

Bethesda Downtown Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) comments on the 2024 Bethesda Downtown Annual Monitoring Report

General comments:

The regularly updated information on the website about implementation of the Bethesda Downtown Plan (the Plan) is appropriate and informative. However we believe a more comprehensive and straightforward annual report, one that addresses issues of concern (e.g., building a recreation center, park creation) in addition to points of progress, (e.g., status of development projects, PIP funds, increase in housing units, etc.) would be more useful to the community and those not intimately involved with the IAC. The report should address achievements and issues of concern. In our opinion, the draft report selectively presents information in an overly positive light.

Transportation. It is not clear what the data presented in the report is intended to tell us. A quick review of the data for the intersections in the Plan area reveals that all except two have gotten worse since 2022. However, it is not clear what “worse” means and whether there are any potential remedies.

Bike Lane Utilization: If there is data collected on utilization, it should be included in the report.

Sidewalk and Street Closures. The report would benefit from a more extensive discussion of pedestrian challenges, including short and long-term sidewalk closures. A list of the sidewalks and streets that are closed and their anticipated duration should be included to show the impacts of development on pedestrians and businesses. A table with lane closures and street closures should also be included.

Loading and Unloading: The study that was done resulted in some recommendations for ameliorating the problems. Please add information to the report about what steps will be taken to implement the ideas in the coming year or two, both generally, and perhaps in relation to an ongoing or anticipated development project(s)..

Parks: Creation of new parkland is a primary goal of the Bethesda Downtown Plan, where thirteen parks were proposed.. To acknowledge the importance of park development in the Plan, the annual monitoring report should include a table that lists all 13 parks and shows the status of their implementation, updated annually

Add more information about the Farm Women's Market redevelopment to this report, notably when it is expected to begin development and/or what steps it needs to take before development can begin. Information about progress made on the design of the park and funding sources should be included.

Notably, there is no mention about Veteran's Park and the Union Hardware property. The Minor Master Plan Amendment includes a recommendation regarding location of

the Veteran's Park expansion, and this should be mentioned. This is the sort of information that should be included in a Parks table.

If Caroline Freeland and the new plan for redesign of Elm Street Park (for the CCT surface trail) are to be cited in this report, then it should be noted that neither of these parks is new and that the work done in them was not mentioned in the Plan -- they have nothing to do with implementation of the Plan.

Development Approvals: Given the importance of providing more housing in the County and keeping a focus on new development in Bethesda, the annual monitoring report should include an annual synopsis of the projects that have been proposed and approved (sketch, preliminary, and site plan) in the reporting year, detailing name of project, location, construction timing, number of housing units, amount of MPDUs, PIP contribution, etc. A table should be included that has the same information for prior years with the project status updated as necessary (information about whether they have obtained extensions, have applied for permits, are under construction, are completed, are not moving). This would give the IAC and the public a snapshot of what development is presently underway and what could be in the near term.

The proposed project at 4702 Chevy Chase Drive was mentioned in the report, but without pertinent details. Please add that the project has not pulled any permits and instead has gotten an extension; that the community meeting was in 2020, and that connectivity with Norwood Park is years in the future.

Park Impact Payment The PIP is an important part of the Plan and a table showing how much PIP money has been approved to date and in 2024, how much has been collected to date and in 2024, how much has been spent and on what and how much is left should be included -- not just an accounting of the amounts collected and approved in 2024. The number of projects that have contributed to the PIP or have been approved to use BOZ density and will be contributing to the PIP is not very long so a PIP table in the report could include each of them and indicate which have paid the PIP and which have not yet paid.

The status of the PIP funds tied up in the old Union Hardware site should be mentioned in this section.

Schools. The presentation on schools is overly positive and as regards elementary schools, misleading. The section "SHIFTING TREND: ENROLLMENT DECLINE LEADS TO ABUNDANCE OF SURPLUS" with its focus on cluster numbers, ignores the overcrowding that is happening at Bethesda Elementary School. This section title needs to be toned down and information about overcrowding at Bethesda Elementary School needs to be fully addressed in this report. There was overcrowding for the 2023-24 school year (the year presented in this report) but it appears that it is worse for the 2024-25 school year because on December 16, 2024, Superintendent Thomas Taylor sent an email message to the parents of Bethesda Elementary students to inform them that overcrowding at the school requires immediate remedial action. However, the only

relief that can be offered for this school year is to transfer students to Somerset Elementary School at the end of the second marking period. He wrote:

“As a short-term solution, we are offering families the option of a Change of School Assignment (COSA) to transfer their child to either Somerset Elementary School, Westbrook Elementary School or Chevy Chase Elementary School. This option is available on a first-come, first-served basis until available space at Somerset and Westbrook Elementary schools is full. This option is available for interested families until the end of the 2nd marking period and transfer would occur at the marking period.”

However, parents who decide to move their children will not be offered transportation. This needs to be added to the report.

Also, the Friendship Heights master plan needs to be added to the list of plans at the bottom of page 14 (the discussion about build-out enrollment estimates) because students from Friendship Heights attend B-CC cluster middle and high schools. Note, it should be mentioned that a new Friendship Heights master plan is being written.

Final comment

The IAC believes that a transparent data-rich report, as described herein, could be used as a template for future reports. And after the first issue of the report, it would not be onerous to produce because the data could be easily inserted from more regularly updated data in tables on the website, and the narrative would flow from those.