

OCTOBER 2004

# PUBLIC HEARING DRAFT DAMASCUS MASTER PLAN



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

# **DAMASCUS MASTER PLAN**

## **Public Hearing Draft**

A comprehensive amendment to the Damascus Master Plan, 1982, and the 1993 Amendment to the Damascus Master Plan. It also amends The General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District within Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, the Countywide Park Trails Plan; the Master Plan of Highways within Montgomery County, and the 1993 Functional Master Plan for the Patuxent River Watershed.

Prepared by:

**THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION**

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To be approved by:

**THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL**

To be adopted by:

**THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION**

**ABSTRACT**

**TITLE:** Damascus Master Plan Public Hearing Draft

**AUTHOR:** The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission

**SUBJECT:** Comprehensive amendment to the Damascus Master Plan, 1982

**DATE:** October 2004

**PLANNING AGENCY:** The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission  
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**SOURCE OF COPIES:** The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission  
8787 Georgia Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3760

**ABSTRACT:** This Master Plan is a comprehensive AMEMDMENT of land use, housing, zoning, transportation, environmental resources, and community facilities in the planning area.

**CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL AND ADOPTION**

## THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission is a bi-county agency created by the General Assembly of Maryland in 1927. The Commission's geographic authority extends to the great majority of Montgomery and Prince George's Counties; the Maryland-Washington Regional District (M-NCPPC planning jurisdiction) comprises 1,001 square miles, while the Metropolitan District (parks) comprises 919 square miles, in the two counties.

The Commission has three major functions:

1. The preparation, adoption, and, from time to time, amendment or extension of The General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) for the Physical Development of the Maryland-Washington Regional District in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties;
2. The acquisition, development, operation, and maintenance of a public park system; and
3. In Prince George's County only, the operation of the entire County public recreation program.

The Commission operates in each county through a Planning Board appointed by and responsible to the county government. All local plans, recommendations on zoning amendments, administration of subdivision regulations, and general administration of parks are responsibilities of the Planning Boards.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission encourages the involvement and participation of individuals with disabilities, and its facilities are accessible. For assistance with special needs (e.g. large print materials, listening devices, sign language interpretation, and others), please contact the Community Relations Office, 301-495-4600 or TDD 301-495-1331.

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## **NOTICE TO READERS**

This area Master Plan, after approval by the County Council and adoption by The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, constitutes an amendment to the General Plan for Montgomery County. It provides a set of comprehensive recommendations and guidelines for the use of publicly and privately owned land within its plan area. This Master Plan reflects a vision of future development that responds to the unique character of the local community -- within the context of a countywide perspective.

This area master plan is intended to provide a point of reference with a long-range perspective of public policy for the Plan area. Together with relevant countywide functional master plans, this master plan should be referred to by public officials and private individuals when decisions are made that affect the use of land within the Plan's boundaries.

Master plans generally look ahead 20 years from the date of adoption, although it is intended that they be updated and revised every ten to fifteen years. Maintaining relevance is important, as the circumstances at the time of plan adoption will change, and specific elements of any master plan will become less relevant as time passes.

## THE MASTER PLAN PROCESS

**STAFF DRAFT PLAN** — This document is prepared by the Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning for presentation to the Montgomery County Planning Board. The Planning Board reviews the Staff Draft Plan, makes preliminary changes as appropriate, and approves the Plan for public hearing. When the Planning Board's changes are made, the document becomes the Public Hearing (Preliminary) Draft Plan.

**PUBLIC HEARING (PRELIMINARY) DRAFT PLAN** — This document is a formal proposal to amend an adopted master plan or sector plan. Its recommendations are not necessarily those of the Planning Board; it is prepared for the purpose of receiving public hearing testimony. The Planning Board holds a public hearing and receives testimony on the Draft Plan. After the public hearing record is closed, the Planning Board holds public worksessions to review the testimony and to revise the Public Hearing (Preliminary) Draft Plan as appropriate. When the Planning Board's changes are made, the document becomes the Planning Board (Final) Draft Plan.

**PLANNING BOARD (FINAL) DRAFT PLAN** — This document is the Planning Board's recommended Plan and it reflects the revisions made by the Board in its worksessions on the Public Hearing (Preliminary) Draft Plan. The Regional District Act requires the Planning Board to transmit the Master Plan directly to the County Council with copies to the County Executive. The Regional District Act then requires the County Executive, within sixty days, to prepare and transmit a fiscal impact analysis of the Planning Board (Final) Draft Plan to the County Council. The County Executive may also forward to the County Council other comments and recommendations regarding the Planning Board (Final) Draft Plan within the sixty-day period.

After receiving the Executive's fiscal impact analysis and comments, the County Council may hold a public hearing to receive public testimony on the Master Plan. After the record of this public hearing is closed, the Council's Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee holds public worksessions to review the testimony and then makes recommendations to the County Council. The Council holds its own worksessions, then adopts a resolution approving the Planning Board (Final) Draft Plan, as revised.

**ADOPTED PLAN** — The Master Plan approved by the County Council is forwarded to The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission for adoption. Once adopted by the Commission, the Plan officially amends the various master or sector plans cited in the Commission's adoption resolution.



## THE DAMASCUS MASTER PLAN REVIEW COMMITTEE AND TASK FORCES

Community participation in the Damascus Master Plan was achieved through a series of Task Forces that addressed various elements. Membership on all of these Task Forces was open to any interested participant. Each Task Force held two to four meetings. Over 100 participants, many participating in multiple Task Forces, cumulatively comprised the Master Plan Review Committee. The Task Force groups included:

	<u>Participants</u>
▪ Town Center Charrette	58
▪ Land Use, Housing, and Historic Preservation Task Force	56
▪ Environment Task Force	33
▪ Transportation Task Force	53
▪ Parks, Trails, Open Space, and Community Facilities Task Force	44

This Master Plan specifically recognizes the contributions and commitment of David Bernard, Wayne and Pamela Bussard, Michael Cohn, Chris and Nancy Doyle, Bruce Hall, Katie Junghans, Dan King, Jane King, Mary King, Douglas King, Bernard and Melanie Lauer, Charles Limparis, George and Alice Moy, Sara and Joseph Rice, J.R. Smart, Joan Snow, John and Cindy Snow, Frank Stodolsky, James Varley, Debbie Weinman, Mary White, and especially Gary Richard (who attended the most meetings), all of whom participated in 4 or 5 Task Forces.

The listing or names of members of the Master Plan Review Committee (MPR) and Task Forces does not indicate approval or disapproval of this document by any MPR Committee or individual Task Force member. The Master Plan Review Committee and Task Forces provided recommendations regarding the problems, needs, and views of individuals, groups or areas. These views were considered by the staff in its deliberations regarding the Master Plan.

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# INTRODUCTION

This Plan amends the 1982 Damascus Master Plan, and its subsequent 1993 Amendment. The reasons for preparing this Plan include:

- Changes to environmental regulations that placed additional restrictions on land in the Patuxent River Watershed.
- Many recommendations of the existing Master Plan have been implemented and there is a need to assess their impact on the community and its future.
- The commercial heart of Damascus needs a different vision for the future to revitalize locally oriented commercial activity and provide additional housing opportunities.
- A much stronger emphasis on non-vehicle connectivity in the community is needed – a layered approach of pedestrian access, bicycle connections, and regional trails.

## PLAN HIGHLIGHTS

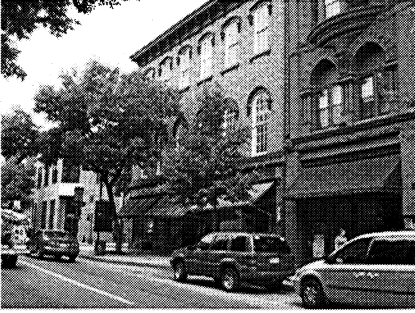
The recommended actions in this Plan implement the goal of ensuring the identity of central Damascus as the heart of the master plan area. Major issues include improving connectivity and cohesiveness, strengthening local retail and residential opportunities within and near the Town Center, enabling growth appropriate for the town vision, and protecting the surrounding rural areas. Opportunities for additional residential growth outside the Town Center are limited due to infrastructure concerns and to achieve environmental policy objectives.

### Land Use and Zoning

This Plan generally maintains the existing overall level of anticipated residential growth, but strengthens the potential for multi-family residential and mixed-use development in the Town Center. The Plan encourages mixed-use and residential development in the Town Center, and cluster development in the areas beyond the Town Center. Residential opportunities in the Agricultural Reserve remain limited.

The Plan supports compressing commercial uses along Main Street and at major downtown intersections to create additional opportunities for residential development that supports retail and service businesses in the core.

The Plan establishes guidelines for future development and redevelopment to enhance Main Street identity, increase mobility and connectivity, and expand and enhance Community Open Space. A summary of the recommendations in this Plan follows.



**Town Center** - The Plan recommends mixed-use zoning appropriate for town-scale development emphasizing proportion, design, and architectural context of structures, rather than separation of uses.



**Transition Areas** - Use of the Rural Neighborhood Cluster (RNC) Zone with limited increase in density is generally recommended for developable sites in Neighborhood Transition Areas.

Two TDR receiving sites are proposed.

In Rural Transition Areas north and east of the Town impacted by the 1993 *Functional Master Plan for the Patuxent River Watershed*, a recommended zoning change will reduce potential imperviousness.



**Rural Areas** - The existing extent of the Rural Density Transfer (RDT) Zone is supported and confirmed with minor adjustments for rural village centers.

A new mixed-use zone for two historic rural villages is proposed that will protect and maintain their existing scale of development through appropriate types of uses and limited levels of intensity.

Emerging agricultural methods and practices and agriculturally related businesses are specifically endorsed as the best – most efficient, effective, and economical – means to maintain a viable agricultural economy and protect the Agricultural Reserve.

- Guidelines are proposed for Rural Vista Protection
- Guidelines are proposed for Agricultural Conservation Development for residential subdivisions in the RDT Zone within this Master Plan

### **Housing**

To support balanced housing objectives, this Plan recommends moderate-density development within the Town Center, including increased senior housing opportunities.

For single-family development, this Plan recommends maintaining the small town character of Damascus through small lot cluster development, and limiting single-family cluster development to existing densities except in areas recommended for TDR receiving sites. A summary of the major recommendations in this Plan follows.

## Transportation

This Plan recommends the use of context-based street design techniques in the Town Center and entry street segments of Ridge Road, Woodfield Road and Damascus Road to address safety and community character issues.

The Plan recommends retaining the existing two-lane roadway network outside the Town Center to protect the rural and agricultural character of the area, and an evaluation of modifications to improve the efficiency of the network through operational, design, and classification changes. Other recommendations include:

- Establishing a business street in the Town Center along the route formerly called Damascus Boulevard, designed to be a narrow street generally for local use.
- Removing two unbuilt primary residential roadways now considered not viable, and including a classification for several previously unclassified roadways reflecting their current function in the roadway network
- Supporting the need for a thorough analysis of the potential for a bypass around Damascus, after the completion of Woodfield Road Extended.
- Improving connectivity of the *pedestrian system* through a network of sidewalks within the Town Center with extensions to key civic destinations elsewhere in the Plan Area.
- Improving the *bikeway system* through a network of shared-use pathways oriented toward the Town Center and Magruder Branch Trail connecting to area parks and the County trail systems, and on-road cyclist accommodations along arterial roadways.
- Improving *transit access* by considering an additional park-and-ride lot north of the Town Center to intercept long distance commuters.

## Environmental

This Plan recommends protecting existing forest corridors and reforesting stream valleys, protecting high priority forest stands, encouraging development techniques that minimize forest fragmentation, connecting existing forest stands, and promoting the use of forest banking.

This Plan recommends maintaining existing stream buffers and associated habitats while increasing buffer widths for wetlands, springs and seeps, avoiding “channelizing” or enclosing streams in culverts, and encouraging clustered development.



**Parkland** - This Plan recommends developing or improving facilities at Seneca Springs Local Park, Woodfield Local Park, Damascus Recreational Park, and completing the Magruder Branch Trail northward to a terminus in the Town Center and providing a Trailhead Park. And this Plan recommends adding designated properties in the Little Bennett Creek Watershed Headwaters and the stream valley of the Western Tributary of Seneca Creek as parkland.

**Trails** - This Plan recommends amending the Countywide Park Trail Plan to reflect the east-west natural surface trail corridor being added to link the Seneca Trail to the west to the Little Bennett Trail system to the east; and providing a sidewalk or bike path along Valley Park Drive including access to Magruder Branch Trail and special treatment at the Ridge Road intersection to ensure safety.

**Legacy Open Space** - Designated properties are recommended for protection as Natural Resource sites through parkland acquisition (in the Little Bennett watershed) or easements (in the Bennett Creek Headwaters and Upper Patuxent River Forest Area).

**Public Sewer Service** – An expansion of Community Sewer Service is recommended for properties proposed for the Rural Neighborhood Cluster Zone if those properties develop using the cluster method. This Plan recommends a comprehensive study of designated neighborhoods for alternative ways to address failing septic systems.

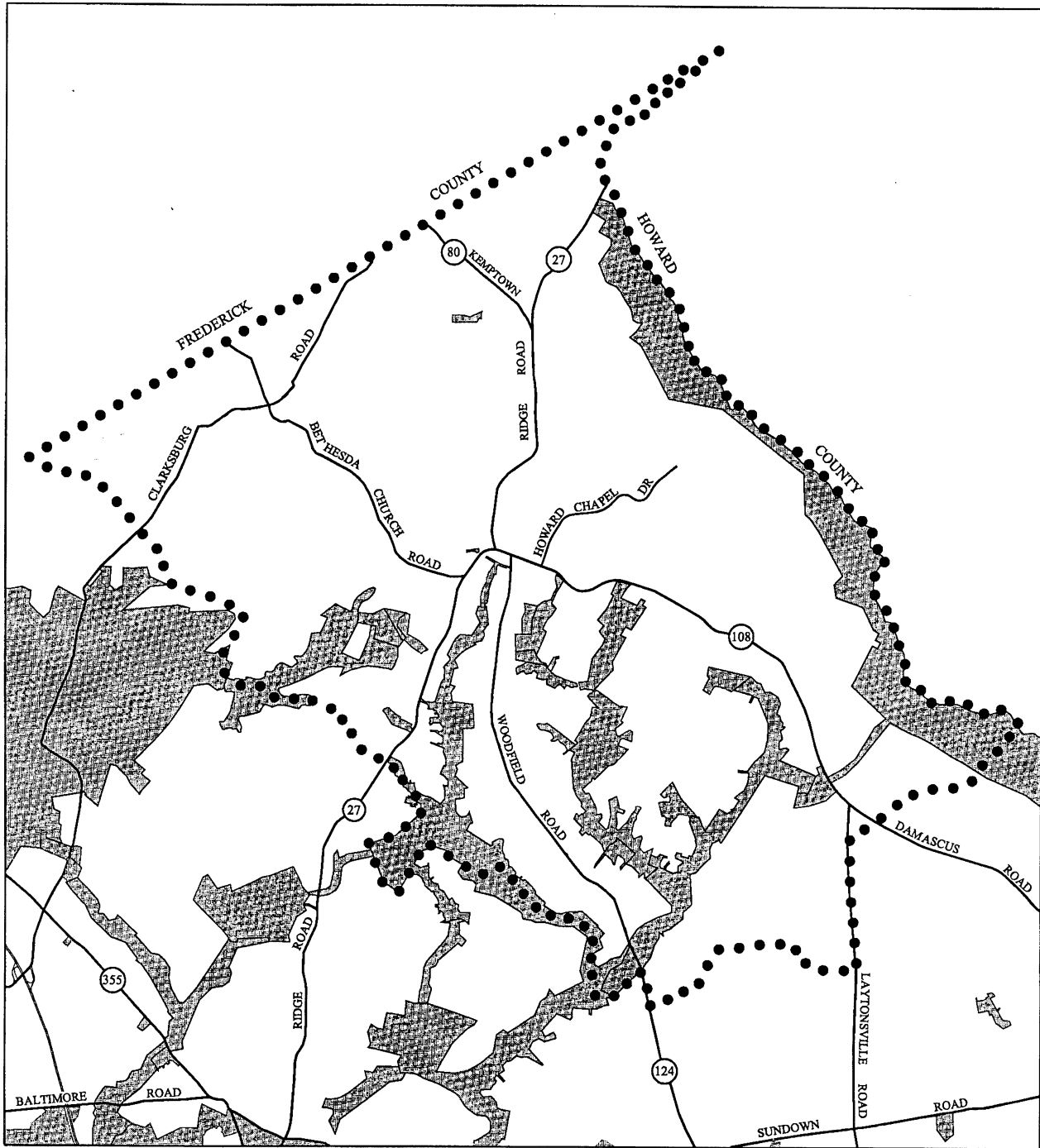
## **DESCRIPTION OF THE MASTER PLAN AREA**

### **Regional, County, and Planning Area Context**

Damascus anchors the northern tip of Montgomery County, a town surrounded by agricultural and rural open space. The Master Plan Study Area abuts three counties (Frederick, Howard, and Carroll). Within Montgomery County Damascus is adjacent to the Clarksburg, Olney, and Agricultural and Rural Open Space Master Plan areas. Like Montgomery County, all three adjacent counties are directing growth into designated growth areas while preserving certain rural areas. Damascus has lower development potential due to limited sewer access, and its location in the heart of the Agricultural Reserve. Damascus serves as a market hub for this rural area, providing service and specialty retail for its residents that complement and supplement the larger commercial areas in Clarksburg to the south and Mt. Airy to the north.

Damascus is a small town with community oriented retail services and low to moderate density neighborhoods that provides a unique contrast to the booming development in nearby Clarksburg and adjoining counties. Maintaining this unique community vision is a paramount goal of this Master Plan. Extensive suburban growth in the Mt. Airy area and job growth along the I-270 corridor have contributed extensively to commuter traffic congestion in Damascus. Additional growth in Mt. Airy and in Frederick County anticipated in the next decade will increase through traffic in Damascus, which serves as the primary conduit for commuters to jobs in Montgomery County or the District of Columbia.

# Damascus Master Plan Boundary

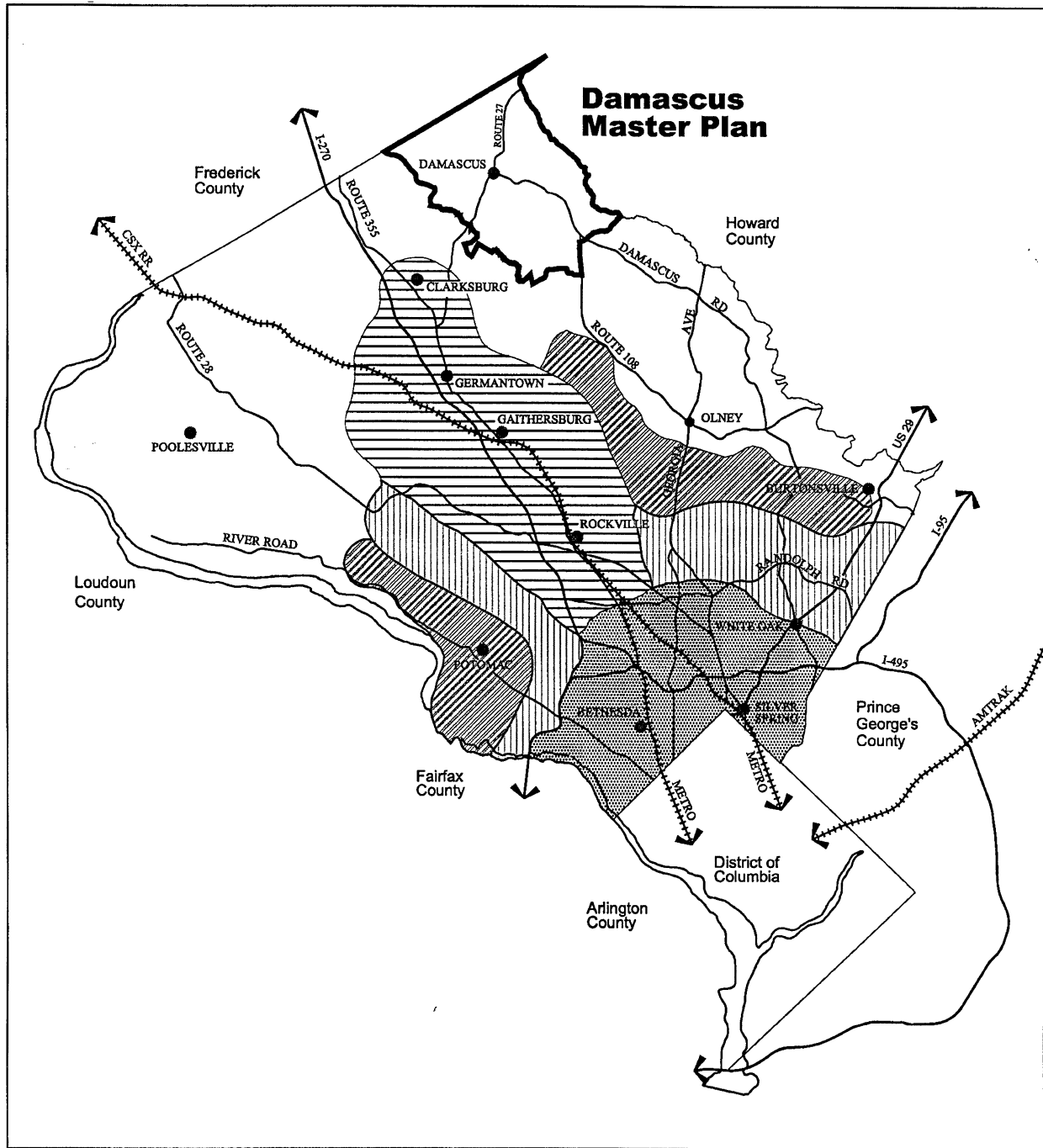







- Master Plan Area Boundary
- Existing and Proposed Parkland





# Wedges and Corridors



-  Urban Ring
-  I-270 Corridor
-  Suburban Communities
-  Residential Wedge
-  Agricultural Wedge



NOT TO SCALE

## Planning in Adjoining Counties

The Damascus Master Plan area is directly impacted by growth in three adjoining counties. This Plan explored current master plans in those counties.

- **Frederick County** - The area of Frederick County that abuts the County line is designated as the Urbana Region. In 2002, Frederick County began a new master plan process for the region, which is still underway. The draft plan recommends generally rural neighborhoods, conservation areas, and agricultural areas adjacent to the Damascus Master Plan area. Growth is anticipated to significantly increase the population in the Urbana Region by 2010.
- **Howard County** - Howard County lies to the northeast of the Master Plan area. This section of Howard County is planned for low-density residential development.
- **Carroll County** - The Carroll County border touches the northern tip of the Damascus Master Plan area. This area north of Damascus and south of the Town of Mount Airy was designated as a Community Planning Area, one of the five areas where the majority of residential, commercial and industrial development should be concentrated. New residential units will add significantly to the population of the County. The Town of Mount Airy is located at the interchange of I-70 and MD 27, north of Damascus. The town is one of the five development nodes in Carroll County, serving the commercial needs of the upper part of Howard County and northern Montgomery County.

## Planning History

This Plan amends the *1982 Damascus Master Plan* and the *1993 Amendment to the 1982 Damascus Master Plan*. It also amends the General Plan (On Wedges and Corridors) that designates Damascus as a rural community. The General Development Plan proposes defined edges to corridor cities like Clarksburg and Germantown and recommends low-density, rural zoning to separate rural towns from suburban development. These General Development Plan recommendations have guided the preparation of the Damascus Master Plan.

## MASTER PLAN FRAMEWORK

### Existing Land Use

The existing Town Center includes a mix of uses, two small shopping centers, a main street, smaller retail and office uses, some light industrial uses, and housing. Immediately beyond the Town Center the land use is primarily residential and institutional along the major highway corridors (Ridge Road and Woodfield Road), and within the Magruder Valley. This pattern reflects both historic development patterns and the availability of public water and sewer. Beyond these core areas the land use becomes much more open. A few older residential areas at one and two acre densities exist, but for the most part the land use is low-density residential and agricultural in nature. Agricultural uses in the area include cattle, plant nurseries, equestrian facilities, field crops, and some food production. The town is situated on high ground that divides four watersheds. Major roads are built on the ridgelines.

### Demographic Characteristics Summary

Population growth has been modest in the Damascus area compared to the County's overall growth rate. Damascus is more stable than the County in that 43.1 percent of its residents have lived at their current address for more than 10 years, compared to 34.5 percent for the County residents overall. The predominant housing type is single-family detached, and the number of persons per household (3.04) is larger than the County overall (2.66). This reflects the larger number of children in households.

The Damascus area is also younger than the County overall, with a median age of 35.1, 1.7 years younger than the County's median age of 36.8. Children age 19 and younger comprise over one-third of the population, and the area has a relatively small percentage of seniors. Only 6.3 percent of Damascus residents are 65 years or older, compared to 11.2 percent county-wide.

Ethnically Damascus is more homogenous than the County. Few residents are foreign born, and most residents (90.7 percent) are European-American or Hispanic. This compares to 64.8 percent County-wide. Less than 10 percent of Damascus residents identify themselves as members of a racial minority, compared to over one-third of the County (35.2 percent).

Median income levels in Damascus are somewhat lower than the County - a median household income of \$60,812 vs. \$71,551 for the County. Overall there is a stronger percentage of middle income ranges, and lower percentages of very high and very low income levels.

The Damascus area gained 666 persons and 223 dwellings since the 1990 Census, with the more rural areas showing small losses in population and dwellings, and the central areas showing the largest gains. Areas with the largest growth include the central Magruder Valley and the areas along Hawkins Creamery Road where there has been significant residential development over the decade. Additional demographic information is in the Housing Chapter.

#### **Plans and Policies Affecting the Master Plan Area**

This Master Plan is built upon the foundations of existing plans and policies, and influenced by current best practices and the desires of the community. Several significant County and State plans and policies have influenced the recommendations of this Plan. These include:

- The *1982 Damascus Master Plan* confirmed the vision of Damascus as a town of low to moderate density residential neighborhoods surrounded by the Agricultural Reserve.
- The 1992 Maryland Planning Act confirmed the need to limit housing growth in rural areas and reinforce the rural town centers.
- The Montgomery County General Plan confirmed the rural community vision for Damascus.
- The *1993 Functional Master Plan for the Patuxent River Watershed* established improved environmental protection for the tributaries of the Patuxent River.
- The 1993 Damascus Master Plan Amendment established the need to consider alternative through-traffic access around central Damascus when Master Plan Road A-12 is completed.
- The 1997 Maryland Smart Growth Act confirmed the need to limit housing growth in rural areas.
- The 2002 Montgomery County Planning Board Transportation Policy Report recommends that the majority of new development in the County be located near transit stations or within the I-270 Corridor, and a reduction of future potential development in the rural areas of the County.
- The 2003 Montgomery County Council Action Plan for Affordable Housing encourages using a full range of housing types to meet the diverse needs for housing in the County.

## COMMUNITY VISION

### Summary

Damascus is a small town surrounded by the agricultural and rural open spaces of the County's Agricultural Reserve. It is a town that offers community oriented commercial uses, a variety of housing types, mixed uses in the town center, clustered single-family residential neighborhoods surrounding the Town Center, and a protected area of agricultural and rural open spaces that buffer it from more intense growth patterns in adjoining master plan areas and adjoining counties. The Plan maintains approximately the current level of planned growth in the area, but it reorients growth primarily in and around the Town Center.

### Goals

This Master Plan establishes the following goals for the Damascus community:

- A human-scaled town center easily identifiable as the heart of the surrounding community
  - Create moderate intensity mixed-use in the Town Center
  - Increase pedestrian orientation for neighborhoods
  - Emphasize design and scale over separation of uses in the Town Center
  - Increase housing opportunities within the Town Center
- Greater connectivity within and around the town
  - Increase pedestrian and bicycling opportunities along all major roadways
  - Emphasize multi-use aspects of all roadways in planning for safety and access.
  - Evaluate the necessity for alternate routing for through commuter traffic
- A Green Environment
  - Cluster new development to achieve greater overall environmental protection
  - Encourage the use of green technologies
  - Adjust land use density in the Patuxent Watershed outside the Town Center to reflect realistic development potential and goals of the Patuxent Master Plan
- Preservation of Agricultural and Rural Open Space
  - Confirm the Rural Density Transfer Zone
  - Create zoning appropriate for rural crossroad communities
  - Support agricultural and agriculturally related uses on rural land

