

# The Upsizing of

By Andrew Ratner

# White Flint



The signature Wishbone Bridge is one of several major projects bringing TOD and greater density to suburban White Flint.

eff Peterson, a U.S. Navy nurse, phoned his wife Kristine to describe the apartment he'd found for them and their four-year-old son, Jack, in a spot just north of Washington, D.C. They had lived for several years on the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where frills were rare. So when he explained to her that the new apartment had a large, fancy supermarket on the ground floor, she nearly cried.

It was "like seeing the gates of heaven," says Kristine Peterson, who moved with her family to White Flint, Maryland, an unincorporated area of about 10 square miles in Montgomery County.

Apartment towers with green roofs and grocery stores with sushi bars are just a part of the formula to transform a quintessential 1960s suburb into a vertical, vibrant, urban village. The White Flint Sector Plan, adopted by the county council in March 2010, seeks to trans-

form an unsightly quilt of surface parking, chaotic highways, and unattractive strip malls in an area of about 430 acres, about half the size of New York's Central Park. Zoning changes will promote a six-fold increase in the number of housing units from 2,300 to 14,400, and double nonresidential building from six million to 13 million square feet.

Planners want to flip the property mix in the area from 70 percent nonresidential to 60 percent residential, which will

cut automobile trips and build a critical mass of residents to support a more urban center, they say.

For a generation, White Flint has been mostly known for two things: its station on the Washington Metro, about 12 miles from downtown D.C., and the White Flint Mall. Two of the mall's anchors, Bloomingdale's and Lord & Taylor, hint at the shopping center's tony appeal when it opened in 1977, but it's been a while since anyone associated "lavish"



with the mall or its setting on Maryland Route 355.

That road begins as Wisconsin Avenue in the District of Columbia and ends 40 miles north in exurban Frederick, Maryland. But through White Flint it is known as Rockville Pike, an unappealing eight-lane artery that carries 60,000 vehicles a day. Rollin Stanley, AICP, the Montgomery County planning director, says the road often reminds him of the scene in the cult movie *Office Space*, where a pedestrian with a walker gets where he's going faster than the motorists stuck in traffic.

### Now and next

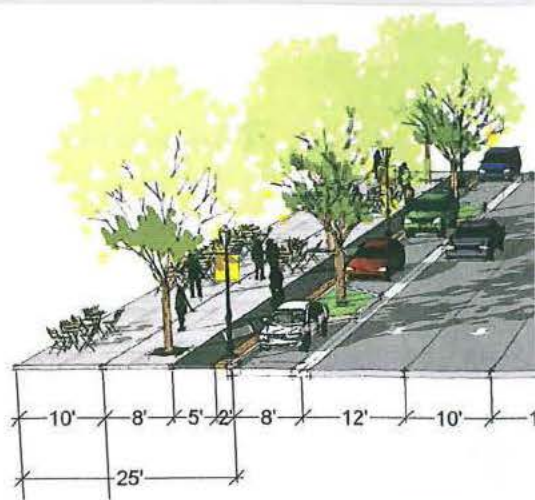
White Flint's future was a planning topic back when the capital's Metrorail system was being built in the mid-1970s, but the subject took on greater urgency over the past decade as congestion worsened along Rockville Pike. County officials, property owners, and community activists have spent the past five years debating a dramatic overhaul. The full vision is a decade or two away, but parts of it are now taking shape.

Driving south on Rockville Pike, the White Flint area rises up, Emerald City-like, from a land of strip shopping centers and parking lots. Soaring cranes prepare a major addition to the existing offices of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission beside the glass-roofed modern pagoda of the White Flint Metro stop. Half of the NRC employees already use mass transit, making it one of the most transit-oriented of federal agencies. According to the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the White Flint stop could attract 8,000 daily users when all the redevelopment is complete—up from 4,200 now.

Nearby, the project with the Harris Teeter grocery on the ground floor—and hundreds of sedum plants arrayed in a pinwheel on its green roof—is slated to include four towers encircling a community green. The build out calls for nearly 1,300 apartments, 1.4 million square feet of commercial space, and outdoor dining around a “preserve” of old-growth trees that were saved from a golf driving range previously on the site—quite unlike the current “outdoors” experience along the congested pike.

The developer LCOR Inc., like other builders in the sector plan area, was al-

Rockville Pike will be transformed from an eight-lane highway into a boulevard with dedicated rapid bus lanes and wide, tree-lined sidewalks. The 24-story residential tower at North Bethesda Market (below), a mixed use development anchored by Whole Foods Market, is the tallest building in Montgomery County.



lowed to trim its costs by providing about one-third less parking than it normally would. The county reduced parking minimums in the area to entice development proposals designed to capitalize on White Flint's proximity to the Washington Metro.

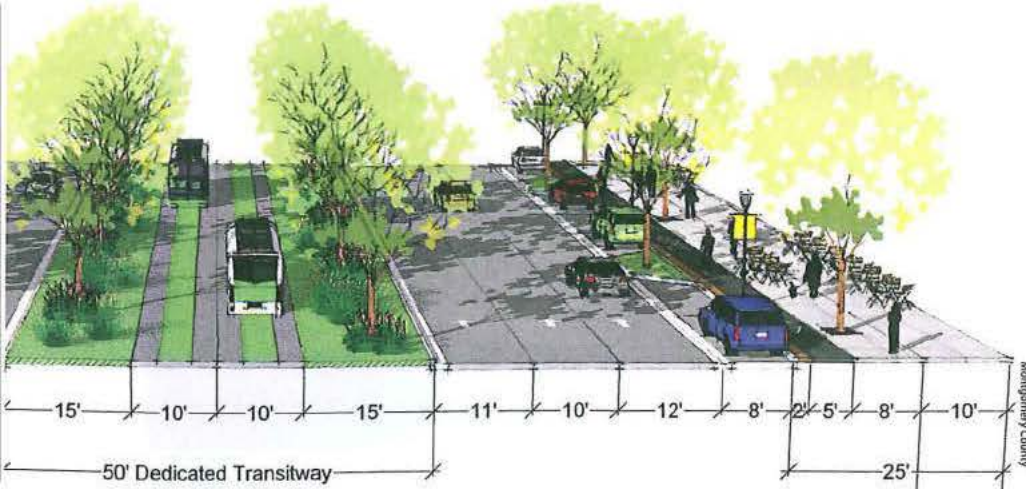
“This was a nowhere-ville. There was no sense of place,” says Michael Smith, a vice president of LCOR, which leased 97 percent of the first apartment tower not long after opening it in 2008. “We don’t want to be known as White Flint. It references a mall. It doesn’t reference a neighborhood environment. We have led a revolution out here in North Bethesda.” Some of those involved have tried to make the nickname “NoBe” stick—for North Bethesda—hoping to cultivate a SoHo vibe.

Just across Rockville Pike, construction crews are busily completing a Whole

Foods Market linked to an apartment tower that at 24 stories is the tallest building in the county. Penthouse vistas sweep from a view of the Washington Monument—12 miles south—to distant, purple Sugarloaf Mountain in the Appalachian foothills a couple of dozen miles north. As for the nearby White Flint Mall, the plan prescribes additional buildings on the property nearest the pike with greater density and scale than the shopping mall.

“This is big anywhere, but to plan this in the middle of an established suburban environment, it’s one of the most transformative developments in a suburb in America,” says Stanley, who arrived from St. Louis three years ago to head Montgomery’s planning department. Rockville Pike is to be rebuilt as a grand boulevard with dedicated bus rapid transit lanes down the middle and landscaped bike paths, although that vision could take de-





acades to complete. All existing commercial property owners are starting to contribute nearly 80 percent of the cost of the infrastructure improvements through a special tax. Existing multifamily, town houses, and a religious institution are excluded, says Nkosi Yearwood of the county's planning department.

The commercial real estate owners and county officials obviously see a large economic benefit, too: The sector plan is expected to generate an additional \$7 billion in revenue for the county over the 40-year life of the plan. It is the largest redevelopment plan in the county, Stanley says, adding that the financing and staging plans for White Flint's intended transformation are much more exhaustive than for the more massive redevelopment being planned for larger Tysons Corner, Virginia, some 15 miles to the southwest.

### Strategic Infill

The remaking of White Flint, as Stanley and others tell it, was only in part about retrofitting a suburb. There are plenty of worse-off suburbs in America or even suburban Washington. Its strip centers are largely full and its access to the Washington Metro is priceless. Even Mid-Pike Plaza, a 1960s strip center that will be replaced with a mixed use neighborhood, could have chugged along profitably in its current form, says Evan Goldman, vice president of development for the center's owner, Federal Realty Investment Trust.

Next year the real estate investment trust plans to begin the first phase of redevelopment at Mid-Pike, a project that could ultimately result in 13 buildings totaling three million square feet of retail, residential, office, and hotel space. The completed redevelopment is envisioned to include a nine-block street grid, hundreds of bike racks and showers, and

changing areas in all commercial buildings.

The verticalization of White Flint—"strategic infill," Stanley calls it—will help Montgomery County to maintain its low-density land use in other spots. It will also provide more affordable housing in one of the top 10 richest counties in America, where the median household income exceeds \$93,000. In the Harris Teeter tower, about 35 of the 312 units are leased below market, in line with the county's affordable housing law—renting for between \$1,000 and \$1,400 a month compared to regular priced rents from \$1,400 to \$2,600.

"For every doctor working at Suburban Hospital," says Stanley, referring to a medical center in nearby Bethesda, "there are three people making less than \$50,000 a year who come from 140 countries and speak 100 languages. Where are they going to live? How are they going to get to work? This is what we need to be discussing."

### Making it work

Montgomery County officials were deliberate in their approach to White Flint. They raised the fee structure for applications to ensure credible proposals. Developers must provide something from a menu of amenities, from public art and benches to a civic green, in exchange for increased density. But what may have been most important, Stanley says, were developers and community activists seeing mutual benefit and joining to sell the plan. They used a mix of new media and old-fashioned shoe leather to reach out to a smart and politically savvy community where nearly one-third of all adults hold postgraduate degrees. "We couldn't have done it all alone or we'd have just looked like salesmen," Stanley notes.

Critics railed against greater traffic on Rockville Pike and contended that the plan was a ruse to pack in more development. But support grew among residents who saw the concept as a means toward a more modern, sustainable, and green suburb. A blog called *Friends of White Flint* attracted many followers with news such as a traffic study that estimated an average trip along the Pike might increase by all of 32 seconds by the time the build out is complete.

"I don't think anyone is looking at this as a get-rich-quick scheme," says Dan Hoffman, a White Flint home owner who occasionally bikes to his job at the NRC. "The term 'smart growth' is a bit overused, but if they want to grow in a smart manner they're going to have to put the density around Metro stations and around transit hubs. White Flint is a perfect example of where we can grow but not increase congestion and infrastructure to the point where it's unsustainable."

A mix of interest groups not normally keen on major development—senior citizens, environmentalists, social equity advocates—saw the benefits of a more walkable, cyclable, affordable White Flint. "The Sierra Club, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, 1,000 Friends of Maryland got behind this project," says Smith, the LCOR executive. "We changed the paradigm. We flipped the switch." Goldman of Federal Realty says he was astounded to witness competitors in commercial real estate openly discuss market trends and rent projections, cards they normally hold tight to their vests. To him, it was a sign of their collective commitment to propelling change.

"This is replicable around the country where you've got a road that's not functioning, where you have a sea of parking, where most retail shopping centers have aged 20 or 30 years, be it the hodgepodge up and down Routes 4 and 17 in Paramus, New Jersey, or around Chicago or California," he says. "We had to figure out how to make Swiss cheese into something."

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