



PLANNING PROCESS

The Rockville Town Center Master Plan is the result of a nine month long process designed to determine how Rockville residents and employees use the existing Town Center and surrounding commercial areas, how they envision the future Town Center, and what they consider to be potential opportunities or obstacles to development. A number of tools were utilized to gather and quantify the opinions of Town Center stakeholders and participants in the planning process. Those tools included:

- stakeholder interviews,
- Town Center Action Team meetings,
- feedback from the board and staff of the Greater Rockville Partnership,
- surveys, and
- a public open house held on September 20, 2000.

A report entitled *Report on Public Input* (Appendix C) was prepared in December of 2000 and describes in detail the involvement tools and the results of the interviews and meetings. This chapter is intended to present a summary of the process and its findings focusing primarily on issues identified and the implications of those issues on the final plan recommendations.

Planning Process Tools

The consultant planning team began conducting stakeholder interviews at the onset of the master planning process. The greatest concentration of interviews was performed during the week of August 15, 2000. Comments from the

35 interviews generally focused on the following topics: leadership and vision (from both the public and private sector); City-County relations; parking and traffic circulation (particularly along Rockville Pike); strength of the residential market; disadvantages of the Town Center from an office development perspective; and reasons for the overall attractiveness of Rockville and the Town Center area for all market segments.

Members of the consultant planning team had the opportunity to meet with the Rockville Town Center Action Team (TCAT) on two occasions. The first meeting was a brief introductory discussion at the TCAT meeting on August 15 that focused on the motivation behind the creation of the TCAT and members' general thoughts regarding the Town Center. On September 19, 2000, planning team members attended a second meeting of the TCAT and led a discussion regarding the potential *Desired Development Framework* for the Town Center. The framework was described as a tool for illustrating how the major organizational pieces (gateways, focal points, pedestrian and vehicular thoroughfares, etc.) of the

Town Center should be organized. Participants were divided into five groups to prepare their own framework diagrams. These

Seattle avoided urban decline by fostering close-in neighborhoods that support a downtown retail core. The city government works with its active neighborhoods through a system of community councils, the Parks Department's community centers and the Neighborhood Improvement Program.

thoughts and ideas were incorporated into the final *Desired Framework Diagram* that is described in Chapter 5, *Physical Plan*.

Members of the consultant planning team participated in a discussion regarding the Town Center at the Greater Rockville Partnership (GRP) Board meeting on July 25, 2000. Seven Board members and GRP staff were in attendance. The discussion began with each person identifying one thing they would add to the Town Center and one thing they would remove. The group indicated a desire to add parking, an office and retail environment, active development, retail character (local and national), MD 355 entryway and seamless connection to MD 355, large public gathering place, excitement, visitor center, small specialty retail, something that ties community together, and activities that draw people between events. The group agreed on the goal of removing underutilized and underdeveloped land and the 'back lot' image of the Town Center; and also generally agreed that the Town Center will not compete with the I-270 corridor in attracting office tenants but did think it could compete with Bethesda's central business district because Rockville's Town Center can offer lower lease rates while maintaining urban amenities for the companies.

On September 20, 2000, the City of Rockville and the consultant planning team hosted a public open house to gather input regarding the Town Center Master Plan. Between 40 and 50 people attended the Open House. Four stations were set up in City Hall that focused on existing conditions and planned developments (including goals and objectives for the Town Center), development framework, transportation and circulation, and urban design elements. Each station was designed to present the current conditions on a particular topic and to engage participants in evaluating and validating those circumstances and then in re-

sponding to preliminary ideas regarding potential remedies to those current conditions.

At the existing conditions station, participants indicated the strongest appreciation for the proposed new regional library and associated parking garage, the relocation of the Giant supermarket, and the renovation of Gateway Tower. Concern was expressed regarding the Rockville Center Inc. (RCI), District Court, and City Hall expansion projects.

By prioritizing goal statements previously prepared by the Planning Commission, Town Center Action Team, and the City's Master Plan participants, open house attendees identified mixed-use development, around-the-clock activity, and a pedestrian-oriented character as the most important elements to include in the Town Center. This prioritization was done through a survey mechanism, the results of which are described in further detail below.



Open house participants found the building design above to be desirable.

Participants at the development framework station were asked to give their feedback on three different draft versions of a proposed Desired Development Framework Diagram. In general, participants showed support for connections to East Rockville, enlarging the highly pedestrian-oriented area northward from East Middle Lane

all the way to the North Washington-Hungerford split, gateways or 'entrances' to the Town Center at the 'mixing bowl' and the North Washington-Hungerford split, East Middle Lane and Maryland Avenue as major spines or focal points for pedestrian activities, and greater incorporation of the Rockville Metro station into the Town Center.



Streetscapes displaying creative design elements were of interest to open house participants.

Information available at the transportation and circulation station included existing traffic information and existing non-vehicular access routes. Participants were asked to give feedback regarding potential transportation improvements such as a new interchange at Interstate 270 and Gude Drive, and improvements to Wootton Parkway, MD 355, First Street, and West Montgomery Avenue. In general, the response was favorable to using Gude Drive as a bypass of the Town Center and constructing an additional interchange at I-270. A number of residents noted that Tower Oaks Boulevard currently offers access to Wootton Parkway and with improved signage and minor roadway improvements this interchange could promote a southern bypass of the Town Center.

Most residents approved of the proposed northward Maryland Avenue extension. Few were enthusiastic about the other connections to reinstate the grid system in the Town Center. In general, participants suggested that it is the approaches to the Town Center that are more of an issue than the circulation system within the Town Center.

At the urban design elements station, participants viewed several photographs of buildings, open spaces, and streetscapes from environments comparable to the Town Center. The images that scored highest give an indication of the aesthetic and design preferences of participants. Those images are included throughout this chapter.

As described earlier, the planning team was given three documents from the Planning Commission, the Town Center Action Team, and the City's Master Plan process that described each of the group's goals for the Town Center. In order to begin prioritizing the goals and objectives into a working document that could steer the Town Center Master Plan process, the planning team synthesized those goals into one document that consisted of nine goals. Participants were given a survey that described objectives that accompanied the goals. The key results of the returned surveys are summarized below.

In prioritizing the goals and objectives, survey respondents identified mixed-use development as the most important goal for the Town Center Master Plan. A large percentage believed the Town Center should include elements such as hotels, spaces for small and large businesses, local and national retailers, and both small and large office tenants. Everyone surveyed agreed that the Town Center should have a mix of uses for day and night activities. One hundred percent agreed that the Town Center should have retail, restaurant, and entertainment uses; however, 51% felt that restaurants should not outnumber retail uses.

Maintaining an active Town Center after normal business hours was clearly reflected as an important community goal, as nearly all of those surveyed agreed that Town Center businesses should have evening hours and general support should be given to encourage evening activity. Eighty percent agreed the Town Center



Activities such as outdoor restaurant seating were identified as desirable.

should be an evening destination for the entire region.

Twenty-six percent of those surveyed felt that the Town Center should emphasize residential development over other uses, yet 69% believed that the government should offer incentives that encourage residential development. If housing was developed, 57% thought that high density development was preferable to low density, single-family housing in the Town Center. Finally, 61% said that housing should replace other underutilized and incompatible uses. It appears clear that while residential development is not the main goal, it is perceived to be a better alternative than empty or underutilized buildings and lots.



Streetscapes that included water elements were well-received by participants.

Following mixed-use development, survey respondents identified pedestrian-oriented character, design excellence, and around-the-clock activity as priority goals for the Town Center. One hundred percent of those surveyed agreed that the Town Center should be “walkable” and linked to surrounding neighborhoods. More than 95% of survey respondents believe small block sizes are important in the Town Center. Furthermore, more than 80% agreed that planning in the Town Center should result in reduced vehicular traffic. Eighty-eight percent think most Town Center buildings should be required to have active, pedestrian-friendly uses at street level, while 23% think the Town Center should require only those buildings on primary corridors to have pedestrian-friendly uses at street level.



Participants regarded pedestrian activity and brick sidewalks as desirable elements for the Town Center.

Open space was identified through the survey as an important element to give the Town Center a unique character. Eighty-eight percent think there should be a passive open space or park system and 90% of those surveyed think new buildings should include public open space as part of their development. Ninety-three percent think the Town Center should contain a public park or town square.

In order to get development appropriate to the Town Center, 82% believe the public sector should offer incentives for projects that meet the Town Center Master Plan objectives.



Open spaces that incorporate greenery and hard and soft surfaces scored well at the open house.

Issues Identified

In synthesizing all comments gathered during the early phases of the planning process, there were a number of very broad recurring themes. Those themes that shaped the subsequent work of the planning team are described below:



Plant materials were identified as desirable elements.

- **Vision & Leadership**
Some participants indicated that they felt there was no clear vision for the Town Center.

Although others felt like there was a clear vision, when they described it, their vision was not always consistent with the goals described by others. The main differences of opinion revolved around scale, density, and uses. The hope was expressed that the City would follow through with a plan once it was prepared, but there was also concern that past efforts to steer Town Center redevelop-

ment that resulted in less-than-successful outcomes may make leaders overly cautious in their approach. There was generally a consistent belief that the boundaries of the Town Center are not clear and would benefit from better definition.



Functional water features - an identified desirable Town Center element.

- **Public Sector Cooperation**
It was overwhelmingly expressed that the City and County will have to both agree on and support the plan that is developed. Although this relationship has been strained at times, the results of County involvement in redeveloping Silver Spring indicate that they could play a role in facilitating activities in Rockville. Skepticism was expressed regarding the amount of financial support the County might direct toward the Rockville Town Center. Because of the amount of their landholdings and the proportion of revenue that the City and County receive, participants felt that the County should seriously consider partnering with the City to play a significant role in Town Center activities.
- **Traffic & Circulation**
The impact of traffic on the Town Center

cannot be overstated. Rockville Pike/MD 355 was overwhelmingly identified as dangerous for pedestrians and the source of much congestion. Even though not all of the traffic on MD 355 is traveling toward the Town Center as its destination, this congestion affects both the development potential of the Town Center from a marketing perspective and the user-friendliness of the area. Easing traffic flow and providing alternative routes that connect to the larger cir-



Lighting and streetscape amenities were determined to be important design features.

ulation system was determined to be a worthwhile goal as long as any diversions or new routes did not generate additional traffic through residential neighborhoods.

■ **Market Opportunities & Limitations**

The goal of identifying the best target markets or market niches for the Town Center resulted in many discussions with nearly as many outcomes. Most agreed that the residential market is strong; but not all agreed on how the strength of that market could be directed into specific projects within the Town Center. Known proposed projects indicate that land costs on the edges of the Town Center are affordable enough to attract developers interested in constructing medium density residential projects; how-



Street furniture was identified as a desirable feature to include in open space designs.

ever, differing opinions exist regarding the likelihood of residential projects within the core of the Town Center where land costs are higher. Similarly, several participants felt that the Town Center is not a ‘big tenant market’ for office users and slow pre-leasing of both the Foulger Pratt (620,000 square feet) and RCI (1,200,000 square feet) projects indicate there may be some truth to that statement. Others felt that the delay in the availability of space within new projects results in inaccurate perceptions of the Town Center office market. However, smaller buildings than those approved on the RCI site seem to be better received by the marketplace.

■ **Density Expectations & Desires**

Through the course of interviews, meetings, and discussions, it became apparent that a healthy tension between a market-driven (potentially high density) approach and a more traditional ‘Main Street’ scale approach to Town Center redevelopment exists. Several participants expressed concern regarding the scale of development proposed in the Foulger Pratt and RCI projects, yet others did not see problems with that scale of development as long as parking and traffic solutions were provided.

Master Plan Advisory Group

In December of 2000, the Mayor and Council formally assembled a stakeholder group called the Town Center Master Plan Advisory Group to interact directly with the consultant planning team and to provide feedback on recommendations. Three committees focused on the following topics:

- Land Use & Community Character,
- Economic Development, and
- Transportation & Interjurisdictional Coordination.



Open space used as focal points were favored by open house attendees.

The Advisory Group was created to guide the development of plan recommendations and to generate both private and public sector input and support for the plan. The expectation was that its members would form a core of plan advocates, championing the plan within their respective communities.

With the formation of the Advisory Group, the planning process evolved into a more 'hands-on' and collaborative process that incorporated written work products generated by the committees of the Advisory Group. The Advisory Group consisted of 24 members representing Town Center and adjacent neighborhood residents (9 seats), developers/property owners (6 seats), business leaders (4 seats), and public entities (5 seats). Representatives of the City, County, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit



Varying surface materials and patterns in streetscape design were identified as desirable.

Authority (WMATA), State Highway Administration, Rockville Chamber of Commerce, and the Greater Rockville Partnership all participated as part of the Advisory Group. Meetings of the Advisory Group were open to the public and members of the Town Center Action Team, and residents from East Rockville often participated in discussions. The ultimate plan recommendations are a result of five months of interaction with the Advisory Group and reflect direction given to the consultant planning team by the committees.

Not surprisingly, the separate committees did not always agree on specific elements of the plan recommendations. Some items were clearly supported by one or more of the committees, yet not by the third committee. The consultant planning team offered solutions that meet clearly defined and supported objectives. Ultimately, the final solution may differ from what is proposed in this Plan; however, the consultant planning team strongly recommends that decision-makers use the principles articulated throughout this document to evaluate the merits of alternative solutions.

Draft Goals & Objectives

One of the first tasks of the Advisory Group was that of finalizing a list of goals and objectives to guide the development of the Master Plan.

At the public open house, the consultant planning team presented the following draft goal statements for review by participants:

■ **Housing**

Growth in the Town Center’s residential population, through the retention of existing housing and the development of new housing, will help to attract additional services, nighttime activities, and restaurants and will help to give the Town Center the distinction of a neighborhood, as well as the seat of Montgomery County government.

■ **Mixed-Use Development**

Residential, retail, office, entertainment, business, civic, educational, and recreational uses will be assembled in the Town Center in a finely grained and integrated manner so that the mixed-use collection will be more dominant than any one type of use.



Appropriately scaled signs using traditional materials were favored.

■ **Pedestrian-Oriented Character**

The diverse collection of uses in the Town Center will be interconnected with attractive, safe, and comfortable sidewalks, spaces, and paths that prioritize the pedestrian experience over that of the vehicle so that users are encouraged and eager to walk between the extremes of the district.

■ **Access Alternatives**

The prioritization of the pedestrian experience in the Town Center will be reinforced by improved connections within the district and to adjacent neighborhoods and by the promotion of public transit, bicycle use, live-work space, and incentives to live near places of employment.



Pedestrian activity had a high priority for open house participants.

■ **Design Excellence**

The buildings, streets, and spaces within the Town Center will exhibit outstanding design solutions that create a distinctive and renowned destination and incorporate animated street-level spaces that encourage pedestrian activity, social interaction, and commerce.

■ **Around-the-Clock Activity**

The mix of uses in the Town Center will encourage employees to linger after the end of their workday, attract residents from throughout the area, and provide residents of the Town Center and adjacent neighborhoods with a vibrant and active ‘Main Street’ environment that can be shared with the rest of the metropolitan area.

■ **Incentives**

Town Center leaders and promoters will support redevelopment activities by strategically using resources to encourage private sector investment that will help to achieve the goals for the district.

■ **Role in Civic Life**

Redevelopment of the Town Center will include both public and private uses that create an atmosphere of civic and social engagement and support, and will be the result of clearly identified Town Center champions and stewards.



The integration of greenery with water features was considered a desirable open space element.

■ **Open Space**

Active retail, business, entertainment, and residential spaces in the Town Center will be reinforced by and contrasted with both an interconnected network of open space



Symmetrical design elements in open space were well-liked by participants.

amenities and a significant new centralized outdoor space that offer users both passive and active recreational opportunities.

After gathering feedback from surveys and open house participants, the consultant planning team simplified the nine statements presented above into one overarching goal for the Town Center with accompanying objectives. The Advisory Group then reviewed the document and endorsed the Goal and Objectives for the Town Center, as shown on page 20.



Designated pedestrian walkways were identified as a favored design amenity by open house participants.

These objectives represent the collaborative results of the early months of the planning process. By drafting and adopting them early in their tenure, the Advisory Group communicated their priorities to the consultant planning

team. These objectives, in conjunction with ongoing feedback from the Advisory Group, then guided the work and recommendations of the planning team throughout the Master Plan process.

Town Center Master Plan Goal

Create a daytime, evening, and weekend activity center that is easily identifiable, pedestrian-oriented, and incorporates a mix of uses and activities.

Objectives

1. Provide an environment conducive to and supportive of living, working, shopping, and entertainment.
2. Accommodate a variety of densities and scales of development that are sensitive to an urban neighborhood environment and the demands of the marketplace.
3. Enhance links to transportation options which improve their visibility and accessibility.
4. Provide improved connections from neighborhoods to the Town Center.
5. Minimize the divisive impact of Rockville Pike and the Metro and CSX rail lines.
6. Make the Town Center a unique, high amenity destination for local and regional customers.
7. Utilize urban design to establish zoning and density requirements that will assist in defining the Rockville Town Center.
8. Provide sufficient parking for new mixed-use development and visitors to the Town Center.
9. Address integrating new aesthetic public parking garages with linkages from road networks.