

Appendix B: Outreach

Outreach strategies for the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan engaged a broad cross-section of residents, business owners and stakeholders who have an interest in the future of the area through face-to-face meetings and digital tools. The strategies enabled participants to focus on both the overall goals of the Plan and also interact with staff in smaller group settings. The following appendix includes an outline of the community outreach strategies used during the course of the project up to the delivery of the working draft in May 2015.

Outreach strategies for the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan engaged a broad cross-section of residents, business owners and stakeholders who have an interest in the future of the area through face-to-face meetings and digital tools. The strategies enabled participants to focus on both the overall goals of the Plan and also interact with staff in smaller group settings.

Digital strategies, including online questionnaires, required expanding e-mail lists for the Plan to encourage the participation of large groups of people who have limited time or capability to attend face-to-face meetings. They enabled people to easily participate at any hour of any day, to whatever extent.

In fall 2013, the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan was launched with a public kick-off meeting and two smaller drop-in meetings, and then focused on the scope of work at a public forum. Three face-to-face workshops were subsequently held on visioning, neighborhoods and eco districts. The workshops garnered excellent participation from baby boomers, especially those living in surrounding communities outside the Sector Plan boundary. However, attendance at these public meetings was noticeably low on the part of the younger Gen X and Gen Y generations. Demographic information collected at each event confirmed what the planners observed and helped to measure progress.



Staff identified the need to target the engagement of millennials, particularly those residing within the Sector Plan Boundary. Demographics showed that 60 percent of the residents within the boundary are between the ages of 22 and 49 years of age. Planners also monitored other characteristics, such as involvement by residents, people who work within the Sector Plan boundary, people whose children spend time there and real estate professionals.

In-House Focus Group

Staff decided to adjust the outreach to achieve better representation of millennials and a focus group with young Bethesda residents was held at the Planning Department to gather ideas. Outreach approaches garnered from other planning departments throughout the country were also considered. Staff contacted community and businesses via the Downtown Bethesda Plan website to help reach millennials and consider hosting events aimed at this group.



Digital Media

An online newsletter and Facebook ads were launched to boost posts to the selected demographic within targeted zip codes. Research indicated social media is popular with the millennial demographic and Twitter was also used to reach a larger segment of this population.

Visual Preference Study

Staff created a visual preference study to advance the conversation with the community and distributed it through a local County Council member's e-list to reach more residents within the planning area (see results of the visual preference survey on the Bethesda Downtown website at http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/bethesda_downtown/index.shtm).

Millennial Outreach

To engage more millennials in the planning process, staff worked with businesses in Downtown Bethesda to host happy hours at local restaurants and offices. The goal was to engage these younger residents and others who typically do not participate in planning efforts through more informal, conversational events than typical community meetings and presentations. The happy hours allowed participants to meet the planning team, ask questions and discuss planning issues within a casual, social setting.

The first of the happy hours was hosted in April 2014 by the blog Greater Greater Washington, DC, the DC chapter of the Congress for New Urbanism and Young, Innovative, Professional Planning Superstars (YIPPS). Young Leaders in Affordable Housing hosted the second event in May 2014. The third was hosted in July 2014 by Streetsense with JBG and Clark Construction, and support from Next Execs Group of the Greater Bethesda Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce. A fourth happy hour was held in January 2015 at SK&I Architects with support from the Potomac Valley chapter of the American Institute of Architects.



In addition, staff conducted outreach at the Bethesda Central Farmers Market on two Sundays during summer 2014 to engage millennials and others in the planning process.

Live Online Property Owners Forum and Interactive Map

The purpose of this forum in October 2014 was to enhance transparency of the planning process and provide the opportunity for property owners to share information and ideas, and collaborate with the community regarding their properties. The most significant outcome of the live online forum was related to the major civic spaces shown in the Concept Framework Plan, focusing on the ideas proposed for the central plaza at the Bethesda Metro Station.

An interactive map showing the properties discussed during the online forum was launched on the Planning Department's website to encourage and assist the communication. The map shows the physical distribution of properties under discussion, identifies property owners and provides an opportunity for each owner to provide webpage information and share materials with the public (see presentations from the property owner's forum on the Bethesda Downtown website at http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/bethesda_downtown/index.shtm).

Feedback Loop This online questionnaire, posted on the Planning Department website in December 2014, provided the opportunity for the public to react to preliminary planning concepts proposed for the Bethesda Downtown Plan. It encouraged the engagement of all generations living and working in the area; and brought a more representative proportion of Gen Y and Gen X residents into the process.

Respondents were invited to offer views on a number of concepts, ranging from bike paths to building heights, through a short, manageable format. They could focus on a topic of interest and stay up to date on the latest plan ideas. From their feedback, planners better understood the community's priorities for Downtown Bethesda (see Feedback Loop results on the Bethesda Downtown website at http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/community/bethesda_downtown/index.shtm).

