

Mr. Artie Harris, Chair
And Members of the Planning Board
Montgomery County Planning Board
2425 Reedie Drive, 14th Floor
Wheaton, Maryland 20902
Re December 2, 2024 Public Hearing on the Bethesda Downtown Minor Master Plan
Amendment
November 22, 2024

Montgomery County Planning Board Chair Harris and Members of the Planning Board:

The Bethesda Implementation Advisory Committee (IAC) consists of 7 residential/homeowner representatives and 7 commercial property owner/business community representatives, all of whom have considerable knowledge of the history and implementation of the 2017 Bethesda Downtown Plan. Please see the description of the IAC at the end of this letter. We offer the following comments on the Downtown Bethesda Minor Master Plan Amendment (MMPA) recommendations:

Development Cap

The primary motivator behind the MMPA review was what to do with Bethesda's development cap given that on the ground and approved development had come within 2 million square feet of the 32.4 million square foot cap. Should the development cap be raised (and if so, by how much) or should it be removed?

The IAC recognizes the importance of providing certainty to property owners, developers and related financial entities that wish to redevelop and invest in Bethesda. But the IAC also recognizes that it is important to balance the need for certain and known development standards with the need to ensure that Bethesda's infrastructure and amenities will be in place to support additional growth in Bethesda. The IAC is a strong proponent for infrastructure and amenities (including parks) to keep pace with new development so that Bethesda's appeal to developers, businesses, and current and future residents will continue into the future.

We therefore support removal of the development cap only if a requirement for multiple check-in points is included in the Bethesda Overlay Zone (BOZ) to ensure community resources (parks, transportation, recreation center, etc.) are keeping pace with development, and that the policies and funding mechanisms needed to implement infrastructure improvements and public amenities have been established. We suggest the first check-in occur when we are within 10% of the original cap of 32.4 million square feet based on building permits pulled, and subsequent check-ins occur when 36.4 and 40.4 million square feet of density have been approved (4 and 8 million square feet respectively above the current cap). These check-ins should not require any action by the Planning Board or County Council but will ensure that additional analyses occur as build-out occurs since the hard cap is proposed to be eliminated from the BOZ.

The check-ins should comprehensively evaluate whether development is proceeding as predicted and that delivery of amenities and facilities is keeping pace. IAC is particularly concerned about the effects of the projected more-than-doubled population increases and skeptical about the projected employment increases.

Parks and the Park Impact Payment

New parks are the primary “overarching” goal of the Plan. The Plan calls for 13 new parks and 13 new acres of parkland. No new parkland identified in the Plan has been delivered yet.

The IAC had suggested that, as part of the MMPA work this past year, Montgomery County Parks and Planning work with the IAC to review park priorities. This did not occur. The IAC continues to believe that this review could be useful. The IAC also urges Montgomery County Parks to be open to the acquisition of properties for parks not specified in the Plan and for acceptance of parks created through privately owned public open space, as opposed to dedication to the Parks Department.

Recognizing the high cost of developing the new Bethesda parks and the limited capacity of the CIP, the Plan established the Park Impact Payment (PIP) to partially fund the new parks – the PIP was never intended to cover all of the costs of developing the new parks. The Plan recommended identification of new financing mechanisms to provide other funds for the parks. To date no other funding mechanisms have been identified and it appears that the County is relying solely on the PIP to provide the needed funding. As well, the recommendations suggest using PIP funds for a recreation center, a new burden for limited funds. M-NCPPC should explore more creative public/private partnership opportunities for delivering on the Master Plan recommendations for public open space.

Nevertheless, the IAC supports the proposed increase in the PIP rate to \$15.57 per square foot conditional on provision of a predictable and feasible metric for increasing PIP over time and conditional on the County seeking to identify additional local, state, and federal funding sources for park development as called for in the Plan. The MMPA draft report noted that Bethesda generates considerable income for the County and the IAC does not believe it is appropriate for a disproportionately large portion of the funds generated in Bethesda to be used in other parts of the County.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony,

Dedun Ingram, IAC Co-Chair
Jack Alexander, IAC Co-Chair

*The role of the IAC is described as the following in the Bethesda Downtown Plan Implementation Guidelines:

“This advisory group will work in coordination with the Montgomery County Planning Department, Bethesda Urban Partnership, Bethesda Chevy-Chase Regional Services

Center and Bethesda Green by providing specific community and redevelopment expertise that would also serve as an interface between developers and County agencies in implementing the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan recommendations. The IAC will be guided by the vision, goals and recommendations in the Approved and Adopted Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan, the Bethesda Downtown Design Guidelines, and the Bethesda Overlay Zone. The role of the Committee is to coordinate and monitor the progress of development and address implementation of the recommendations in the Approved and Adopted Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan. The committee will help to ensure transparency and accountability in the implementation of the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan, Design Guidelines and Bethesda Overlay Zone. It will help the Planning Board, the County Council, the County Executive and their staff to maintain the objectives of the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan, Design Guidelines and Bethesda Overlay Zone. The Committee will strengthen the monitoring of implementation, development, and construction of the various projects comprising the Sector Plan. The committee is to provide advice and guidance to the Planning Board, County Council and County Executive staff on the County's outreach, interaction with affected communities and businesses, advice on the issues appropriate to and pertaining to the achievement of the objectives of the Sector Plan."

Cc: Councilmember Andrew Friedson
Cindy Gibson
Jason Sartori
Elza Hisel-McCoy
Larissa Klevan

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.