

Bluemont's Vision of our Commercial Center

Several years ago, in developing our Neighborhood Conservation (NC) Plan, Bluemont Civic Association (BCA) surveyed all households and businesses in the neighborhood and formed a committee that drafted the section of our NC Plan pertaining to the Wilson Boulevard commercial area between George Mason Drive and Jefferson Street. This area is the geographic center of our neighborhood, and comprises the 'business district' of our neighborhood. Recently another BCA committee—the Wilson Boulevard Improvement Committee—was established to further define the vision set forth in the NC plan and to advance the realization of that vision.

Our NC plan recommends that:

“The County, in partnership with local business owners and the Association, should develop a phased urban village action plan to improve the appearance of the Wilson Boulevard Commercial Area, to enhance vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian access, and to generally encourage the establishment of a traditional town center that pulls together the community.”

The plan went on to recommend that:

“Should Safeway company officials decide to renovate or expand the store at Wilson Boulevard and Edison Street, the neighborhood encourages consideration of a new design that is more pedestrian friendly and has more curb appeal. Behind-store parking, attractive landscaping, and welcoming pedestrian walkways should be considered.”

Bluemont Vision Statement

We envision a Bluemont neighborhood center that:

- Is pedestrian-friendly and business-friendly—where visitors are invited to spend time wandering the area and exploring shops beyond their initial destination;
- Encourages small independent businesses that are useful and convenient to the immediate neighborhood;
- Is aesthetically appealing—a cohesive “village center” that unifies the corridor from George Mason to Jefferson Street, attractively landscaped and free of utility lines or uninterrupted expanses of asphalt;
- Mixes residential, office, retail and public use; and
- Provides creative parking solutions that encourage motorists to park their cars and stroll from shop to shop.

How do we attain our vision?

Economic Revitalization and Commercial Redevelopment

Revitalization usually aims to restore a commercial area to a prior level of vitality and economic health, chiefly through public funding and investments by commercial property owners and business owners. As such, revitalization is generally limited by the previous high water mark. Revitalization often focuses on decaying neighborhoods. Municipalities may create enterprise zones where they encourage business investment and promote the creation of new jobs through business loans, tax incentives, business workshops. They may work with business owners, conducting market analysis, encouraging retail mix and complementary use strategies, but relying on private sector market forces to strengthen the local economy.

Redevelopment is usually done by the private sector, and may be much more extensive than revitalization, because it can include replacement of the basic infrastructure and a fundamental change in the character of an area. Zoning restrictions are intended in part to limit how much change can be brought about by redevelopment.

Community revitalization and community redevelopment are both means to a desirable and energetic community or neighborhood center. In deciding on the balance between the two, an essential question to ask is “where are we starting from?” If you can say that what exists (the buildings and their uses, streetscape, pedestrian circulation, parking, green space, etc.) is almost all right, then community revitalization might provide the solution. If you believe it is not, community redevelopment may be the answer.

Revitalization offers as its premise that what’s “there” is almost all right as a place to shop, work or play but lacks “something.” Typically, that something is commercial vigor and vibrancy, and revitalization takes on a decidedly economic and public focus. The approach is typically focused on improving or adding amenities to improve the attractiveness of the area and therefore its desirability as a place to work, shop and play. It is an effort to “reposition” the area to better attract people by providing the desirable features or amenities. The amenities may include better lighting, trees, green space, sidewalks and streetscapes, pedestrian access, traffic control, etc. These items are usually part of the public infrastructure and revitalization is typically a public investment with the hope that private property owners will follow suit. The challenge in revitalization is achieving the intended results when the cooperation of multiple private property owners and business owners is needed for success. One holdout can severely impact a project, and negate the effect of the improvements.

Redevelopment starts with the assumption that a place is not almost all right and has potential for greater value. It takes the view that the place that exists cannot be made to compete effectively economically without investment in new buildings, streetscapes, amenities, utilities, roads, etc. Typically, there is a unified vision based on market forces, approved under public review and executed with private funding. The challenge is for the community to open the developer’s vision, and assure that the development is a positive force in increasing the vigor of the community.

In striking a balance between Economic Revitalization and Commercial Redevelopment, consider these questions:

- Do we want to preserve unique businesses?
- What if these businesses are not economically sustainable?
- Are the infrastructure, the parking, the buildings and the layout of the sites adequate?
- Which approach will provide lower costs to consumers?
- Which approach will provide a better selection of goods and services?
- Which approach will provide more unique goods and services?
- Which approach will provide more attractive facilities?
- Which approach will provide more modern facilities?
- Which approach is more feasible?
- Which approach favors independent businesses?
- Which approach favors franchises or national chains?
- Which approach provides the best density?
- Which approach provides the best access?
- Which approach protects property values?
- Which approach makes housing more affordable?
- Which approach encourages diversity?
- Which approach will keep Bluemont from becoming an extension of Ballston?
- Which approach provides the best traffic solution?