

### III. PLAN FRAMEWORK

#### The Plan Concept

Four Corners, located at the southernmost end of Eastern Montgomery County, is entirely within the area described as the Urban Ring in the 1993 *General Plan Refinement of the Goals and Objectives for Montgomery County*. Four Corners is the oldest and most urban of the four Eastern Montgomery County master plan communities. The General Plan Refinement characterized the Urban Ring communities as well-maintained, many with landmarks that identify them as distinct neighborhoods. The General Plan Refinement noted, "A strong sense of community pride exists among residents in these neighborhoods of tree-lined, well-connected streets." The 1986 *Sector Plan for Four Corners and Vicinity* also recognized the importance of the existing residential neighborhoods and sought to preserve and protect them through a series of plan goals and objectives.

The language from the General Plan Refinement and the emphasis placed on residential neighborhoods in the 1986 Sector Plan describe, in part, the qualities of the Four Corners community that have attracted people to this area for many years. Some features that appeal to local residents include an urban neighborhood atmosphere that still has a small town friendliness, a strong sense of community spirit and involvement, established, mature residential neighborhoods that offer a variety of single-family housing styles at reasonable prices, a convenient location within the metropolitan region, local neighborhood shopping, and proximity to parks and natural areas.

The people of Four Corners are seeking to sustain the positive qualities that contribute to an appealing lifestyle in their neighborhoods. At the same time, the residents want the areas that need improvement to be addressed through the Master Plan and implemented by the appropriate agencies. Of primary concern are the integration of the new Blair High School into the community, the State Highway Administration (SHA) construction project at the Colesville Road/University Boulevard intersection, and the appearance of the commercial district.

This Plan concept describes the community of neighborhoods that comprises Four Corners and forms the foundation for this Master Plan and its recommendations. The Plan concept is followed by a Plan vision (page 16), which describes Four Corners in the future. In order to develop a concept for Four Corners, the framework that constitutes community and neighborhoods was analyzed. First, community character and value are discussed. The analysis then describes the places where people live based on a hierarchical system composed of subdivisions, neighborhoods, and community. These elements are discussed below in general terms first, and then specifically applied to the Four Corners area.

Communities comprise two important elements -- character and value. A community's character can be measured by tangible aspects -- a variety of local services that support community life: daily retail and business services, religious institutions, parks and recreation, and gathering places for community activities. A community's value is more elusive -- it pertains to the community's intrinsic worth to the people who are a part of it. A community's value evolves through residents'

familiarity with the surroundings, frequent shared use of services, fellowship and companionship, and common concerns and interests that foster a feeling of collective responsibility.

A livable community is sustained when its best attributes are recognized, reinforced, and enhanced. Sustaining a livable community involves identifying what makes it distinctive and then channelling change to preserve existing assets. Ultimately, livable communities are places with enduring character and value that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

**Subdivisions** represent the smallest segment of community and constitute the building blocks of neighborhoods. Subdivisions are primarily residential areas that contain similar housing styles and types, reflecting the architecture and building materials at the time of construction. The street network in most subdivisions is designed for local traffic and can include culs-de-sac and deadend streets.

**Neighborhoods** are the second tier in the community hierarchy and often include several subdivisions. The predominant land use is residential, but other low-density uses such as elderly housing, day care, a school, or professional offices (such as a doctor or dentist) also may be located within a neighborhood's boundaries. Residents of the neighborhood can reach these local destinations by walking, biking, or short car trips. Focal points such as a school or a local park or recreational facility provide gathering places and an opportunity for social interaction among neighbors. Neighborhoods usually have definable boundaries and often there is some form of homeowners, neighborhood, or civic association. If there is a neighborhood association, residents may identify with the association and the boundaries it represents. For others, neighborhood boundaries are not fixed, but vary depending on age, lifestyle, daily activities, and personal preference. The neighborhood street network primarily serves the immediate area and connects local residents to major thoroughfares.

**Community** is the largest segment of the system and it is made up of a cluster of neighborhoods. Uses are primarily residential, but also include a range of commercial and public services. Community can be viewed as that territory close to home that residents consider as their "own." This feeling of belonging develops because of residents' familiarity with the surroundings, frequent shared use of community services, and common concerns and interests that foster a feeling of collective responsibility. Residents of the neighborhoods look to the broader community to provide essential services -- convenience retail, schools, places of worship, recreational facilities, a post office. The street network throughout the community serves the immediate area by connecting the neighborhoods to one another and to the local services. However, the street system likely serves regional as well as local traffic.

When this hierarchical concept is applied to Four Corners today, neighborhoods and community are the strongest, most important features. The smallest segment, the subdivision, no longer has meaning in terms of neighborhood identification. Local residents identify with a *neighborhood* name. South Four Corners, for example, describes a geographic location within the larger Four Corners community and the local civic organization uses this name, which increases recognition and contributes to community identity within the neighborhood.

Other neighborhoods in the Four Corners area appear to have adopted the name of the largest subdivision or a portion of a name that was common to several subdivisions. For example, the neighborhood south of the Beltway east of Colesville Road is known today as Indian Spring after subdivision names like Indian Spring Club Estates and Indian Spring Terrace and the Indian Spring Country Club, formerly located here, and now the site of the YMCA. North Hills of Sligo, the neighborhood south of the Beltway and west of Colesville Road, takes its name from its sloping terrain and its location north of Sligo Creek Park.

There are five distinct neighborhoods in the Four Corners Master Plan area: Woodmoor-Pinecrest, Northwood-Four Corners, South Four Corners, North Hills of Sligo, and Indian Spring. (See Figure 8, page 15.) When the neighborhood concept is applied to Woodmoor-Pinecrest, for example, many of the elements described above can be found. Single-family detached homes, some built 50 years ago, are the predominant land use and contribute to the stability of the Woodmoor-Pinecrest neighborhood. Streets are curvilinear and many have names ending in "moor," such as Southmoor, Crestmoor, and Eastmoor, which may increase neighborhood identity. Despite its age and lackluster appearance, the 50-year-old Woodmoor Shopping Center is an enduring neighborhood institution with a loyal following of patrons. With the "WOODMOOR" name displayed across the top, the shopping center has long been the unofficial front door to the neighborhood.

Other local institutions, such as Pinecrest Elementary School and St. Bernadette's church and school, are focal points that provide a sense of permanence and distinction in the Woodmoor-Pinecrest neighborhood. These institutions, as well as the Pinecrest Local Park and recreation building provide gathering places for activities that contribute to neighborhood unity and a sense of pride among its residents. The Woodmoor-Pinecrest Citizens Association allows residents to become directly involved in a variety of neighborhood and community issues.

Many of these same elements are repeated in the other Four Corners neighborhoods. In Northwood-Four Corners, streets are also curvilinear, with many small courts and several culs-de-sac. Like the use of "moor" in the Woodmoor-Pinecrest neighborhood, a Northwood-Four Corners identity may be enhanced by the use of "wood" in street names, such as Timberwood, Southwood, and Eastwood. Portions of the commercial district are contained in each of the three neighborhoods north of the Beltway (Woodmoor-Pinecrest, Northwood-Four Corners, and South Four Corners), which provide residents with easy access to shopping and other local services. South Four Corners also has a few neighborhood retail stores on Forest Glen Road. All five neighborhoods have citizens organizations that meet regularly and distribute newsletters to keep residents informed about issues in their area.

Parks, recreation buildings, and natural resources also are locally available to residents of the Four Corners neighborhoods. As mentioned above, Pinecrest Local Park is located in the Woodmoor-Pinecrest neighborhood. The other four neighborhoods also have a park within or just outside the Master Plan boundary: Indian Spring Terrace Local Park and recreation building is adjacent to the YMCA in Indian Spring; Parkside playground, Sligo Creek Park, and Sligo Creek Golf Course are near North Hills of Sligo; Argyle Local Park and Sligo Creek Park are located just outside South Four Corners; and the North Four Corners Local Park and recreation building are in

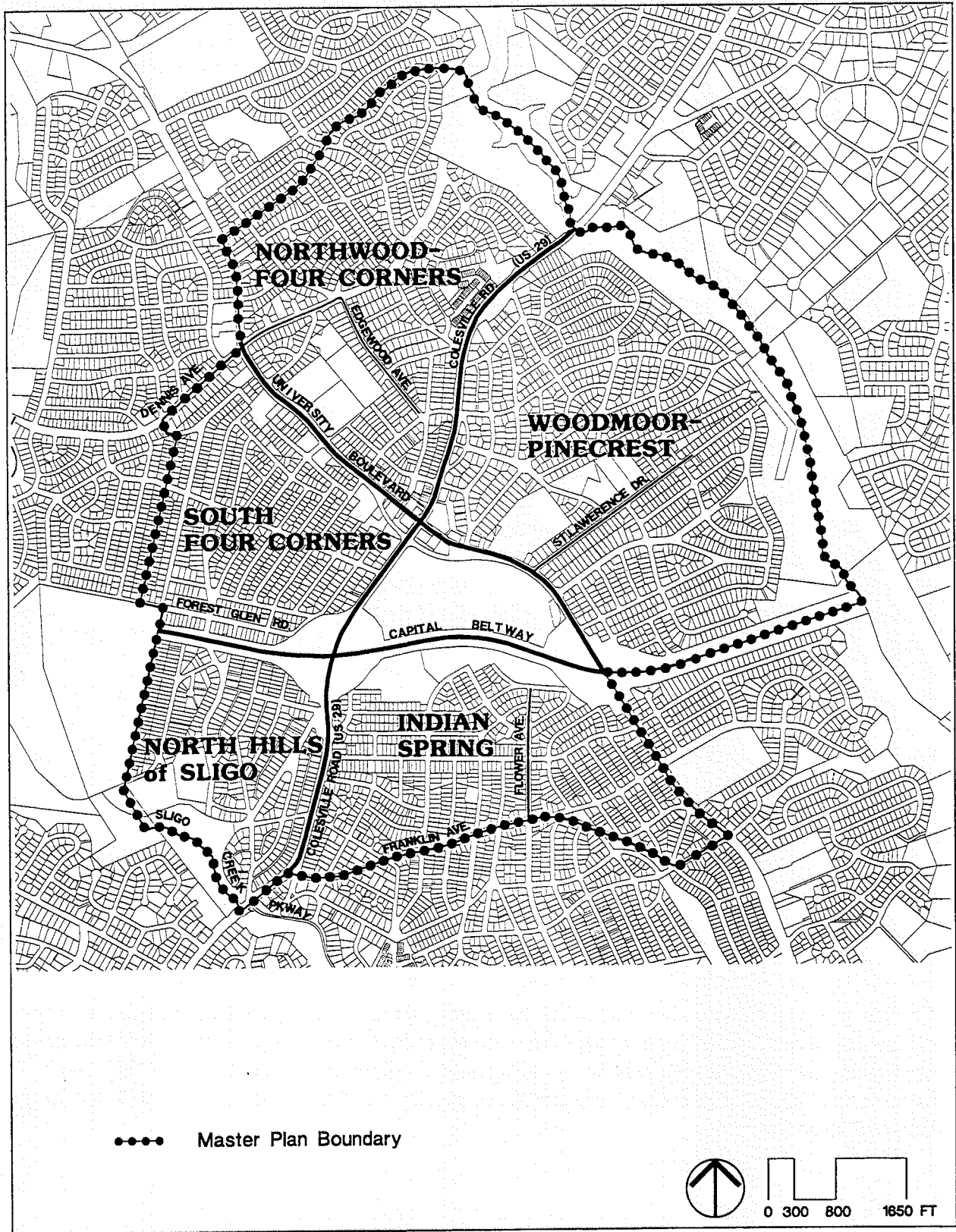
Northwood-Four Corners. (See Figure 21, page 57.) The Woodmoor-Pinecrest and Northwood-Four Corners neighborhoods also have direct access to informal walking paths in Northwest Branch Park.

Clearly, all five of the Four Corners neighborhoods have strong characteristics that contribute to a sense of community, commitment, and belonging. The strength of these neighborhoods may well be enhanced by their clearly defined boundaries. Major roads and natural boundaries delineate the Four Corners neighborhoods, creating distinct enclaves. Woodmoor-Pinecrest, for example, is a neighborhood to itself -- contained and defined by its boundaries. As shown on Figure 8, it is bounded by major roads and by a natural boundary, Northwest Branch Park, with no other neighborhoods directly adjacent to it.

While major roads define the boundaries of the Four Corners neighborhoods, they also separate and isolate the five areas from one another. What makes for a genuine community in Four Corners is the commercial district. Located in the center of the Master Plan area, the commercial district is figuratively and literally the heart of Four Corners. A sense of community is formed at the commercial district where residents of the five neighborhoods can come together. Without the commercial district there would be no center, simply five separate neighborhoods divided by major highways with no connection to one another and nothing to bring people together. The commercial district is the hub, the magnet and activity center that creates a place.

If Four Corners is viewed as a small town, as it is by some residents, then the commercial district is the center. When residents of the Four Corners area look to the broader community for essential services, they discover many of their needs can be met locally. Residents can find everything from a quart of milk to a hair stylist. At the local bakery or post office, neighbors may meet by chance and spend a few minutes catching up on each other's lives. These small-scale, nearby retail and service businesses are an integral part of the Four Corners community. Not only do they provide services that are necessary to daily life, their small town atmosphere and friendliness foster a sense of community. Many merchants in Four Corners have owned and operated their businesses in the same location for a number of years. This longevity contributes to a sense of permanence and to the feeling of ownership that residents have for their commercial district. Residents get to know the people who serve them as well as the other customers. Because the neighborhood businesses are so close and convenient, local residents are able to walk or bike to them, which increases opportunities for chance encounters with their neighbors.

Beyond the heart of the commercial district, Four Corners residents continue to meet their neighbors in shared activities and facilities throughout the larger community. Additional services that support community life can be found throughout the five neighborhoods, including places of worship, schools, child day care centers, the Silver Spring YMCA, a retirement housing facility, medical and health offices, and a fire station.



Residents in any neighborhood derive a strong sense of community from three sources: a variety of services locally available, shared activities with their neighbors, and control over what happens in their neighborhood. Four Corners has all three of these ingredients, some by chance, but many due to the vigilance and commitment of the local residents. This community of neighborhoods has managed to hold on to its positive qualities despite its urban location. To maintain these qualities and sustain Four Corners as an appealing community, the public projects planned in the area must be carefully incorporated into the built environment and designed to enhance the overall appearance and image of the area.

## **The Plan Vision**

This Master Plan is guided by aspirations for the Four Corners community -- how it should look and function in 10 to 15 years. These aspirations are presented here as a vision of the future. This vision, along with the Plan goals and objectives, should be referred to when the Plan is implemented.

The vision for the future of the Four Corners community is not elaborate or grandiose or complex. Simply stated, the vision for Four Corners, and the challenge for this Master Plan, is to maintain the positive qualities and to enhance the areas that need improvement. The vision is more a refinement of what Four Corners has to offer, rather than a grand redesign of what is there. In this vision, the Four Corners residential neighborhoods are stable, enduring, appealing, and livable. In this vision, the planned public projects have been successfully implemented and the Four Corners commercial district is an attractive, vibrant, multi-purpose center. The first portion of the vision describes concerns about the area, particularly the commercial district. The second portion assumes that the vision has been achieved and describes how Four Corners will look and function in 2005.

### **FOUR CORNERS TODAY: THE MID-1990s**

Four Corners in the mid-1990s is a community with many positive qualities that have endured over the years and continue to attract new residents. The well-established residential neighborhoods and the convenient location are the primary attractions. Most of the houses are well maintained and many have an older charm with a variety of designs, styles, and building materials. Housing prices have remained affordable compared to other parts of Montgomery County. The neighborhood settings include an abundance of mature, stately trees and, in some areas, rolling hills. The proximity of natural and recreational resources such as Northwest Branch Park, Sligo Creek Park, and Wheaton Regional Park are also an attraction.

There is growing concern, however, that the positive features that have made this community of neighborhoods so livable could erode. To maintain the positive features and preserve the quality of life that has attracted residents for many years, it is critical to address the areas that need improvement and to ensure that the planned public projects in the area improve the function and image of Four Corners.

The commercial district has always been centrally located at the heart of the Four Corners residential neighborhoods. While its location is well suited as a convenience shopping area for local residents, the physical appearance of the commercial district has deteriorated. The business area has developed incrementally and haphazardly over the years. This parcel-by-parcel development pattern has resulted in paving with no landscaping, inadequate pedestrian connections and access, and a disjointed collection of commercial buildings with poor visibility from the road. In addition, some residents feel the range of uses and services has not kept pace with their needs.

Uncertainty about the future of the Kay tract and the impact of proposed road improvements concerned the community for many years, and residents have felt the need to protect their neighborhoods from the pressures of development, road widenings, and even an underpass. In addition, many residents are concerned that the commercial district will continue to deteriorate if its problems are not addressed and that somehow this deterioration might spill over into the residential neighborhoods. After all, the commercial district has been the "front door" to the surrounding neighborhoods. The impression one receives when driving through the Colesville Road/University Boulevard intersection, due to the physical appearance of the commercial district, is incongruent with the stability of the surrounding neighborhoods. It is clear that something must be done to improve both the image and function of the commercial district.

#### **FOUR CORNERS TOMORROW: THE YEAR 2005**

Four Corners in the year 2005 is a community of stable, attractive residential neighborhoods that have been well maintained and preserved for some 70 years. The most striking and important changes to the area since the 1990s has been the revitalization of Four Corners' commercial district and the integration of Blair High School into the existing community. The combined improvements in Four Corners, coordinated among the State Highway Administration (SHA), the County, and private property owners and merchants, have resulted in a successful facelift for the community's commercial district.

After many years of planning, SHA implemented the jughandle improvements to the Colesville Road/University Boulevard intersection. Despite heavy vehicular traffic during weekday mornings and evenings, the streetscape improvements make the area inviting for pedestrians. The pedestrian domain is emphasized with details that make the walker feel safe and welcome, and include clearly marked crosswalks and specially paved sidewalk borders. Pedestrian and bicycle connections from the residential neighborhoods have been formalized, encouraging residents to explore the shopping area by foot or bike.

Blair High School is a strong architectural and social presence in Four Corners. The school is part of a community that was shaped by the residential neighborhoods, the commercial district, and the local institutions. The school's design, massing, and building materials create a visual, physical, and architectural connection to the community. Due to its central location in Four Corners and an accessible and friendly building design, the school is not only a civic landmark, but an integral part of the social fabric of the community. In addition to the community facilities at the site, many of the school's resources are available to the community at large. Through past and

current cooperative interagency arrangements, the community accesses an expanded range of resources including recreational facilities and public gathering places for community activities and events.

A successful commercial revitalization program, initiated through the perseverance of community-minded residents, business owners, and the cooperation and commitment of County government, accomplished a number of improvements in the commercial district, including renovated building facades, and colorful awnings and banners. Additional trees and landscaping are planted along streets, medians, and parking lots and screen large pavement areas. Special gateway features, installed at the "four corners," provide community identity and a sense of place, and create an inviting and attractive front door to the neighborhoods. Older retail establishments are reinvigorated, the range of services expanded, and community-serving retail has replaced auto-oriented uses. Public uses such as Blair High School and the Woodmoor Post Office contribute to the success of the area as a multi-purpose center.

The Four Corners' commercial revitalization is successful because it built upon the positive features that existed in the community. Coordination and careful attention to the public projects in Four Corners has resulted in a center that is visually and functionally improved. The small town flavor of the commercial district is retained and given new life as a vibrant and lively center. The rejuvenated commercial district, with the addition of the well-designed Blair High School, is the unifying feature of the Four Corners community, a destination that people actively seek. Residents not only enjoy local shopping and services in a safe and comfortable atmosphere, but also take pride in an attractive, viable, and visually appealing center at the heart of their community.