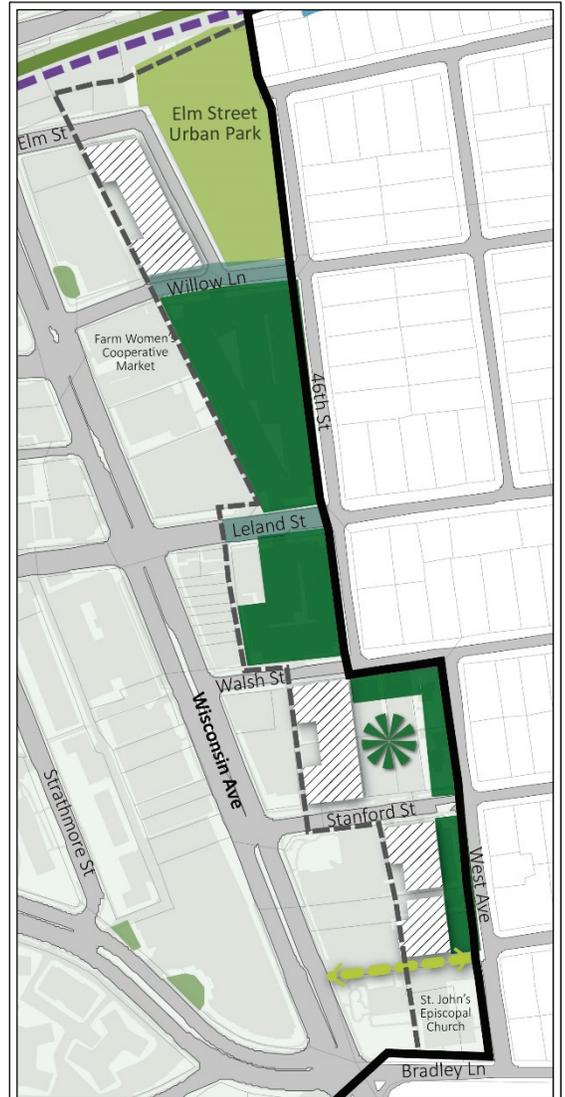


# Vision for a New Bethesda: County Council Approves the Bethesda Downtown Plan

On May 25, after nearly two years of public discussion, the Montgomery County Council approved the new Bethesda Downtown Plan by a vote of 8 to 1.

The Plan:

- Envisions more parks and recreational space, pedestrian and bicycle-friendly streets, and increased units of affordable housing.
- Permits much taller buildings – up to 25 to 30 stories on central downtown lots – and offers greater flexibility to developers to build the amount of floor area they want.
- Allows total development up to 32.4 million square feet of built floor area in downtown. This is 8.8 million square feet more than the amount on the ground today, or the equivalent of one and 1/3 Pentagons.
- Aspires to protect neighborhoods through proposed creation of additional parks and a “Greenway.” See *illustration at right*.
- Recommends reopening two elementary schools and establishing a southwestern county consortium consisting of the B-CC and Whitman school clusters to address overcrowding at middle school and high school.
- Assumes that increased congestion will be manageable, given Bethesda’s mass transit options. The County Council rejected staged development, strongly supported by communities and the Council staff, that would have required an increase to 55% in the number of workers and residents who shift from driving their own cars to using other modes of travel during rush hours before permitting the final 2 million square feet of development to proceed. Instead, the Council authorized a plan to achieve this goal, with annual progress reports, but with no requirement to suspend building if the goals are not achieved. Transportation improvements at designated intersections, including Connecticut and East-West Highway and Connecticut and Bradley, are also recommended.



	Recommended/Enhanced Open Space
	Potential Open Space (Location TBD)
	Illustrative Potential Development

The layout above presents the vision for green space – parks and the greenway – along the Town’s border. Realizing this vision will require a financing plan.

## Community Successes

Our Town worked closely with other communities through the Coalition of Bethesda Area Residents (CBAR). Together, presenting a united voice representing 25 communities and over 10,000 households, we achieved significant improvements to the original draft Plan:

- **Parks:** The Plan now designates four county-owned surface parking lots in Bethesda as future parks, instead of sites for development. This designation applies to the lots behind the Farm Women’s Market and between Leland and Walsh. Any plan to convert parking lots into parks will likely require retaining some parking spaces underground. Town residents participated in collecting over 3,000 signatures on a petition to support these parks.
- **Reduced Heights:** Maximum building heights have been significantly reduced for many properties along the east side of Wisconsin Ave. The Jaffe property, located just north of St. John’s Church and directly across from Town residences, now has a maximum height of 9 stories – as the Town had recommended – down from 14 stories in the draft Plan.

- **Greenways:** Development on lots that directly confront our Town and East Bethesda will be required to set aside a green strip – or “Greenway” – for public use. These will serve as transition areas between the core of downtown and our residential neighborhoods. As we had recommended, the minimum width for greenways was increased to 35 feet, instead of the 20-foot width recommended in the draft Plan, and with that width, the height of a new building on the property is limited to 35 feet. Another Town and CBAR recommendation was also adopted: To encourage even wider Greenways, developers will be allowed to add an additional foot in building height for each additional foot in greenway width that is provided, up to a 70-foot width and height maximum.
- **Capital Crescent Trail:** We were not successful in obtaining a Greenway along the Capital Crescent Trail, but we did gain a statement in the Plan that developers should “enhance the experience of trail users,” either through “activating uses”, such as an outdoor café, that draw people to the ground floor of buildings, or through setbacks and landscape buffers. Also, the Plan now includes the need for a tunnel for bicyclists under Wisconsin Avenue.
- **Knowing How Much Is Being Built:** CBAR discovered that the County uses a manual and error-prone process to track and calculate development. As a result of our advocacy, some errors were corrected and County officials agreed (verbally) that new systems must be developed. This system must provide transparent access to property-level data and be easily accessible online to allow policy makers, developers, and community groups to track progress towards the 32.4 million square foot development cap. We don’t want poor data and monitoring to lead to development beyond this number, which is meant to be a hard stop.

## Community Disappointment

A major disappointment was not securing support for staging. This was our effort to assure development does not exceed the capacity of our roads, and hence degrade our quality of life. Our proposal of a “gate” – standards to be met before the final phase of development could continue - would have served as an action -forcing event, requiring all parties, including County government and developers, as well as residents, to work together to ensure congestion does not become excessive. Instead, we have an observation post. If the goal of controlling congestion by encouraging people to use other modes of transit is not met, the County Council may take action – or may not.

## The Work Ahead

- **More Documents:** The County Council expects to vote in July on the new Bethesda Overlay Zone, which will include comprehensive zoning to implement the vision outlined in the Plan. In addition, Design Guidelines, under development by the County’s Planning Department, are expected to take effect by August. These guidelines will recommend standards for buildings, as well as for parks and sidewalks in the Plan area. The Town is deeply engaged in reviewing and commenting on both documents.
- **Parks Financing:** While the Plan sets out goals, it does not include many mechanisms to achieve them. In order to convert County-owned parking lots to parks, the County must develop a credible, actionable funding plan. We expect to be deeply engaged in developing such a plan over the next year. If one is not put in place, the default option will likely be development of buildings on much of the surface parking lot land, and we will lose forever our best opportunity for substantially increasing parks adjacent to our densely built-up downtown.
- **Staying Involved:** Plans are one thing. Implementation is another. We need to remain engaged, monitoring the ongoing development in Bethesda, calling attention to concerns such as school adequacy and road congestion, and demanding action from the County when needed. Without this involvement, we cannot be assured that the goals of this Plan will be achieved.

## Thank you!

Residents of our Town have spent thousands of hours working on the Bethesda Downtown Plan: To understand it, develop positions, coordinate with other communities, enlist signatures on petitions, attend public hearings and work sessions, draft comments and position papers, and meet over and over with County officials. Much was achieved. **Thank you all, for all your efforts.**