

COMMUNITY CHARACTER ASSESSMENT REPORT

November 24, 2020



HOCO BY
DESIGN

Every Voice, One Vision

City Explained MAHAN RYKIEL
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE
URBAN DESIGN & PLANNING



COMMUNITY CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

Report Introduction

Community character is the impression of a place experienced by those who live in, work in, or visit it and is achieved through both the natural and built environments and the interface between the two. The natural environment and geography, land uses, development patterns, and preservation patterns all inform the character of a place, as does its native vegetation, underlying geology and materials used in the built environment. Development patterns that are sensitive to the inherent qualities of a place can often lead to a community character that is desirable, while development patterns that ignore inherent qualities of a place often result in an undesirable character.

The purpose of this assessment is to evaluate and summarize community character found in Howard County. This exercise will help to define what characteristics make Howard County and the various communities within unique and worthy of special attention. This summary of community character also seeks to simplify the complexity of describing Howard County's character by establishing a preliminary categorization of existing

"character areas." These character areas and this existing community character assessment will be used as reference to inform future phases of the general planning process.

This assessment is divided into four parts. The first part summarizes the review of background documents as they relate to community character. The second part provides an overview of the existing community character assessment and examines character-defining elements such as geography, transportation influences, development patterns, buildings and architectural styles, building materials and style elements, landscape, and spatial definition. The third part identifies and describes a preliminary categorization of the unique character areas found throughout the county. The fourth part of the assessment summarizes key findings and conclusions and identifies questions to guide refinement of the palette of character areas throughout the planning process.





PRO FENCE

PART I: BACKGROUND REVIEW DOCUMENT SUMMARY

Overview

Mahan Rykiel Associates (MRA) reviewed existing plans, studies, and policies related to community character and urban design to provide context for existing conditions and development of HoCo By Design. PlanHoward 2030, the Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan (draft), several corridor plans, design guidelines, and the county's Historic Preservation Plan aid the discussion of the county's current character and create a framework from which regulations and their efficacy can be assessed against the goals of HoCo By Design. Many of the background documents and studies share an overarching theme of preserving open space and agricultural land while improving the function and aesthetics of already developed nodes and corridors. Additionally, the county is rapidly changing with only 2% of land considered "undeveloped" in 2019. However, since 1984, more land has been preserved as parkland, open space or preservation easements than has been developed. The county's character in the future will depend on guidance related to maintaining buffers and vistas to the open spaces and enhancing the aesthetics and connectivity of the already-developed areas.

Document Review

PlanHoward 2030

PlanHoward 2030 emphasized the importance of enhancing the county's auto-oriented, suburban land use patterns and aiming for more compact, complete communities with mixed uses and more options for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users. A careful balance is needed between preserving homogeneous character and creating infill opportunities that will enhance the community. Howard County Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan (2017) highlights the importance of land stewardship, healthy ecological systems, and placemaking to the County's public lands and open spaces.

Since PlanHoward2030 was adopted in 2012, the County has undertaken several planning efforts that influence community character in Columbia. Planning in Columbia has been focused on a mix of infill nodes and neighborhood-focused village centers, all with improved connective tissue and sense of place. The Columbia Gateway Vision Plan (2018) and community-based planning efforts for each of Columbia's Village Centers focus on adapting older development nodes to current needs and desires,

including stronger internal road and path networks, elevated sense of place, removal or relocation of surface parking, and infill development that will create critical mass of density, vibrancy and cohesion. Columbia's mid- to late-20th-century traditional suburban development patterns need to give way to more connected, vibrant network of communities.

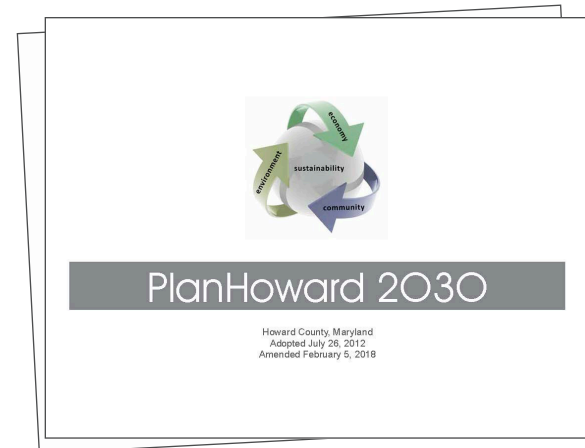


Figure 1: PlanHoward 2030 Report

Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan

The Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan includes a focus on community character and placemaking. Plan recommendations emphasize protection and enhancement of the elements that comprise Ellicott City's character: landform and geology; the natural environment and wooded stream valleys; winding roads that follow the steep

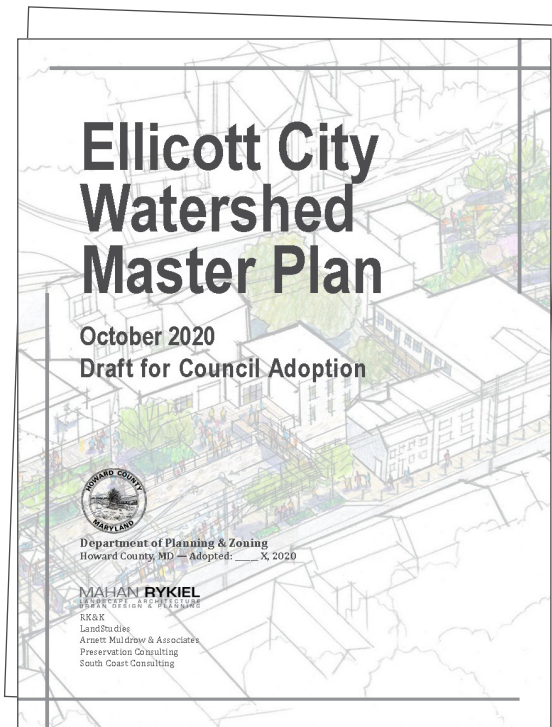


Figure 2: Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan

terrain; viewsheds to historic buildings and the downtown. The plan acknowledges the tightly woven relationships between the built and natural environments which is at the core of what defines the community's character. While the historic district is fairly well protected, the plan encourages broader reaching polices and tools to inform aesthetics and development form in areas of the watershed outside of the historic district. As of November 2020, the Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan is under consideration for Council adoption.

Corridor Plans and Design Manuals

Three corridors in the County—Route 1, Route 40, and Clarksville Pike—were the focus of planning efforts and design guidelines for improved functionality and aesthetics. Route 1 Corridor Assessments (2020), US Route 1 and Snowden River Parkway/Dobbin Road Corridors Market Analysis (2011), and US-1 Corridor Improvement Strategy (2008) focus on Route 1. Both Route 1 and Route 40 are designated Redevelopment Corridors in the Howard County 2000 General Plan and were included as targeted growth and revitalization place types in PlanHoward2030.

US-1, spanning the Elkridge, Columbia, and Southeast planning areas, served as the primary north-south highway before

the interstate system was constructed. The typical roadside land use patterns are characterized by vintage motels and restaurants, trucking terminals, warehouses, and a hodgepodge of industrial and commercial uses. The corridor is book-ended by the historic communities of Elkridge to the north and Savage to the south with industrial uses in between. However, the industrial and transportation land uses of the corridor do not meet the demand for



Figure 3: Redevelopment Along Route 1



Figure 4: Evolving Character of Howard County

community services, retail, and recreational uses for residents. The Route 1 Corridor Land Use and Urban Design Assessment recommends actions in six Candidate Investment Areas based on the themes of Redevelop, Connect, and Preserve. These candidate investment areas will be tested during the HoCo By Design modeling. Building off of existing and planned community anchors and historic cores, recommended policies focus on: preserving and enhancing neighborhood character;

creating walkable, compact nodes; enhancing gateways; building on successes of non-residential land uses; protecting and creating green corridors; and constructing new parks and trails. The Elkrige/Thomas Viaduct areas is recommended for a Main Street character and gateway node building on the existing character of Elkrige. While the US-1 Corridor subject matter Assessments discusses the urban design framework and relationship of land uses, there is no mention of specific architectural

styles. The Route 1 Manual (2009) aims to promote new development patterns that allow for more intensive and efficient land uses in specific districts. The multi-story and greater pedestrian orientation of the newer zoning districts is a departure from the current pattern found in business and manufacturing districts. Consequently, the buildings in these locations should have more urban character than buildings in the corridor do presently. However staff comments reveal that zoning may still not be conducive to the type of development that is desired.

The 2010 Route 40 Design Manual outlines the challenges of the commercial corridor that lacks continuity and sense of place and has minimal or non-existent linkages between residential communities and commercial uses. The suburban, auto-centric corridor should reflect its designation as the National Road Scenic Byway with a unified, identifiable character throughout and specifically near the Enchanted Forest/Chatham and Normandy commercial centers. Mixed use developments with connections for pedestrians and bicyclists should be planned on vacant and underutilized parcels.

The Clarksville Pike Streetscape Plan and Design Guidelines (2016) were adopted with goals of having standards that reflect the unique character of the area while creating

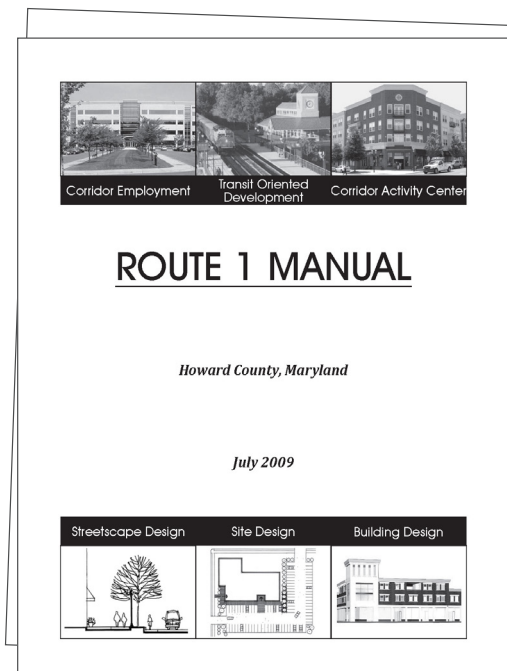


Figure 5: Route 1 Manual (2009)

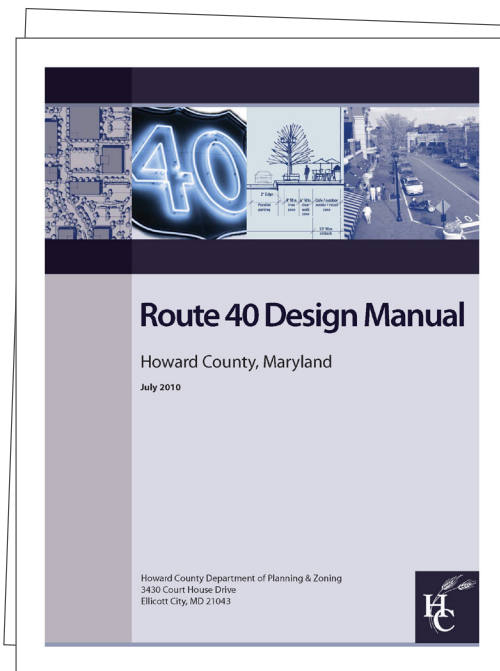


Figure 6: 2010 Route 40 Design Manual

a sustainable, pedestrian-oriented, attractive streetscape and developments. The guidelines are written to facilitate complete streets and better appearance and function of the public realm with more continuous building frontages, screened and consolidated parking, and increased open space.

Howard County Historic Preservation Plan

Finally, the Howard County Historic Preservation Plan (2014) relates to community character and urban design with the tandem goals of supporting historic neighborhood and commercial area revitalization. This specifically relates to the PlanHoward 2030 Key Growth and Revitalization Nodes along Route 1, Route 40, and in Columbia and policies related to the design and revitalization of new and aging commercial areas and rural commercial crossroads. Lawyers Hill Historic District Guidelines require that new development be directed away from sensitive and historic resources and that subdivision plans minimize alterations to topography, vegetation, and landscape character. New homes should be sited and designed to blend with the gently rolling topography and respect existing setbacks and vegetative buffers to screen them from the roads. New buildings should be wood frame or brick construction and compatible in form, scale, proportion, and height with

the homes in the historic district. Ellicott City Historic District Guidelines recognize that the district is not uniform in style—in less dense areas new buildings with diverse styles may not impair the historic character while in denser areas all aspects of a new build’s design will affect the historic streetscape. In general, compatibility in form and siting, and preservation of existing topography and landscape features are key to preserving historic value. New buildings

should not be disproportionately large or out of proportion to nearby historic buildings. The guidelines call for grading to be minimized to make use of the land’s natural contours and to preserve rock outcroppings, water courses, and tree lines. Views to the Patapsco River should be made available to the public when possible.

Development Regulations Assessment

The zoning and land development regulations assessment (2018) emphasized public outreach with citizens and stakeholders to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the counties

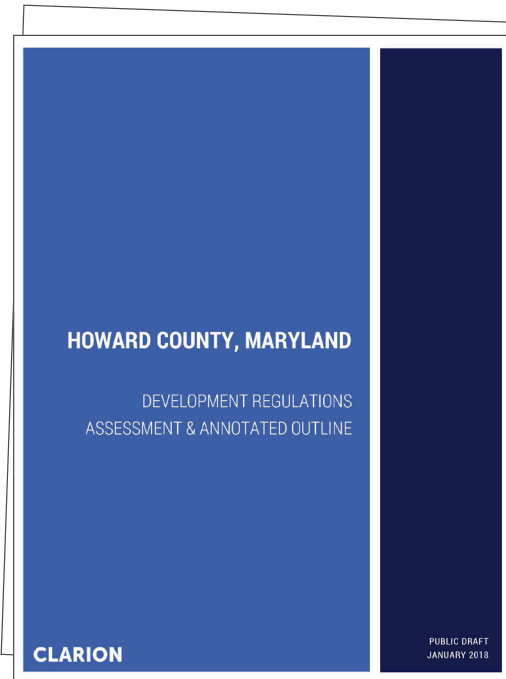


Figure 7: Howard County Development Regulations Assessment Report



Figure 8: Public Engagement Session Held During the Code Review

land development regulations and recommendations for improvement. Begun in 2016, the effort engaged stakeholders in more than 40 meetings to discuss what should be improved in the existing regulations. The Columbia development regulations were a key part of the discussions.

One of the most defining features of Columbia is the fact that it was initiated by a single developer with a single vision to be carried out over time. As a by-product, Columbia still has one single zoning district, New Town, and 268 contiguous approved Final Development Plans. The approval process for projects in downtown Columbia and the village centers—some of the most dynamic parts of Columbia with the greatest need for flexibility—is difficult and cumbersome. This unique aspect of Columbia’s history has both created community character and inhibits future changes and flexibility.

As part of the development regulations review in 2017, community and staff commented on the current county development regulations related to urban design and community character. Many of these comments emphasize the need for:

- More predictability around what, where, and how much intensity of development will occur;

- More protection of farm and agrarian landscapes/uses through buffers and setbacks;
- Better connectivity between developments and land uses for pedestrians, bicyclists, and cars;
- Recognizing that the county is largely built out and regulations need to foster redevelopment;
- Form-based districts and neighborhood compatibility standards for some areas that emphasize form over use type;
- High-quality design and architectural standards to ensure well-designed and compatible communities and redevelopment of commercial properties;
- A shift toward urban design instead of suburban and rural development;
- Specific planning and guidance for redevelopment or infill of industrial areas and business parks;
- Stronger Howard County-specific design requirements for national/corporate chains;
- A re-evaluation of Route 1 revitalization and whether zoning supports it;

- Zoning that is conducive to achieving the desired development patterns and character.

Key Takeaways

Howard County has achieved a good balance between preservation and development making it a desirable location for families and businesses. Howard County has completed numerous plans to address key geographic areas in need of revitalization, protection, and connectivity improvements, including Ellicott City, Route 40, Route 1, Clarksville, and Downtown Columbia.

The plans for Downtown Columbia have been successful so far in guiding redevelopment (mostly within surface parking lots) more conducive to a downtown environment, including vertical and horizontal mix of uses, walkable streets and compact development patterns. Similarly, the Clarksville Master Plan and guidelines have been successful in guiding new commercial development that reflects the nearby agrarian character of the community. Redevelopment along Route 40 has not occurred and redevelopment along Route 1 has occurred slowly. For both corridors, this could be because the existing uses continue to serve a need and because of the complications associated with redevelopment of multiple parcels under different ownership.



PART II: EXISTING COMMUNITY CHARACTER ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

Character-Defining Elements

Howard County is an urbanizing rural county that has experienced significant growth over the past 60 years. As such, community character within the county is quite diverse. It is shaped by a number of influences including Howard County's location between two major metropolitan areas within the northeast corridor; its geography; its historical development as a center for rural industry; rapid suburbanization beginning in the mid-20th Century with the creation of Columbia; historic preservation; and early attention to county-wide planning and evolving planning principles and practices. More recent attention to agricultural preservation in the west, mixed-use redevelopment in the east and environmental stewardship throughout has allowed the County to better focus growth and better protect the natural and man-made attributes that contribute to a positive community character while balancing the competing pressures that often come with preservation and growth. These competing pressures will remain as Howard County continues to change.

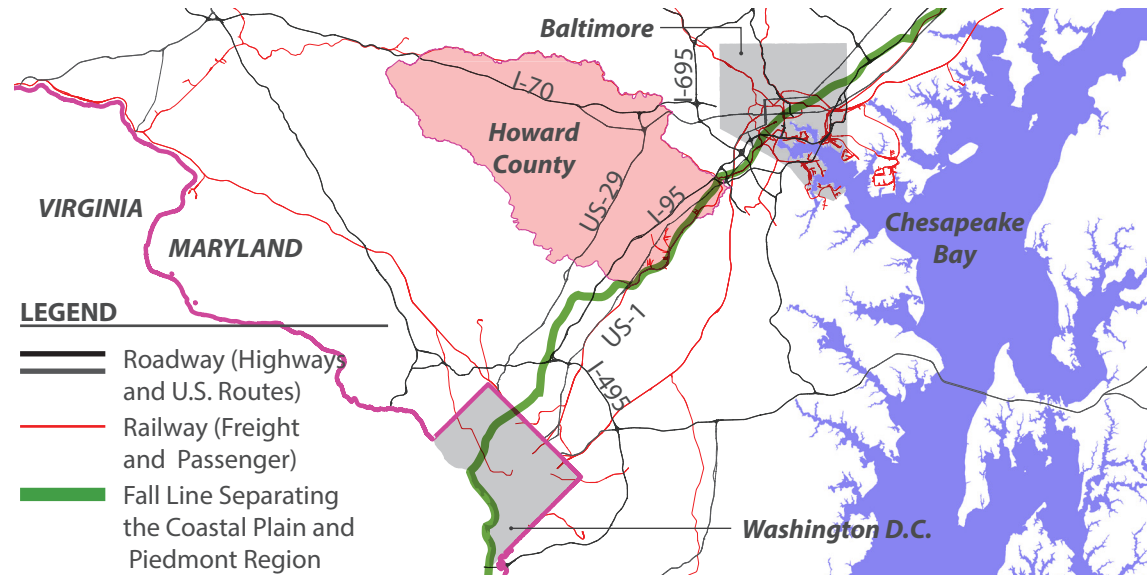


Figure 9: Regional Context of Howard County. Location between Baltimore and Washington Helped Shape Community Character

“Our cities grow by sheer chance—by accident, by whim of private developer and public agencies. A farm is sold and begins raising houses instead of potatoes—then another farm. Thus, bits and pieces of a city are spattered across the landscape.”

—James Rouse

Geography

Primarily located in the Upland Region of the Piedmont Plateau physiographic province, with a small sliver located within the Coastal Plain, Howard County's geography along the Fall Line is comprised of steep river valleys contrasting with broad plateaus. River valleys define much of the county's borders. This geography

informed the physical patterns of both early and present-day industry, transportation networks and development.

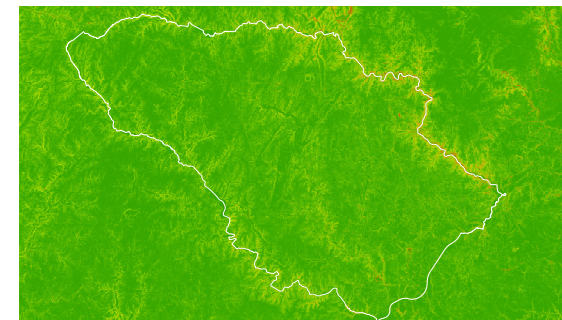
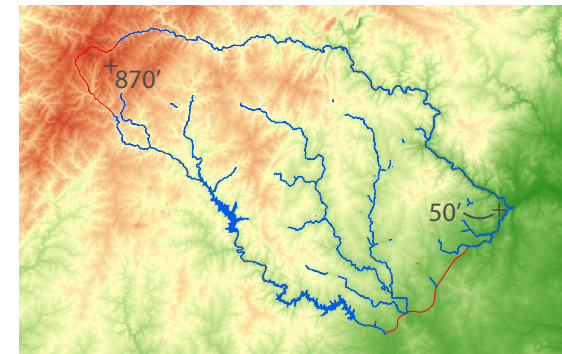
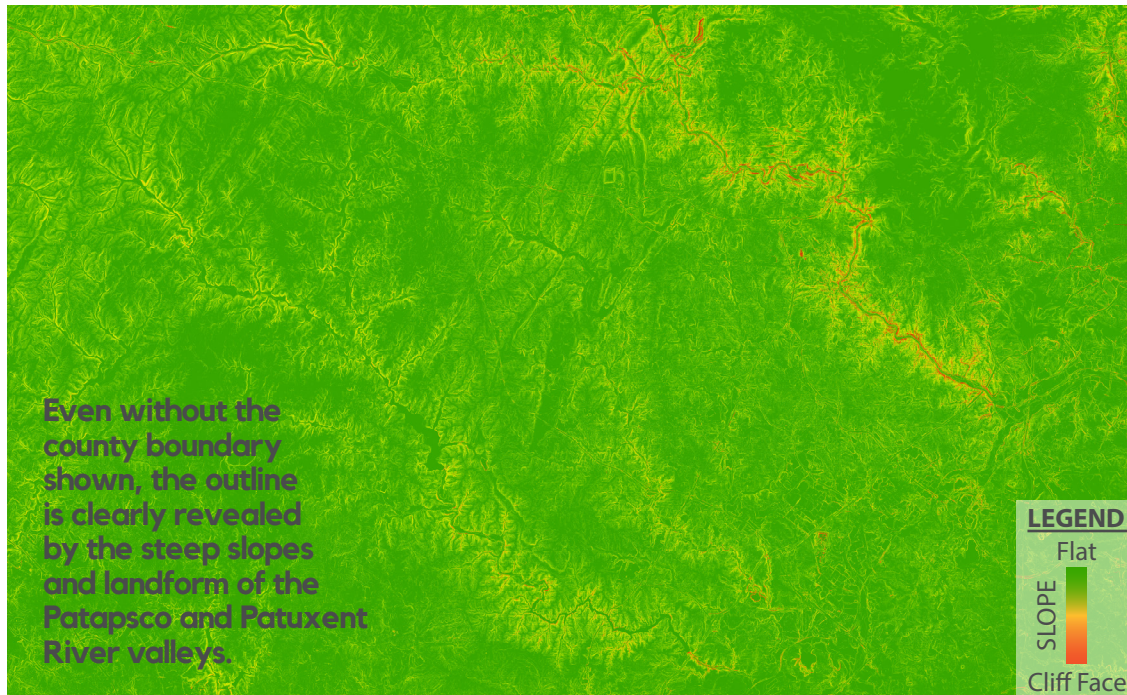
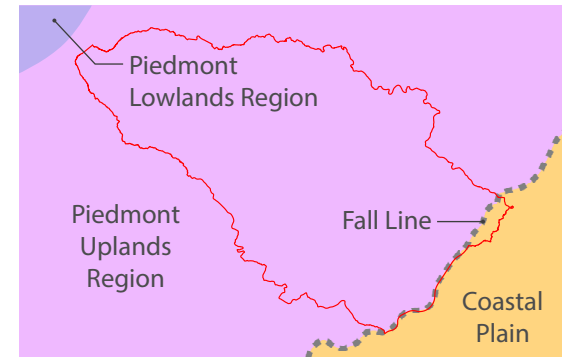


Figure 10: Geologic Features of Howard County: (Top to Bottom) Physiographic Provinces, Elevation, and Steep Slopes/Landform

Transportation Influences

Early transportation networks included the railroad which followed the Patapsco River valley to accommodate trade to the west and between Baltimore and Washington. Similarly, early roadways, the National Road (Route 40) and Route 1, made these same connections. Later, improved highways and the interstate system were added, following

the same routes. A growing network of pathways, sidewalks and bicycle routes add another layer to the transportation network. Many people experience Howard County from these transportation routes, shaping their impressions of its character.

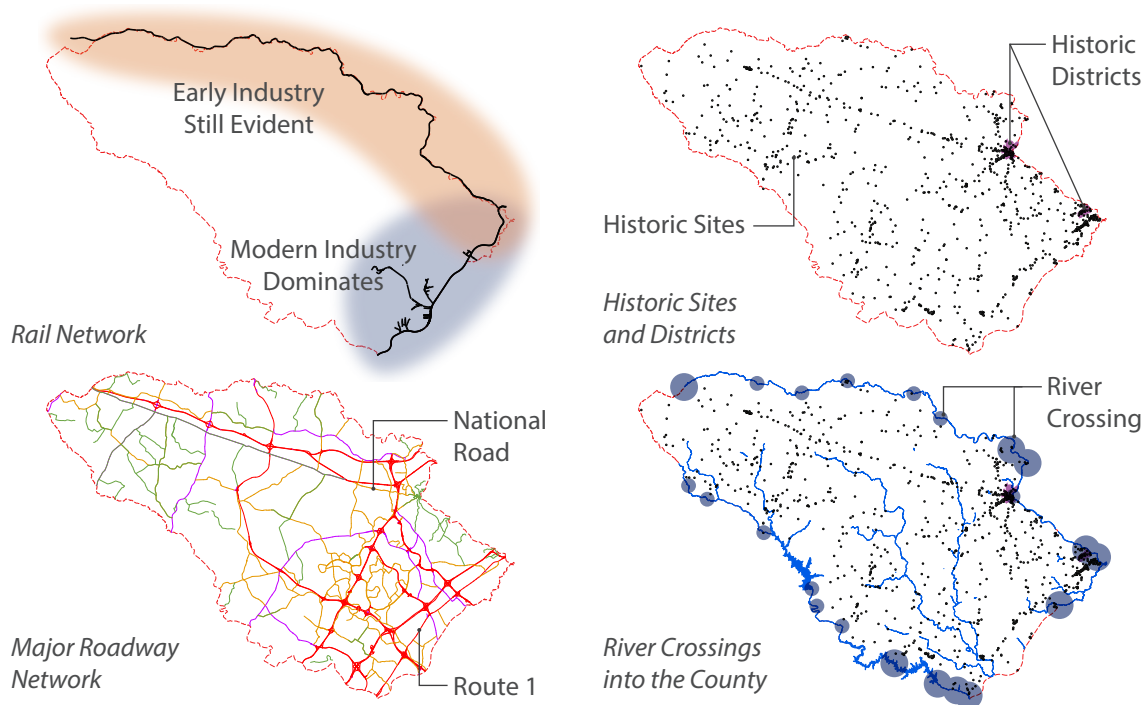


Figure 11: The individual layers that comprise the juxtaposition described in Figure 13. Note how the historic sites and districts clearly reveal the alignments of the National Road and Route 1.



Figure 12: Transportation Influences Shaped Howard County's Early Character

The juxtaposition of transportation networks with geography and development patterns shapes how many experience community character. Most gateways into the county are distinctive as they involve a river crossing.

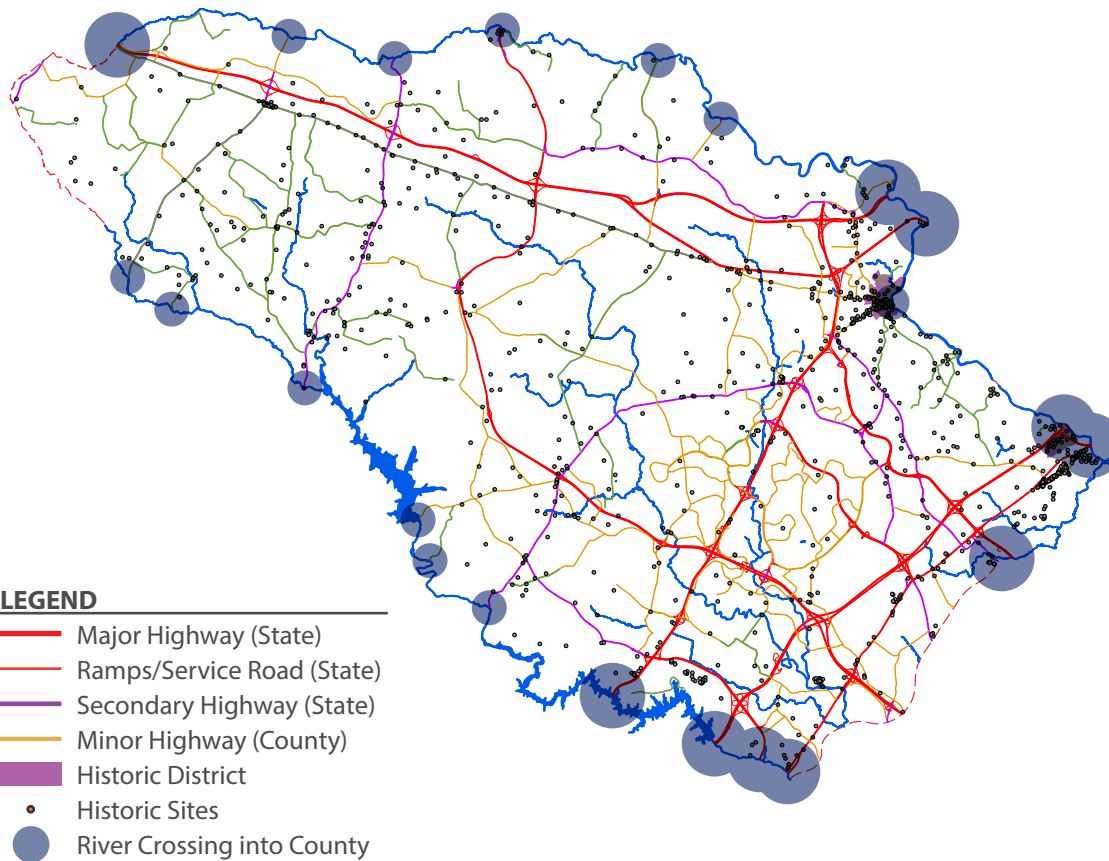


Figure 13: Composite Plan of Transportation Influences of Howard County



Figure 14: The Character of Many Major Gateways to the County



Figure 15: Roadway Following the Landform



Figure 16: River Crossing into the County

Development Patterns

Early development followed the rivers, railroads and roadways. In rural areas, clusters of farm buildings were located in the center of fields; housing and commerce developed along the roadways in a linear fashion or clustered at river crossings. Later development occurred in a patchwork of separate disconnected automobile-oriented enclaves as farmland

was converted to single uses such as housing and other uses. Today, some aging automobile-oriented areas are experiencing redevelopment and an evolution of their character into mixed-use walkable communities. Most notable is along the Route 1 corridor where some single-story retail, industrial and warehouse sites are being redeveloped

as predominantly compact residential communities with space reserved for commercial uses on the lower level of multi-story buildings.



Figure 17: Many Early Settlements Developed Along Rivers, Railroads and Roadways



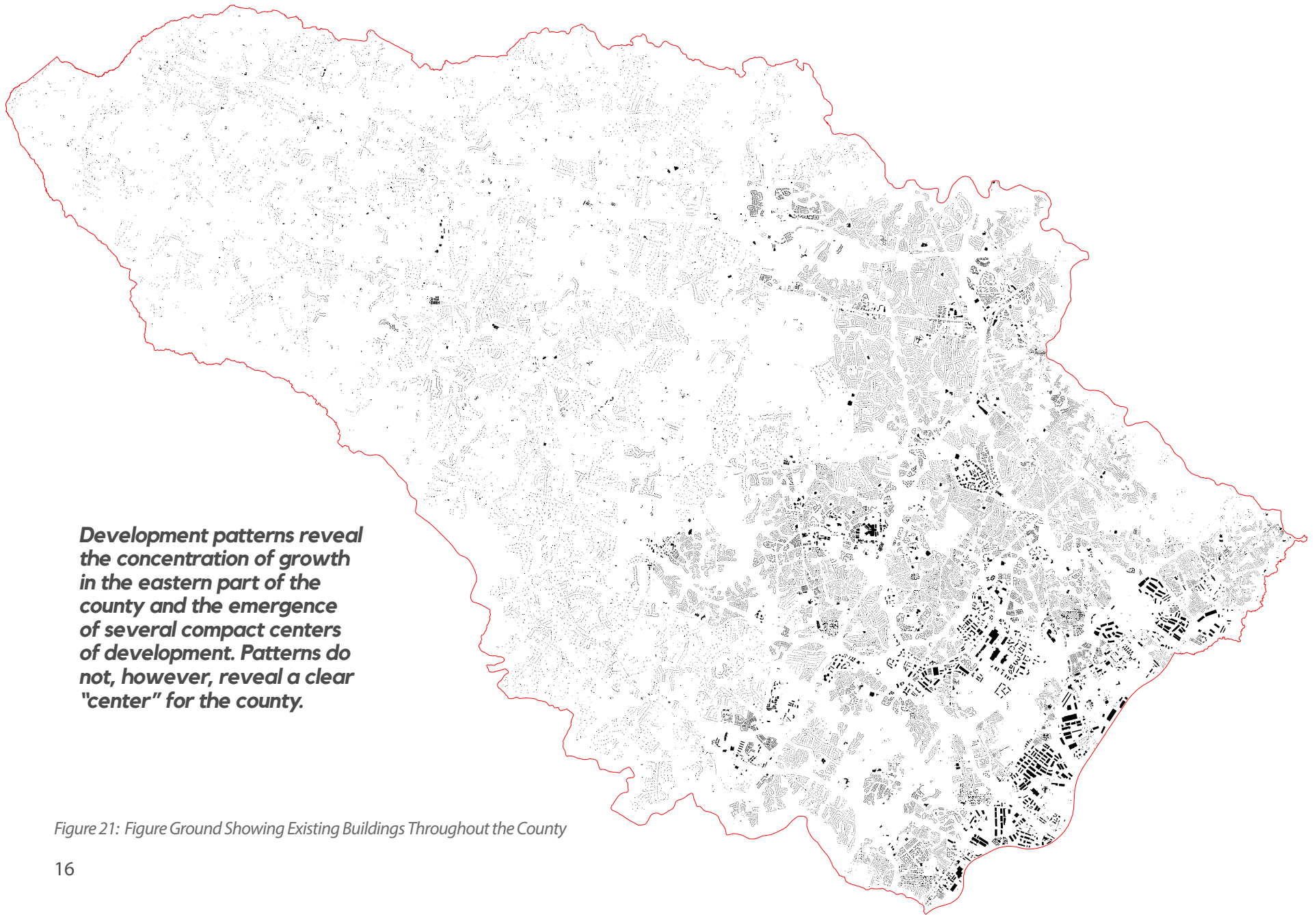
Figure 18: Disconnected, Automobile-Oriented Enclave



Figure 19: Redevelopment with a Walkable Character



Figure 20: Evolution of Development Patterns in Howard County



Development patterns reveal the concentration of growth in the eastern part of the county and the emergence of several compact centers of development. Patterns do not, however, reveal a clear "center" for the county.

Figure 21: Figure Ground Showing Existing Buildings Throughout the County

Buildings and Architectural Styles

Building and architectural styles are varied throughout Howard County, however, the predominant style has evolved from early American traditions grounded in Colonial, Georgian, Greek Revival, and Federal forms and styles. Development in the mid-Twentieth Century brought contemporary styles, particularly in the early phases of Columbia. New contemporary architecture continues to be utilized in Downtown Columbia but most residential and a significant amount of commercial development continues to be traditional in style. Early rural development utilized simple agrarian forms and styles; rural residential development of the past 50 years mostly follows traditional styles found in suburban areas. Some newer commercial development in Clarksville, stemming from design guidance in the Clarksville Master Plan, are inspired by agrarian architecture.



Figure 22: Historic Forms and Styles as Basis for Traditional Architecture in Howard County



Figure 23: Agrarian Influences



Figure 24: Agrarian Inspired Architecture



Figure 25: Contemporary Architecture of Early Phases of Columbia



Figure 26: Neo-Traditional Interpretation of Traditional Styles



Figure 27: Typical Interpretation of Traditional Styles



Figure 28: Recent Contemporary Architecture in Downtown Columbia

Landscape

Both the natural and the planned landscape informs community character. The natural landscape includes the forest stands and wooded river valleys and associated wetlands and floodplains. The planned landscape includes agricultural fields and the associated tree-lined drives and properties; street tree plantings, landscaping of developed parcels and landscapes associated with buffers and berms that separate and screen different uses. Howard County's emphasis on tree canopy and forest protection and long history of stringent landscape requirements has a mostly positive impact on its character and is evident throughout the county. Forests and wooded buffers are the predominant image along Interstates 70 and 95 and many parts of Route 29. The landscapes of Columbia and of many other older residential and commercial areas are lush and, in many places, mature. Here, buildings and uses are often secondary to the landscape. Redevelopment along Route 1 includes street tree and setback plantings where none previously existed. Recent planned landscapes include the incorporation of Environmental Site Design (ESD) practices.



Figure 29: Natural Landscape



Figure 32: Tree-Lined Drives and Property Boundaries



Figure 30: Agricultural Landscape



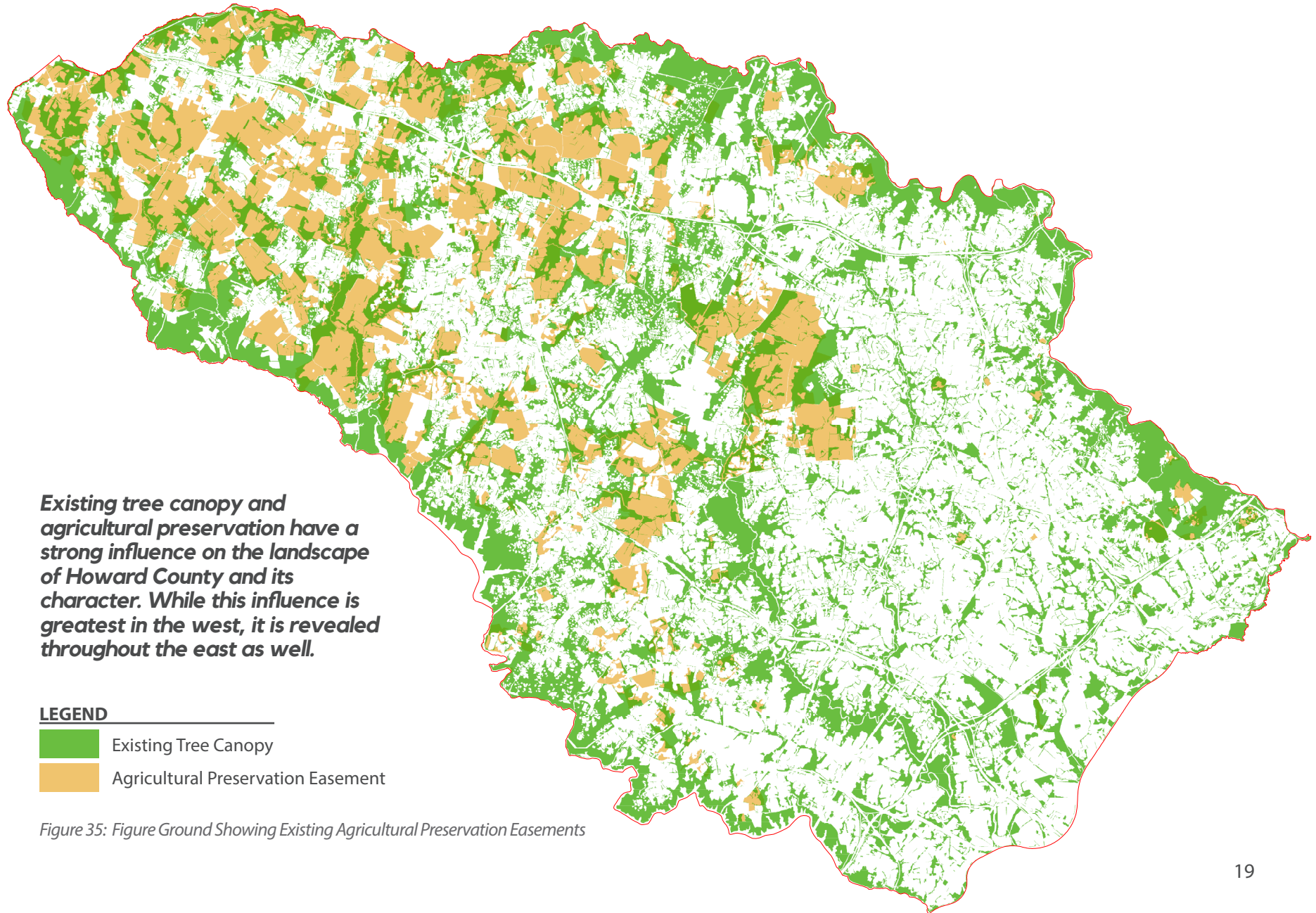
Figure 33: Mature Street Trees in Columbia — Buildings are Secondary to Landscape



Figure 31: Environmental Site Design (ESD) Practices



Figure 34: Buffer and Screening Landscape



Existing tree canopy and agricultural preservation have a strong influence on the landscape of Howard County and its character. While this influence is greatest in the west, it is revealed throughout the east as well.

LEGEND



-  Existing Tree Canopy
-  Agricultural Preservation Easement

Figure 35: Figure Ground Showing Existing Agricultural Preservation Easements

Building Materials and Site Elements

The building materials and site elements—and associated construction quality—that occur throughout the county also inform community character. Historically, buildings and site structures were comprised of locally available materials including stone, wood siding, wood fencing, metal and brick. To a lesser degree, stucco was also used.

These materials (and/or replications of them) continue to be used today where, over the past several decades, they have been used in both interpretations of traditional architectural styles in and contemporary applications. In many instances, the materials used in these modern day applications have not held up well over time due to poor construction methods and/or use of low quality synthetic replications. While the use of wood, brick, stone and metal continue to be used today, metal, glass and architectural precast concrete are utilized more frequently, particularly in Downtown Columbia and other commercial areas. New mixed-use construction often utilizes a combination of these materials within the same structure.

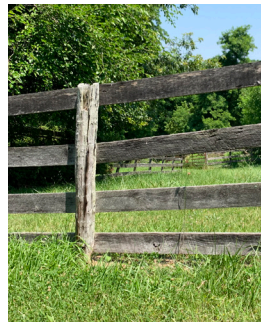
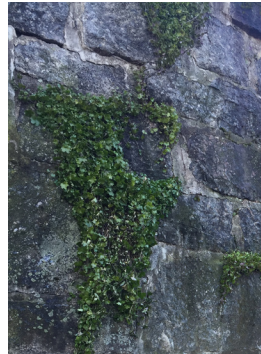


Figure 36: Early Building Materials Used Throughout the County Include Stone, Wood, Brick, Metal and Stucco



Figure 37: Applications of Wood, Brick, Metal and Synthetic Stucco During Growth in the 1960's through the Late Twentieth Century



Figure 38: Present Day Applications of Brick, Metal, Stone and Architectural Precast Concrete

Spatial Definition

Both the natural and built environments define spaces at varying scales and levels of spatial enclosure that impact the county's character. A transitioning and evolving character is experienced as people move from one geographic area of the county to another. An example is a tight enclosure found along a winding road in the narrow, wooded Patapsco River valley that transitions to broad open farmland. Similarly, the tight enclosures of Main Street in downtown Ellicott City and newer streets in Downtown Columbia and compact developments are quite different than the broad highway corridors of Route 40 and Route 1 or the rural residential streets with generous building setbacks.



Figure 39: Broad Farmlands Offer Sweeping Views of the Landscape and Convey a Sense of Openness



Figure 40: Streets in Compact Developments and Tight Wooded Valleys Convey a Sense of Enclosure



PART III: EXISTING CHARACTER AREAS

Howard County's community character is comprised of a broad spectrum of different places, elements and patterns and cannot be described in only one way. Therefore, "character areas" is a term used in this assessment to describe the unique and discernible areas that currently exist within the county. The character areas described on the following pages generally follow a progression from least intensive to most intensive development patterns and include Open Space, Rural Community, Historic Sites, Suburban Neighborhoods, Institutional Campus, Suburban Commerce, Suburban and Urban Walkable Centers and New Town—the planned city of Columbia. While New Town also includes most, if not all, of the other character area designations within its boundaries, it is identified as a separate character area because of its unique standing as a carefully planned city, an element not shared by many other counties. Each of these character areas is then further divided into sub-categorizations to convey the diversity of places within each overall category.

These character areas will be used in collaboration with a companion Land Use Assessment to create a more detailed and refined "palette" of character areas in Howard County. This collaborative character area palette will be used during the scenario planning phase of the general

planning process. The character areas identified and described in this assessment will help to reinforce intended design and character elements for future development and redevelopment and will ensure that community character is referenced during scenario planning rather than relying exclusively on land use maps and density controls.



Open Space

Open space in its broadest sense (not only as a land use classification) significantly contributes to Howard County's character and is manifested in numerous forms. Occurring throughout the County and within other place types, its form is determined by natural systems, land uses, planning and design trends, regulations, citizen recreational needs and its context in relation to other place types. The relationship of parks and open spaces to other place types influences

the perception of community character. Many are comprised of unbuildable land and located behind residential, office and commercial uses, usually following drainage systems. Others are part of a more active setting, located as community commons along streets with uses fronting onto them. These spaces tend to be more visible and engaging with adjacent uses and have a more "civic" presence. Open spaces may include a variety of ownership forms including State, County, community association (such as Columbia Association), HOA, utility companies and private. All

offer environmental, social, economic and aesthetic value. From a broad perspective, open space can be divided into usable and non-usable open spaces, although there is often overlap between the two.

Usable Open Space includes active and passive parks (ball fields, picnic grounds, playgrounds, plazas, courtyards, and trails). Picnic grounds and trails often overlap with some of the non-usable open spaces.

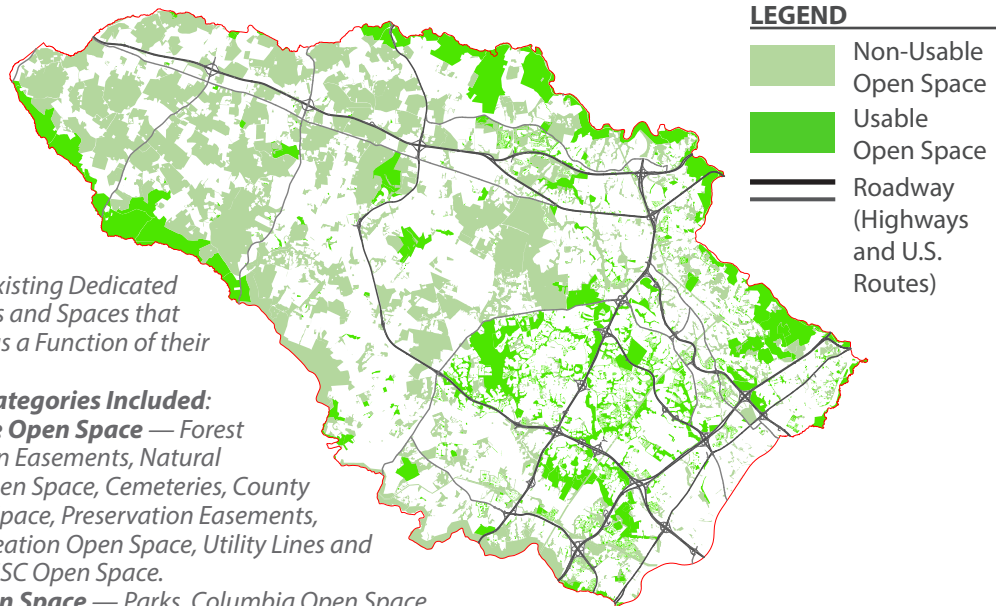


Figure 43: Existing Dedicated Open Spaces and Spaces that are "Open" as a Function of their Land Use.

Land Use Categories Included:

Non-Usable Open Space — Forest Conservation Easements, Natural Resource Open Space, Cemeteries, County Park/Open Space, Preservation Easements, Private Recreation Open Space, Utility Lines and Stations, WSSC Open Space.

Usable Open Space — Parks, Columbia Open Space, HOA Open Space, and State Parks.



Figure 41: Columbia's open space system following drainage patterns is often located behind uses

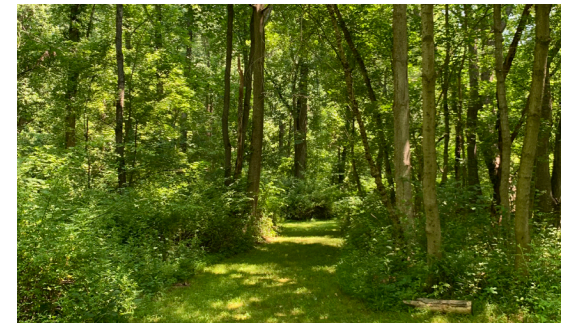


Figure 42: Natural Park



Figure 44: Community Common



Figure 45: Active and Passive Regional Park



Figure 46: Urban Plaza

Non-Usable Open Space includes natural resource protection areas; floodplains, drainage and stormwater management areas; steep slopes; protected forest stands; land associated with overhead utility easements; cemeteries; and buffers and setbacks.



Figure 49: Mature Forest Stands along Highways



Figure 47: Utility Easement



Figure 48: Cemetery



Figure 50: Setback Area

Rural Community

Howard County's rural character is primarily preserved in the western areas of the county in part because of its distance from the Baltimore-Washington corridor and in large part because of planning policies. Rural character is, however, still apparent in parts of the central and eastern areas of the county. The Rural Community is comprised primarily of farms, rural residential development and rural centers or "crossroads."

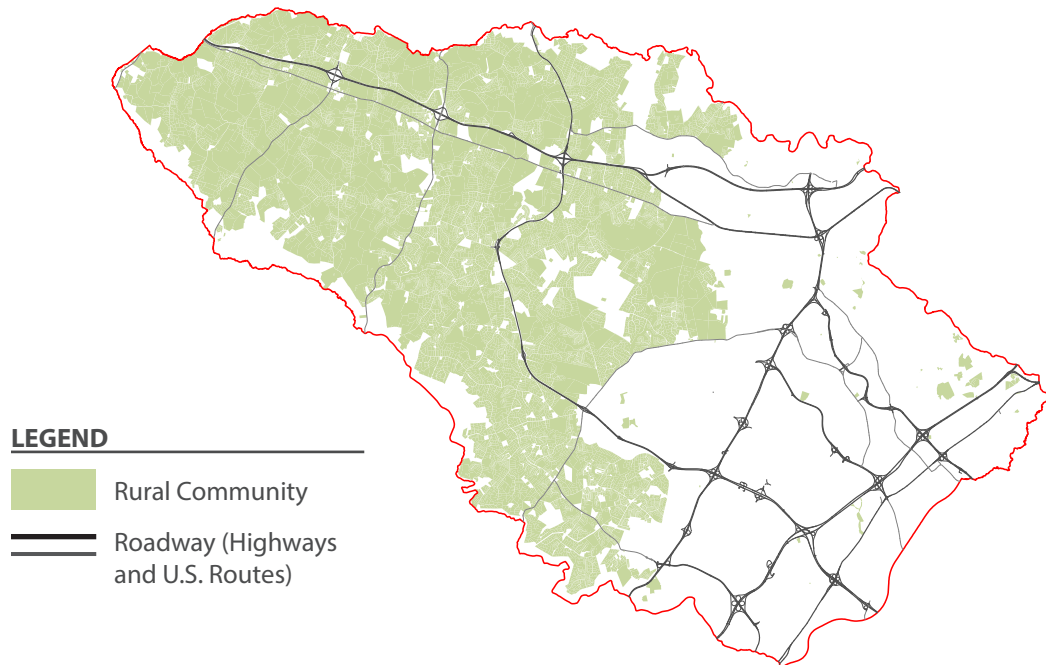


Figure 51: Rural Community (Land Use Categories Included: Low Density Residential and Farmland Preservation Easements)

Farms range in size and include equestrian as well as agriculture-based farms. They are generally characterized by broad open fields or pastures defined by wood rail fencing, buildings clustered together away from surrounding roads, tree-lined drives, woodland stands and hedgerows. Agrarian architectural styles include simple and functional forms. Generally, the spatial character is often broad and open with expansive skies.



Figure 52: Typical Farm Complex Pattern, Credit: Google Earth



Figure 53: Creative Residential Development of Paternal Gift Farm Preserves Horse Farm



Figure 54: Farmland Preservation



Figure 55: Western Howard County Farm



Figure 56: Typical Farm Complex



Figure 57: Effective Integration of Development along Scenic Road

Rural Residential development occurs in two forms. The first, following historic development patterns spreading out from Rural Centers and along primary transportation routes, includes single-family lots of varying sizes fronting onto state and local secondary highways in a linear arrangement. This residential development is typically just the depth of one lot before transitioning to farm fields or woodlands. More recent rural residential development includes large single-family lots fronting onto cul-de-sac local or private streets. Architectural styles vary from the vernacular style of rural central Maryland to predominantly traditional. Streets are generally narrow, without curbs or sidewalks.



Figure 58: Typical Large-Lot Rural Residential Development



Figure 60: Typical Rural Residential Lots Fronting onto Roadways

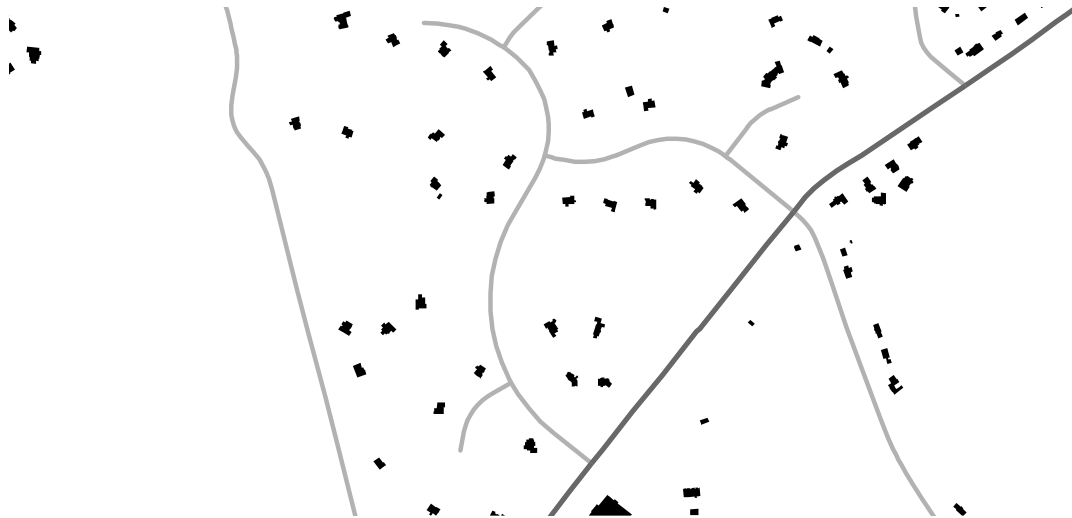


Figure 59: Typical Rural Residential Patterns



Figure 61: Typical Rural Residential Lots Fronting onto Roadways

Rural Centers represent historic places of commerce within the rural community and continue to serve that function today. They generally occur at a “crossroads” of secondary highways and, in a less defined form, at river crossings into the county from the north. They provide a “sense-of-place”, arrival and community focal point. They are characterized by older commercial buildings, older residential buildings converted to commercial uses and newer commercial development. Uses may include an agricultural-related use, grocery or mini market, restaurant and pub, automotive use, bank, church, real estate offices, and other small-scale offices. Established well before contemporary development codes, building placement, site planning, parking access, signage and ad-hoc uses such as farm stands have often evolved organically, adding to their character and distinguishing them from recent planned developments. While the Rural Centers in the central and western parts of the county are distinct from adjacent uses, many in the central and eastern parts of the county have either disappeared or been obscured as the areas expanded in growth. The character of the intersection of Frederick Road and St. John’s Lane in Ellicott City, however, still conveys its former role as a Rural Center.



Figure 62: Highland Rural Center



Figure 63: Small-Scale Office Center in Highland



Figure 64: Highland Rural Center Development Pattern



Figure 66: Recent Commercial Development in Lisbon



Figure 68: Farm Stand in Lisbon



Figure 69: Typical Rural Center Pattern of Linear Development Along Highway with Farmland Behind



Figure 67: Early Development Converted to Commercial Uses in Lisbon



Figure 70: Lisbon Rural Center Development Pattern



Figure 71: St. John's Lane, Frederick Road and Route 40



Figure 72: Aerial Image of St. John's Lane and Frederick Road, Credit: Google Earth



Figure 73: Detail Plan of St. John's Lane Development Pattern

Historic Sites

In addition to designated historic districts, Historic Sites occur throughout Howard County and have a significant influence on character. Historic Sites include residential and early industrial buildings and notable infrastructure such as that associated with early railroad history and the National Road.



Figure 74: Main Street in Ellicott City

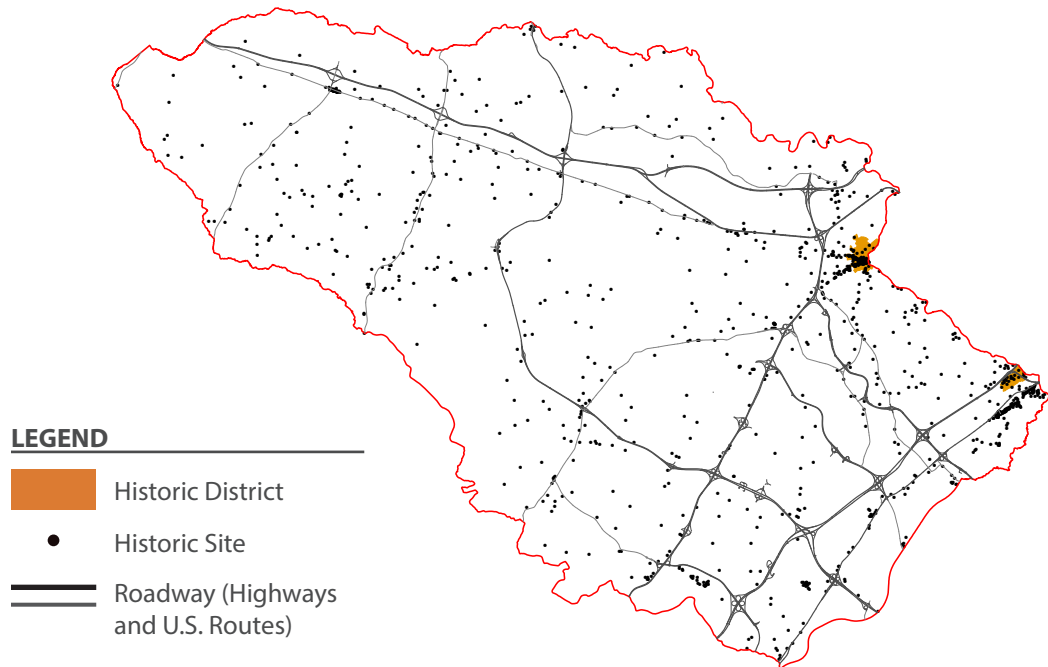


Figure 75: Historic Sites (Includes a Range of Land Use Categories Based on the Site's Location within the County)

Estate Houses occur throughout the eastern and central part of Howard County. Some remain as private residences with significant acreage intact while others have been converted to other uses including event venues and restaurants. In many instances, the acreage has been subdivided and developed with housing.



Figure 76: Waverly is Maintained as an Event Venue



Figure 77: Oakland in Columbia is Maintained as an Event Venue

Historic Infrastructure includes bridges, viaducts, and the railroad. Most notable are the Thomas Viaduct, spanning the Patapsco River valley, the Oliver Viaduct spanning Main Street in Ellicott City and the Bollman Truss railroad bridge in Savage.



Figure 78: Thomas Viaduct

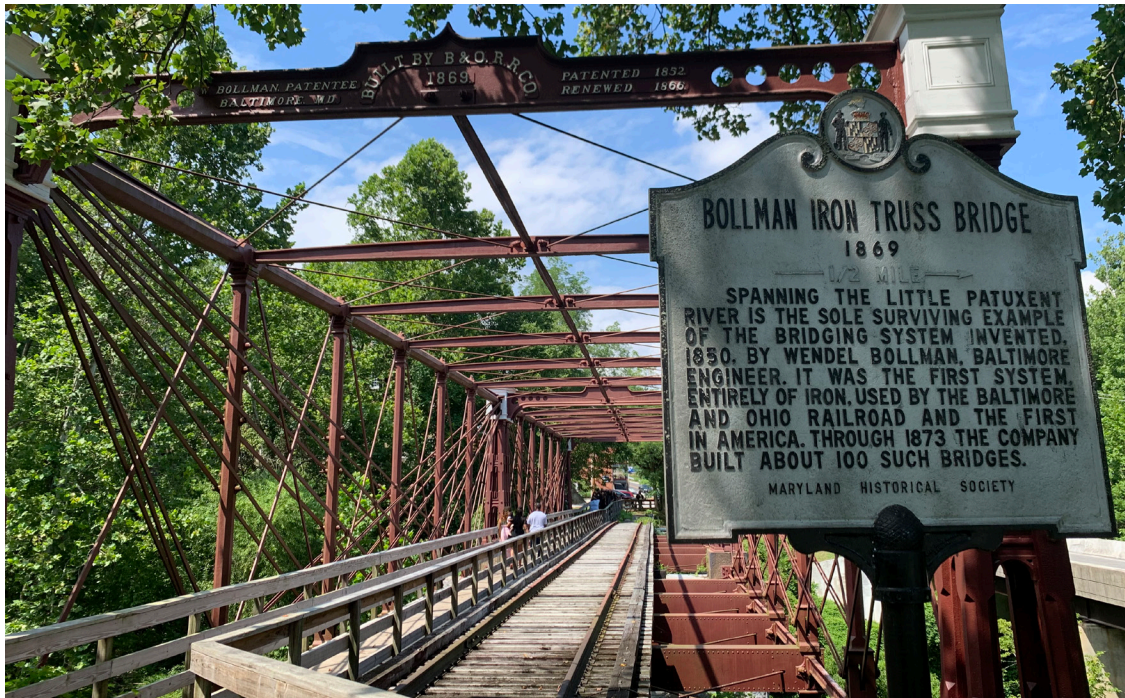


Figure 79: Bollman Truss Railroad Bridge in Savage

Former Mills utilize adaptive reuse and reinforce the early industrial history of the county that harnessed the power of the Patapsco and Patuxent Rivers. Savage Mill is the most notable in the county, while the Wilkins Rogers mill site and Oella Mill, located just across the Patapsco River in Baltimore County, also contribute to Howard County's character.



Figure 80: Savage Mill Adaptive Reuse

Suburban Neighborhoods

Suburban Neighborhoods are areas with housing as the predominant single use. They include a variety of housing types comprised of single-family, mobile homes/ manufactured housing, single-family attached/townhomes, and multi-family apartments. They are characterized by a variety of lot sizes, different levels of compactness and street patterns, connected blocks of various sizes and culs-de-sac. They are also generally characterized by tree-lined streets—many, not all, lined with sidewalks—garages and driveways, private space to the rear of the houses and significant amounts of landscape. Those with sidewalks are generally walkable but with limited destinations nearby. Much of the open space is derived from protecting sensitive natural features such as woodlands, streams and wetlands. Consequently, it is often located behind housing.

This section of the Character Assessment overlaps with “Rural Residential,” described in Rural Community on the previous pages, and “Planned Mixed-Use Centers,” described in Suburban and Urban Walkable Centers on the following pages. These character areas include examples of creative suburban neighborhood development patterns including Paternal Gift Farm and Maple Lawn.

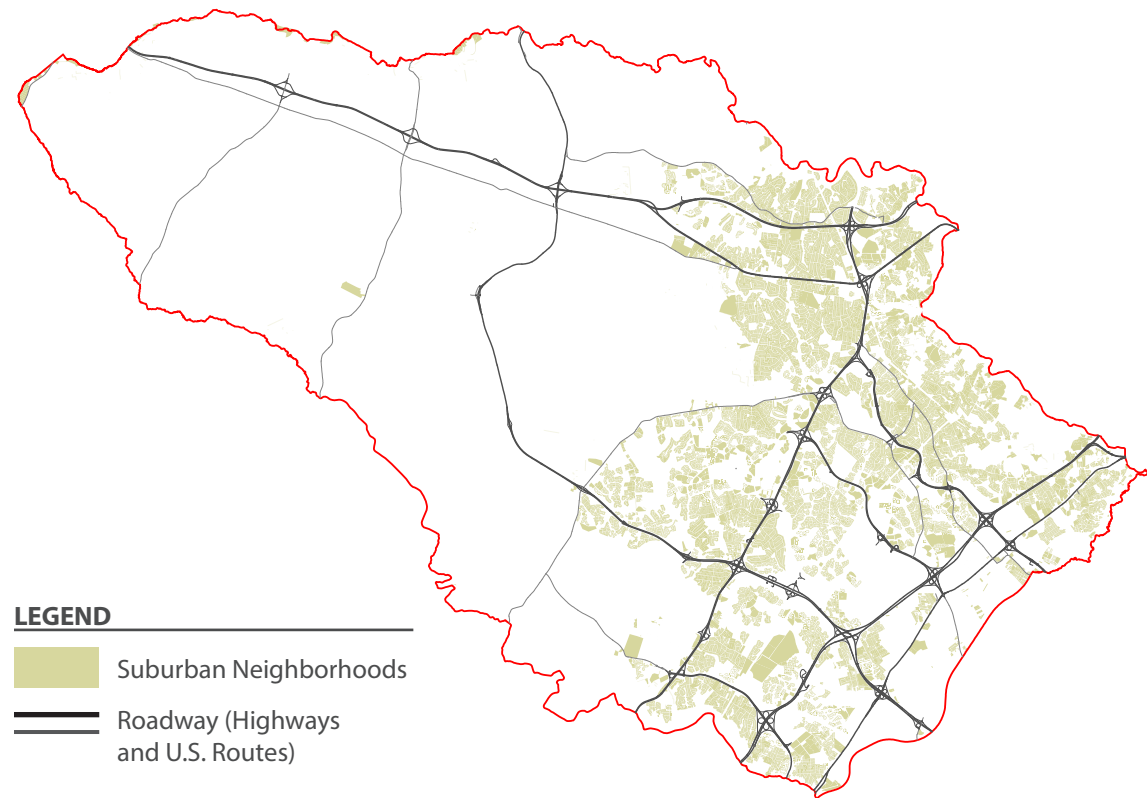


Figure 81: Suburban Neighborhoods (Land Use Categories Included: Medium and High Density Residential and Age-Restricted Housing)

Single-Family Neighborhoods throughout the county are predominantly organized around local cul-de-sac streets with lots of various sizes. Most notable are the neighborhoods in Columbia where the cul-de-sac development pattern allowed for the preservation of an open space network following natural drainage patterns. Some older Single-Family Neighborhoods utilize a connected network of streets with large, loosely defined "blocks."

Gridded neighborhoods, traditional suburban forms with distinct, regularly sized blocks, are historically uncommon in Howard County due to topography and the planning trends in place during the county's prime development years. The few exceptions include Savage, Harwood Park, and Dorsey. Gridded street patterns have been utilized more recently as part of Planned Mixed-Use Centers.



Figure 82: Early Contemporary Architecture within Suburban Neighborhood



Figure 83: Typical Cul-de-Sac Development



Figure 84: New Construction within Suburban Neighborhood



Figure 85: Typical Cul-de-Sac Development Pattern



Figure 86: Typical Large Blocks in Older Single-Family Neighborhoods



Figure 87: Typical Large Block Development in Older Single-Family Neighborhoods



Figure 88: Older Single-Family Homes near ElkrIDGE



Figure 89: Gridded Neighborhood in Savage



Figure 90: Harwood Park Development Pattern



Figure 91: Grid Pattern of Savage

Townhouse and Apartment Neighborhoods include separate enclaves of townhouse and apartment developments that utilize similar development patterns.

Townhouse communities include single-family attached housing in “sticks” of four to eight units located in the eastern part of the county and throughout Columbia. Recent development trends include stacked towns that result in less impervious coverage than traditional townhouses. Most of these communities are organized around parking courts and back onto open space. Many recent communities utilize alleys and the housing faces onto local pedestrian-friendly streets.

Apartment Neighborhoods are generally comprised of three-story garden apartment buildings organized around parking courts and shared open space and are located in the eastern part of the county and throughout Columbia. Recent development also includes larger and taller apartment buildings that face onto local pedestrian-friendly streets.

Mixed Residential Neighborhoods include single-family houses, townhouses and apartments usually separated into distinct but connected neighborhoods. For older communities, these distinct neighborhoods are often separated by swaths of natural open space. For more recently developed communities, the distinct neighborhoods are often connected by a shared street frontage or public square.



Figure 92: Apartment and Townhouse Enclaves in Ellicott City Organized Around Parking Courts



Figure 93: Typical Older Apartment Neighborhood Organized Around Parking Court



Figure 94: Typical Older Apartment Neighborhood Organized Around Open Space



Figure 95: New Apartment Community Near Route 1



Figure 96: Typical Townhouse Community Organized Around Parking Court



Figure 97: Typical Older Townhouse Neighborhood



Figure 98: Typical Townhouse/Apartment Enclaves Separated by a Common Street



Figure 101: Typical Recent Apartment Community Organized Along a Street



Figure 99: Typical Recent Apartment Neighborhood Organized Along a Street



Figure 100: Typical Mixed Residential Neighborhoods with Townhouses and Apartments Facing a Common Street



Figure 102: Typical Recent Townhouse Community Organized Along a Street

Manufactured Home Neighborhoods are generally limited to the Route 1 corridor and include small lots organized around a grid or cul-de-sac network. Generally these communities lack shared open space amenities and older communities lack sidewalks.



Figure 103: Typical Manufactured Home Neighborhood



Figure 104: Manufactured Homes in Jessup



Figure 105: Typical Manufactured Home Neighborhood

Institutional Campus

Institutional Campus includes both educational and medical uses comprised of multiple buildings organized in a campus setting, around common open spaces and road network. Most notable in Howard County include the Howard County Community College and Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. Howard County General Hospital is also an Institutional Campus, however, the buildings are organized around an internal parking lot network.

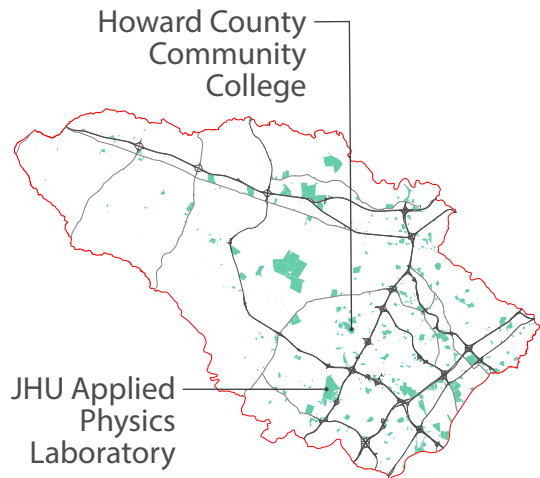


Figure 106: Institutional Campus (Land Use Categories Included: All Government and Institutional Uses including Schools, Religious Uses, Hospital/ Medical, etc.)



Figure 107: Howard Community College Development Pattern



Figure 108: JHU Applied Physics Laboratory Development Pattern



Figure 109: Howard Community College Includes a Traditional Campus Quadrangle

Suburban Commerce

Suburban Commerce includes employment and retail uses not associated with a downtown or planned mixed-use center. They include shopping centers, retail “pad” sites, retail super centers, single-use business and corporate parks and warehousing/industrial centers. Designed for convenience and automobile use, they are typically organized around parking

and buffered from, rather than connected to other uses by natural open spaces or planned buffer treatments. While designed around the automobile, many adjacent commercial centers lack inter-parcel driveway connections, resulting in a significant number of curb cuts and access points along the adjacent roadway. Except for many warehousing/industrial centers they typically include an internal sidewalk network that primarily serves customers and

commuters getting to and from their cars and/or exercise (office parks). Similarly, while many commercial centers include an internal sidewalk network, they often lack sidewalk connections to adjacent commercial centers.

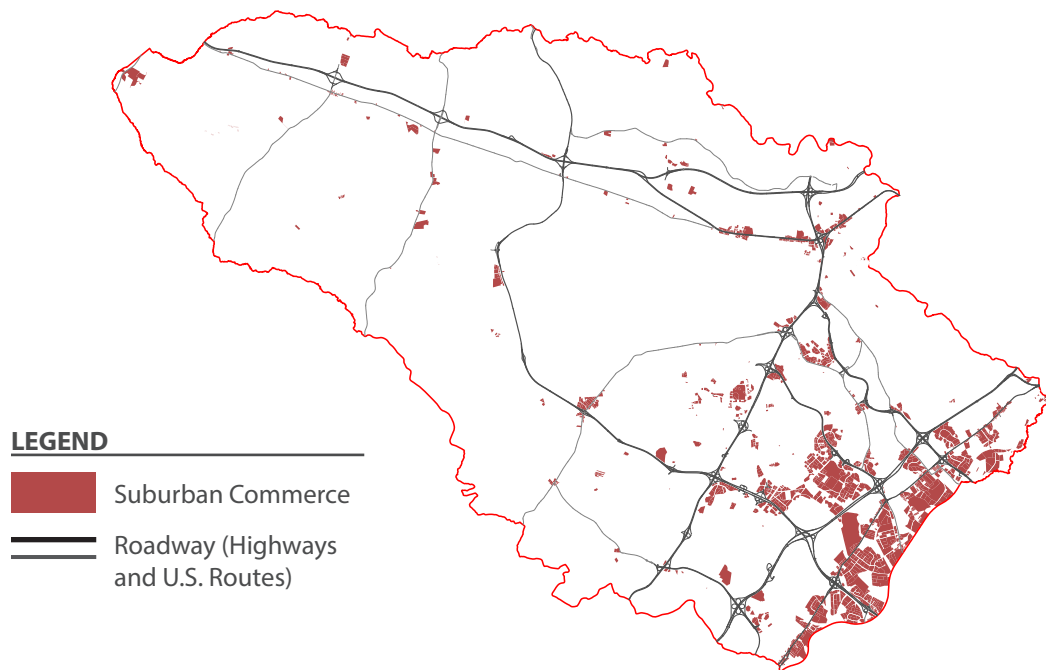


Figure 110: Suburban Commerce (Land Use Categories Included: Retail, Office, Service, Hotel and Mixed Commercial)



Figure 111: Suburban Office and Retail Uses, Connected by Sidewalks but not Relating to Each Other



Figure 112: Typical Suburban Office Park

Strip Commercial includes a diverse mix of retail uses of various sizes, often arranged in linear “shopping center formats” with associated pad sites. Parking is typically arranged within large lots between the center and the street. Older commercial centers often lack amenity spaces, clearly defined parking areas and/or consolidated curb cuts. Strip commercial is primarily located along primary highways such as Route 40 and Route 1, with smaller centers located along secondary highways.

Commercial pad sites are typically organized around parking and located near intersections of primary and secondary highways with prominent visibility from the roads. In Columbia, these pad sites tend to be clustered; outside of Columbia they are typically arranged in a linear arrangement. Regardless of their arrangement, the individual pad sites typically do not relate to each other. Newer restaurant pad sites often include outdoor dining spaces.



Figure 113: Route 40 Strip Commercial with Limited Relationship to Adjacent Uses



Figure 114: Route 40 Strip Commercial



Figure 115: Route 1 Strip Commercial



Figure 116: Older Strip Development Along Route 1 with Continuous Curb Cut



Figure 117: Individual Pad Site Development Along Route 40



Figure 118: Newer Strip Development Along Route 1 with Clearly Defined Parking Area

Retail Super Centers include “big box” retail typically located in a shopping center format with multiple big box uses. They are organized around large surface parking lots near highways.



Figure 119: Super Center along Route 175

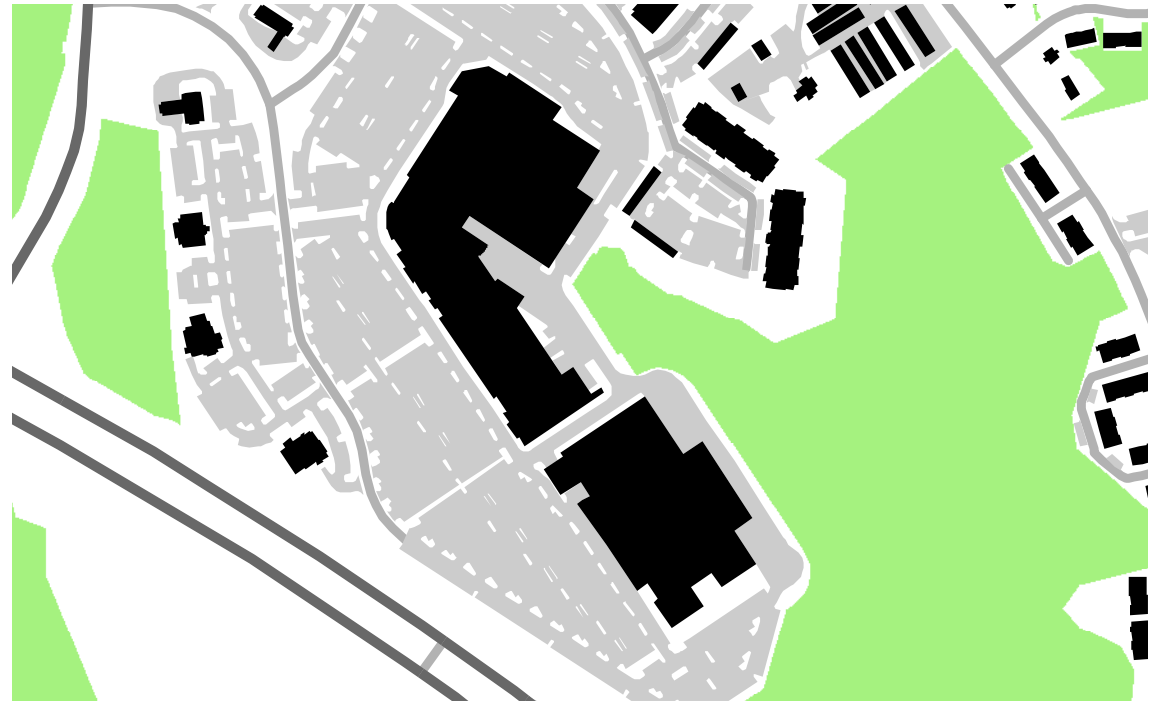


Figure 120: Super Center and Associated Pad Sites at Route 175

Business and Corporate Parks include office and research and development (R&D) buildings organized in a landscaped park-like setting. The site planning is based upon ease of parking, with lots arranged around loop roads with broad setbacks and buildings organized around or surrounded by parking. Office buildings may be arranged around shared open space amenities. Generally, the parks are active only during the workday and have little relationship and connectivity to surrounding uses. They are often developed in separate enclaves (“parks”), have a limited number of access points, and often include entrance gateway features.



Figure 122: Office Park with Buildings Organized Around Shared Loading Areas and/or Open Space Courtyards



Figure 121: Office Park with Buildings Organized Around Shared Open Space Amenity



Figure 123: Gateway Corporate Park Office Cluster



Figure 124: Research and Development Building organized around Parking Area



Figure 125: Standalone Office and Commercial Pad Sites, Each Surrounded by Parking



Figure 126: Standalone Office Building



Figure 127: Office Park Entrance Gateway

Warehousing/Industrial Centers are primarily located in the eastern part of the county along the I-95 and Route 1 corridors. They are single use with businesses that require large footprints, truck access rail service. Pedestrian amenities are limited or non-existent.

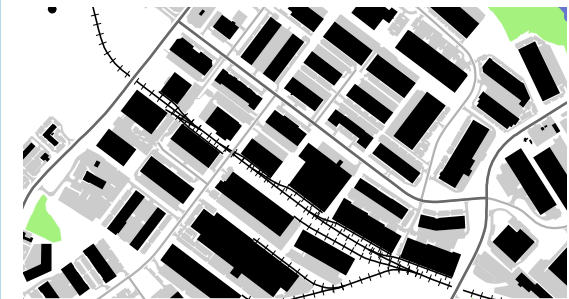


Figure 128: Rail-Served Warehouse and Industrial Uses Along Route 1



Figure 129: Warehouse

Suburban and Urban Walkable Centers

For the purposes of this assessment, Suburban and Urban Walkable Centers are those places in addition to those located within Columbia (New Town) that promote pedestrian environments beyond just having pedestrian infrastructure such as sidewalks and paths. These character areas for Columbia area addressed on the following pages under New Town. Pedestrian activity in these places is generally convenient, purposeful, and interesting with uses activating the pedestrian experience. It is often easier and more enjoyable to walk among uses than drive. Walkable Centers include traditional downtowns/historic centers and planned neo-traditional mixed-use centers.

Traditional Downtowns and Historic Centers are historic places of commerce. Howard County's three major traditional downtowns are located in the eastern part of the county, associated with the county's early commerce centered along the Fall Line to harness the energy of the Patapsco and Patuxent Rivers and include Ellicott City, Elkridge and Savage. Each of these, however, has its own distinct character. Downtown Ellicott City is located in a steep river valley at the convergence of multiple tributaries. The resulting character includes steep topography, narrow enclosures and winding

streets that follow the geography. Of the three, it has the most cohesive network of downtown buildings, most of which define a continuous street edge. Elkridge's downtown is limited to a small area with individual buildings on their own lots. The downtown district has been fragmented and overshadowed by the surrounding transportation network. Downtown Savage is anchored by the Savage Mill and is the only traditional downtown in Howard

County with a "town square", although it was not created until the 1970's. With the exception of Savage Mill, there are limited commercial uses in downtown Savage and they generally do not relate to each other, in spite of a clear gridded street network.

While located across the Patapsco River in Carroll County, Sykesville's downtown also contributes to Howard County's character as both counties share this river valley.

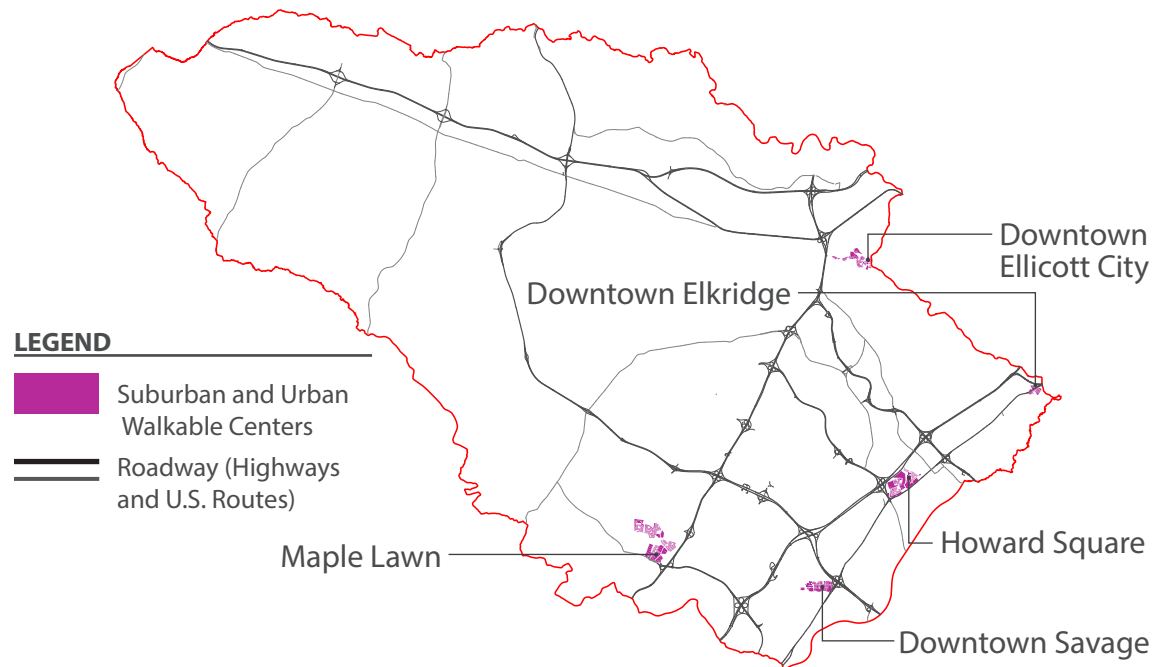


Figure 130: Suburban and Urban Walkable Centers (Land Use Categories Included: High Density Residential and Mixed Commercial that Promote a Pedestrian Environment)



Figure 131: Historic Character of Ellicott City



Figure 133: Main Street Music Fest in Ellicott City



Figure 134: Wooded Hillsides of the Patapsco River and Its Tributaries Define Ellicott City's Character



Figure 132: Ellicott City Historic District



Figure 135: Downtown Ellicott City Development Pattern



Figure 136: Downtown Savage Development Pattern



Figure 138: Retail Space as Part of Walkable Environment in Downtown Savage



Figure 140: Use of Traffic-Calming Between Savage Mill and Downtown Savage



Figure 137: Variety of Housing Types Along Streets with Sidewalks in Savage



Figure 139: Baldwin Common Serves as Downtown Savage's "Town Square"



Figure 141: Savage Mill Trail Connects Neighborhoods to Downtown Savage

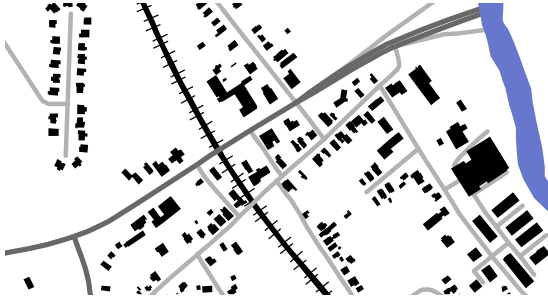


Figure 142: Downtown Elkrige Development Pattern



Figure 144: Highway Creates Barriers for Pedestrian Connection to and from Elkrige's Main Street



Figure 143: New Development Oriented to Street and Sidewalk in Elkrige



Figure 145: New Restaurant Uses along Main Street in Elkrige



Figure 146: Downtown Elkrige

Planned Mixed-Use Centers include developments that utilize recent planning trends modeled after “traditional” downtown and neighborhood development patterns. They include a mix of residential, retail and commercial buildings oriented to streets and prominent public open spaces. Rather than being buffered from one another, different uses share street frontage and an interconnected street network. The most extensive of these is Maple Lawn in the south central portion of the county where the developed east transitions to the rural western portions of the county. Other planned mixed-use centers occur along the Route 1 corridor.



Figure 147: Howard Square Development Pattern Along Route 1



Figure 148: Mix of Uses at Howard Square



Figure 149: Mission Place in Jessup



Figure 150: Howard Square



Figure 151: Maple Lawn Development Pattern



Figure 154: Streetscape at Maple Lawn



Figure 155: Office Uses Define the Street Edge at Maple Lawn



Figure 152: Mix of Uses Oriented Around Common Open Space in Maple Lawn



Figure 153: Streetscape at Maple Lawn



Figure 156: Townhomes at Maple Lawn

New Town

The New Town designation applies to the planned community of Columbia where components are organized around the village concept. While New Town includes many of the other character areas described earlier, it is divided out separately for the purposes of this assessment in recognition of the uniqueness of Columbia as a planned city. Columbia includes ten villages, each containing multiple neighborhood clusters organized around a

village center. The ten villages are organized around Town Center, which includes Downtown Columbia. With “Respect for the Land” being one of four formative goals for Columbia, clustered development patterns and the curvilinear road network are informed by the open space system which is defined by the natural drainage patterns. The open spaces and roads, therefore, serve a dual role in both connecting and separating the distinct components of Columbia. Because it follows natural drainage patterns, much of the open

space network has historically been located behind structures.

Because Columbia first opened over 50 years ago, planners and developers emulated its residential development, open space and road network patterns elsewhere in the county. Therefore, many of the Suburban Community place types (suburban neighborhood and suburban commerce) found throughout Howard County are evident in Columbia. While Columbia’s early inward-oriented village centers are unique in the county, the most recent village center, River Hill, has followed more traditional retail development patterns as have other retail developments in Columbia. As Town Center and the village centers mature and, in some cases, redevelop, development patterns are following more current trends in planning with uses oriented to and engaging the street and civic open spaces with an emphasis on walkability. Other distinct characteristics of Columbia include the emphasis on landscape; the incorporation of lakes in Town Center and several villages; and the retention of historic structures such as former manor homes, barns and hedgerows. In spite of having an extensive pathway and sidewalk network, Columbia is generally auto-oriented. It is trending, however, toward redevelopment and infrastructure improvements that enhance bicycle accommodations and walkability.

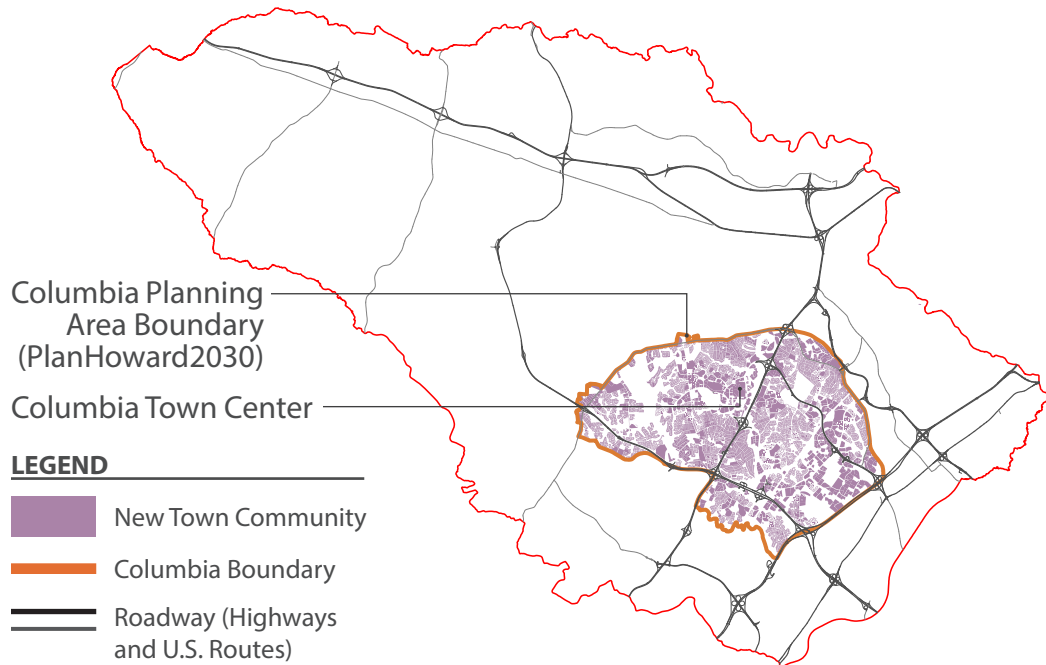


Figure 157: New Town (Land Use Categories Included: Residential and Commercial Uses Found within the Columbia Planning Area Boundary from PlanHoward2030)

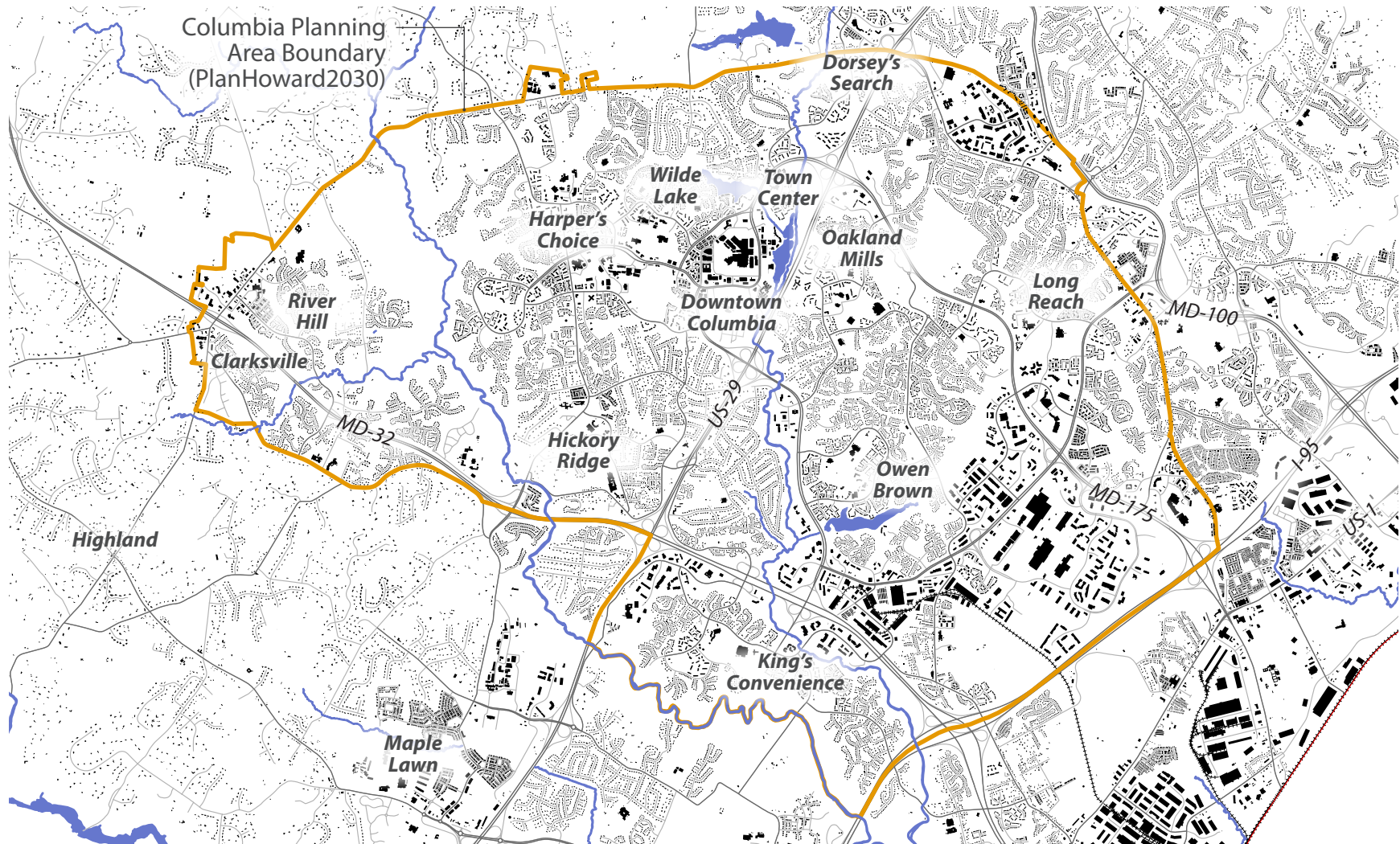


Figure 158: New Town Development Pattern Reveals Clustered Neighborhood Development, the Mall as a Significant Part of Downtown Columbia and Large Building Footplates Close to the I-95 Corridor

Open Space Network is defined by the natural drainage system associated with the Middle and Lower Patuxent Branches and includes natural areas, a series of lakes, an extensive trail system, parks and playgrounds. Most of the open space is informal and naturalistic in design and not very visible because it is located behind residential, commercial and employment uses. Recent development and redevelopment, however, includes prominent open spaces activated by streets and surrounding uses.

“New regulations for [New Town] should recognize the need for redevelopment of already existing properties include residential uses as well as commercial uses. The onerous regulations that have been put in place for redeveloping village centers put unnecessary hurdles in the path to redevelopment of the centers.
—Anonymous Comment, 2017

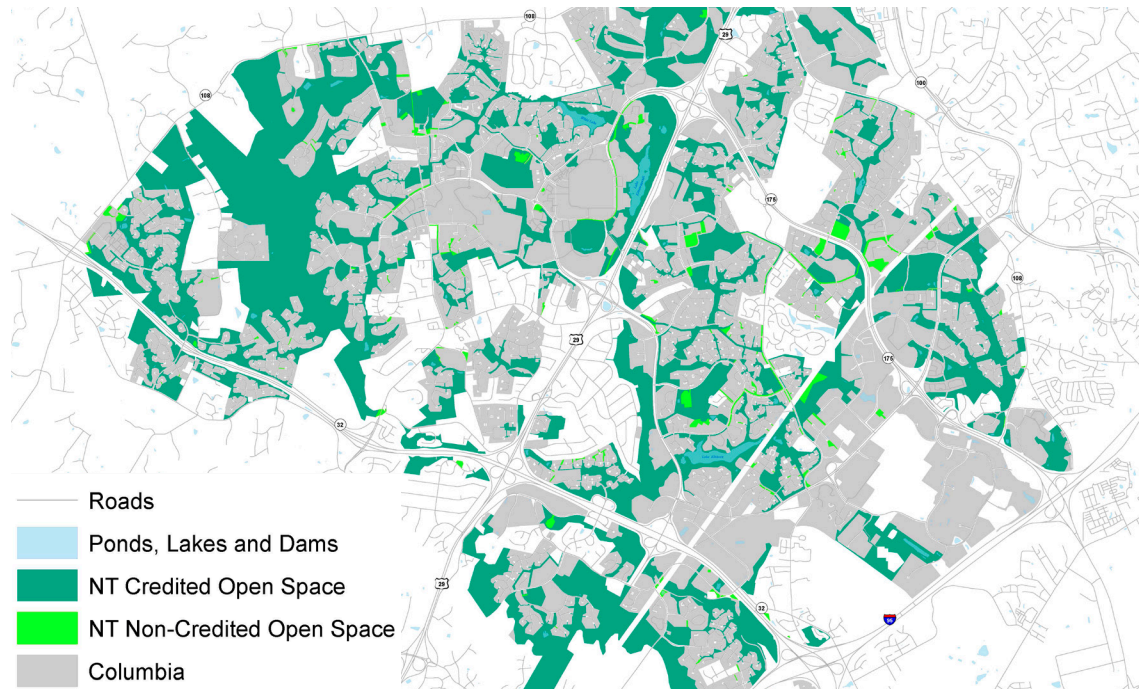


Figure 159: New Town Open Space Network, Credit: Columbia Association



Figure 160: Prominent Open Space Along Wilde Lake, One of Columbia’s Three Man-Made Lakes



Figure 161: Typical Trail and Open Space System Located Behind Development



Figure 162: New Urban Plaza Activated By Mixed Use in Downtown Columbia

Road and Sidewalk Networks follow the natural drainage patterns. Based upon a hierarchy of arterial roads, collector roads and local streets, the resulting curvilinear and loop road pattern can be confusing to some. Most streets include broad landscaped setbacks and berms with no on-street parking. However, new development in Town Center and Wilde Lake Village Center incorporate “complete street” design that includes on-street

parking, bike infrastructure and ESD practices.

Neighborhood Clusters include a variety of housing types and Suburban Community place types with higher densities toward the village center, transitioning outward to lower densities. Residential uses are primarily organized around culs-de-sac, local streets and parking courts.

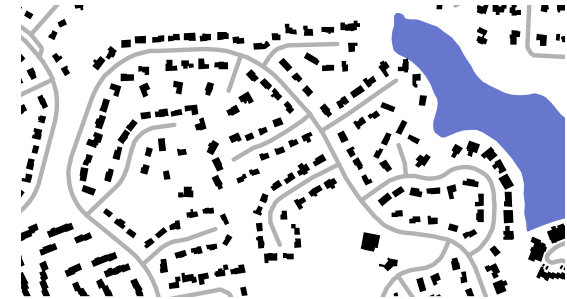


Figure 164: Neighborhood Clusters Development Pattern

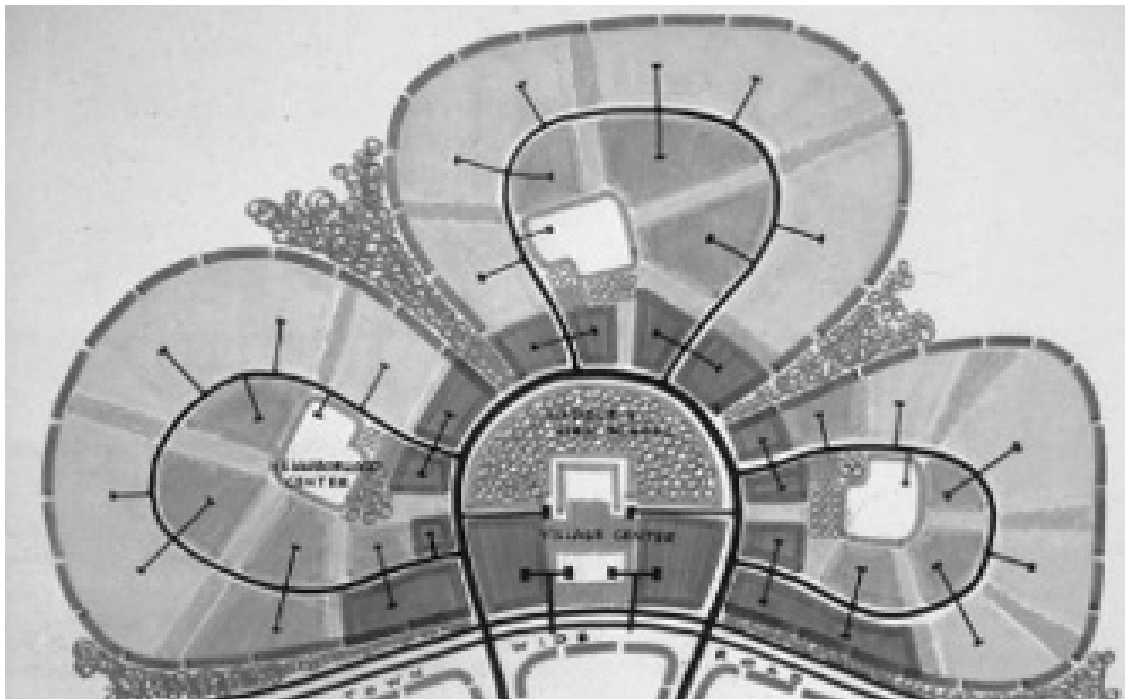


Figure 163: Columbia Village Cluster Concept, Credit: Columbia Association



Figure 165: Open Space Connections Between Residential Clusters

Village Centers include a mix of retail, service, community and faith-based uses and are primarily inward oriented, organized around pedestrian-only courtyards. New village centers follow a more traditional retail model and developed in a shopping center format with smaller pedestrian-only courtyard areas. As village centers are renovated, residential uses are being incorporated, such as at Wilde Lake Village Center.



Figure 169: Retail Uses at Harper's Choice Village Center



Figure 168: Harper's Choice Village Center Development Pattern



Figure 170: Courtyard at Harper's Choice Village Center



Figure 171: Courtyard Areas at Wilde Lake Village Center (Top Left and Right)



Figure 172: Wilde Lake Development Pattern



Figure 173: Recent Mixed-Use Development at Wilde Lake Village Center

Town Center is Columbia's central neighborhood and includes Downtown Columbia, comprised of a variety of uses, including employment, retail (anchored by the Columbia Mall), restaurants and housing. The Columbia Lakefront is Columbia's key civic space. Town Center is generally automobile-oriented with many "stand alone" uses and single-use buildings, particularly office buildings. As Town Center matures, following the Columbia Downtown Master Plan, new construction is emphasizing compact development with a mix of uses within buildings and uses that front onto and activate streets and open spaces, relate to each other, and promote more walkable environments.



Figure 174: Traditional Office Development in Downtown Columbia



Figure 175: Redevelopment in Downtown Columbia



Figure 176: Recent Mixed Use Development Fronting Onto and Activating Open Space

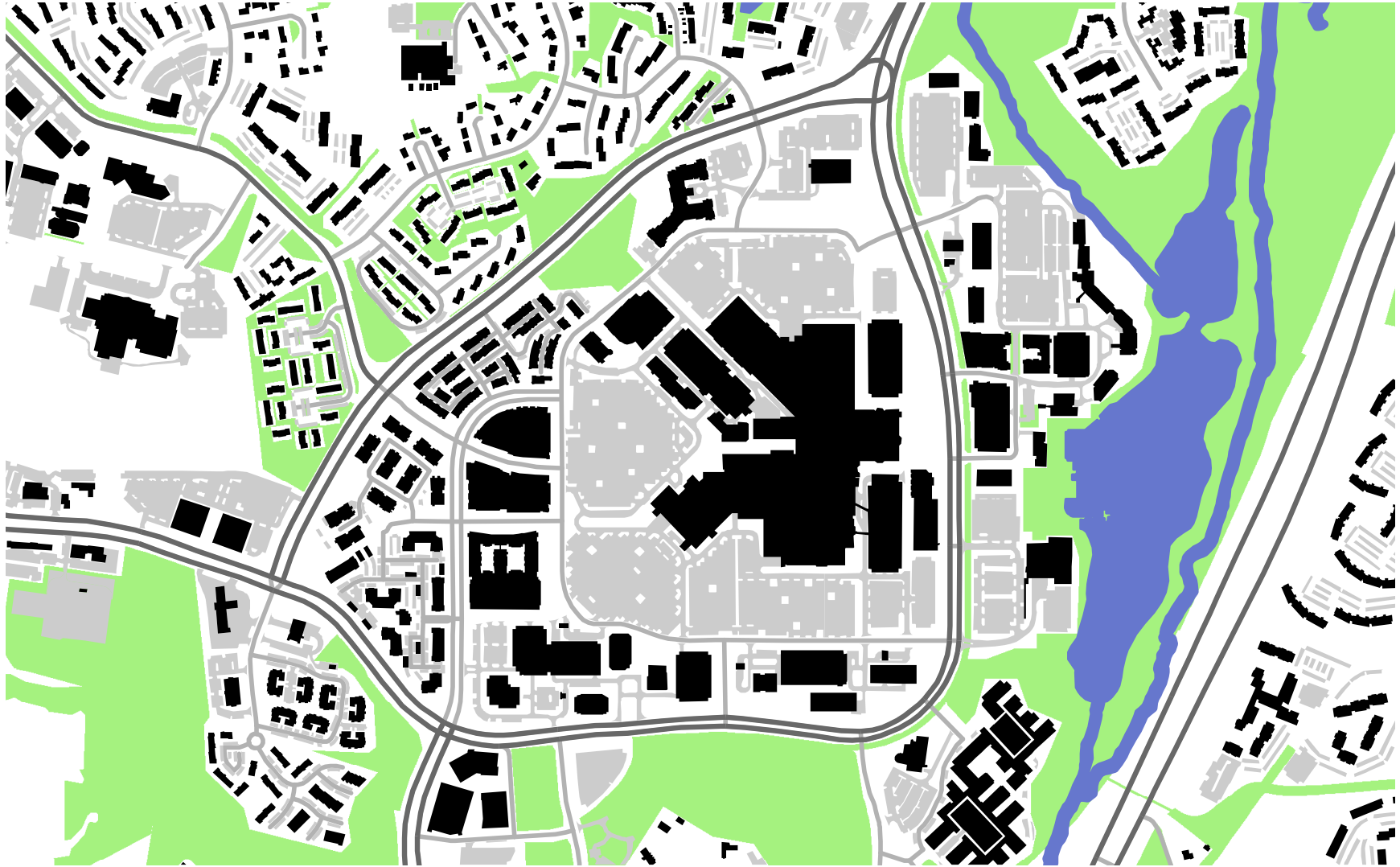


Figure 177: Downtown Columbia Mall and Recent Compact Infill Development Patterns



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PART IV: KEY TAKEAWAYS

Howard County does not convey a single character, nor do specific geographic areas within the county; its character is rich and varied. Community character is closely tied to attention to design, whether resulting from the craftsmanship, use of available materials and construction methods during early settlement or from intentional design efforts associated with recent development. While some property owners and developers are naturally inclined to high quality design, some are not. Additionally, “good” design means different things to different people. Regulating design can be a sensitive issue.

As the General Plan update occurs, how does the process determine those character areas that need to be protected or replicated?

Which patterns should be discouraged or limited to specific areas, and which should be considered for change?

Is there an appetite for design guidelines and controls? If so, are they best done through policies, regulations or incentives or a combination?

For those areas with master plans and design guidelines, why has implementation of the guidelines in some areas been more successful than for other areas?



Figure 178: Rich and Varied Development Patterns In and Around Maple Lawn

Development Patterns

Development patterns have evolved over time as the county grew organically and then through planned growth and are manifested in different ways. How developments respond to the land, interface with other uses, relate to the street and civic spaces, and reinforce connections; and how sites and structures are designed generally has a greater impact on community character than the use itself.

As some areas experience change, what are the appropriate development patterns to follow?

When is it appropriate to maintain or develop separate enclaves and when is it important to interconnect different development areas?

Where early rural development patterns are still evident in the developed parts of the county, is it appropriate or desired to protect and enhance these patterns as change occurs?

How can successful examples of sensitive and creative development approaches in the county be applied to other areas as change occurs?

Which areas within the county would benefit from form-based zoning?



Figure 179: The Development Patterns Along Old Washington Boulevard, and at Frederick Road and St. John's Lane Reveal Elements of Rural Character in the Developed Eastern Part of the County



Figure 180: Effective Integration of Development along Scenic Road



Figure 181: An Example of Interconnected Development Pattern that Results in Awkward Relationships Among Uses



Figure 182: Awkward Development Pattern with Townhomes Backing onto the Street



Figure 183: Example of the Land Adapted to Fit the Buildings vs. Buildings Designed to Fit the Land



Figure 184: Sensitive Development Preserves Horse Farm

Architecture

The varied architecture throughout the county helps to reinforce the character of different places and the time periods during which they evolved. There is no one correct architectural style for Howard County, nor should there be. However, architecture, is often generic in style and form, found anywhere in the Mid-Atlantic. Buildings outside of historic districts or in rural areas often do not reflect or respond to the character of those nearby districts and areas.

Residential Architecture

Residential architecture varies but is mostly traditional in design (or modern with traditional design elements), reflecting the Early American styles of Maryland settlements. There are exceptions, such as in Savage and Elkrigde, where small pockets of different architectural styles, such as the bungalow, are evident. This is particularly true of buildings developed post World War Two, however, they include very broad interpretations of those early architectural styles. More recent development such as Maple Lawn, however, incorporates traditional architecture that more accurately reflects historic forms and proportions.

In Columbia, early development utilized contemporary residential architecture but has transitioned over the years to more traditional architecture. Recent development trends in Howard County, however, reveal a move toward more contemporary design, particularly as it relates to housing associated with urban multi-family housing and mixed-use development in downtown Columbia, Wilde Lake Village Center and in some redevelopment along Route 1.

As Columbia and other parts of the county evolve is there an opportunity to be a showcase for cutting edge architecture?

As aging housing stock is redeveloped in Columbia's villages, how can architectural styles be distinct and reflect the unique identity of each village?

Which areas are appropriate for contemporary architecture and which areas are appropriate for traditional?

How can non-traditional architecture be designed and remain sensitive to its context?



Figure 185: Residential Architectural Style with Traditional Elements Found Throughout the Mid Atlantic

"I would like to see more attention to quality architecture. Most of the new developments we see in the county feature a tacky, eclectic, pseudo-colonial style that appears to be plucked out of builder source catalogs. We can do better. I would suggest studying some of the style."

—Anonymous Resident Comment, 2017



Figure 186: The Images on the Left Reflect Historic (Top Left and Center Left) and Current Day Interpretation (Bottom Left) of Historic Early American Architectural Styles. The Images on the Right Reflect Architectural Styles Contemporary to Their Time)

Commercial Architecture

As with residential uses, commercial architecture varies widely in the county and includes utilitarian agricultural and industrial buildings, early Twentieth Century commercial buildings along Ellicott City's Main Street, simple modernist office buildings and retail strip centers, and commercial buildings incorporating traditional styles and design elements. Columbia's Rouse Company Headquarters is and continues to be a notable landmark building within the county. Recent commercial development includes contemporary office buildings and commercial strip centers in downtown Columbia, Gateway and Maple Lawn. Clarksville Commons is a good example of how commercial architecture can reflect the nearby agrarian community character in use of materials, building style, and massing. This is the result of very detailed design guidelines included in the Clarksville Master Plan.



Figure 187: Single Story Modernist Office Building in Gateway



Figure 188: Typical Office Buildings in Downtown Columbia



Figure 189: Recent Contemporary Architecture in Downtown Columbia



Figure 190: Contemporary Buildings at Howard County Community College



Figure 191: Traditional Design Applied to Office and Strip Commercial Buildings (Top Left and Middle)



Figure 192: Contemporary Strip Commercial



Figure 193: The Former Rouse Company Headquarters has been an Architectural Landmark in Downtown Columbia Since the Community Was Founded



Figure 194: Agrarian Influences Can Be Seen in Clarksville Commons

Open Space

Open space patterns influence community character and offer different benefits. Broad setbacks, buffers and large parking lot islands serve an aesthetic function and provide some environmental benefit but offer little social or recreational benefit. Stream valley open space networks located behind buildings offer recreational benefits but aren't very visible and prominent. Community commons and open spaces located along street and building frontages and as community focal points provide social and aesthetic benefits as highly visible civic spaces. Each of these open space patterns are appropriate for specific applications.

As Howard County experiences change, how can new open space be located and designed to provide the most value?

How can some existing open spaces such as large setback areas be better utilized or improved?



Figure 196: Open Space Developed as Recreational Space to the Rear of Residential Uses



Figure 195: Open Space Developed as a Community Commons Defined by Street Frontage and Residential Uses



Figure 197: Open Space Provides Aesthetic Value but Few Other Benefits

Landscape

Howard County's geography, natural systems, protected areas, rigorous planting requirements, and maturing landscapes in developed areas have resulted in a community character where the landscape often predominates over the built form. As a result, the landscape can often neutralize architecture. This can be positive if architecture is not of a character that the community desires. On the other hand, too much planting can often obscure and negate superior architecture or important sightlines.

The Howard County landscape in developed areas also reveals an evolution from an

emphasis on the amount of planting, to an emphasis on the use of native plants and increasing canopy coverage to and emphasis on providing more ecologically beneficial landscapes and incorporating them into the overall landscape design.

What are the opportunities to create more ecological beneficial landscapes and transform existing one-dimensional landscapes to more ecologically balanced systems?

How can the General Plan help guide landscape design and identify areas where buildings and sight lines should predominate over dense planting?



Figure 199: Typical One-Dimensional Setback Landscape Where Emphasis Was on Plant Quantities, Tree Canopy and Setback Width



Figure 198: Maturing Landscapes in Columbia and Oaklawn Illustrate How the Landscape is Often Predominate Over the Built Environment



Figure 200: Example of an Ecologically Beneficial Landscape Setback Area

Transportation Networks

People experience community character from the transportation networks they utilize. From the interstate highways that convey travelers at great speeds, it is easy to move effortlessly across landforms without people realizing that they are crossing something or from one place to another. Individual details of the landscape become less important than the networks of forest and farmland and broad views. Off the highways and along secondary and local roadways with lower speeds and tighter design, changes in landform, the crossing of a river and the details of adjacent buildings and the landscape become more apparent. On bike and on foot, these details are even more pronounced and scale, shade, comfort, and activated edges along the way become as important as the infrastructure itself. Redevelopment in Columbia's downtown and village centers and recent planned mixed-use developments recognize this by emphasizing pedestrians and bicyclists and implementing complete streets.

How can on-going changes to the transportation network promote and reinforce rather than obscure community character?



Figure 201: The Arrival Experience Changes with the Scale of the Crossing



Figure 202: Community Character is Perceived Differently Passing Above at High Speeds vs. Below at Low Speeds

Sensory Experiences

While visual experiences play an important role in community character, other sensory experiences such as smells and sounds also play a role. The sounds associated with the rural areas in the west—the rattle of farm equipment crossing the railroad tracks and the sounds of nature and moving water at a river crossing—contrast greatly with the sounds of the urbanized areas in the east—community events, active parks and playgrounds and street and highway traffic. Similarly, the smells associated with a rural area can be viewed positively when associated with farming but not so when experienced from within residential areas.

As the General Plan update considers change, how can policies best respond to sensory experiences associated with community character, beyond those that are purely visual?



Figure 203: Sounds of Rural and Urban Areas Contribute to the Character of Place

Cultural Influences and Experiences

As Howard County continues to become more diverse, so does its character. Different ethnic groups organize diverse cultural events. Retail tenants are increasingly transitioning to capture unique ethnic needs and preferences to serve these growing communities. This is evident with Korean and Asian influences along Route 40, “Korean Way,” and Latin influences along Route 1.

How does the General Plan protect, promote and further reveal these cultural influences as a part of reinforcing the distinct community character of each of these corridors?



Figure 212: Route 40 “Korean Way” and Route 1



Conclusion

Howard County has a long history of innovative planning that has evolved in response to opportunities, needs, growth pressures and planning trends. Each General Plan update has had a different focus; with this update there is the opportunity to emphasize design and community character. In Howard County, community character covers a broad spectrum and is quite diverse, not only across geographic areas, but within geographic areas as well.

In order to protect its character and authenticity, Howard Countians are charged with the important task of identifying, protecting, and perpetuating preservation and development patterns that they find desirable while identifying patterns they no longer wish to replicate. This is not a task that comes without challenges. Desirable character can be defined differently by different members of the community. Identifying an agreeable direction will require the input of residents, staff, elected officials, and stakeholders, and a commitment to making the right policy changes to clearly direct change for future generations. This Community Character Assessment will serve as a foundation to guide this input and allow residents and decision-makers make informed decisions regarding policies and actions to include in HoCo By Design.