

COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND DESIGN FACT SHEET

INTRODUCTION

Community identity is the collection of attributes that make a community unique, make it "home," and separate it from other places. Physical, social, ethnic, political, geographic, economic, and other characteristics contribute to our perceptions about communities. The process of community design can help create neighborhood identity.

Although community identity and design was not a specific goal of the 1964 or 1969 Plans, these concepts were included throughout the text of both Plans. More specifically, the 1969 General Plan stated, "each community should have an identity, which can be created by imaginative design." Since 1969 the role of design review at the master plan, zoning, and subdivision levels has increased significantly.

This fact sheet will address the concepts of community identity and design in four sections: 1) who we are, 2) where we gather and interact, 3) how we govern ourselves, and 4) how we design communities.

The creation of communities occurs at several levels. At the County level, the General Plan envisioned Montgomery County as part of the Washington Metropolitan Area in which Washington served as the center of regional activity with wedges and corridors radiating outward. On a slightly smaller scale, the General Plan envisioned the wedges and corridors concept as a system to organize groups of communities. The communities in a wedge were intended to be different in scale and mix of uses from those in the corridor, and those in the corridor were intended to be different from those in the urban/suburban ring. Within these larger communities there are also smaller neighborhood communities. The functions and interrelationships of these commu-

nities will vary and often overlap. It is these functions and interrelationships which influence the way that a community is perceived, both by its residents and others.

Government activities can influence the function and interrelationships of communities, but in many ways, the government's ability to achieve community identity is limited. Government can affect some aspects of this goal but it can not be achieved solely by government action. The government can do such things as provide space for civic activities and some programming but can not demand attendance.

One aspect of community identity controlled by government is the place name used by the United States Postal Service. While addresses are seemingly insignificant, residents express confusion over why there are 16 zip codes that use Silver Spring as the place name, with areas ranging from the County's borders with Washington D.C. and Prince George's County to Howard County. Since a number of these zip codes also have individual post offices, the confusion is even greater and makes it harder to know where to find a business listed in the yellow pages or for individuals to explain where they live.

Community identity starts with an idea in the minds of citizens and is realized by attitudes and actions which bond people with their neighbors near and far. Ultimately, community identity only flourishes with each citizen's personal commitment.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY AS A PLANNING ISSUE

Like other American suburbs, Montgomery County has developed into a place where cars are the most common means of travel. It was the auto-

mobile that enabled so many people to move away from their downtown homes and jobs in the first place, and it was the near-universal use of the automobile that enabled suburban houses to be located so far from each other and from shopping centers, employment centers, and everywhere else in the suburbs that we routinely drive to.

It is easy to have a feeling of belonging somewhere, a "sense of place," when the majority of one's daily activities happen in a single town or village. In Montgomery County, though, a family's and individual's activities usually happen in several different places. Just naming where you live can be a challenge for some County residents. The need to fortify this sense of place and community identity is the focus of the Community Identity and Design Section of the General Plan refinement. In addition there is a growing perception that good design is essential to creating strong communities.

Montgomery County has undergone a major transformation in the last two decades, changing from a bedroom community of Washington, D.C., to a major employment center. Our orientation has changed from downtown Washington to our own urban ring and corridor areas. We now look for our identity within Montgomery County. In addition, the composition of our families, households, workforce, and lifestyles have changed dramatically. Many feel that these changes and the pace of change have resulted in a loss of community identity, both here in Montgomery County and throughout the United States.

As part of the *Comprehensive Growth Policy Study*, the predecessor to this General Plan Refinement, the Montgomery County Planning Department hosted a public workshop. Workshop participants were asked to name other suburban places in the United States that seem to have a better quality of life than Montgomery County. The places named were all similar in that they all were perceived to have a strong sense of community or a "village" atmosphere. When the groups

listed the attributes that they would most like to bring to Montgomery County, there also were a lot of similarities. Two attributes were mentioned most: sense of community with a "village" atmosphere, and an efficient transportation system that allows access by non-car methods.

The workshop summary stated that "The other top attributes from all of the groups were: community identity, more mixed land uses, ease of use of many modes of transportation, neighborhood access (especially by foot and bicycle), convenience shopping, neighborhood focus in government and issue resolution, increased use of mass transit, environmental protection, scenic and cultural amenities, sense of community, affordability, and jobs and housing."

THE ROLE OF THE GENERAL PLAN

One of the challenges of the General Plan is to provide guidance for creating community identity. The General Plan, by being general, will not provide a specific prescription for each individual community. However, this fact sheet lists some of the attributes that are important in creating a community identity.

Local area master plans, long term operating and capital budgets, and individual subdivision and zoning actions provide more specific guidance, on adjusting these various elements to establish community identity and design. While government can influence location, layout, and some functional aspects, it is the community itself that determines its identity and how it functions. The General Plan's role is to provide guidance to foster an environment in which individuals can get a sense of pride in their community.

I. WHO WE ARE

The demographic characteristics of Montgomery County residents have changed dramatically during the last twenty years. In short, the changes in household composition, number of