

Chapter 1: Introduction

The area of the Approved Branch Avenue Corridor Sector Plan and Sectional Map Amendment includes the properties along both sides of Branch Avenue, St. Barnabas Road (to the Capital Beltway), Old Silver Hill Road, and Silver Hill Road between Branch Avenue and the Suitland Parkway (see **Map 1, page 4**). Much of this area supports older commercial establishments that were developed prior to modern standards. As a result, much of the area is in poor condition and/or functionally obsolete. This was raised in the 2000 *Approved Master Plan and Sectional Map Amendment for the Heights and Vicinity (Planning Area 76A)*, which included recommendations for the sector plan area. This sector plan is intended to build on the broad recommendations in the Heights Master Plan and to focus more effort and specific recommendations on redeveloping and improving the Branch Avenue Corridor, which serves as an important gateway to Prince George's County. Although the Heights Master Plan focused on development of some limited employment at the Naylor Road Metro Station, this plan recognizes that unless a critical mass is met in creating new mixed-use development along the corridor, revitalization will never be possible.

Behind the commercial development fronting the roadways are stable single-family neighborhoods, often interspersed with apartments and condominiums that act as a buffer. As commercial areas decline, they ultimately affect the residential neighborhoods they abut. Some of these apartment complexes and condominiums are already experiencing this decline. The decline is not only physical but can be social as well, i.e., increased opportunities for crime. This sector plan makes recommendations that are aimed at reversing this decline and providing a foundation for new growth that will not only stimulate the commercial areas but also strengthen and preserve the adjacent residential neighborhoods. The sector plan area and the larger communities surrounding it represent a diverse community ready for positive change.

Long-term residents fondly recall the late 1960s and 1970s when Iverson Mall was a major regional shopping center that attracted other high-quality retail to the corridor, and when one was proud to live within easy access of the shops along Branch Avenue. Today, issues of

crime, retail competition from newer suburban shopping centers, and commuter traffic to the District of Columbia have significantly weakened the economic viability of the area's retail centers, its ability to attract new businesses, and its reputation as a desirable place to live, shop and work. Nevertheless, the location, existing road network, accessibility to three transit facilities in the immediate area, and stable neighborhoods provide a strong and viable foundation on which to rebuild an exciting community and regional destination.

On February 6, 2007, the District Council approved the initiation of the sector plan and sectional map amendment for the following purposes:

- ❖ To implement the recommendations of the 2002 *Prince George's County Approved General Plan* and to assess its implications on the sector plan area.
- ❖ To update the portion of the 2000 *Approved Master Plan and Sectional Map Amendment for the Heights and Vicinity (Planning Area 76A)* within the sector plan boundary.
- ❖ To analyze existing development and the current zoning pattern for consistency with the county's development policies.
- ❖ To develop land use recommendations and amend the zoning map through an SMA in order to implement these recommendations.
- ❖ To set policies and strategies that will improve the quality of life for the residential communities, improve the business climate, and guide future development in the sector plan area.

The sector plan was developed in collaboration with many community partners, including broad-based representation from the area's residents, business and property owners, church organizations, landowners, developers, and county, state, and federal agencies with jurisdictional interest in the area.

The product of this effort is a plan that contains an assessment of current conditions in the sector plan area including retail markets, residential markets, and household demographics. The plan presents a vision for the future of the community. It also provides strategies for revitalization and redevelopment, an action plan to preserve and enhance the area's assets and the existing residential communities, and strategies to encourage or facilitate economic development, attract new residents with a range of income levels, and improve public safety and other quality-of-life factors.

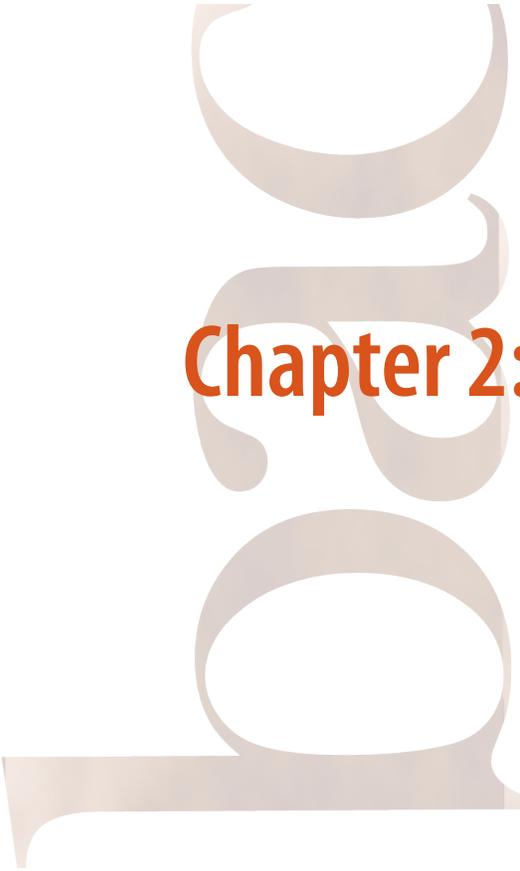
The Branch Avenue Corridor sector plan will guide revitalization and redevelopment efforts consistent with the established vision and goals. The plan establishes goals, policies and strategies for different areas of interest that support the vision such as economic development and land use, public infrastructure, quality of life (including public safety), and community involvement. It spells out short and long-range implementation strategies and appropriate zoning to implement the land use recommendations.

The plan is useful for property owners, the general public, and developers as a reference guide to the area vision and the desired land use and development pattern for each property within the area. It provides recommendations on how to make the vision a reality. For business owners, it is a reference guide to available business improvement programs and assistance. For planning staff and other government agencies, it provides a guide

for evaluating development proposals and setting priorities for service delivery, program funding, and scheduling. For elected officials, it becomes a reference guide for making land use, development, and funding decisions.

Plan Organization

This document is organized around seven chapters. The **Introduction** chapter gives a general overview of the plan and its purpose. The **Planning Background and Process** chapter defines the project boundary, its relationship to other plans and policies, and the public participation process. The **Sector Area Character Analysis** chapter gives a brief historical perspective, a demographic and market profile for the primary market area, a description of existing conditions relating to land uses and appearance, and a description of other areas of interest or functional areas such as transportation, environmental preservation, parks and recreation, historic preservation, and other quality-of-life factors. The fourth chapter spells out the **Vision** for the area and provides a brief narrative of the five elements that frame it. The **Action Plan** chapter establishes goals, policies, and strategies for achieving the community vision. The **Sectional Map Amendment** chapter identifies recommended zoning changes necessary to implement the land use recommendations.



Chapter 2: Planning Background and Process

Project Boundary

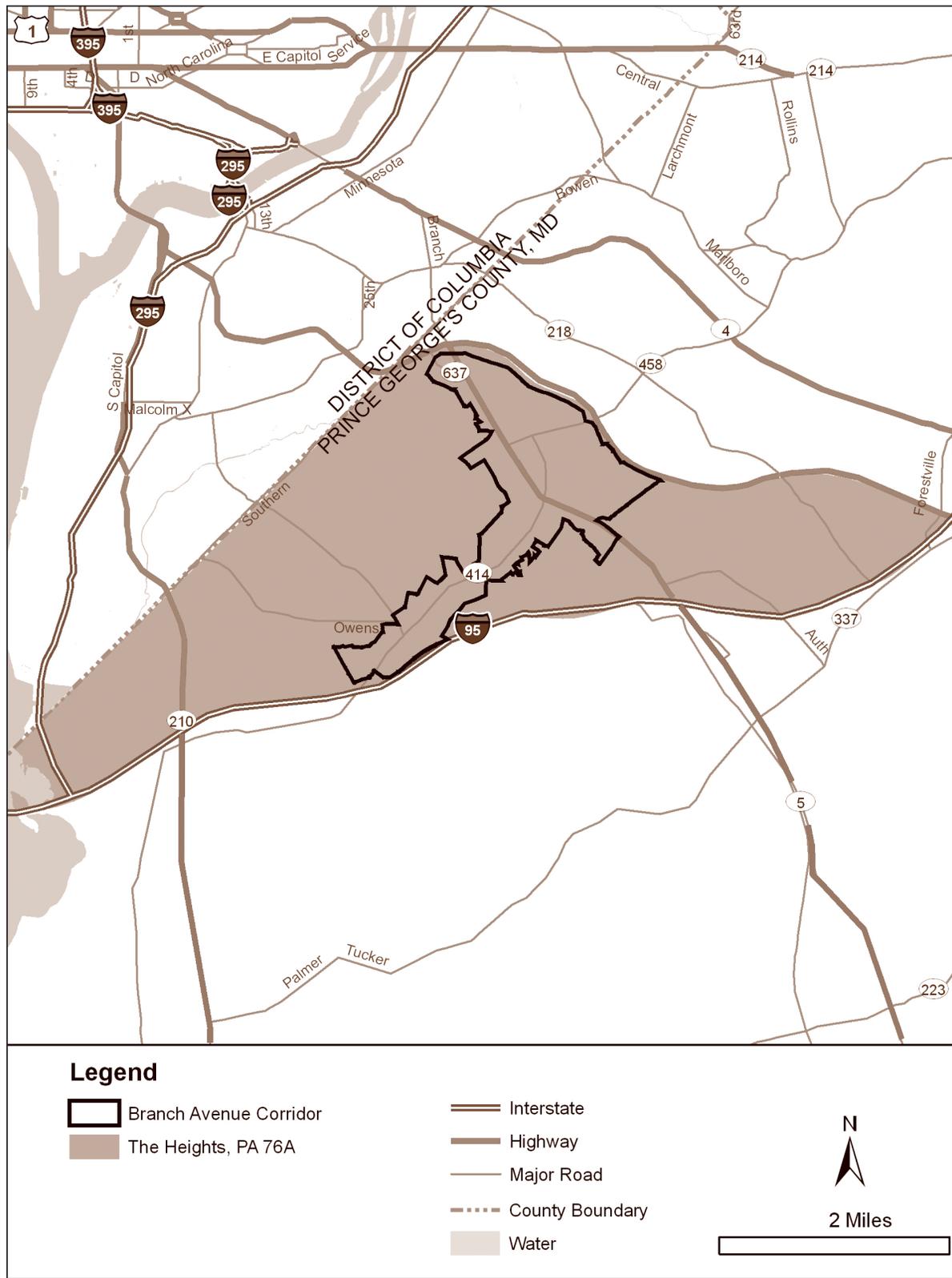
The sector plan area comprises the Branch Avenue Corridor from the District of Columbia boundary line to St. Barnabas Road, including the Naylor Road Metro Station, Iverson Mall, and Marlow Heights Shopping Center, Silver Hill Road, Old Silver Hill Road, and the St. Barnabas Road commercial corridor to the Capital Beltway (I-95/495). Residential areas and other proximate land uses adjacent to the roadways were included as part of the sector area to ensure that recommendations are in context and compatible with those areas.

The project area is approximately 2.32 square miles. It borders a portion of a residential neighborhood in southeastern Washington, D.C., and the Suitland Parkway, and is approximately one and one-half miles away from the Branch Avenue and Southern Avenue Metro Stations.

Relationship to Other Plans and Policies

The sector plan area is part of the 2000 *Approved Master Plan and Sectional Map Amendment for the Heights and Vicinity (Planning Area 76A)*. The Heights plan recommends infill development and redevelopment of vacant and underutilized sites along Branch Avenue from Iverson Mall and Silver Hill Road to the Naylor Road Metro Station with commercial and office uses. It also recommends medium-density residential and parkland for the area bounded by St. Barnabas Road, Silver Hill Road, Suitland Parkway, the Meadowview and Hartford subdivisions, and Branch Avenue. (**See Map 2 on page 6.**)

Map 2: Heights Master Plan and BAC Sector Plan Areas



The 2002 *Prince George's County Approved General Plan* provides broad guidance for future growth and development. The General Plan placed the Branch Avenue Corridor sector plan area in the Developed Tier. The vision of the Developed Tier is a network of sustainable, transit-supporting, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented, medium- to high-density neighborhoods. Its policies emphasize quality infill and redevelopment, a streamlined review process, and highest priority for the expenditure of public funds. The General Plan designates the Suitland-Iverson area as a "Regional Center," the Naylor Road Metro Station as a "Community Center," and Branch Avenue from the D.C. line to the Beltway as a "Corridor" within the Developed Tier. The General Plan characterizes regional centers, community centers, and corridors as follows:

Regional centers are locations for regionally marketed commercial and retail centers, office and employment areas, some higher educational facilities, and possibly sports and recreational complexes serving Prince George's County. High-density residential development may be an option at these centers if the needed public facilities and services, particularly schools and transit, can be provided. Regional centers should be served by rail or bus mass transit systems.

Community centers are concentrations of activities, services, and land uses that serve the immediate community near these centers. These typically include a variety of public facilities and services and integrated commercial, office and residential development, and can include mixed-use and higher-intensity redevelopment in some communities. Community centers should also be served by mass transit.

Developed Tier corridors generally contain a higher intensity of residential and nonresidential land uses, and a greater mix of uses that are regional in scope, than the Developing Tier corridors. This development should occur at selected corridor nodes and be planned as transit-oriented development.

In addition to the Heights Plan and the General Plan, other plans and policies helped guide the planning effort in terms of issues identification, opportunities, and redevelopment strategies. One of these is the 2006 *Approved Suitland Park Mixed-Use Town Center Zone Development Plan*. This mixed-use town center development plan covers the area east of the Branch Avenue project area and retains the General Plan recommendation for the Suitland Metro Station as a regional center. Part of the quarter-mile walking distance for the core area of the Suitland Metro Station falls within the Branch Avenue Corridor sector plan area. The 2006 *Approved Master Plan and Sectional Map Amendment for the Henson Creek–South Potomac Planning Area* recommends a potential light rail transit line from the vicinity of St. Barnabas Road to the Suitland or Branch Avenue Metro Stations.

Other plans and policies include the 1992 Economic Growth, Resource Protection, and Planning Act and the 1997 Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Initiative. The goals of these policies are generally to encourage economic development, limit sprawl, protect valuable natural resources, support existing neighborhoods and communities, and save taxpayers millions of dollars in unnecessary costs for building infrastructure to support sprawl. A significant aspect of the Smart Growth and Neighborhood Conservation Initiative is its requirement that state funding for projects in Maryland municipalities, other existing communities, and industrial and planned growth areas designated by counties will receive priority over other projects. These are called priority funding areas (PFAs). The sector plan area is within the Prince George's County PFA.

Public Participation

Given the General Plan recommendations and the need to stimulate investment through revitalization and redevelopment within the corridor, this sector plan process was initiated in March 2007 by the County Council. Planners and elected officials recognized the opportunity to define the economic, physical, and social goals for the area and to evaluate the effectiveness of the General Plan's designations to achieve these goals as part of the planning process.

In addition to the policy documents that influenced the planning effort, public participation was fundamental to identifying and understanding community issues and concerns and developing a vision that stakeholders (residents, business and property owners, institutions, public officials, etc.) could support. The strategy for developing the Branch Avenue Corridor Sector Plan and Sectional Map Amendment (SMA) was centered on an inclusive participatory process. Through a series of interviews with community leaders, business owners, developers, and county officials, as well as “person on the street” surveys and community meetings, current conditions were defined and preliminary goals, issues, and concerns were established.

The heart of the participatory process, however, was a series of workshops, meetings and presentations with the community at large, aimed at understanding current concerns, defining a vision for the future, producing alternative development concepts, and receiving input on concepts and strategies to achieve the vision. Approximately 600 people attended the various community sessions, which included three workshops where assets, issues, concerns, and vision were determined (**See Map 3 alongside**); a four-day charrette where development concepts and implementation recommendations were established; and a post-charrette presentation where community comments were received on the refined development concepts and implementation recommendations. The planning process was a collaborative and inclusive process, and this product reflects the input of a broad segment of the community—one that elevates and promotes the hopes and dreams of people who care about this area and want to see it thrive in the future as it did in the past.

A community's involvement is critical in producing a vision that reflects its priorities. BELOW: Community members participate in a visioning session.



Area Stakeholders' Assessment of their Community

Community character is defined by perceptions, concerns, and visions for the future. Critical assets and issues of the sector area were identified by the project team and by area stakeholders, which included residents and business operators, during workshops and the charrette. Although location and access to other parts of the Washington metropolitan area, as well as stable residential neighborhood and religious institutions, were identified as strong assets, crime was cited as the most important issue affecting the area. Most residents and store owners felt that the issue of crime needed to be solved before any development could occur in the area, making the case that development would not succeed if potential new residents and business owners perceive the area to be unsafe.

A breakout group session identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.



Another overwhelming issue for the community is the lack of quality retail and restaurants. Many community members recalled the former economic strength of Iverson Mall and Marlow Heights and expressed the need for the return of regionally known, high-quality stores and restaurants. Other issues identified by the community included poor pedestrian access and mobility throughout the sector area, unattractive streetscapes, lack of building maintenance, too many liquor stores and fast-food restaurants, too many automobile dealerships on St. Barnabas Road, and the creation of opportunities for criminal behavior through underutilization of areas around Naylor Road.

At the workshops, participants were presented with issues identified in “person on the street” surveys and a series of interviews with community leaders, business owners, developers, and county officials. Participants were asked to prioritize the most critical issues. **Table 1 on page 11** summarizes the result. These community issues, analysis of the area’s physical characteristics, and demographic and market assessments collectively present the picture of the sector plan area that this plan seeks to address.

The following issues ranking was based on the number of times workshop participants labeled the individual issue as one that should receive priority. The number of people in agreement is represented as a percentage of the total number of respondents.

Table 1: Community Issues (ranked from most to least critical)		Agree
1.	Crime in the area is a major problem.	95%
2.	Quality retail needs to be improved in the area.	93%
3.	The lack of nationally-known retailers and quality restaurants is a problem.	95%
4.	The area lacks the kind of stores and attractive setting that would draw people from both the community and the region.	92%
5.	The area is unfriendly and unsafe for pedestrians.	84%
6.	The area lacks a positive identity and attractive appearance.	93%
7.	The surrounding residential communities are threatened by conditions in the sector area.	90%
8.	More affordable housing ownership options are needed in the area.	64%
9.	More development of housing retail and office space is needed at or near Metro stations.	69%
10.	Community facilities are inadequate.	85%
11.	The area is negatively impacted by poorly maintained housing.	63%