

MEMORANDUM

April 14, 2021

TO: Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee

FROM: Pamela Dunn, Senior Legislative Analyst
Glenn Orlin, Senior Analyst

SUBJECT: Ashton Village Center Sector Plan

PURPOSE: Worksession to development recommendations for Council consideration

Participants:

Casey Anderson, Chair, Montgomery County Planning Board
Gwen Wright, Director, Montgomery Planning Department
Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Director, Montgomery Planning Department
Patrick Butler, Upcounty Division Chief, Montgomery Planning Department
Jamey Pratt, Senior Planner, Upcounty, Montgomery Planning Department
Roberto Duke, Planner Coordinator, Upcounty, Montgomery Planning Department
Katherine Nelson, Planner Coordinator, Upcounty, Montgomery Planning Department
Christopher Van Alstyne, Senior Planner, Upcounty, Montgomery Planning Department

Councilmembers may wish to bring their copy of the Plan to the meeting.

This is the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee's second worksession on the Ashton Village Center Sector Plan. The first worksession covered all of the Planning Board's recommendations. This worksession will focus on one topic that remained unresolved at the conclusion of the first worksession: whether design guidelines should be included in the Sector Plan or should be a document referenced in the Sector Plan but separate from it.

Design Guidelines

The Ashton Village Center Sector Plan includes a chapter titled Design Guidelines. The Plan states that the recommendations in this chapter offer a frame of reference for the design recommendations included elsewhere in the Plan and provide a more detailed specification of design expectations. This chapter includes design recommendations related to the construction of buildings, open spaces, and the transportation network.

The Council received testimony from several individuals and civic/neighborhood groups, including a petition with over 600 signatures, supporting the inclusion of the design guidelines in the Plan (advocating that the guidelines be made requirements in the Plan). The Council also received testimony from Francoise Carrier on behalf of the Nichols Development Company, requesting that the maximum building width standard recommended in this chapter be increased to allow the maximum length for a residential building on the main roads be increased from 80 feet to 90 feet and to allow the maximum length for a mixed-use building not on the main roads be increased from 120 feet to 150 feet.

The Committee discussed at length the merits of including and excluding design guidelines from a master plan. Design guidelines provide a framework for the design of new and improved streetscapes, buildings, parks, and public open spaces. They are intended to help ensure that new projects fit well into the community character of a plan area, today and in the future.

Most master plans over the past decade or so have been accompanied by design guidelines, the exception being plans that cover smaller geographic areas, such as Sandy Spring or Grosvenor, in which case the design “guidelines” have been included in the plan. However, this isn’t always the case; the Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan has design guidelines separate from the Plan. When separate from a plan, design guidelines are approved by the Planning Board for use by public entities and developers in preparing development proposals, and are used by planners and the Board in reviewing them. The reason they are, more often than not, developed as a separate document is that past practice has shown that design guidelines may need to be reviewed and updated by the Planning Board as best practices and conditions evolve over time.

Sector plans, whose design guidelines are included in the plan, require a master plan amendment to make any changes to design recommendations. Additionally, all master plans (including amendments) must be approved by the Council as part of the Planning Department’s work program and must follow the same basic process required of all master plans. This would result in a time-consuming and intensive process merely to change an element of design such as, in the case of the Ashton Village Center Sector Plan, the maximum building width, the depth of a stoop, or the number of units in a multiplex structure.

The Ashton Village Center Sector Plan contains the following text in a chapter titled Design Guidelines:

Building Guidelines

To ensure that the form and scale of new development is compatible with the surrounding area building guidelines are proposed which address building types, building placement, massing and composition of buildings, architectural embellishments, and building materials.

Building Types¹

The Plan envisions the following building types as part of future development in the Plan area:

- *Single-family detached houses*
- *Duplexes*
- *Townhouses*
- *Stacked Flats (multifamily structure of two or more stories with a unit(s) on each floor)*
- *Multiplex (4-12 unit multifamily structure)*
- *Multi-Use and General Buildings*

¹ The third and fourth paragraphs under this section address building massing and will be covered under that section.

Building Massing and Composition

The overall shape and size of a building influences the scale of the built environment. This section provides direction for development regarding building elevations, façade treatments, the composition of multi-use and general buildings, rooflines and fenestrations.

One element of massing was referenced in testimony to the Council. On page 89, the Plan contains text that limits the width of a residential building to 80 feet or less, if located along MD 108 or MD 650. For multi-use and general buildings, width can be up to 120 feet; however, it is recommended that no buildings in the Plan area be wider than 120 feet.

The inclusion of design guidelines in the Ashton Village Center Plan and the resulting testimony regarding elements of the proposed design standards prompted a lengthy discussion between the Committee members and Planning staff. As part of this dialog, Councilmember Friedson requested that the Planning Department provide information on a systematic approach to the inclusion/exclusion of design guidelines in master plans. Attached is the memo produced by the Planning Department.

The memo from Planning provides a table indicating the inclusion/exclusion of design guidelines over the past 15 years. It notes that almost all plans include recommendations related to design. In most cases, these are the “high-level” recommendations such as the ones included in Chapter 3 of the Ashton Village Center Sector Plan. However, it is the more detailed design recommendations that are either included in the plan or developed as a separate document.

Slightly more than half of the plans provided design guidelines separately from the plan. In these cases, the guidelines were substantial documents of 25-150 pages in length. In general, Planning recommends the following policy guidance for the treatment of design guidelines:

Policy Recommendation for the Treatment of Design Guidelines:

Based on the review of previous practice over the past 15 years, Planning Department staff recommends the following policy:

Design guidelines will be included in the body of master plans except for the following situations:

- *Plans that are particularly complex and include multiple potential development sites that require detailed guidance to assure future compatible development.*
- *Plans that require design guidelines that are so detailed and voluminous that a separate document would be most logical from a logistical standpoint.*
- *Plans that use special zoning tools that allocate development capacity based upon design review, such as the Bethesda Downtown Plan.*

Planning staff reiterated their support for including the design guidelines in the Ashton Village Center Sector Plan.

The Committee has two options:

1. Retain the design guidelines in the Sector Plan.
 - If this is done, the name of the chapter should be changed to Design Recommendations as they are no longer “guidelines”, and this clarification will alleviate confusion; or
2. Remove the design guidelines from the Sector Plan.
 - They would remain guidelines and as noted in the attached memo from Planning staff:
“It is important to note that, per the Zoning Ordinance, site plans reviewed by the Planning Department must be found to ‘substantially [conform] with the

recommendations of the applicable master plan and any guidelines approved by the Planning Board [emphasis added] that implement the applicable plan'. This appears to give equal weight to guidelines regardless of location. So, deciding where to place guidelines is not a matter of where they will be most enforceable, but rather where they make the most sense from the perspective of plan size and complexity."

- Additionally, require that any change to the Guidelines must include the participation of the Ashton Village Center Implementation Advisory Committee.

Noting that the recommendations within the Guidelines are no less enforceable than in the body of the Plan and that any potential need to change the Guidelines would require a master plan amendment, Council staff still supports design guidelines that are separate from the Sector Plan, with the provision that any change to the guidelines must include the participation of the Ashton Village Center Implementation Advisory Committee.

Attached to this Staff Report

April 12 Memo from Planning Department

© pages

1-6



April 12, 2021

MEMORANDUM

TO: PHED Committee

FROM: Gwen Wright, Planning Director
 Patrick Butler, Chief, Upcounty Division
 Jamey Pratt, Senior Planner, Upcounty Division
 Roberto Duke, Urban Designer, Upcounty Division

SUBJECT: Policy regarding design guidelines and master plans

Recommendation:

Discuss policy regarding design guidelines and master plans. Approve Ashton Village Center Sector Plan with design guidelines included in the Sector Plan as recommended by the Planning Board.

Background:

The PHED Committee discussed this topic on April 5th. The primary focus of discussion was whether the design guidelines for the Ashton Village Center Sector Plan should be included in the plan (as recommended by the Planning Board) or published as a separate document (as recommended by Council staff).

Planning staff was asked to look at how this issue has been addressed in other master plans and return to the PHED Committee with a clear written policy on the issue.

Discussion:

Planning Staff reviewed all master plans adopted by the Planning Board and County Council over the last fifteen years. For each Plan, Staff determined the format of the guidelines and categorized them as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Design Guidelines Formats

Format	Description
External	Standalone document approved by the Board
Included	A design guidelines or similar plan section
Incorporated	Design guidelines/recommendations throughout the Plan text
None	Plan does not contain design recommendations

Table 2, on the following page, lists the 30 master plans approved and adopted since 2006 in chronological order. The format and length of the guidelines are shown, as is the size of the plan area. In almost all cases, even when a plan has external design guidelines, the master plan has design elements incorporated into the text of the plan, generally in the form of plan recommendations. Most plans without external design guidelines have a chapter or section with design recommendations. A few plans do not have a specific plan section for design guidelines or recommendations but instead incorporate design elements throughout the plan when discussing plan neighborhoods or specific sites. One plan

does not contain any design recommendations at all. Table 3 and Table 4, at the end of the report, contain the same list sorted by alphabet and size of plan area, respectively.

Table 2. Master Plans Sorted by Year Adopted

Master Plan	Year Adopted	Size of Plan Area (Acres)	Design Guidelines Format	Length of Guidelines (Pages)
Damascus Master Plan	2006	22,200	Included	10
Shady Grove Sector Plan	2006	1,967	Incorporated	
Woodmont Triangle Amendment	2006	101	Included	7+
Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan	2009	2,602	External	51
Twinbrook Sector Plan	2009	154	External	35
Great Seneca Science Corridor	2010	4,329	External	45
White Flint Sector Plan	2010	434	External	26
Burtonsville Commercial Crossroads Neighborhood Plan	2012	232	Included	8
Kensington Sector Plan Update	2012	394	External (Projects also reviewed by Town of Kensington)	46
Takoma/Langley Crossroads Sector Plan	2012	181	External	52
Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan	2012	484	External	38
Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan	2013	380	External	54
Glenmont Sector Plan	2013	711	External	32
Long Branch Sector Plan	2013	242	External	46
Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment	2014	13	Incorporated	
Ten Mile Creek Area Limited Amendment to the Clarksburg Master Plan	2014	4,057	Included	1+
White Oak Science Gateway	2014	3,132	External	40
Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan Amendment	2015	15	Included	4
Sandy Spring Rural Village Plan	2015	53	Included	2+
Montgomery Village Master Plan	2016	2,513	Included (Montgomery Village also has an Architectural Review Board)*	2+
Westbard Sector Plan	2016	181	Incorporated	
Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan	2017	452	External	110
Greater Lyttonsville Sector Plan	2017	584	External	60
Rock Spring Sector Plan	2017	536	External	150**
Grosvenor-Strathmore Metro Area Minor Master Plan Amendment	2018	117	Included	22
White Flint 2 Sector Plan	2018	547	External	150**
MARC Rail Communities Plan	2019	541	Incorporated	
Veirs Mill Corridor Master Plan	2019	1,004	Incorporated	
Forest Glen/Montgomery Hills Sector Plan	2020	257	Incorporated	

Germantown Plan for the Town Sector Zone	2020	1,429	None
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* Montgomery Village’s architectural guidelines are far more extensive and specific than any master plan design guidance.

**Rock Spring and White Flint 2 were both included in a single 150-page design guidelines book.

It is important to note that, per the Zoning Ordinance, site plans reviewed by the Planning Department must be found to “substantially [conform] with the recommendations of the applicable master plan **and any guidelines approved by the Planning Board** [emphasis added] that implement the applicable plan”. This appears to give equal weight to guidelines regardless of location. So, deciding where to place guidelines is not a matter of where they will be most enforceable, but rather where they make the most sense from the perspective of plan size and complexity.

From staff’s review of master plans, the decision to have separate design guidelines appears to be focused on plans that are particularly large and complex with multiple potential development sites. For example, the White Flint 2 and Rock Spring sector plans.

Where design guidelines have been included within a master plan, either as a separate section or incorporated throughout the plan, they have typically been much shorter than the external guidelines. These plans are frequently for smaller plan areas or the design guidelines cover only a small portion of an overall plan area, such as a town center. Most of the time they have been included, they are fewer than ten pages long—oftentimes much fewer—although it is difficult to get a precise page count for the design recommendations and guidelines when they are spread throughout a master plan. Even when plans have external guidelines, the plans also typically include general design guidance within the plan document.

For those plans that have included design guidelines in the body of the plan, some of the design guidelines are very specific. For example, in the Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan Amendment, there is the following language in the plan document:

Transition to Residential Neighborhoods: Ensure appropriate transitions between non-residential development and adjacent residential neighborhoods to minimize the impact of new development on those neighborhoods. As required by the Zoning Ordinance, provide landscaping and new tree canopy in parking areas; taper building heights away from existing residential development; and retain (and expand where feasible) existing trees and greenery the entire length of the western edge of the Vitro/BAE property to buffer new development. **On the north side of Aspen Hill Road, non-residential buildings may not be constructed within 100 feet of an adjacent lot improved with a detached house.**

In the recent Forest Glen/Montgomery Hills Plan, guidance is in the plan document and states (as an example):

Provide a 25-foot setback, at a minimum, from building face to curb along Georgia Avenue and Forest Glen Road to accommodate a generous sidewalk.

These types of guidance in a plan have a direct impact on the placement and design of new buildings – just as is the case with the recommendations in the Ashton Plan. It is also important to note, that we have never been faced with a request to amend guidelines – either external or internal. Applicants work with Planning staff to implement guidelines and they have not prevented projects from moving forward.

In addition, the logistics of creating design guideline documents needs to be considered. If design guidelines are less than about ten pages in length, it is difficult to create a document that will be sufficiently “memorable” and there is a strong possibility that future applications may not focus on the design guidelines in an appropriate way.

Policy Recommendation:

Based on the review of previous practice over the past 15 years, Planning Department staff recommends the following policy:

Design guidelines will be included in the body of master plans except for the following situations:

- Plans that are particularly complex and include multiple potential development sites that require detailed guidance to assure future compatible development.
- Plan that require design guidelines that are so detailed and voluminous that a separate document would be most logical from a logistical standpoint.
- Plans that use special zoning tools that allocate development capacity based upon design review, such as the Bethesda Downtown Plan.

Table 3. Master Plans Sorted by Plan Name

Master Plan	Year Adopted	Size of Plan Area (Acres)	Design Guidelines Format	Length of Guidelines (Pages)
Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan Amendment	2015	15	Included	4
Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan	2017	452	External	110
Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment	2014	13	Incorporated	
Burtonsville Commercial Crossroads Neighborhood Plan	2012	232	Included	8
Chevy Chase Lake Sector Plan	2013	380	External	54
Damascus Master Plan	2006	22,200	Included	10
Forest Glen/Montgomery Hills Sector Plan	2020	257	Incorporated	
Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan	2009	2,602	External	51
Germantown Plan for the Town Sector Zone	2020	1,429	None	
Glenmont Sector Plan	2013	711	External	32
Great Seneca Science Corridor	2010	4,329	External	45
Grosvenor-Strathmore Metro Area Minor Master Plan Amendment	2018	117	Included	22
Kensington Sector Plan Update	2012	394	External (Projects also reviewed by Town of Kensington)	46
Long Branch Sector Plan	2013	242	External	46
Greater Lyttonsville Sector Plan	2017	584	External	60
Montgomery Village Master Plan	2016	2,513	Included (Montgomery Village also has an Architectural Review Board)*	2+
MARC Rail Communities Plan	2019	541	Incorporated	
Rock Spring Sector Plan	2017	536	External	150**
Sandy Spring Rural Village Plan	2015	53	Included	2+
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Twinbrook Sector Plan	2009	154	External	35
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White Oak Science Gateway	2014	3,132	External	40
Woodmont Triangle Amendment	2006	101	Included	7+

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**Rock Spring and White Flint 2 were both included in a single 150-page design guidelines book.

Table 4. Master Plans Sorted by Size of Plan Area

Master Plan	Year Adopted	Size of Plan Area (Acres)	Design Guidelines Format	Length of Guidelines (Pages)
Bethesda Purple Line Station Minor Master Plan Amendment	2014	13	Incorporated	
Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan Amendment	2015	15	Included	4
Sandy Spring Rural Village Plan	2015	53	Included	2+
Woodmont Triangle Amendment	2006	101	Included	7+
Grosvenor-Strathmore Metro Area Minor Master Plan Amendment	2018	117	Included	22
Twinbrook Sector Plan	2009	154	External	35
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Glenmont Sector Plan	2013	711	External	32
Veirs Mill Corridor Master Plan	2019	1,004	Incorporated	
Germantown Plan for the Town Sector Zone	2020	1,429	None	
Shady Grove Sector Plan	2006	1,967	Incorporated	
Montgomery Village Master Plan	2016	2,513	Included (Montgomery Village also has an Architectural Review Board)*	2+
Germantown Employment Area Sector Plan	2009	2,602	External	51
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Damascus Master Plan	2006	22,200	Included	10

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