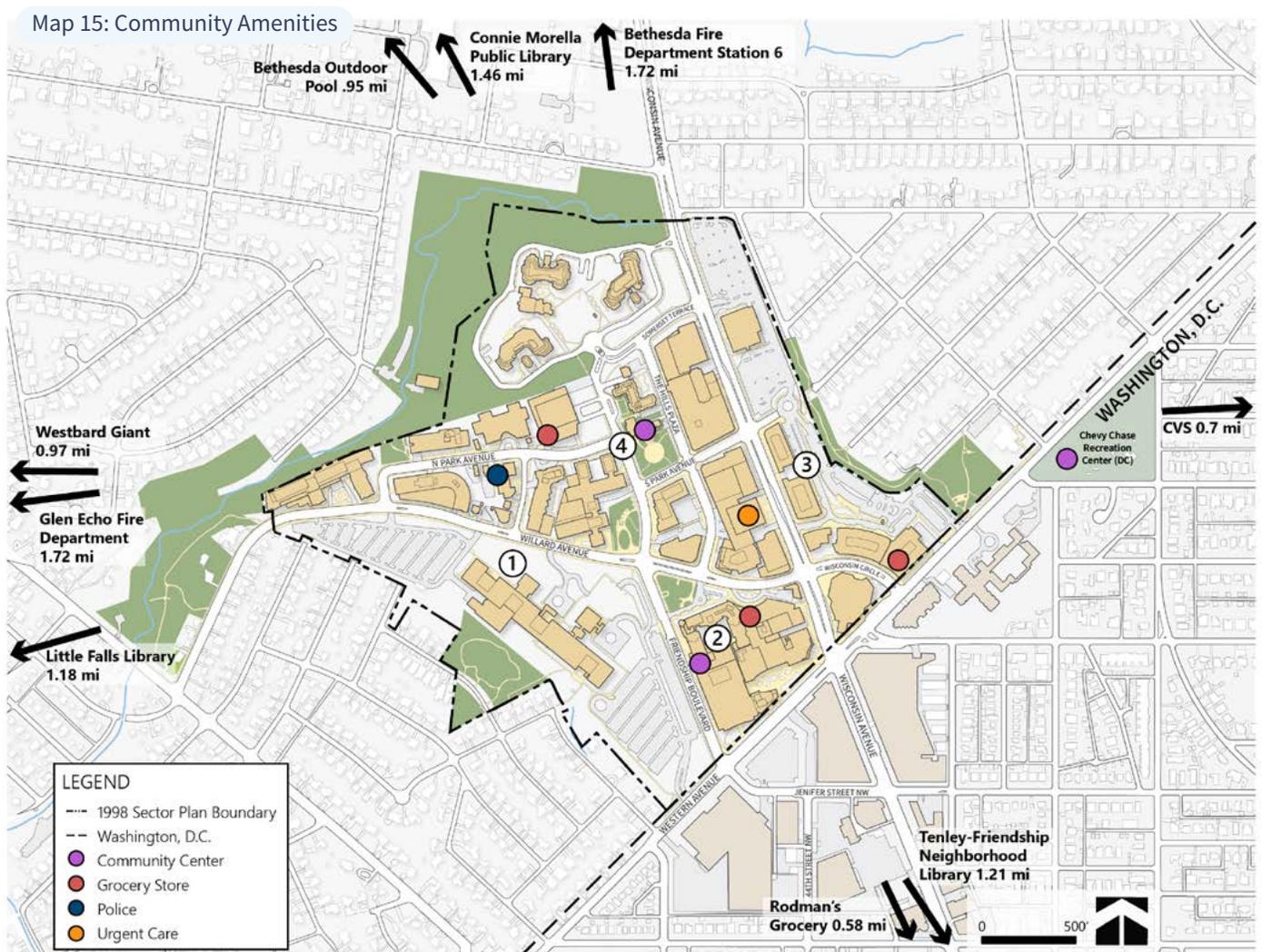
Whole Foods is a popular destination

### 3.5.1 Community Amenities Analysis: What We Saw

Community amenities include neighborhood services and features that enhance the quality of living in a given area. These may include grocery stores, restaurants and other retail establishments, key services like dry cleaners and hair salons, civic resources like recreation centers and libraries and emergency or medical services like urgent care, pharmacies, and police and fire stations. Community amenities also include arts and entertainment such as theaters or museums. All of these businesses and spaces contribute to the success and quality of a community.

### Neighborhood Services

Friendship Heights is rich in some services, while lacking in others. There are well-loved restaurants, and Whole Foods is an important destination, but the area is missing a non-specialty grocery store. There are several independent pharmacies, but nothing that is open late into the evening or on weekends. There is no library, bookstore, or movie theater in Friendship Heights, although these amenities can be found only a few miles away in Bethesda or Washington DC. Map 15 shows the amenities in Friendship Heights and those in nearby neighborhoods.



## Public Art

Public art<sup>3</sup> contributes to the beautification of the public realm. Art can be found in several locations in Friendship Heights. The most well-known pieces of public art are likely the sculptures in Humphrey Park which include J. Seward Johnson's tribute to Officer McAuliffe and "When Now Becomes Then," a likeness of a seated woman drawing next to the fountain. These two pieces share the public realm in and around the park with passersby and encourage interaction with the art. The park also includes an abstract sculpture tucked next to the Village Community Center by Ann Ruppert entitled "Ring Around."

Along Willard Avenue there is a unique three-part art installation about the concept of time designed by Steven Weitzman in the early 2000s. This complex collection of interventions includes the large sundial sculpture in Willoughby Park, a waterfall clock (no longer telling time) at the plaza at Lia's restaurant, and granite arcs embedded in the sidewalks along Willard Avenue and The Hills Plaza containing quotes by famous people about time. As a pedestrian, it is difficult to grasp the link between these pieces without significant explanation. However, the sundial sculpture is the most prominent piece and stands alone as a piece of visual interest at the corner of Willard Avenue and Friendship Boulevard.

At Wisconsin Place and The Collection, public art provides additional interest to the plazas and public spaces that surround these retail developments. Wisconsin Place has several designs by Athena Tacha, the primary-colored "W" sculpture outside Whole Foods, and the paving design at Bloomingdale's Plaza. The Collection on Wisconsin Avenue includes six origami-inspired steel animal sculptures by Kevin Box.

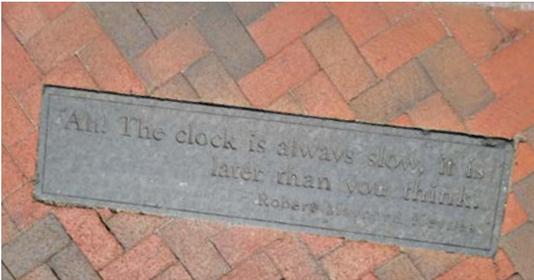


Sculpture of Colonel James S. McAuliffe Sr. by J. Seward Johnson on The Hills Plaza outside Hubert Humphrey Park



"When Now Becomes Then" by J. Seward Johnson in Hubert Humphrey Park

<sup>3</sup> Sources for details and artist credit for public art in Friendship Heights from: Brookdale Bugle, Sept 2011 issue; collectionchevy-chase.com/public-art/; "Time to Check Out More Armillary Spheres," by John Kelly, Washington Post, June 29, 2013; friendshipheightsmd.gov/about/parks/.



Pieces of Steven Weitzman's installation about the concept of time



Turtle at The Collection by Kevin Box



"W" sculpture at Whole Foods

## 3.5.2 Community Amenities: What We Heard

Engagement indicated that while people enjoy the amenities in Friendship Heights, such as restaurants and medical offices, they are often leaving Friendship Heights for nightlife activities, and to access a library, grocery stores, and other specialty retail. The tables on page 54 summarize what amenities people frequent in Friendship Heights as compared to what amenities they visit elsewhere. Most respondents leave Friendship Heights and travel along Wisconsin Avenue/Rockville Pike (MD 355) to Washington DC to the south, and to Bethesda and Rockville to the north.

People mentioned specific restaurants and stores when talking about “favorite places” to visit in

Friendship Heights. Clyde’s was the most popular restaurant mentioned, with 20 responses, followed by Lia’s with 16 responses. It is worth noting that both of these restaurants have sizable outdoor dining areas. Grocery stores were also common favorite places as 44 participants named Whole Foods as a favorite place, and 13 listed Amazon Fresh. Specific amenities that people named as missing from Friendship Heights included coffee shops and a movie theater. Several participants commented on the desire for a pool, and for better signage for the Wisconsin Place Community Recreation Center, as it is an underused community asset.

Finally, several participants noted that they feel unwelcome in some retail stores because of the high pricing, and that Friendship Heights is missing more reasonably priced retail options.

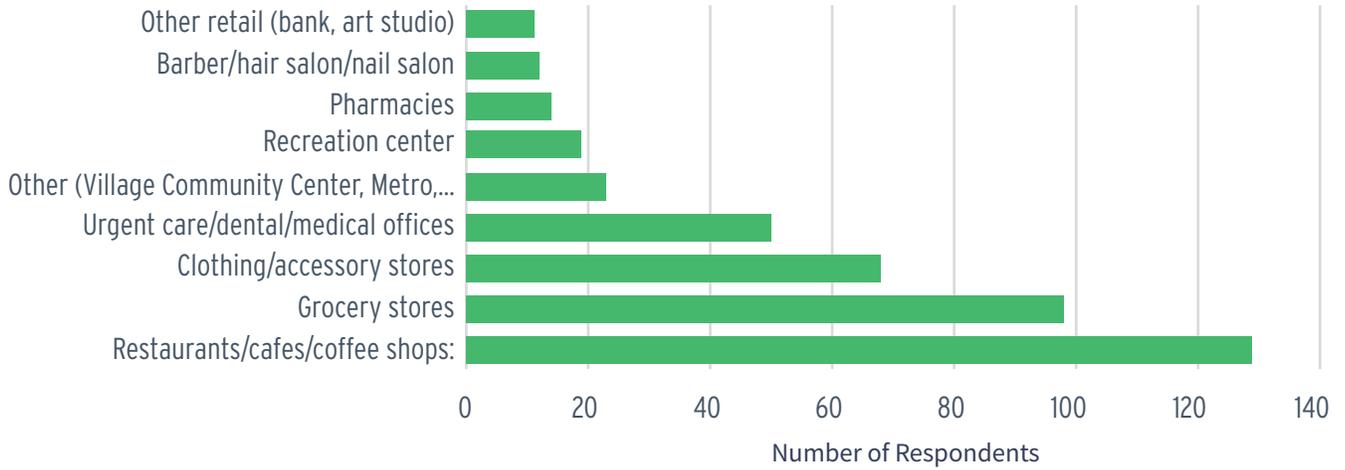


Patrons enjoying outdoor tables at Lia's

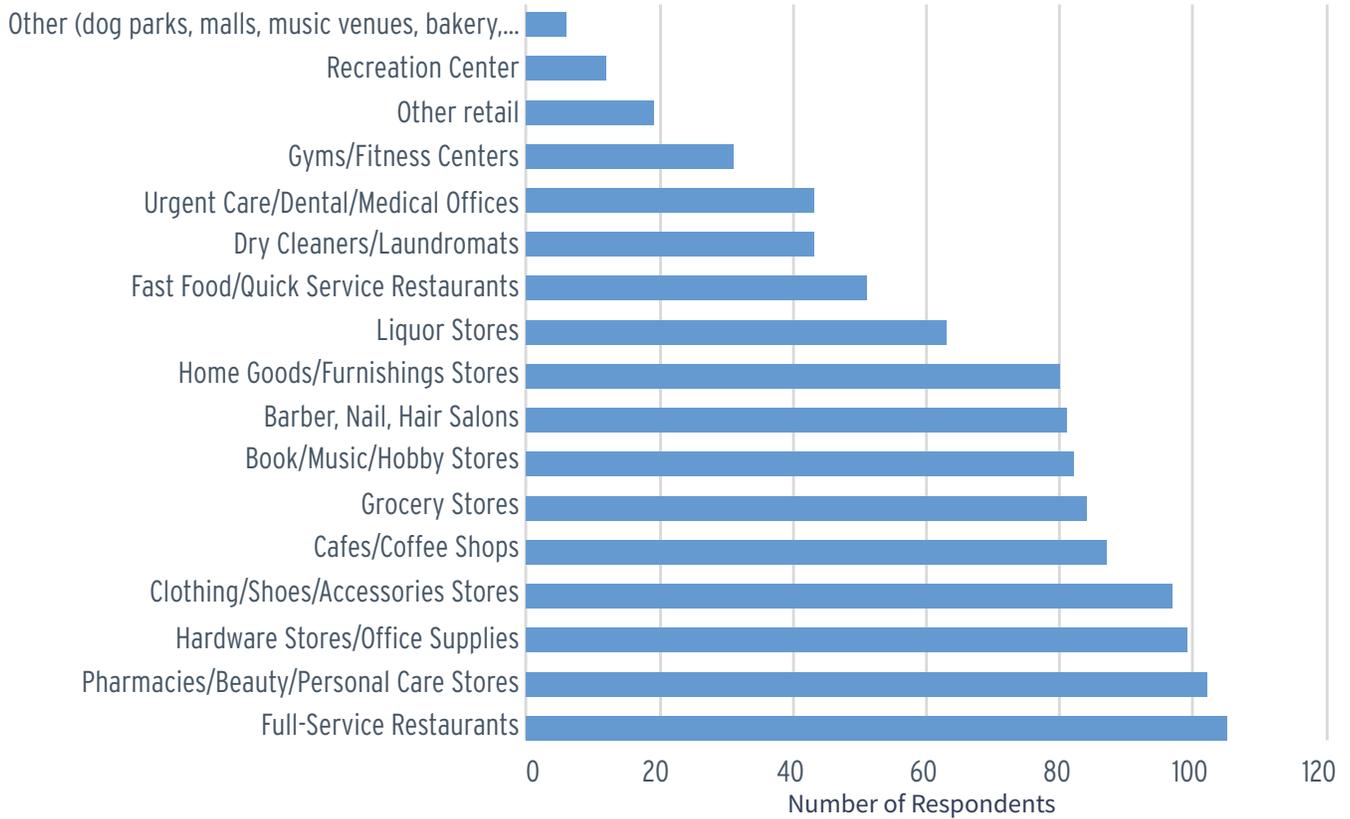


The entrance to the Wisconsin Place Recreation Center can be hard to find

**Table 9: Most-Used Amenities in Friendship Heights**



**Table 10: Amenities People Leave Friendship Heights To Access**



# 4. LESSONS LEARNED





A quiet moment in Hubert Humphrey Friendship Park

# 4.1

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

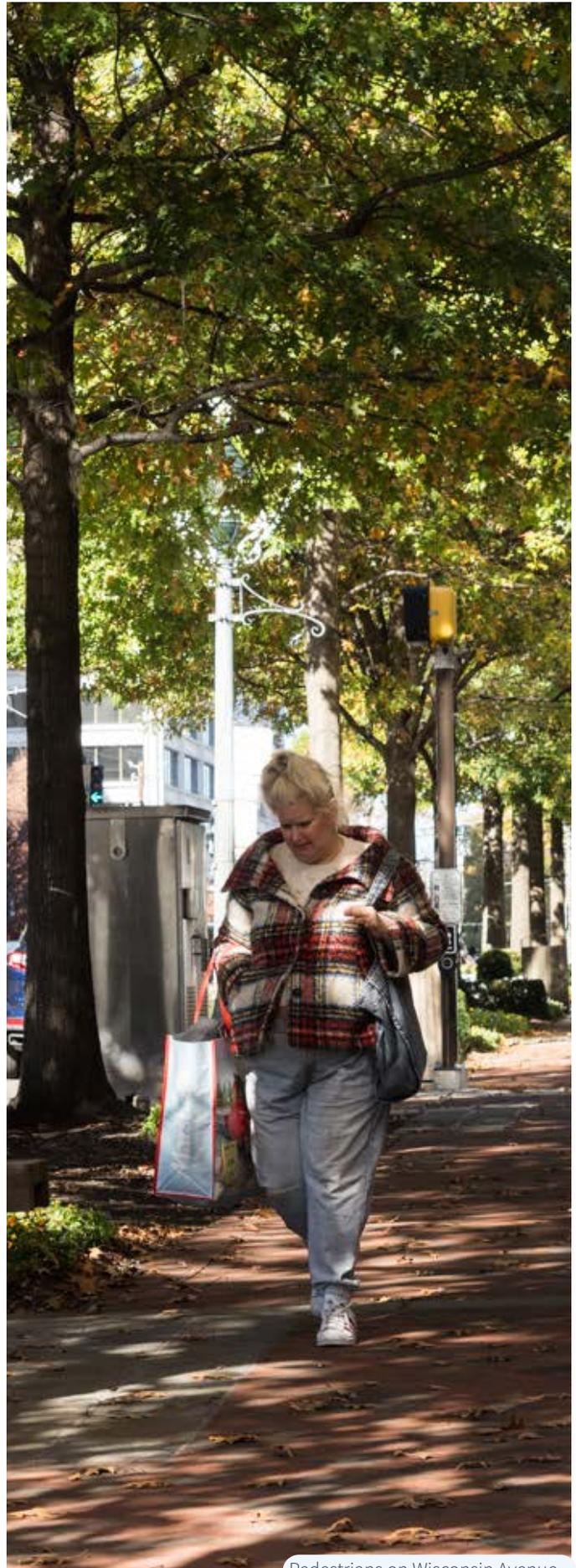
Through the engagement process, stakeholders highlighted a dichotomy of Friendship Heights: an urban area with a successful underlying structure, but one that has perhaps not continued to meet its fullest potential over time. Many stakeholders expressed this contradiction but were hopeful and encouraged about the future of Friendship Heights. This study highlighted some of Friendship Heights' urban design assets and areas for further study.



Metrorail entrance at the intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and Western Avenue

# ASSETS

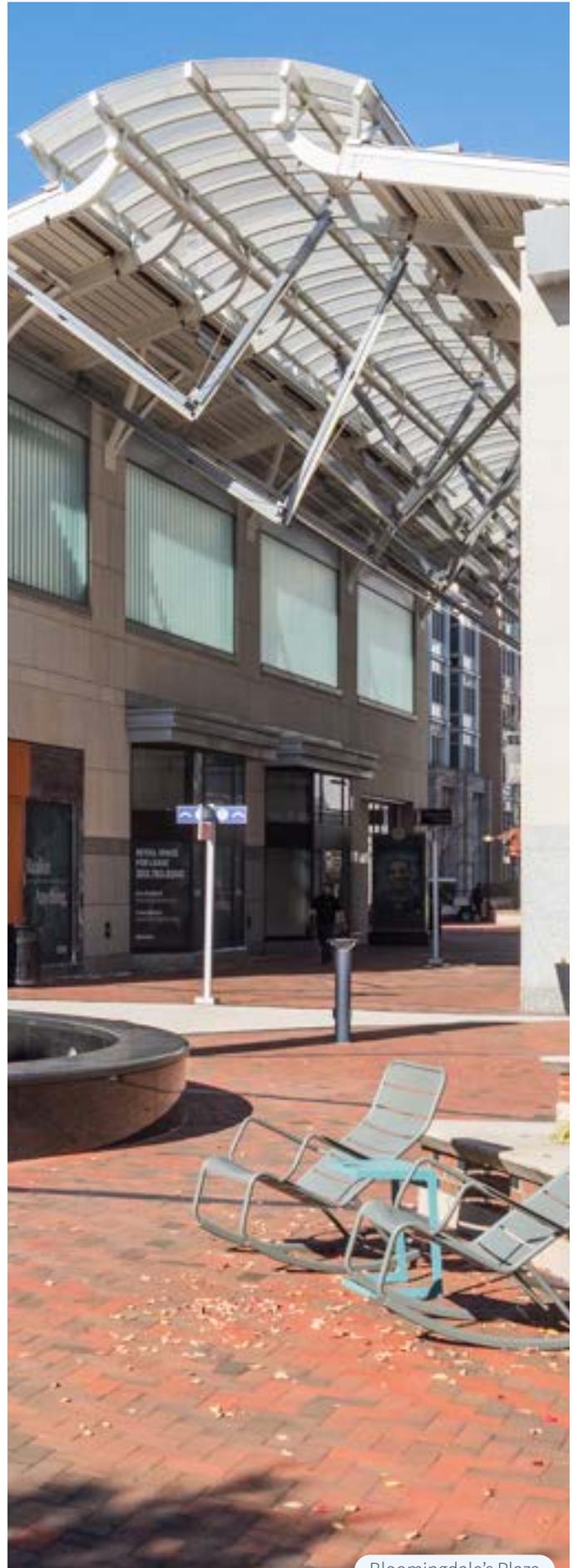
- Its location at a Metrorail station on the Red Line along the major north-south corridor of Wisconsin Avenue (MD-355) is one of its most important strengths and one reason why Friendship Heights was transformed into a mixed-use downtown years ago.
- Today the urban area has a continuous sidewalk network and supports pedestrian safety with clearly marked, signaled pedestrian crossings at most intersections and some mid-block points.
- A variety of green spaces throughout the downtown provide shaded areas for rest and there are several outdoor areas for community gatherings or events.
- The street tree canopy is more mature in Friendship Heights than in many of the other urban areas in Montgomery County and there are new trees and landscaping planted throughout the neighborhood.
- As evidenced by the engagement for this study, most Friendship Heights stakeholders chose to walk when moving around in the downtown because it is so comfortable.
- Despite struggling with several vacancies, Wisconsin Avenue is a retail corridor with several popular restaurants and shops and strong street activation.



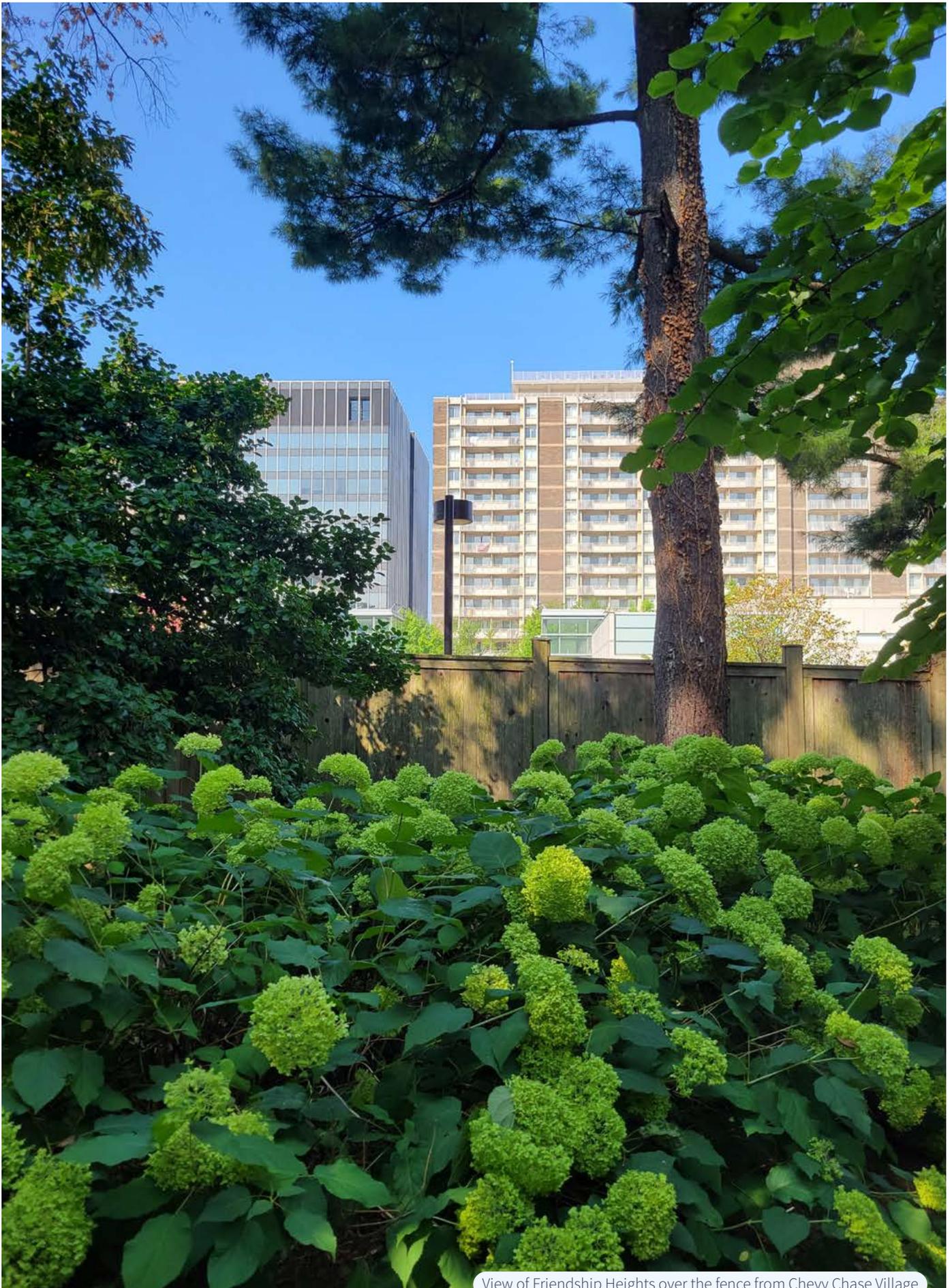
Pedestrians on Wisconsin Avenue

# AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Vehicular entrances for surface parking lots and circular entrance driveways often conflict with or compromise the pedestrian experience in the downtown.
- Friendship Heights feels somewhat cut-off from surrounding communities, making it harder for nearby residents to enjoy what the downtown has to offer.
- While there is a large number of green spaces in the downtown, they are not all easy to access and some are disconnected from the surroundings and therefore underutilized. The Bloomingdale's Plaza is large and underutilized at a key intersection in Friendship Heights which does not contribute to street activation.
- Even with a strong pedestrian network, many stakeholders reported feeling unsafe at various intersections and along certain streets due to lighting, visibility, and vehicular speeds.



Bloomingdale's Plaza



View of Friendship Heights over the fence from Chevy Chase Village

# 5. APPENDIX





Pedestrians walking along Willard Avenue.

# ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK ANALYSIS



Friendship Heights Urban Design Study  
Montgomery Planning, M-NCPPC  
December 11, 2023

The following memo serves as a summary report of outreach and engagement efforts to support the Friendship Heights Urban Design Study as led by M-NCPPC with support from Brick & Story.

## ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

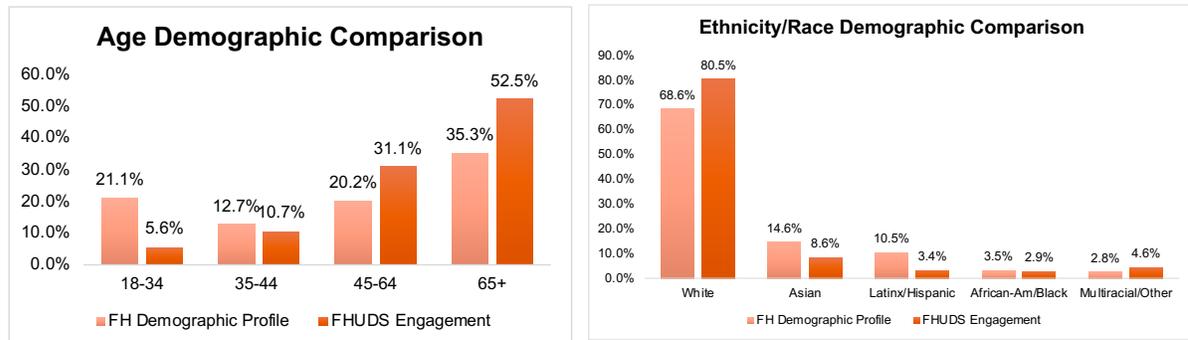
Montgomery Planning, with support from the consultant team at Brick & Story, invited community engagement and feedback to inform the Friendship Heights Urban Design Study (FHUDS) through a variety of engagement methods. Outreach efforts included mass emails to community stakeholders, flyering at local businesses and multifamily buildings, pop-ups at local stores and events, and targeted outreach to key community partners to assist with sharing information through their communication networks. Feedback mechanisms were two-part: an online questionnaire and 2 open house events. The online questionnaire was available from October 2 through November 12, 2023, and consisted of 18 questions. The open houses were strategically located within the study area – the first open house was hosted at the Wisconsin Place Community Center on October 24, 2023 and the second at the Friendship Heights Village Center on October 30, 2023. Both open houses ran from 5:30-8:30pm and included interactive stations for engaging around the key topics of the study.

## OUR REACH

Through our engagement efforts, we received direct feedback from a total of 207 stakeholders. We had over 65 participants at the community open houses: 24 at the Wisconsin Place Community Center and 41 at the Friendship Heights Village Center. Through online engagement, a total of 142 people completed the questionnaire. The majority of online respondents and open house participants self-identified as white adults who are 55 or older and speak English as their primary language. 78% of participants reported that they live in Friendship Heights, and 72% identified as homeowners. Of online questionnaire participants who live in Friendship Heights, there was a diverse range in their length of time living there. The breakdown is shown below:

IF YOU LIVE IN FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS, MD, HOW LONG HAVE YOU LIVED THERE?		
Less than 1 year	5	3.6%
1-5 years	41	29.7%
6-10 years	14	10.1%
11-20 years	18	13.0%
More than 20 years	30	21.7%
Don't live in FH	30	21.7%

In comparison to the Friendship Heights Urban Design Study Area Demographic Profile, developed by the Montgomery Planning Department in November 2023, pulling from the 2021 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, and Research & Strategic Projects, the reach of this study provides decent representation across the total population in the area. There are deficits in representation from the younger population (under age 35) in comparison to the study area’s demographic profile. There is also a slight deficit in responses from the Latinx population, in comparison to the demographic profile, although with the small sample size we could argue that the engagement reach was sufficient in ethnic/racial representation. The charts below summarize the age and ethnic/race demographic reaches of the study’s engagement efforts in comparison to the total population data provided in the demographic profile. Engagement demographic information is taken from questionnaire and open house participants, as self-reported demographic data.



Engagement efforts in the FHUDS resulted in a strong reach across the various family types in the study area. 20.3% of participants in the open houses and online questionnaire identified as families with children under 18 years old; the demographic for this area shows a total of 12.6% families with children under 18. In terms of housing tenure, the demographic profile reports that 62.5% of households are renter-occupied and 37.5% are owner occupied. However, of participants in FHUDS engagement, 71.7% self-identified as homeowners while only 27.8% identified as renters. In part, this discrepancy may be due to the geographic area of the demographic profile vs. participants’ residencies. While the demographic profile data pulls specifically from the Friendship Heights village boundaries, participants reside beyond the village bounds and into neighboring communities. Increasing engagement of the renter community within the village, however, should be considered in strategy development for future engagement in this area.

The total of 207 participants in providing feedback for the FHUDS puts the reach at about 3.4% of the total population of Friendship Heights Village. As a note, outreach efforts reached many more than the 207 participants who provided active responses to engagement questions.

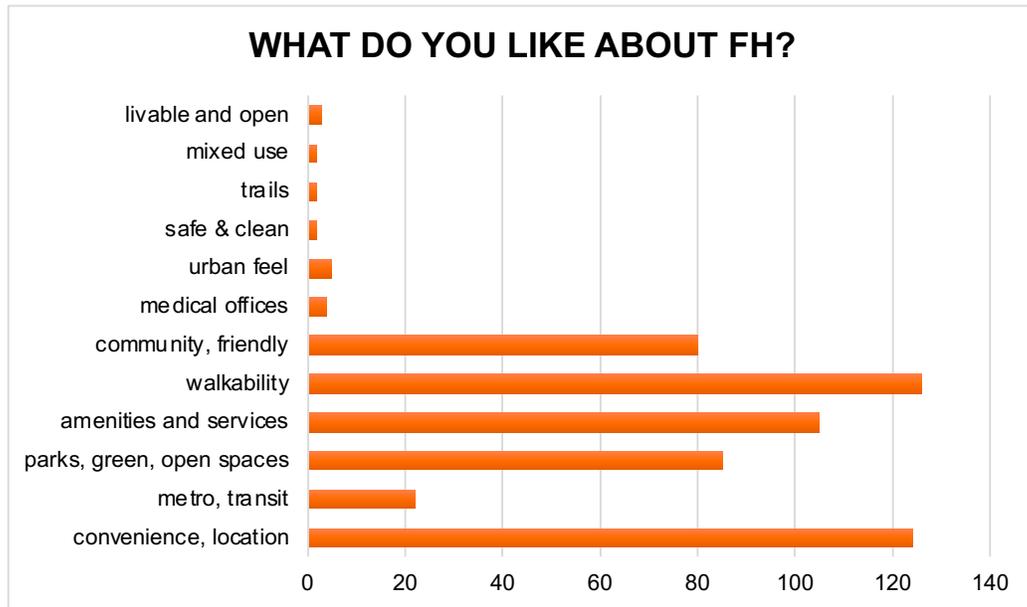
## ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK ANALYSIS

Below we summarize key findings from both the questionnaire and open houses.

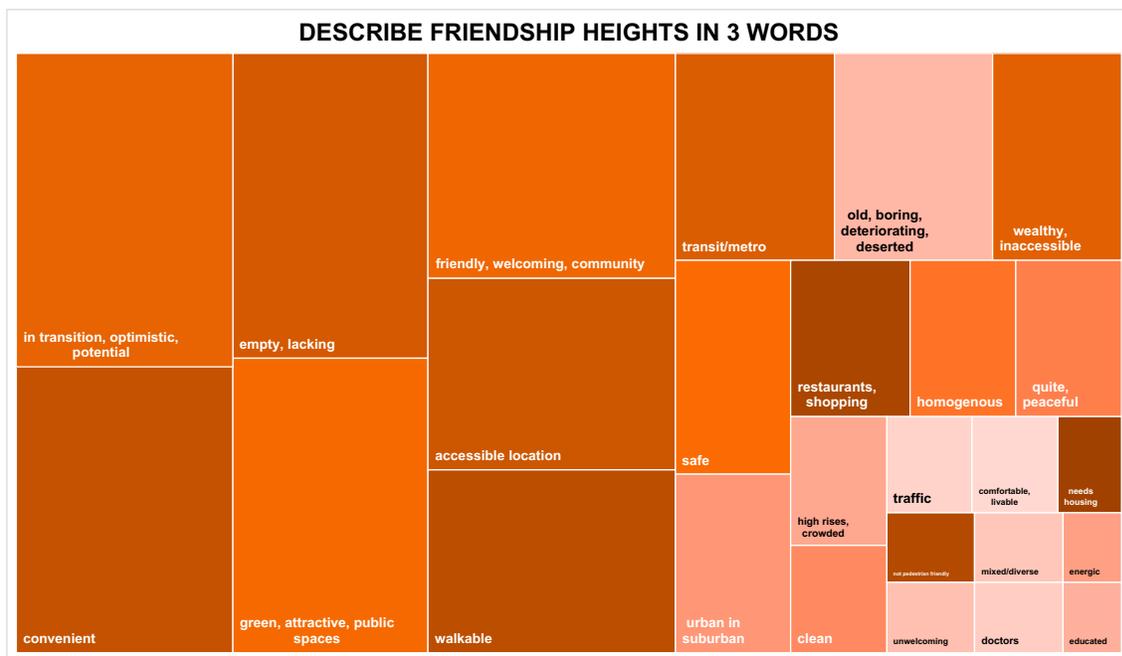
### Community Identity

When asked about how people describe Friendship Heights and what they most like about Friendship Heights, several themes were repeated across stakeholders. Top themes that emerged as people described the neighborhood included its convenience and location; its walkability; the green elements, landscaping, and parks; access to amenities and services; and the friendly, welcoming community

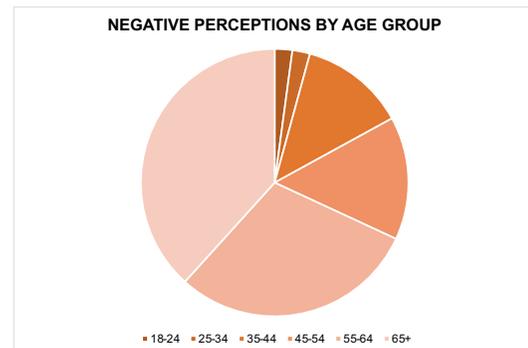
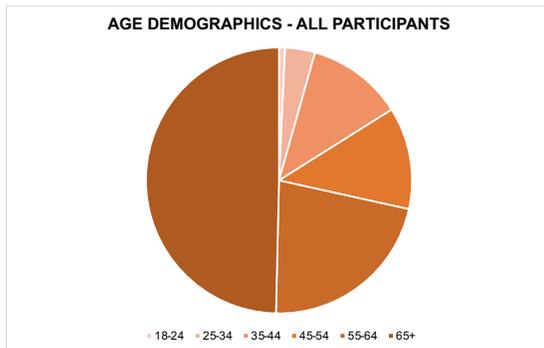
atmosphere. Other key themes included transit access, most importantly the metro; its characteristics as a safe, clean, and quiet neighborhood; and its “urban within suburban” feel.



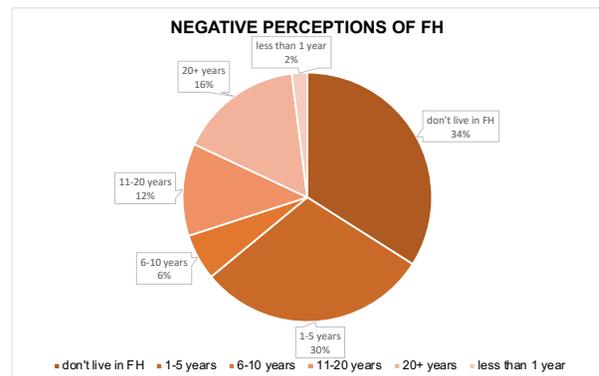
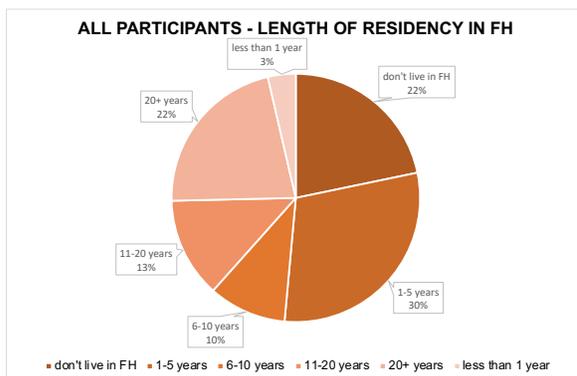
Some of the negative themes that arose describe Friendship Heights as inaccessible due to its expensive, wealthy nature; lacking in vibrancy and services; old, boring, deserted, empty, and deteriorating. In contrast to these negative perceptions, others described Friendship Heights as optimistic with potential, as an area in transition, that is reinventing and growing.



From the online questionnaire results, 50 of the total 142 participants expressed at least one negative sentiment in the prompt “Describe Friendship Heights in 3 words.” However, 40% of responses expressing a negative perception also included a positive sentiment. 8 of the 50 negative responses juxtaposed empty, dying, or similar words with potential, promise, etc. Despite the negative perceptions, there is a strong sense of future positive change among respondents. Of the 50 responses with at least one negative word to describe Friendship Heights, all age ranges were represented, with the least negativity coming from those 65 years or older.



Similarly, there were participants who expressed negative perceptions of Friendship Heights from all “length of residency” groups. A higher proportion of people who don’t live in Friendship Heights shared negative perceptions; on the contrary, those who have lived in Friendship Heights the longest were the least likely to express negatively in their 3-word description of Friendship heights.



Overall, there are mixed sentiments around Friendship Heights, its current state, and its future potential. Despite the wide range of responses, the overwhelming majority of participants did express positive sentiments (some mixed with negative ones, as noted above) in their personal descriptions of Friendship Heights.

**Pedestrian Network**

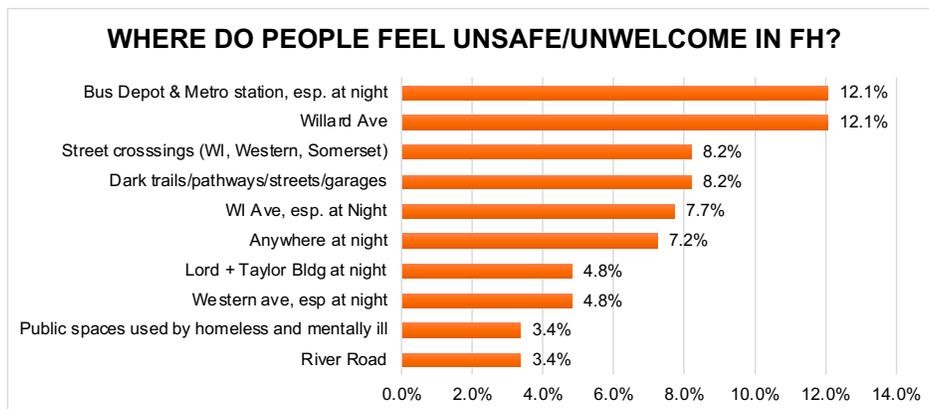
In questions around community identity, as shown above, a large portion of participants named “walkability” as one of Friendship Height’s strengths. In fact, 118 or the 142 questionnaire participants selected walkability as something they like about the area in the multiple selection question – 83% of respondents. Similarly, 30% of participants of the open houses referred to Friendship Heights’ walkability as a key word that describes the area; walkability was also one of the most frequent words used to respond to the prompt “Describe your Friendship Heights in 3 words.”

A summary of people’s favorite places to walk in Friendship Heights is shown in the chart below:



Beyond parks, people highly favor walking along Wisconsin Avenue, followed by Willard Avenue. Some responses to questions about pedestrian networks included comments about places not being “favorites” per say, but rather a necessary part of their daily commute, in route to favorite amenities, etc. Parks, GEICO’s property, and the neighborhood streets were commonly mentioned as places that people walk because they enjoy the atmosphere.

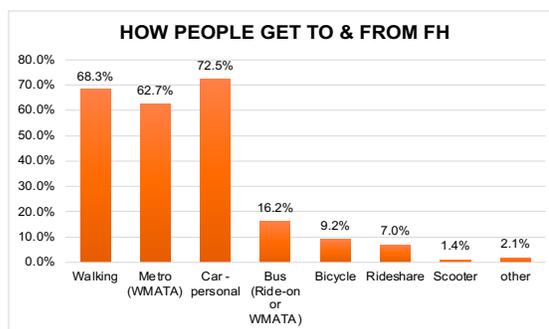
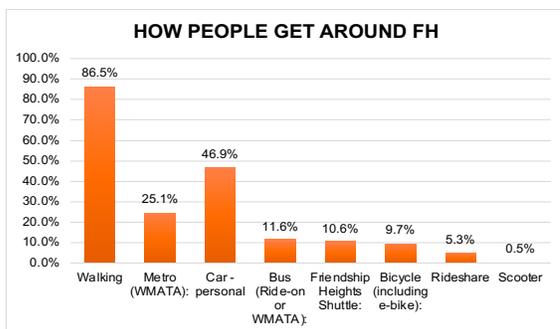
While walkability was clearly noted as a strength of the area, participants also shared challenges and concerns about the pedestrian network. The biggest issues expressed were around safety – speeding, unsafe street crossings, and lighting. Safety at night was specifically named as a concern for 25% of online questionnaire participants and noted by 15% of open house participants. Specific streets where people feel unsafe are Willard Avenue, Wisconsin Avenue, Western Avenue, and River Road. People also feel unsafe at the Bus Depot/Metro and the Lord + Taylor Building, specifically at night. Specific street crossings of concern include: Somerset Terrace and Wisconsin Ave, Somerset Terrace and Hills Plaza, Wisconsin Ave and Western Ave, Willard Ave at the park trail entrance, the HAWK signal at Willard Ave and Hills Plaza (generally confusing), Western Ave and Friendship Blvd, Wisconsin Ave and Wisconsin Cir., and Wisconsin Ave and S. Park. Other safety concerns people expressed include dark garages and/or garage openings, the presence of homeless and mentally ill people in public spaces, biking, accessibility of trails, vacant storefronts, and construction areas.



It is important to note that 18.4% of all participants (open house and online questionnaire) answered questions about feeling safe or welcome as “being comfortable everywhere in Friendship Heights.” Of the 35 questionnaire respondents who indicated that there are no places they feel unsafe walking in Friendship Heights, 9 of them self-identify as non-white. 24% of white respondents reported feeling safe walking everywhere in Friendship Heights, while 32% non-white respondents reported feeling safe, suggesting that walking safety perceptions are not directly tied to racial/ethnic identity. Questionnaire participants who feel safe walking everywhere also include residents of all ages (including families with children), a mix of renters and homeowners, and a variety of residency groups, including people who do not live in Friendship Heights, those who have lived there a short time, and those who have lived in the neighborhood for over 20 years. There is no clear demographic pattern that correlates to those who answered that they feel safe walking everywhere in Friendship Heights.

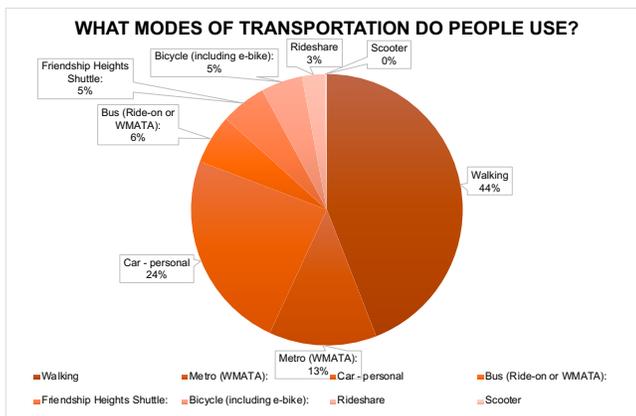
### Transportation Network

In terms of getting into, out of, and around Friendship Heights, walkability continues to be a prime asset of the area. When asked about how people get around Friendship Heights, 86.5% of participants (open houses and questionnaire) included walking as one of their main mobilization methods, followed by the 46.9% who reported using their personal car to get around. When asked how people get in and out of Friendship Heights (questionnaire only), the top three responses were using a personal car, walking, and using the Metro.



In addition to the multiple selection responses about modes of transportation, a strong number of participants commented on the importance of the metro; one open house participant wrote “The most important asset of FH is Metro!”

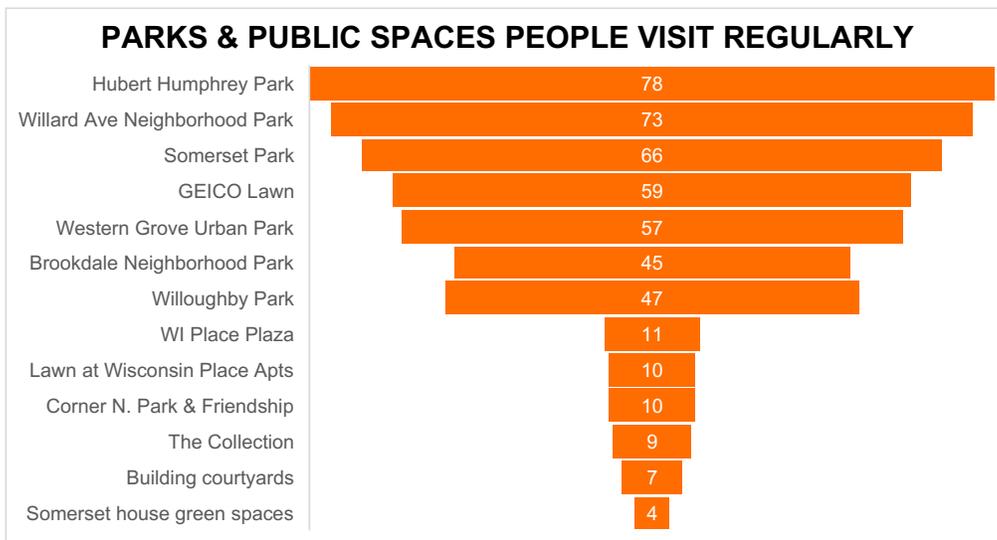
Another breakdown of modes of transportation used in Friendship Heights is reflected in the pie chart below.



In addition to the importance of walking, metro, and personal cars, there are significant numbers of residents who use Metro buses, the Friendship Heights Shuttle, and/or who bike in and/or through Friendship Heights. One open house participant shared “The shuttle bus is very important to many of us. Those who don’t drive need it to shop for groceries.” As a note, of participants who use the Friendship Heights Shuttle, only one of them was under the age of 55. Cyclists, on the other hand, ranged in age from 35 to over 65; however, over half of participants who ride their bike do not live in Friendship Heights, MD, suggesting it is a main route for cyclists in the greater community.

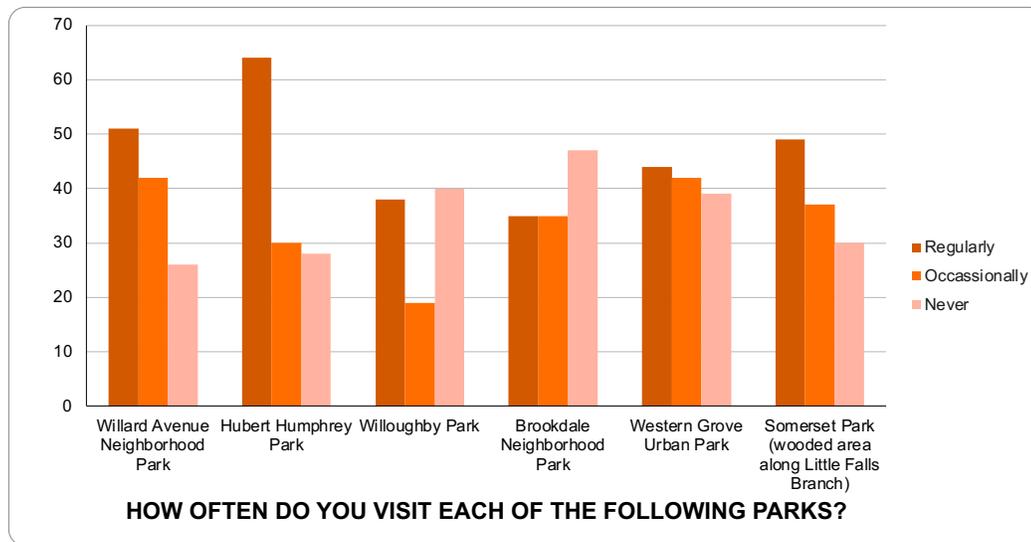
**Open Space Network**

The majority of open house and questionnaire participants claimed regular use of some public space and/or green space in Friendship Heights. Public spaces that people regularly visit or use include both parks and public spaces like lawns, plazas, sidewalk benches, etc. Participant answers about what green and public spaces they visit regularly are summarized in the graphic below:



In the online questionnaire, participants were given the opportunity to identify parks they visit regularly (at least once a month), parks they visit occasionally (every few months), and parks they never visit. While Humphry, Willard, and Somerset Parks are the most regularly visited, there were also a high number of participants who claimed to never have visited these same parks. Participants who have at least one child in their household favor Somerset, Western Grove Urban, Hubert Humphrey, and Brookdale Neighborhood Parks, in this order, for regular visits. In addition, 45% of participants with children in their household reported visiting the GEICO Lawn regularly, compared to the 32% of overall participants who reported visiting the GEICO Lawn .

Participants who live outside of Friendship Heights are least likely to visit Willard Avenue and Hubert Humphrey Parks regularly, and are most likely to visit Somerset Park and Western Grove Urban Parks regularly. Non-Friendship Heights residents also make up 44% of participants who claim not to visit any Friendship Heights parks at least once a month and 38% of participants who claim never to have visited any of the parks in Friendship Heights.



People shared a variety of reasons why they like different parks and public spaces in Friendship Heights. Key words that describe the strengths of each park based on engagement responses are summarized below:

- **Willard Ave:** location; quiet and serene; dog friendly; water/creek; playground; paved path; Reynolds House; break from high rises; largest park; beautiful; oasis in urban area; peaceful; beautiful
- **Hubert Humphrey:** park and plaza in one; the fountain; well-maintained; landscaping; seating; friendly people; children and elderly together; community center; safe; activities and farmers market
- **Willoughby:** dog friendly; accessible
- **Brookdale Neighborhood:** kid friendly; shade; path; quiet; convenient; well planned; well located; inviting; play equipment and basketball; quiet; dog friendly
- **Western Grove:** paved trail; relaxing; nice sitting spaces; not too crowded; shaded; utilized by a broad range of people; water feature for kids; large open space; picnic space/tables; natural play; location; well programmed; wifi
- **Somerset:** stream; nice place to sit; natural oasis; good for walks; makes Friendship Heights pedestrian accessible

People also commented that they enjoy visiting the lawn in front of the Wisconsin Place Apartments for its sunny and grassy area and its seating. The GEICO Lawn is also favored for its good lighting, being well-maintained, and being dog friendly.

When questionnaire participants were asked about parks they don't visit in Friendship Heights and why, they shared a variety of responses. 33% of questionnaire participants claimed to never visit Brookdale Neighborhood Park, followed by Willoughby Park (28%), Western Grove Park (27%), and then Somerset

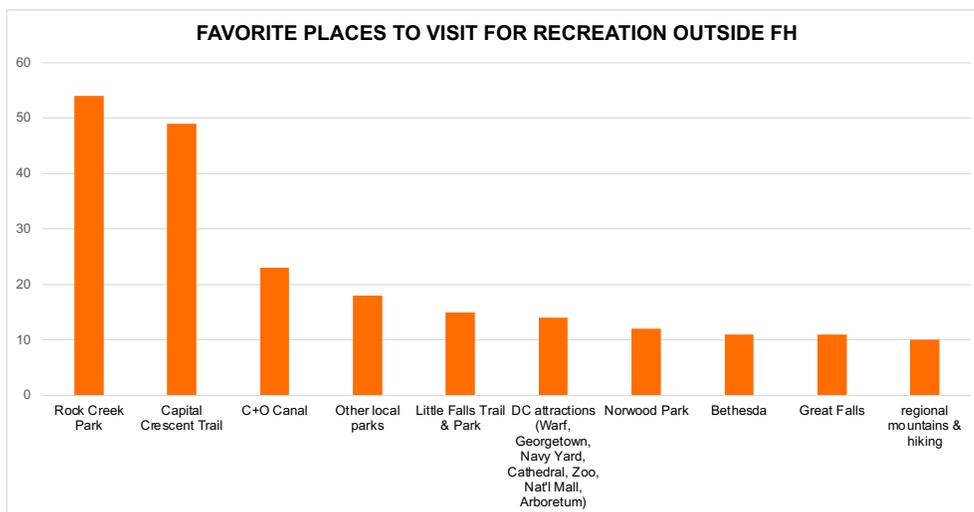
Park (21%). In general, the most common reasons people don't visit parks in the area are because the parks are 1.) too far to walk to, 2.) inconveniently located, and 3.) people are unfamiliar with or don't know about them. Other reasons people don't visit parks include: lack of interest or need to visit parks in general; parks are not perceived as unique, special, or attractive; people prefer other parks; parks feel unwelcome or unsafe; parks are too small; lack of parking; lack of playgrounds or kids attractions.

Some participants commented around needs or wishes for improvements at specific parks as well. These comments are summarized by park below:

- **Willard Avenue:** need more open, visible entrance; please preserve Reynolds House
- **Hubert Humphrey:** too much hardscape and brick
- **Willoughby:** too industrial; poorly designed; wasted space; not well-maintained
- **Brookdale Neighborhood:** no comments around improvements
- **Western Grove:** no comments around improvements
- **Somerset:** unsafe, especially at night; needs better signage

Additional wishes not tied specifically to any parks include: wanting a dog park, needing better lighting at night, needing better signage between parks and neighborhoods, wanting more organized activities, wanting more street furniture and benches, needing more play space for adults and children, and needing improved accessibility for people with disabilities. Although not superficially referenced in any engagement questions, people expressed their discontent around Page Park being closed at both open houses and through the online questionnaire.

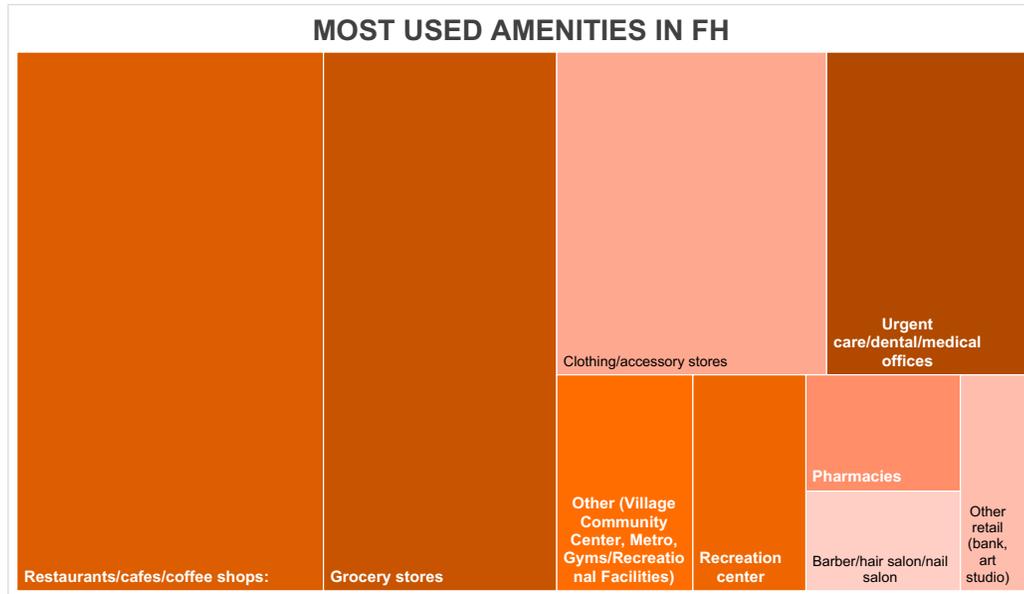
Finally, participants were given the opportunity to share additional green and open spaces that they use outside of Friendship Heights. There were a wide range of responses, including parks, trails, beaches, towns and cities, community centers and clubs, etc. Rock Creek Park and the Capital Crescent Trail were by far the most popular places for participants to visit. The top ten responses are represented in the graphic below:



Beyond the top 10 places shown in the chart above, people also commented that they visit Cabin John for the trails and dog park and several other parks and playgrounds outside of Friendship Heights but in the Chevy Chase/Bethesda. Pools and aquatic centers outside of Friendship Heights were also mentioned, as well as a comment about the need for a public pool in the study area.

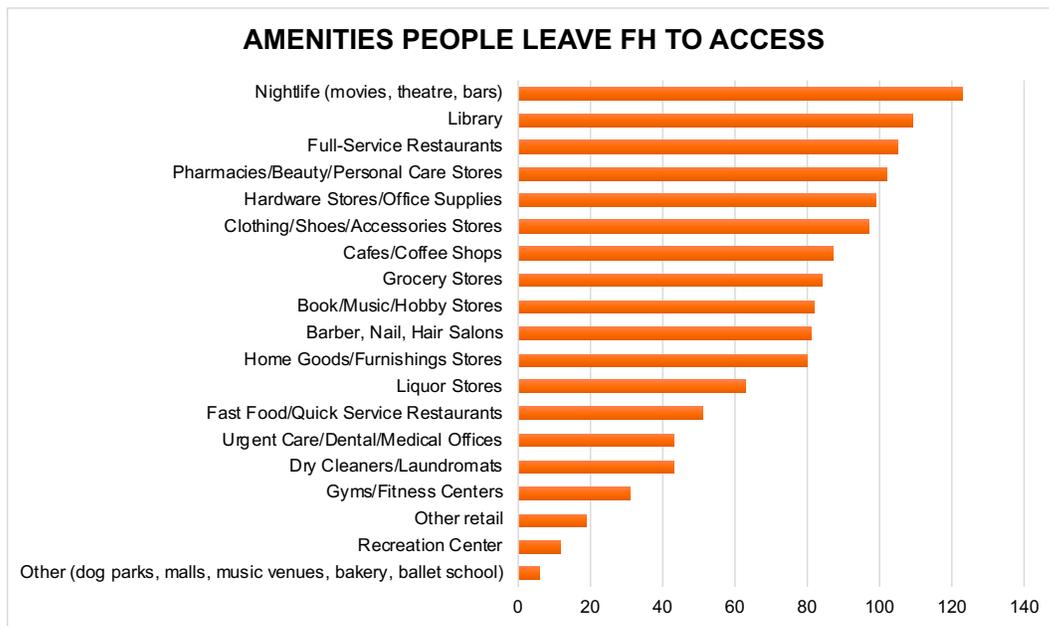
### Community Amenities

Participants of the open houses and online questionnaire also weighed in on most used and missing amenities, as well as their favorite places in Friendship Heights. While a significant number of participants commented on the loss of past amenities and missing restaurants and stores that were previously located in Friendship Heights, there are still a high number of amenities being heavily used in the area. The most commonly used amenities are food service, including restaurants, cafes, and coffee shops. Grocery stores were ranked second, followed by clothing and accessory stores.



In the online questionnaire, people mentioned specific restaurants and stores when talking about “favorite places” to visit in Friendship Heights. Of restaurants, Clyde’s was most popular, with 20 responses, followed by Lia’s with 16 responses and Junction Café with 10 responses. For grocery stores, 44 participants named Whole Foods as a favorite place, and 13 listed Amazon Fresh as a favorite. Additional places with high numbers of responses include WI Place/Bloomingdale’s (15 responses), the Collection (10 responses), and the Friendship Heights Village Community Center (9 responses).

In contrast, people also leave Friendship Heights to access a variety of amenities. The top five things people seek outside of Friendship Heights are Nightlife (concerts, theater, bars), Libraries, Full Service Restaurants, Pharmacies, and Hardware/Office Supply Stores. Despite the fact that restaurants are a highly used amenity within Friendship Heights, participants also commonly leave the area for food services. There is a similar phenomenon with grocery store access happening both within and outside of the study area. The amenities people are least likely to leave Friendship Heights to access are Recreation Centers, Gyms/ Fitness Centers, Dry Cleaners/Laundromats, and Urgent Care/Medical Offices. When asked about where people go to access these amenities outside of Friendship Heights, the most common responses were DC, Bethesda, and Rockville.



Some participants included comments specific to certain missing amenities, specifically amenities that were previously located in Friendship Heights. Coffee shops, restaurants, and a movie theater were all noted as amenities people wish would return. Panera Bread was specifically named, along with the need for more places to “hang out” like street cafes. One participant commented on the difficulty of retaining restaurants as an important note on restaurant access. Other comments were specific to pharmacies, specifically noting the loss of the CVS. In terms of retail, some participants commented that the area lacks “missing middle retail.” This coincides with the descriptions of Friendship Heights that labeled it as “wealthy” and “inaccessible,” and those who noted they feel unwelcome in certain stores due to high prices. Finally, participants commented on the need for better publicity and signage for the current recreation center, and the need for a public pool to provide recreation and social space in the village.





# Friendship Heights

URBAN DESIGN STUDY  
DRAFT MARCH 2024

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