

# FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS SECTOR PLAN UPDATE

## KICKOFF EVENTS: ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

### WINTER 2025

#### 1 - Introduction

In the winter of 2024, Montgomery Planning hosted two kickoff events, one virtual and one in-person, for the update to the Friendship Heights Sector Plan. Building on the recently completed Friendship Heights Urban Design Study, the sector plan will consider existing conditions and make recommendations on zoning, land use, housing, transportation, parks and open space, the environment, schools, economic development, and more.

Both events consisted of a presentation from Montgomery Planning staff followed by facilitated small group discussions and Q&A with staff. In small group discussion, participants were asked the following questions:

1. When you think about future change in Friendship Heights, what are you most excited about?
2. Talking about future change can also cause worry or concern. What are you most worried or concerned about as we launch into the Sector Plan?
3. What makes Friendship Heights different from other neighborhoods around it? What about Friendship Heights do you hope will be preserved in the future?
4. Are there other communities in the area that would be good models or that offer learning lessons for Friendship Heights?

#### 2 - In-Person Kickoff Event

##### *Event Description*

On the evening of Thursday, November 20th, 2024, Montgomery Planning, with the support of consultant Brick & Story, hosted the first event to kick off the [Friendship Heights Sector Plan](#). A presentation from Montgomery Planning staff was followed by facilitated roundtable discussions and Q&A with staff. Roundtable discussion focused on ideas for Friendship Heights' future, concerns, precedent communities, and neighborhood identity.

### *Participant Demographics*

Approximately **60 people attended the in-person event**. Attendees were asked to complete exit surveys at the event's conclusion. Exit surveys asked participants to self-identify key demographic markers and offered a final opportunity to provide feedback. The majority of participants (78%) completed exit surveys, allowing for an analysis of who was (and was not) engaged in this effort.

According to the 47 exit surveys:

- **Most attendees were from the Village of Friendship Heights, MD** (60%), followed by Brookdale (13%), Other (11%), and Friendship Heights, MD, and Chevy Chase Village (both 4%).
- Participants were mostly White (81%).
- **Most attendees were aged 65+** (64%), followed by 55-64 (17%), and 45-54 (13%). Notably, no one 18-34 years old attended.
- Most participants were homeowners (83%).
- Nearly all attendees were English speakers (96%).
- **Most attendees lived with seniors** (66%). Few lived with children (13%)

### *Key Takeaways*

During small group conversations, attendees discussed their concerns and ideas for future change in Friendship Heights, neighborhood identity, and model communities for Friendship Heights. The following themes emerged:

#### *Future Needs/Requests*

- Participants discussed the need for more amenities downtown, specifically a library branch, community garden, and dog park. When considering potential sites for change, the GEICO campus was seen as a great opportunity for mixed-use development, but many feared that it would be over-developed as high-rise apartments.
- Many attendees called for more diversity in the neighborhood, worrying that current housing prices and amenities don't meet the needs of young families/young people.
- Multiple discussions included requests for protected bike lanes on Wisconsin Avenue.

#### *Concerns*

- While many requested denser, more affordable housing, they also expressed concern about meeting the demands of increased density - specifically parking near Metro.
- Walkability and bikeability were much discussed. Downtown Friendship Heights was not perceived as pedestrian friendly by all given its few pedestrian connections, heavy traffic and lack of green space.

### *Precedent Communities*

- Clarendon, Arlington, was the most cited precedent neighborhood, followed by Silver Spring and Takoma Park. Rockville Town Center was also cited.
- Bethesda was both cited as a potential precedent, and as an example of what Friendship Heights should avoid becoming, due to its high density and reliance on chain stores.

### **3 - Virtual Kickoff Event**

#### *Event Description*

On the evening of Tuesday, December 3rd, 2024, Montgomery Planning staff, with support from consultants Brick & Story, hosted a virtual kickoff event for the [Friendship Heights Sector Plan](#). This event consisted of a presentation from staff followed by facilitated breakout discussions and Q&A with planning staff, both the presentation and the questions were identical to those used at the in-person event. Breakout discussion focused on ideas for Friendship Heights, concerns, precedent communities, and neighborhood identity. Registration was required to participate virtually.

#### *Participant Demographics*

At its peak, 30 minutes into the call, 57 attendees were online. After the presentation from Planning staff – when it came time for breakout discussions – roughly 15-20 participants left the call. Remaining attendees were divided into seven breakout rooms of roughly five participants each, for small group discussion.

According to the 27 exit surveys:

- **Neighborhood representation was more diverse than the in-person event.** The Village of Friendship Heights was still most represented (31%), followed by Friendship Heights, MD (15%), and Chevy Chase Village, MD (8%).
- Nearly all participants (96%) identified as White.
- **Most online attendees were over 65**, and to a higher degree than the in-person event (68%); 20% of attendees represented the 55-64 age bracket. Like the in-person event, no one aged 18-34 participated.
- Most participants were homeowners (89%).
- All attendees were English speakers.
- **most attendees live with seniors (80%)**, 20% live in an adult-only household, aged 18-60; only 12% live with children.

#### *Key Takeaways*

The following themes emerged during virtual small group conversations:

### *Future Needs/Requests*

- Attendees appreciated Friendship Heights' accessibility but called for more amenities downtown – specifically requesting a library branch, art performance center, movie theatre, playground, and dog park.
- People were interested in more places to socialize, especially in the evening, in downtown Friendship Heights.

### *Concerns*

- Many participants expressed concern about safety downtown, especially at night due to poor lighting and heavy, high-speed traffic. To improve pedestrian and bicycle access, attendees discussed the impacts of bike lanes on Western Avenue.
- Participants expressed concern for the many closed storefronts and the future of local business in Friendship Heights.
- Stakeholders would like a mixed-use solution at the GEICO property but feared that it would be “overdeveloped.”
- Attendees worried about the impacts of increased density, specifically difficulty parking, increased traffic, and less light/air downtown.

### *Precedents*

- As in at the earlier kickoff, Bethesda was the most cited precedent but was often mentioned as both an example for its appealing retail options and restaurants and as an example of what to avoid due to chain retail and high density.
- Other model communities included Rockville and Cleveland Park, DC for their neighborhood feeling and activated commercial corridors.

## **4 - Takeaways from Kickoff Series**

Stakeholders are appreciative of the open planning process and would like to continue to be meaningfully involved in the sector plan update. Attendance was not very diverse for either kickoff event: most participants were seniors, white, homeowners, and residents of Friendship Heights Village. At each event, attendees called for thoughtful inclusion of other stakeholders: young people, low-income families, and people of color.

### *Divided on Density*

In nearly every small group discussion, stakeholders both called for increased density and expressed concerns about its impact on parking, traffic, and neighborhood identity. The model communities that participants cited reflect this tension. Bethesda was well-regarded for its mix of

uses and active commercial corridor. However, most people would like to see local retail, not chain stores, in Friendship Heights. They pointed to Cleveland Park, D.C., and Clarendon, VA, as models of this retail mix. Future engagements should prioritize discussing density, specifically development impacts/tradeoffs.

### *Prioritizing Walkability & Bikeability*

While participants at both events agreed that walkability and bikeability was an issue in Friendship Heights, there was some disagreement about how to best solve the problem. Some advocated for protected bike lanes and traffic calming measures, while others pointed to solutions off the road itself (better lighting, activated streets).