

PART II: PLANNING ISSUES

This Master Plan will face a range of choices for the future of Damascus. While patterns of density are generally constrained by the realities of sewer limitations, other elements of prior Master Plans need updating and/or reconsideration in the light of current realities. The following is an overview of the major proposed issues to be considered in the context of this Master Plan review:

LAND USE AND ZONING

An overriding concern in considering appropriate land uses in Damascus is the need to preserve and enhance the community's "sense of place" – its unique identity and character as a rural community of low to moderate density residential uses surrounding a town scale commercial center. In the context of that vision, the following land use issues will be evaluated in this Master Plan:

1. Town Center Mix and Land Use Types – including appropriate zoning for the older shopping center site, appropriate land use and zoning of properties along A-12 route, and relationship of existing zoning to future desired commercial uses.
2. Land Use Outside the Town Center – to include an evaluation of the potential need for a rural "village" overlay zone for several existing historic communities.
3. Sewer Issues - remaining capacity of the sewer plant serving Damascus.

HOUSING

While an adequate supply of affordable housing is not as critical a need in Damascus as in other communities in the County, it is important for all master plans to fully evaluate housing needs in all communities. Additional housing for low to moderate income individuals and families is currently under construction or consideration. Further evaluation of this housing element will be a part of the planning process.

There is a lack of housing opportunities specifically designed for seniors. Consideration of how best to address this need will be a part of the master plan review process.

TRANSPORTATION AND PEDESTRIAN ACCESS

1. Status of Master Planned Roads

Several planned roads within the Damascus Master Plan need to be reconsidered for alternate alignments or removal.

P-2 (a rerouting of Howard Chapel Drive northeast of the town center), and *P-5* (a connector between Hawkins Creamery Road and Woodfield Road) currently face practically insurmountable environmental constraints.

P-8 (a street off of Woodfield Road) appears to be unnecessary.

Woodfield Road Extended – modify to reflect the final alignment chosen by the County.

Woodfield Road – modify to better specify locations for two-lane to five-lane treatment and review proposed right-of-way sufficiency.

Damascus Boulevard – a classification category needs to be created in the County Road Code for the designated “rural business street.”

MD 27 (Ridge Road) - north and south of Damascus, evaluate width given the continuing growth of commuter traffic through the Damascus community. This road was to remain a designated two-lane road until the next Master Plan. The Maryland State Highway Administration already thinks the road should be wider, and turning lanes should be considered at several roads.

Annapolis Rock Road - Evaluate status as a State road in Howard County, but a non-classified road in Montgomery County.

2. Possible New Roads for Better Connectivity

The Master Plan should also contemplate several potential new roads in the Damascus area. These include:

Bethesda Church Road – Consider potential extension from Woodfield Road to MD 108 east of Damascus, providing an alternate route for through east/west traffic.

Lewis Drive - Evaluate potential extension to connect to Bethesda Church Road.

Kings Valley Road - Evaluate potential reclassification to arterial status to allow it to handle a larger volume of traffic, and an alternate route to Bethesda Church Road, allowing some commuter traffic to avoid central Damascus.

Consider potential connector road between MD 27 and Woodfield Road Extended just north of the shopping center.

3. Commuter Through Traffic – While this Master Plan update should respect the recommendations of 1982 and 1993 Master Plans regarding the Damascus Bypass, the potential need for an eventual bypass or other type of roadway to route through traffic around Damascus cannot be ignored. The bypass issue has been thoroughly studied in previous Master Plans, most recently examined in-depth in the 1993 Amendment to the Damascus Master Plan.

That document stated that a bypass should be contemplated again only if it is determined that the extension of Woodfield Road (A-12) does not adequately handle through traffic when it is completed. Yet no mechanism for guaranteeing that evaluation is included. Thus, this Master Plan update should contain two elements to ensure that the issue of through traffic will be evaluated in a timely manner:

- The Master Plan should recommend that within one to two years after the completion of Woodfield Road Extended (A-12), the M-NCPPC staff will commence a work program task to evaluate current traffic conditions at that time and work with the community to determine whether a Master Plan Amendment process is warranted to evaluate the need for a bypass.

- To ensure a timely process for the above evaluation, the Master Plan should recommend that the County Council authorize and direct the Montgomery County Department of Public Works and Transportation to conduct, within two years - in conjunction with the M-NCPPC, State of Maryland, Howard County, Frederick County, and Carroll County - a study of the long-term traffic load implications of growth patterns in these adjoining counties that are the major contributing factors in the continuing rise in through traffic in Damascus.

This study would be available as a resource for the evaluation of Damascus through traffic to be conducted after the completion of Woodfield Road Extended, as noted above.

These elements will guarantee future action on this issue for the residents of Damascus.

In addition to these measures, the Master Plan should evaluate the current level of commuter traffic and determine if other alternate measures, such as improvements to MD 27, are warranted in the near future.

4. Pedestrian Issues - Safety and Facilities

Issues of "walkability" including the safety and aesthetics of the "pedestrian experience" will be reviewed in the business area. This will include a review of existing sidewalks, crossing signals, road markings and pedestrian circulation to focus on pedestrian access and safety.

ENVIRONMENT AND WATERSHED PROTECTION

The main focus in this Master Plan review will be on the environmental aspects of roadway connections and zoning issues in the Damascus town area and any other key natural resource and water supply protection issues elsewhere. An Environmental Resources Inventory is underway, and will be available by the time of the Staff Draft. Some of the environmental issues in the Master Plan include:

1. Improved protection of the County drinking water supply, especially in the Patuxent watershed, including the proper relationship between this Master Plan and the 1993 Functional Master Plan for the Patuxent River.
2. Limiting potential impact of development in selected areas on sensitive streams, wetlands, and erodible slopes, including methodologies to protect sensitive streams and stream headwaters.
3. Consideration of natural resources for protection as parkland.
4. Options for reducing the impacts of road construction and improvements.

PARKS, TRAILS, RECREATION, AND LEGACY OPEN SPACE

While much has been accomplished in the timeframe of the current Master Plan, a number of issues relating to park and recreation facilities will be evaluated. This need primarily reflects the growth in housing serving young families with children in the area. Park and Trail needs analysis in the Damascus area will focus on five major issues:

1. Providing adequate recreation opportunities.
2. Considering locations for greenway trail corridors to provide trail connections between the Potomac and Patuxent Rivers; including opportunities to hook east-west connectors into the north-south stream valley trail systems.
3. Consideration of properties for protection as important natural resource areas.
4. Identifying historical and cultural sites that should be preserved as park features.
5. Consideration of properties for protection under Legacy Open Space in the natural resource, water supply protection, and rural open space categories.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES

In recent years there has been progress in providing adequate community facilities in the Damascus area. A new library and adjacent senior center were completed and work is to begin in the spring of 2003 for a new community center on Oak Drive. This Master Plan will evaluate whether additional facilities are necessary and whether existing facilities are adequate for the community.

Overcrowding in schools remains an issue of major concern to Damascus residents. Some school building projects, such as the new Clarksburg High School (which will relieve the overcrowding at Damascus High School) have been delayed due to budget constraints. The community is aware of these problems, and they will continue to work with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to resolve the overcrowding issues.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Potential historic resources are too numerous to be evaluated within the time frame of this Master Plan. There are currently 122 individual sites and six historic districts on the Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites in Montgomery County, Maryland that need to be fully evaluated to determine if they should be included in the Master Plan of Historic Preservation. The Historic Preservation staff is working concurrently to evaluate these sites. Over the years, 18 individual sites and two historic districts were designated in the Master Plan.

OTHER ISSUES

The staff has met with representatives of three properties or property groups in the Damascus community. At their request, these properties will be specifically considered within the master plan process. These include properties north of the town center along the route of Woodfield Road Extended, and properties adjacent to the west side of the town center area. Discussion of these properties will be a part of the work of the Land Use Issues Task Force.