*What’s Next for Wheaton*

Issues in our Community

Wheaton is a vibrant regional commercial hub with a growing urban residential population. However, Wheaton faces some unique issues and challenges that the community would like to see addressed. The Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) has organized a public decision makers forum to be held July 18, 2018. To prepare for the forum, WUDAC drafted a statement of key issues, conducted a survey and held a public meeting to get input from the community. This revised issue paper incorporates the community’s comments. Wheaton’s issues and challenges are categorized below under the headings: **Civic Spaces**, **Connectivity**, and **Accountability**.

**Creating Civic Spaces in the Urban Center**

Urban communities need central spaces where people can gather and share experiences. We are excited about the Montgomery County office building and town plaza that is under construction in Wheaton Triangle on the former Parking Lot 13. WUDAC has recommended in the past that Reedie Drive be closed between Triangle Lane and Grandview Ave. However, community members have expressed concern about maintaining access to the stores on Triangle Lane and about having a connection between Georgia Ave and Veirs Mill Rd and the Westfield Wheaton Mall. The community needs to better understand planned traffic and pedestrian patterns and how potential conflicts will be managed at the center of the plaza between people and cars if Reedie Drive remains open between Triangle Lane and Grandview. We need to ensure that the plaza fulfills its potential as a public community space and is not compromised by Reedie Drive.

The undeveloped portion of Lot 13 where an apartment building was planned (but will not be built) should be turned into a park until the county decides what to do with it. Surface parking will not be needed once the underground lot is open.

Throughout Wheaton, there is a dearth of open areas and green space, despite the Master Plan identifying this as a major deficiency of our Urban District. We would like to see development of multi-functional open spaces: playgrounds, plazas, pocket parks, temporary urban installations, and green areas that incorporate environmental infrastructure to improve Wheaton’s sustainability. All existing publicly-owned open spaces, parking lots, etc. should be assessed for their potential as parks – not only as development sites. We need a public process to identify and preserve urban open spaces.

Wheaton needs to continue to develop its urban core around the Metro station. Therefore, the proposed arts and cultural center currently being studied should be located in the triangle, within walking distance of the Metro. This is the most important capital improvement the county could make toward fulfilling Wheaton’s promise as an A&E district. Officials should commit now to making this more than a feasibility study, and to supporting a center all the way through the planning and funding stages.

There are many lots in the Wheaton sector that will not be developed in the next 10-20 years. We would like to see capital investment in updating streetscapes, i.e. sidewalks, to help lay the groundwork for adjacent development. Improvements are needed to make Wheaton more walkable. The public had more comments about walkability than any other issue, noting that Wheaton needed wider sidewalks that are set back from the roadways, crosswalks that are ADA compliant, and utility poles moved underground. The second largest number of comments called for Wheaton to maintain its “small business character,” while recognizing that the buildings that house these businesses are in disrepair and unattractive.

**CONNECTIVITY – PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL**

Almost half of the perimeter of the Wheaton Urban District is formed by the Westfield shopping mall. However, accessing the mall on foot from the Urban District, from the Metro and bus bays, and from the surrounding neighborhoods is a challenge. We would like to see a process put in place to mitigate this issue. This requires county planners to collaborate with Westfield and WMATA to work toward the common goal of establishing an attractive connection between the mall and the Urban District that functions well for people on foot, on bicycles and in cars. This collaboration should be part of the current redevelopment project. Wheaton residents are concerned about any plan that requires them to access the mall by walking through the WMATA parking garage.

The three state highways intersecting to form the heart of the Wheaton Urban District are both our reason for being and our curse. Likewise, Westfield mall attracts commerce to Wheaton, but also attracts cars and causes traffic congestion, one of the community’s greatest concerns. Increasingly, all three Mall entrances back up with cars, blocking the flow of traffic on the state highways. The Wheaton community needs a comprehensive timeline for improving traffic flow and the pedestrian experience in the Urban District particularly along the three state highways. This requires county DOT to “connect” with the Maryland State Highway Administration to expedite improvements to the three major intersections. It is unacceptable to have traffic on the state highways routed through local roads because of an inadequate intersection at University Boulevard and Georgia Ave.

We are also concerned about the impact that planned developments such as Bus Rapid Transit and bike paths will have on traffic patterns and congestion in the Urban District. With the draft bike master plan on the verge of approval, we would like to know how this will interface with and be complemented by other sidewalk and street parking improvements. The community would like to see coordinated, master planning for multi-modal transportation in Wheaton.

Despite the dearth of parks in the Urban District, Wheaton is surrounded by acres of parkland and miles of trails and a regional attraction at Brookside Gardens, but these lack connectivity via connector trails and signage and access to mass transit. WUDAC has asked Montgomery Parks to work with Ride On or WMATA to establish shuttle service to Brookside Gardens for the Wings of Fancy and Garden of Lights, but currently only cars or pedestrians can access these park features. This is a barrier to greater use of these gems and increases car traffic at a time when we want to encourage bikes, Metro, buses, and walking.

**ADMINSTRATION & ACCOUNTABILITY**

With the closure of the Wheaton Development Office as the lead entity representing Wheaton’s interests in development decisions, there seems to be a void in accountability for achieving the vision set out in the Wheaton Sector Plan. The staff of the Urban District and Mid-County Regional Services Center have been decimated over the past decade and the county needs to find a way to support this office to better enable the county to coordinate development efforts, including outreach to local businesses and citizens.

The Wheaton sector planning boundaries do not include the new library and community recreation center currently being constructed. The Montgomery County Council should consider expanding the boundary of the planning area and perhaps the Urban District to include these facilities so that Wheaton can grow as a fully thought out connected urban area.

As development proceeds, the County needs to consider how to reduce the barrier of entry (development costs) for long-time property owners and tenants to enable them to redevelop properties on a micro scale, thereby preserving our small business diversity and allowing for needed beautification and infrastructure updates.

If Wheaton is to fulfill its promise as an A&E District, arts and entertainment in Wheaton need resources and active management. Additional staff, funding, or some means of drawing upon the community’s resources are needed to ensure effective management of the A&E District.