



# SECTOR PLAN FRAMEWORK

## 2.1 ROLE AND PLANNING HISTORY OF BETHESDA

### A. DESCRIPTION OF SECTOR PLAN AREA

The Bethesda Central Business District Sector Plan area is located between the Capital Beltway (I-495) and northwest Washington, D.C., as shown in Figure 2.1, Regional Location. The Plan area is in the southernmost corner of Montgomery County. (See Figure 2.2, Location within Montgomery County.) The center of the area occurs at the intersection of three Maryland state highways: Wisconsin Avenue, East-West Highway, and Old Georgetown Road.

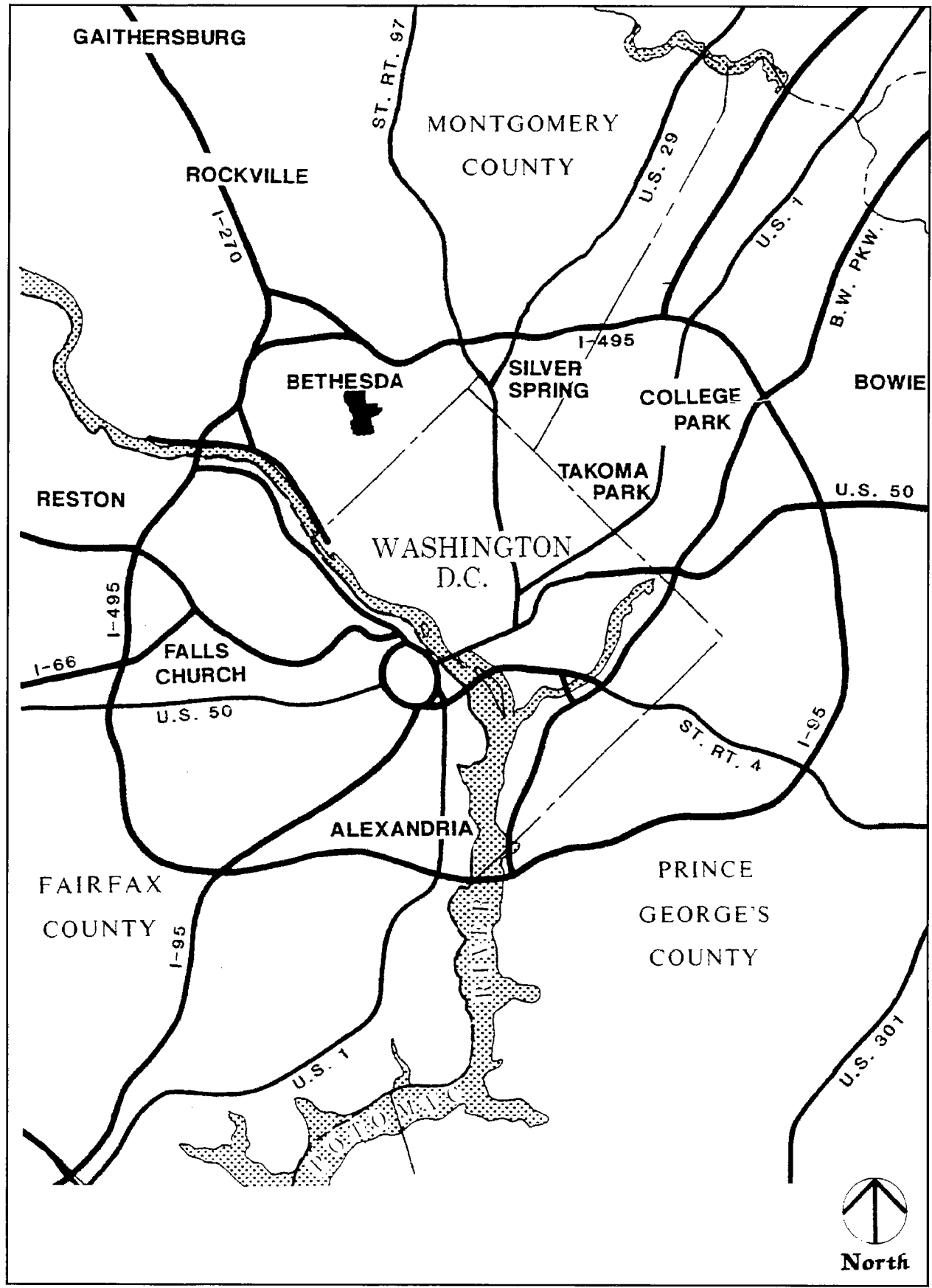
The Bethesda CBD Sector Plan boundary encloses an area of about 405 acres within the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Planning Area. The Sector Plan area has an irregular shape, which is bounded by the National Institutes of Health on the north; Tilbury Street, Sleaford Road, and Chelton Streets, along with the CSX rail line, 46th Street, and West Avenue on the east; Nottingham Drive, Chevy Chase Recreation Center, and portions of Kenwood Forest on the south; and the C-2 zoned property west of Arlington Road and portions of Old Georgetown Road on the west. The Sector Plan boundary is shown in Figure 2.3.

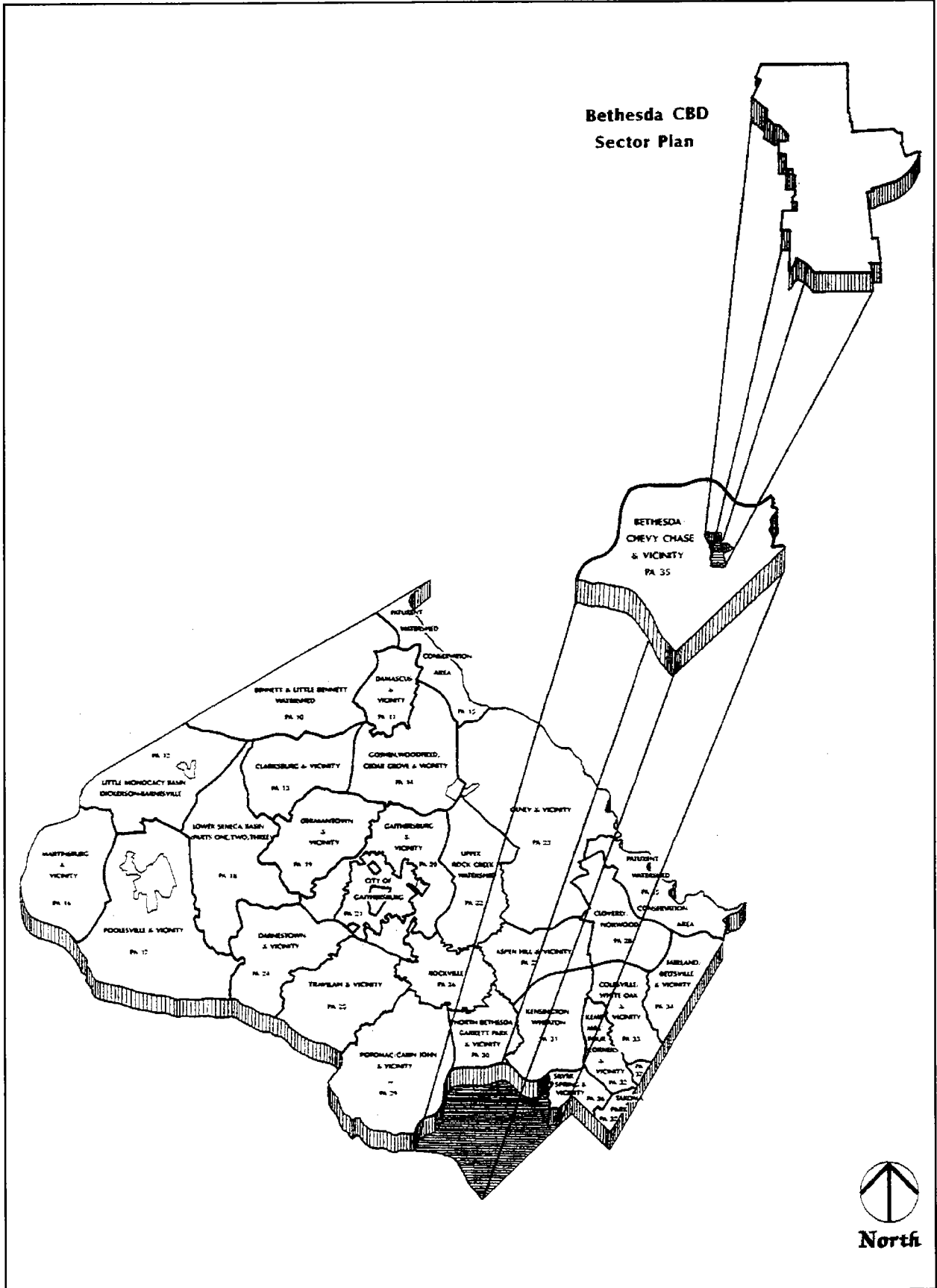
The Plan modifies the Sector Plan boundary. The new boundary is also shown in Figure 2.3. The new boundary deletes some single-family detached lots in East Bethesda and one lot in Edgemoor from the Sector Plan area, adding them to the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Planning Area. This change will further protect the single-family character of these properties and the adjacent neighborhoods. (See Section 4.7.) As a formal amendment to the 1990 *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan*, the Sector Plan makes the following recommendations for the single-family housing area added to the Master Plan area:

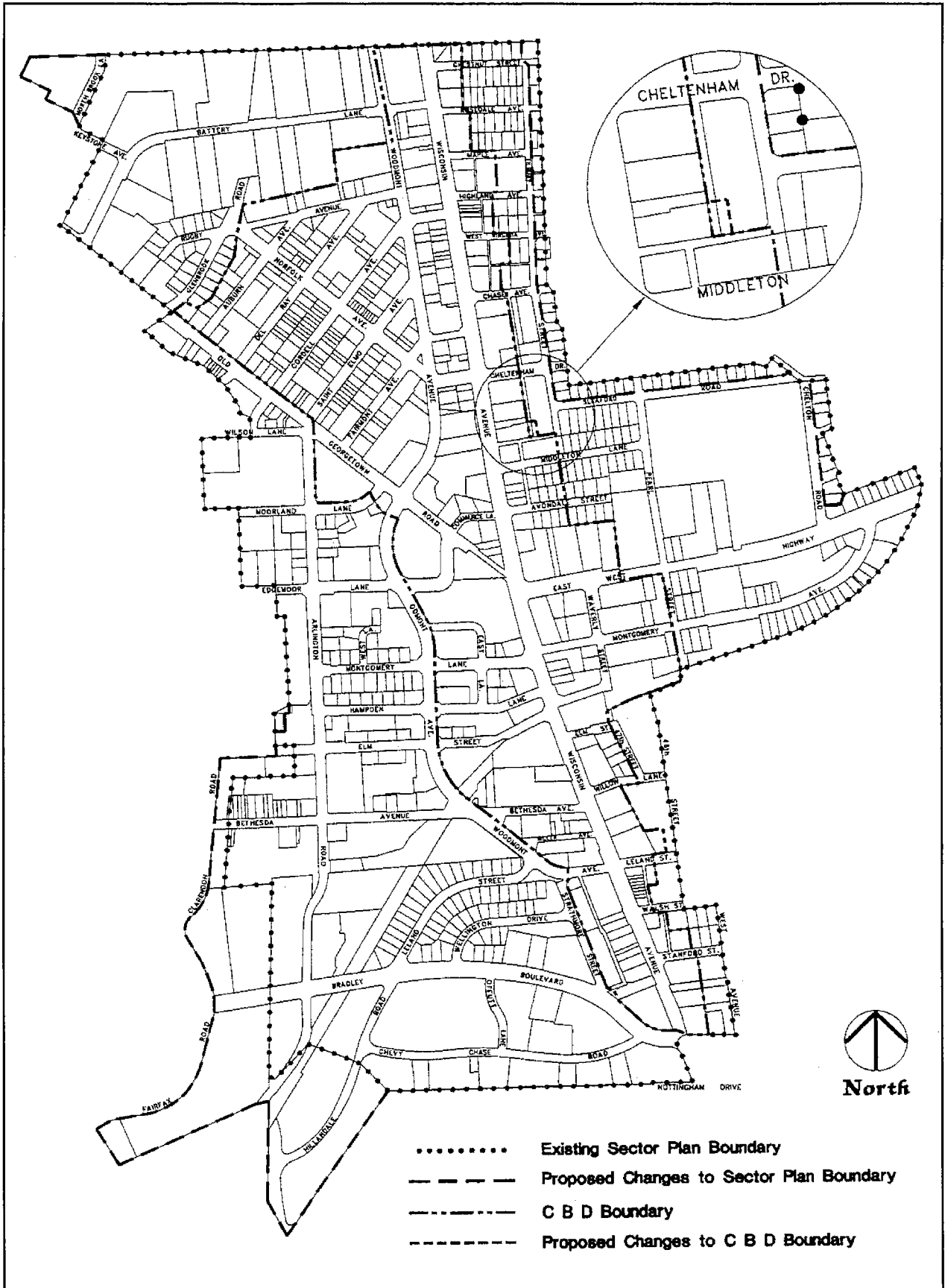
1. Confirm the existing single-family land use and R-60 zoning for these properties.
2. Apply to these properties the B-CC Master Plan guidelines for special exceptions to zoning.

The new boundary also adds to the Sector Plan area some established townhouse and garden apartment communities in the southwest, removing them from the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Planning Area. The zoning for these communities was confirmed in the B-CC Master Plan. The addition of stable, single-family attached and multi-family housing areas is consistent with the higher density character of other housing within the Sector Plan boundary. (See Figure 2.3 and discussion in Section 4.4, Battery Lane District; Section 4.11, Bradley Boulevard District; and Section 4.13, Edgemoor Transition area).

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The CBD boundary defines the Central Business District. It is a smaller area within the Sector Plan area that contains the parcels designated with the Central Business District (CBD) zones. These zones, CBD-0.5, CBD-1, CBD-2, CBD-3, CBD-R1, and CBD-R2, are intended to encourage residential and commercial development at densities which can be supported by public facilities and which are compatible with the surrounding areas. They are designed to encourage provision of open space and other amenities, and to promote better pedestrian and vehicular circulation. Each zone allows development by a "standard method" or an "optional method" of development.

The Plan modifies the Bethesda CBD boundary as follows. (See Figure 2.3, Sector Plan Area.)

1. Extend the boundary eastward 50 feet across an existing public alley right-of-way into the Beta Corporation parking lot, located between Cheltenham Drive and Middleton Lane, to allow an optional method project that should result in preservation of the interior of the historic Bethesda Theatre Cafe. (See discussion in Section 4.1, the Metro Core District.)
2. Depict the boundary just north of Leland Street and west of 46th Street as following the lot lines defined on the original plats of subdivision for Chevy Chase. The boundary line change occurs wholly within the area of Parking Lot #24.
3. Locate the CBD boundary along the east edge of the right-of-way of Strathmore Street. A wider right-of-way will not be needed since the Plan does not recommend the extension of Woodmont Avenue to Bradley Boulevard. The Plan recommends that the entire property on the east side of Strathmore Street be zoned R-10 to retain the garden apartment use. (See discussion in Section 4.11, the Bradley Boulevard District.)

## **B. ROLE OF BETHESDA**

Bethesda has both a local role in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Planning Area and a regional role in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. These roles can be viewed from several perspectives: Bethesda as a downtown, a community center, a diverse market, and a transportation hub.

Bethesda is the downtown for the southwest part of Montgomery County, particularly the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area. While there are many centers of concentrated mixed-use development in the Washington, D.C. suburbs, only a few have the more urban qualities found in Bethesda. These characteristics include a high-quality public environment in the Metro Core District, a strong regional restaurant market, and an emerging cultural arts environment. Bethesda has the vitality of a diverse retail sector, a strong employment base, and a growing housing component. This urban identity has developed while respecting the character of nearby residential communities.

Bethesda is considered the heart of the community by a growing number of B-CC and other down-County residents. It provides many of the central functions common to traditional downtowns. Popular public facilities include a library, schools, and parks,



complemented by private facilities such as churches, and academies. Shopping at the major community retail center along Arlington Road offers encounters with friends and acquaintances. The public plazas and shopping streets have also become places for special community events. Public services include a police station, a fire and a rescue station, and a County government services center.

Bethesda is a strong market for jobs, retailing, and housing. The job market includes the National Institutes of Health and the Naval Medical Command, immediately to the north. Landowners and developers find Bethesda an attractive location for office space, as demonstrated in the development competition of the 1980's. A large and diverse retail sector has grown despite the proliferation of suburban shopping and strip centers in nearby areas. When housing is provided, new residents readily move to Bethesda. The strength of the Bethesda economy provides a strong revenue base for Montgomery County. Bethesda residents' high incomes and the appealing environment continue to attract developers, retailers, and shoppers to Bethesda. A continuing challenge is to ensure that the various types of new growth can be accommodated by transportation and other public facilities.

Bethesda is an important transportation center in Montgomery County. The Metro Center provides both rail and bus transit service. State highways go through the heart of Bethesda, although it is not located directly on the interstate highway system. While travel to Bethesda continues to be dominated by single-occupant auto use, there is potential for increasing the use of walking, bicycles, transit, and car pooling for work-related trips.

### **C. PLANNING HISTORY**

The 1970 *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan* expressed concerns regarding the advent of the Metro station in Bethesda. It raised questions about how the new transportation mode would affect the CBD, including whether it would stimulate positive change, how to guide such change, and what its impact would be on surrounding areas. The plan recommended a CBD boundary but did not specify kinds or intensity of uses.

The public sector made significant progress in implementing the 1970 Master Plan, which was widely supported by public officials and citizens. The County Council contracted the size of the CBD and adopted the Commercial Transition (C-T) Zone as a means of protecting residential communities. Public agencies incorporated the transit station location, design, and major access facilities into various programs.

The 1976 *Bethesda Central Business District Sector Plan* effected a substantial downzoning, reducing theoretical development potential from 63 million square feet to 12.4 million square feet. The Sector Plan applied a new transit station development area zone and CBD zones instead of the C-2 Zone, reducing FAR from 14 to 6 in the CBD-3 Zone, and to 4 in the CBD-2 Zone.

The 1976 Plan also recommended that development in the Metro Core occur in the early years of the planning period, and that the Metro Center be the first part of the Metro Core to be developed. However, prior to development of Metro Center, some optional method projects were built farther out from the Core. Eventually, a large retail-office-hotel complex and a central plaza over the subway station were approved for Metro Center.

This complex opened in 1984, the same year as the Metro station. The timing of these projects followed the general intent of the 1976 Plan. Along with the CBD Zone areas, the 1976 Plan addressed other commercially and residentially zoned land surrounding the Metro Core.

In 1982, the County Council adopted an amendment to the 1976 *Bethesda Central Business District Sector Plan*. Adoption of the Plan Amendment lifted a moratorium on optional method development. The Amendment was solely related to staging issues and development scale and did not address zoning changes or public facility location.

The 1982 Amendment's staging plan permitted development applications prior to the opening of Metro in the Stage II area, farther out from the Core, including most of the CBD-2 and the TS-R areas. Peak-hour vehicle trips became the overall limiting factor in granting development approvals. Two thousand one hundred (2,100) trips were allocated to specific use mixes. The Amendment gave general guidance concerning the land use mix and described desirable features and public benefits to be provided by individual properties in the Metro Core District. The 1982 Amendment ranked optional method applications in Stage II, based upon a set of Standards For Comparison.

Since 1985, there has been no transportation capacity for projects relying on the standard method of development. Two amendments to the Sector Plan, the latest in 1988, allowed very small projects to receive subdivision approval. In 1989, the County Council approved "loophole closure" legislation (Bill 25-89), which placed development limits on those properties recorded prior to 1982 that registered. If they generate fewer than 50 peak-hour vehicle trips, these loophole properties can obtain building permits without meeting further Adequate Public Facilities (APFO) requirements. Loophole properties generating more than 50 peak-hour trips are required to meet APFO requirements, just as new subdivisions are.

Montgomery County and Bethesda experienced a rapid rate of urban growth in the late 1980's. Although this development has been contained within the limits of the County's growth management system, the experience justified a closer look at the impacts of future growth. This Sector Plan provides a comprehensive review of the Bethesda CBD following completion of the new *Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan* in 1990.



## **2.2 SECTOR PLAN PROFILE**

### **A. PEOPLE**

The residents of the Bethesda CBD Sector Plan area reflect its suburban downtown nature. In brief, the residents are:

- Apartment dwellers, with 87 percent in either garden or high-rise apartments.
- Middle-aged, with a median age of 40 years, though 30 percent are in the 25-34 age range.
- Female, 61 percent of the total population.
- Single, 57 percent of the total population, but above 60 percent for apartment dwellers.
- Employed in Bethesda-Chevy Chase (35 percent) or in Washington, DC (41 percent).
- Well educated (29 percent of residents over age 25 have graduate degrees).
- Owners of one car, 71 percent of the residents.
- Residents of small households, an average of 1.5 persons per household.

### **B. LAND USE AND EMPLOYMENT**

The Bethesda CBD Sector Plan area contains a mix of land uses in a suburban downtown environment. Highest densities are concentrated in the Metro Core District. However, high-density buildings are also found along East-West Highway and north along Wisconsin Avenue into the Woodmont Triangle District. Retail exists on the first floor of most commercial structures. Housing is distributed throughout the area.

Between 1980 and 1991, the total floor area in commercial use increased from 6.3 million square feet to 10.1 million square feet. Current space includes 6.7 million square feet of office, 2.3 million square feet of retail, and 1.1 million square feet of other uses.

The employment capacity of commercial buildings increased from 23,000 jobs in 1980 to 37,000 jobs in 1991. In 1991, there was capacity for an estimated 29,500 office jobs, 5,000 retail jobs, and 2,500 jobs in other business groups. (See Figure 2.4.) Since office vacancy reached 21.8 percent and retail reached 12.6 percent in 1991, the actual job level is estimated to be below 30,000 jobs.

Many properties in the Sector Plan area have potential for redevelopment under the 1976 Sector Plan's recommended zoning. Figure 2.5 identifies those properties that have potential for either optional method or standard method redevelopment. The criteria for determining redevelopment potential reflect both the technical standards of the zone and assumptions concerning decisions by property owners. It is clear from the map that many properties have redevelopment potential.



In the past 10 years, almost 3 million square feet of new office space have been completed. The average annual office rent in 1991 was \$24 per square foot and ranged from \$16 to \$33. These figures are comparable to rental rates in Ballston and Courthouse Square Metro station areas in Virginia. The five-year rate of office space absorption through July 1991 has been 143,600 square feet per year. Assuming this five-year rate continues, about 4 million square feet of existing vacant and new office development would take almost 28 years to be absorbed. It is expected that absorption of office space will be considerably slower in the 1990's due to more restrictive financing requirements, less favorable tax laws, and more conservative investment attitudes. As a result, the assumed rate of absorption may still be too high, even though Bethesda will probably be stronger than most other locations in the region.

In the past 10 years, almost 600,000 square feet of new retail space have been completed. Retail space rents range from \$14 to \$45 a square foot, with higher rates occurring in the Metro Core and Arlington Road Districts. Lower rates tend to occur as distance from Metro increases. Since 1987, the number of retail establishments has grown by 13 percent. Bethesda's retailers have identified distinct market niches, offering an eclectic mix of goods and services. Major types of retail establishments include comparison retail, such as home furnishings, women's apparel, electronics, and gifts. Neighborhood retail establishments include food stores, hair care, and dry cleaning. Other retail includes restaurants, cultural retail, auto services, and professional services. These types of retail are dispersed throughout Bethesda, as shown in Figure 2.6.

## **C. HOUSING**

The Bethesda CBD Sector Plan area contains about 5,200 housing units, including 600 units within the expanded Sector Plan boundary. The units are 49 percent high-rise, 38 percent garden, and 13 percent single-family detached and townhouse. Among the high-rise and garden units are 800 condominiums and 250 units for the elderly.

The largest concentrations of housing are in the north, primarily along Battery Lane, and in the south, primarily along Bradley Boulevard. Two lesser concentrations occur along Woodmont Avenue near Old Georgetown Road and along East-West Highway.

Major characteristics of housing in Bethesda include:

- Over half of Bethesda's rental high-rise and garden units are one-bedroom.
- Rents for existing garden and mid-rise units range from \$470 to \$790 per month, with many of the non-air-conditioned units at the lower, more affordable end of the range.
- Rents for new high-rise apartments range from as low as \$650 for an efficiency unit to \$1,400 for a two-bedroom unit.
- Average age of housing completed prior to the 1987 Census Update Survey is now 34 years (in 1992).
- New condominium housing serves higher income households, with a median sales price since 1987 of about \$260,000 and prices as high as \$500,000.
- New apartment rentals appear to have shifted to young and middle-aged singles.

# RETAIL SPACE BY CATEGORY

FIGURE 2.6

