



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL

Councilmember Tom Perez

District 5

April 2005 Silver Spring Community Meeting

On April 14th, over 120 residents and community stakeholders joined me in a discussion of our collective interest and investment in the future of Silver Spring. With the help of volunteers from IMPACT Silver Spring, we divided ourselves into ten smaller groups and asked the following four guiding questions about the Greater Silver Spring community:

- What do you like about the current Silver Spring?
- What would you like to change?
- What do you want Silver Spring to be in 2015?
- What can Montgomery County Government do for you?

Many groups had similar responses while some groups had conflicting opinions even within their group. For the most part, there were clear themes of issues that were on the minds of many of Silver Spring's stakeholders. Many were concerned about transportation – the traffic, mass transit, and pedestrian safety; the survival of small businesses; affordable housing and residential development; and the preservation of the unique character of Silver Spring. The responses to the four questions and specifically, the pattern of issues in the responses are instrumental in shaping the future decisions that we will make as a community.

What do you like about the current Silver Spring?

When asked what residents like about Silver Spring, nearly every group responded about its character and soul, describing it as “funky,” “festive,” “eclectic,” and “vibrant.” The “vibrant” personality of Silver Spring is represented in its homes, businesses, residents, and community activities and events. In particular, people emphasized appreciating the wide range of diversity – of cultures, ethnicities, and socio-economic levels – among its residents and businesses, thereby making Silver Spring a very unique and culturally-rich area.

People also referred to Silver Spring as an “arts mecca,” an area abundant with arts and entertainment-related venues and events. Silver Spring is home to the AFI Silver Theater, Pyramid Atlantic, and Round House Theater. People also appreciated the parks, playgrounds, community centers, libraries, and churches that are easily accessible and part of the neighborhood.

Furthermore, people indicated how they value the historical aspects of the city; many were pleased to see the existence and preservation of historical homes. For residential areas in general, many indicated their preference for varying house designs, instead of the cookie-cutter neighborhood homes. Some people also noted that they appreciated Silver Spring's clean and aesthetically-pleasing streetscape, such as the existence of beautiful flowers along the streets.

Many groups cited our human capital – our neighbors and peers - as reasons why they liked Silver Spring. Specifically, people felt that Silver Spring residents are more active in community issues. Many indicated a sense of pride in their community's involvement with local politics and their proactive lifestyles, where many residents can be found outside strolling the streets and parks, playing sports, or just socializing. More importantly, residents acknowledged that the safe and child-friendly environment of Silver Spring enabled them to meet their neighbors and bring their children to the local parks and playgrounds. A few groups also mentioned that they liked the Silver Spring community because of the progressive tendencies of their neighbors and representatives.

When referring to Silver Spring, some happily labeled it as an “urban village/forest” where there is a downtown region, available green space, and low-density neighborhoods for residents. People also liked the close proximity to Washington, D.C. and the ability to enjoy the advantages and opportunities of the city while Silver Spring itself is able to maintain its unique nature. As a suburban city, many of the residents liked the layout of the city, the accessible mass transit, the pedestrian-friendly attributes, and the parking availability.

Finally, respondents liked the affordability of Silver Spring, although there is considerable angst about whether individuals and businesses will be priced out of the market. They liked the existence of affordable housing units, such as the revitalized Gramax building. They also liked the appropriate balance between small businesses and mall-oriented chain stores, which also means a balance between affordable stores and more expensive ones. Some respondents even indicated that the affordability of Silver Spring is imperative in maintaining the previously-mentioned cultural and socio-economic diversity within the city.

What do you want to change about Silver Spring?

Many of the answers to the question of what to change about Silver Spring was to maintain or improve the things respondents already liked about Silver Spring (outlined in the answers to the previous question). People want to continue or increase funding for schools and libraries, maintain safe streets, keep the neighborhood scale and limit growth, develop smarter growth plans, preserve green spaces, provide affordable housing, minimize generic architecture, and have a better balance of types of businesses. People also wanted to continue the theme of redevelopment by revitalizing areas surrounding the downtown area. There were also responses indicating the important priority of maintaining the character and diversity of Silver Spring.

As mentioned before, many residents like the family-oriented nature of Silver Spring. Therefore, in response to this question, people responded with suggestions for more activities and places for youth to gather, as well as suggestions to maintain a safe and livable neighborhood.

In response to this question, some people took this opportunity to advocate for specific issues. For instance, numerous groups wanted the renovation of the old Blair High School auditorium as a potential cultural asset to Silver Spring with its future ability to host various arts events and concerts. Others voiced their opinions for changes on issues, like the Farmer's Market, preliminary plans for a potential skateboarding park, and the new community civic building. There were even a few requests for an incorporated city government to decentralize County government.

By far, respondents had the most suggestions on issues related to transportation in Silver Spring. There were general requests to improve traffic and ensure a higher level of safety for both pedestrians and bicyclists. Some groups had specific suggestions. For instance, one group specified the request for improved pedestrian safety by asking for a better walkway connection between residential and commercial areas, thereby also creating more walk-in traffic for local and small businesses. There was also a request to improve streetscape by better street maintenance and faster response to street light outages. Other specific suggestions were for more bicycle paths, relocating certain bus stops, and more parking opportunities. The most frequently discussed transportation issue was the Purple line. Although most, but not all, groups were in favor of building the Purple line, many groups and group members disputed whether it should be built above or under ground, the process of having it built, and the path that the line should take. Participants expressed a strong desire to ensure that their perspectives are heard throughout the discussion of the critical issues surrounding the Purple Line.

Vision for Silver Spring in 2015

Again, when residents were asked about their vision of Silver Spring in 2015, many of the responses were to maintain the things that they had already expressed liking about Silver Spring now. For instance, people wanted to maintain a progressive political viewpoint, cultural and economic diversity, arts and entertainment venues, available green spaces, building height and development restrictions, affordable housing, and affordable and diverse restaurants and other businesses.

People also foresaw their suggestions for change mentioned in the previous question being carried out within the next ten years. People foresaw the renovation of the old Blair High School auditorium, the building of the Purple line, more biker and hiker trails, better libraries and schools, improved traffic, and an appropriate number of parking garages. A number of people mentioned a potential incorporated city government, upgraded infrastructure, maintaining the width of the beltway, improved streetscape, a capital for heritage tourism, and/or the addition of a dog park.

Overall, most respondents commented on seeing an appealing, diverse, and economically strong Silver Spring for 2015. Residents wanted to make sure that in 2015, Silver Spring would still be an appealing city for people of all ages and backgrounds. Therefore, many residents commented on ensuring a diverse community through affordable housing, job availability and living wages, economically and culturally diverse business establishments, and gathering places that will serve as community anchors and that will attract a cultural diverse audience. People liked the idea of creating multiple attractive destinations to produce a thriving and prosperous downtown. Also, in order to maintain the character of Silver Spring and provide a balance to larger chain stores, many people expressed their desire to preserve small, local businesses through incubators or tax breaks of some sort.

What can Montgomery County Government do for you?

Finally, to the most pressing question of what county government can do for you, the responses were no surprise. Although not all of the groups answered this question, the responses of those who did answer outlined how Montgomery County government could help achieve the things people had said they liked in the previous questions. People asked the government to increase funding for transportation maintenance and improvement, streetscape, police officers to insure greater public safety, education – public schools and adult education, libraries, community arts, small business funds, and affordable housing units.

There were also specific requests for county government to provide funding for the old Blair High School auditorium, the Purple line, and the community civic building. People wanted the government to make zoning text amendment changes – one person even wanted the County to eliminate them all together, create more job training, provide more affordable child care and health care, take steps to protect the environment, and facilitate smarter growth and development of the city as well as the county. There were also requests for the government to ensure services for those in the community who need it most.

Once again, people mentioned the importance of maintaining diversity and thus wanted the County to secure diversity through its employees. Numerous people wanted the government to be an accurate reflection of the cultural, economic, and social diversity in Silver Spring and the county as a whole.

Conclusions and Next Steps

While we have made considerable progress, the “to do” list remains quite long as we seek to further enhance our quality of life. In the months ahead, I will continue to advocate for the issues that we discussed in this meeting. In particular, I am working hard to ensure that the civic building will include the ice rink and the pavilion, as was envisioned in the original plan. The civic building is the community centerpiece of the revitalization efforts, and I believe it is critically important to build it – all of it – including the pavilion and the ice rink.

In the budget that the Council passed in May, we have included funding to conduct a detailed analysis of how much it will cost to renovate the Old Blair auditorium. We will complete this critical step in the next year, and meanwhile, we are having regular discussions with the Montgomery County Public Schools about this valuable resource. I appreciate the strong advocacy of so many community members on this issue and look forward to continuing to work together in the upcoming year.

I continue to work with small businesses in Silver Spring to ensure that their voices are being heard. I am attaching the report that we prepared regarding Silver Spring revitalization and the small business community. We must work vigilantly to ensure that the rising tide of revitalization lifts all boats.

I will also continue to keep you in the loop on the critical transportation issues, such as the Purple Line, the Transit Center, and the bike trails.

Overall, I have gained a better understanding of the community's priorities on issues related to transportation, businesses, housing, development, and County services. I am extremely proud and blessed to be able to represent Silver Spring as its County Councilmember. From these results, it is evident that the residents of Silver Spring are deeply invested in the future of the city and the welfare of its residents. Residents obviously care about the environment and for their neighbors and their ability to afford housing, maintain their small businesses, and provide a safe neighborhood for their families.

This meeting is only one part of a continuing dialogue, as decisions are being made and changes are occurring in Silver Spring. I want to ensure that the residents and community members of Silver Spring play a role in guiding the future of this city. Please continue to voice concerns and opinions to me either by e-mail, councilmember.perez@montgomerycountymd.gov, or by phone, 240-777-7966. Thank you for your commitment to our community!