THE TOWN OF CAPITOL HEIGHTS
COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY PLAN
2011-2016
Prepared For: The Town of Capitol Heights
1 Capitol Heights Boulevard
Capitol Heights, MD 20743
(301) 336-0626
www.capitolheightsmd.com

Mayor:
Kito A. James, Mayor

Town Council:
Marnitta L. King, Mayor Pro Tem
Renita A. Cason
Monique Hunter
Victor L. James, Sr.
Tamil Perry
Kenneth D. Vinson

Term expiration 2014

Prepared By: Green, McDaniel & Associates

In collaboration with: Green Revisions
Lisa Lincoln, Founder
Phil Sanfilipo, Intern

Kumase Development
Jonathan L. Taylor, Principal

We would like to thank the following individuals and agencies for their aid in the development of this plan:

Citizens and business owners of the Town of Capitol Heights

Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
Sonja Ewing, Planning Coordinator
Bill Washburn, Planner
Keegan Clifford, GIS Specialist

Maryland DHCD, Community Legacy Program
Veronica Owens, Project Manager

Prince George's County Economic Development Authority

Morgan State University School of Architecture and Planning

Montgomery College Architecture Program
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The Mayor and Council have recognized the need to prioritize planning efforts in the Town of Capitol Heights (herein referred to as “The Town”). The Town has seen limited growth in recent years, and many of the Town's assets are not being utilized to their fullest capacity. This plan will provide a clear and concise guide for revitalization of the Town.

The Community Legacy/Revitalization Plan will focus on transforming the Town into a sustainable community. This Plan will also identify development opportunities and direct development and redevelopment efforts in a manner that is consistent with the Maryland Department of Planning’s Principles of Smart Growth, as well as, the County’s vision for the Sub-region 4 Master Plan while preserving existing neighborhoods and highlighting the will of the citizens and the elected officials of the Town.

The Town has many assets that can stimulate positive change. The Town’s strongest assets are its location and the Capitol Heights Metro Station. This plan will focus on developing the following four opportunity areas:

- The Capitol Heights Metro Station and surrounding streets
- Old Central Avenue
- The Walker Mill Business Park
- Preservation and strengthening of existing communities

The intent of this Plan is to provide an enhanced quality of life for residents of the Town while creating a more desirable destination for young professionals, families, and seniors to live, work, play, learn, and prosper.

This Plan should be used to:

- Improve the image of Capitol Heights
- Make legislators and decision makers aware of the will of the citizens, the Mayor, and the Council of Capitol Heights
- Showcase potential development and redevelopment opportunities
- Attract investors and developers
- Attract new residents
- Evaluate the needs and desires of existing residents
- Increase citizen awareness and participation in the development process
- Positively impact development proposals
- Plan for future improvements
- Increase the tax base
- Protect the environment
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The Town of Capitol Heights has a vision to transform itself into a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable community. A sustainable community meets the social, economic and environmental needs of a town without compromising the available for future generations.

**THE HISTORY OF CAPITOL HEIGHTS**

In 1904, Washington, D.C. was growing by leaps and bounds. The overcrowding and the improved public transportation made the idea of living on the outskirts of the District increasingly appealing to people looking for housing. Recognizing the opportunity, Baltimore resident Otway B. Zantzinger acquired 400 hilly acres just beyond the eastern corner of the District. He divided the tract into 4,000 lots and began to sell them at prices ranging from $20 to $150 each. He advertised a picturesque view of the District, a proposed electric railway, drinking water from crystal clear springs, no money down and one dollar per month, no interest, and no landlords. Many buyers bought two lots in this haven that was to become Capitol Heights.

While awaiting their proposed electric railway, commuters to the District could walk about a mile (often through mud) to the District Line station at what is now Seat Pleasant, and board a rail car destined for the District.

The absence of paved roads, sidewalks, streetlights, and other public services (including the electric railway) began to cast a pall over Mr. Zantzinger’s vision of bliss. In 1910, approximately 200 householders voted to incorporate their community as The Town of Capitol Heights. Over the next 50 years, the Town made strides in improving its infrastructure and services. It established its own volunteer fire department, public works department, and built facilities to house them and the other elements of government. However, in the 1970s when the population had reached approximately 3,800 the Town’s center-core business district had started to decline.

A rebuilt Central Avenue diverted lucrative traffic around the town, and parking facilities were inadequate for the current traffic. Rising crime statistics and modest incomes of the residents were cited as other reasons for the Town’s ailing economy. The Town established its own police department and pinned its hopes on the planning reports of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.
In 1980, that long-ago promised electric railway finally arrived. Capitol Heights got its own station on the Washington Metro line, providing easy access to the entire metropolitan region and national transportation facilities. The land around the station has been declared an Enterprise Zone, which the Town is promoting as one of its paths to restoring prosperity. With this designation another of the 100-year-old promises has now been fulfilled.

With a new government emphasis on energy and efficiency, and changes in consumer demand for housing, the Town is positioned to usher in positive change by focusing on its most valuable asset: the Capitol Heights Metro Station and its convenient location.

**COMMUNITY LEGACY PROGRAM**

The Mayor and Council of the Town have received a grant from the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development’s Community Legacy Program to develop a Community Legacy / Revitalization Plan for the Town. The Community Legacy Program is intended to assist communities and local decision makers positively impact local economic development activities.

The Program provides assistance, funding, and support for the revitalization of transitional or at-risk urban communities. One requirement of the Program is the completion of a Community Legacy Revitalization Plan.

The goals of the Legacy Program include:
- Address local revitalization issues
- Develop comprehensive recommendations

This Community Legacy Plan was prepared as a result of a 12-month process that includes the following:
- Community input forums
- Stakeholder interviews
- Review of existing plans and plans in progress
- Community wellness surveys
- Research of existing trends in development

**PROCESS AND OUTREACH APPROACH**

In January 2009, the Town received a grant from the State of Maryland’s Department of Housing and Community Development to create a Community Legacy Plan. The purpose of this Plan is to develop a road map that the Town can use to rebrand itself as a great place to raise a family, work, and to prosper.

This Plan contains elements of physical and social concerns of the Town’s citizens. The Plan should become a living document that will be updated as necessary to accurately reflect the needs and desires of the citizens of the Town as conditions change.

In an effort to gain the best possible understanding of the history, current conditions, issues, and prospects for enhancing the Town, the planning team of consultants (this includes all of the consultants and not to isolate one) examined previous plans, prepared sustainability elements, developed new guidelines and conducted forums with community stakeholders to include:
- Residents
- Business owners
- Local developers
- Regional developers
- Elected officials
- Potential investors
- Town Real Estate Consultant

Introduction 1.2
• Mayor
• The Town Council
• Local shopping center owners
• Local churches

The planning team attended and participated in workshops conducted by the University of Maryland Landscape Architecture Program’s senior class and the Neighborhood Design Center, and presentations of the Prince George’s County Sub-region 4 Master Plan prepared by Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC).

The planning team also interviewed representatives from the M-NCPPC and the Prince George’s County Department of Economic Development to understand existing programs, strategies, and efforts being used to enhance similar communities in Prince George’s County.

Students from The Morgan State University School of Architecture and Planning and the Montgomery College Architecture Program were engaged to analyze and transform several very visible opportunity sites in the Town using information collected from stakeholders and county officials.

EXSISTING PLANNING INITIATIVES

As with inner Beltway communities all around the county, the Town is experiencing signs of decline as older communities attempt to compete with newer, more inviting housing and business options.

A review of the demographic and economic base analysis prepared by RKG Associates revealed:

• Comparatively, nearly 40% of this population group in the rest of Prince George’s County and 61% of the regional population has completed a post-secondary degree program. This difference in educational attainment limits the ability of Sub-region 4 residents to attract higher paying jobs as applicants with higher levels of educational attainment fill many of these positions.

• More than 75% of the occupations in Prince George’s County are considered white-collar positions. The highest occupational skilled group was white-collar positions (123,995 workers), which comprised 36.6% of the occupational work force in 2004.

• Within Prince George’s County employment growth is occurring rapidly in the educational services industry (3,859 total jobs) as it has grown by 385 jobs since 2000.

• There are four large Colleges / Universities in the county but none of them are located in Sub-region 4.

Over the past several years the Town has been the subject of several planning processes at the state, county, and local level. Since the current plan builds upon previous plans, a summary of those plans is provided below.

Maryland Policies

In 1997 the Maryland General Assembly passed five pieces of legislation and certain budget initiatives including Priority Funding Areas, Brownfields, Live Near Your Work, Job Creation Tax Credits, and Rural Legacy. These initiatives, often referred to as Smart Growth policies, are intended to address sprawl, and target state funding and programs for already established communities and designated growth areas. More specifically, Priority Funding Areas identify areas where the state will focus on growth-related infrastructure. The Town falls within a designated Priority Funding Area in Prince George’s County and is therefore eligible for a variety of state funds and programs.
According to the Maryland Department of Planning, the State has adopted the following principles of Smart Growth, which provide guidance for new development, infill development, and redevelopment:

- Mixed land uses
- Take advantage of compact building design
- Create walkable communities
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- Provide a variety of transportation options
- Strengthen and direct development to existing communities
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

The state continues to work with local governments to pursue policies that promote the efficient use of land.

The State of Maryland has also initiated Smart, Green and Growing to strengthen our economy, protect our environment, and improve our quality of life.

From adopting smart growth policies and creating green jobs to improving transit and revitalizing our communities, Smart, Green, and Growing is helping us make informed choices about the kind of future we envision for our State and the kind of progress that will help us realize that vision. Capitol Heights has adopted a Green Agenda to align with the Smart, Green, and Growing Initiative.

**Prince George's County General Plan**
The Prince George's County General Plan, approved by the County Council in October 2002, provides long-range guidance for the future growth of the county. The plan divides the county into three development tiers (developed, developing, and rural). The Town is located in the developed tier.

The General Plan provides a set of countywide planning policies identifying centers and corridors where intensive mixed-use development is encouraged. The General Plan also makes recommendations for infrastructure investments and includes guidance for economic development, revitalization, housing, urban design, and historic preservation.

Old Central Avenue, the Capitol Heights Metro Station, and the Walker Mill Business Center are prime opportunity areas that may benefit from the countywide planning policies identified in the General Plan.

**Development Plan, Enterprise Zone Town of Capitol Heights, 1995**
The central focus of the Development Plan is the construction of mixed building uses in the Enterprise Zone, adjacent to the Capitol Heights Metro Station. The basic premise of the Development Plan is that private-public partnerships must be structured.

**2007 Approved Capitol Heights Transit District Development Plan and Transit District Overlay Zoning Map Amendment**
The goal of the Capitol Heights TDDP is to provide for transit-oriented development within the Capitol Heights TDOZ. The Capitol Heights TDOZ is intended to ensure that the development of land in the vicinity of the Capitol Heights Metro Station maximizes transit ridership, serves the economic and social goals of the area, and takes advantage of the unique development opportunities that multimodal public transportation provides.

The following characteristics contribute to the appeal of the Town:

- Access to major employment centers
- Access to major attractions
- Access to superior mass transit
- Access to a major highway network
- Access to a robust metropolitan customer base
- Value driven land cost
- Motivated leadership

Like many of the small towns located inside the Capital Beltway, the Town is at a crossroads. Appropriate actions by decision makers must be carefully cultivated to assure that this town is reborn and re-branded. Despite superior location, access to major employment centers, access to a great public transportation system, some of the most recognized tourist attractions on the east coast, being situated in the wealthiest African American county in the country, and the emergence of new urban market demand for Housing, the Town has not been able to maximize its resources and assets to become a more desirable destination. The Town must develop ways to attract new investors, citizens, and tax revenue, and improve the quality of life for existing citizens and potential citizens.
It is evident that the Town was once a very desirable bedroom community for employees working in Washington D.C. It is predominantly a residential community; today very few commercial properties thrive in the Town.

Based on information received from four community forums, three plans prepared by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, the current state of the economy, available resources, competition in the region, housing trends in the region, and input from elected officials, it is clear that decision makers must make a conscious effort to:

- Improve the image of the Town.
- Enhance its ability to expand its tax base.
- Improve the quality of life for existing citizens.
- Enhance the Town’s capacity to compete with and complement other municipalities in the region.

**HOW TO USE THIS LEGACY PLAN**

The Community Legacy Plan is a living document that provides decision-makers, residents, non-profit organizations, and investors with a clear set of directions to revitalize and re-brand the Town. This plan should be used as a guide to secure funds, position resources, and attract investors to promote the rebirth of Capitol Heights.

To ensure that this plan maintains its relevance, it is recommended that the Town Council closely monitor and review its progress and update the plan annually. The Town should celebrate its success as recommendations are accomplished. The Town should also use its public access channel, web page, and other means of communication to inform residents and others of the progress made relative to the Community Legacy Plan.
The Town of Capitol Heights has the potential to attract new investments, new citizens, new tax revenue, and new employers, thus improving the quality of life for existing citizens.

An analysis of existing conditions within the Town provides a basis to develop a brighter future for the Town and its residents. The Town enjoys many advantages including a convenient and practical location for families, young professionals and seniors to live, work, play, learn and prosper.

The Town's biggest assets are:
- The Capitol Heights Metro Station
- Easy access to the nation's capital
- Effortless access to a great public transportation system
- Development opportunities
- A robust consumer market
- Situated in the wealthiest African-American County in the Country
- The emergence of new urban market demand for housing
- Motivated leadership
- Affordable land

Commercial development constitutes only a small percent of the Town's land use and industrial development composes even less. Most commercial development in the Town is concentrated along Old Central Avenue. The Town's main street has seen virtually no investments in recent years.

Unfortunately, Old Central Avenue is vacant, underutilized, unattractive, or noncompliant with current zoning requirements. The commercial strip along Old Central Avenue includes a mixture of marginal retail uses (variety store, liquor stores, laundromat, hair salon, car repair shops, carry out restaurants, and public buildings that have also seen little re-investment). It is important that public investments be apparent to potential investors.

While residential uses are distributed throughout the Town with most of being above Rollins Avenue, the vast majority of the non-residential uses (commercial, office and industrial) are primarily located along the arterial roads (Central Avenue, Capitol Heights Boulevard, East Capitol Street, and Walker Mill Road) traversing the Town.

LAND USE AND ZONING

The Town consists of approximately 830 acres and is located in the Developed Tier of Prince George's County. Of that total, 71.3% of the land is zoned for residential uses, 4.3% for commercial uses, 20.9% for industrial uses, 0.7% for mixed use, and 2.8% for open space.
The Town of Capitol Heights contains a wide variety of buildings constructed between 1904 and the present. The majority of buildings constructed in Capitol Heights date from the 1910s through the 1970s. There are a number of popular 20th century architectural styles represented in the community, including craftsman, colonial revival, and examples of the modern movement vernacular interpretations of the Queen Anne style. Common building forms present include row houses, bungalows, cape cuds, ranchers and split-foyers.

The residential buildings are modest and display minimal ornamentation, typical of their uses by middle and working class residents. The majority of houses are small one or one-and-a-half story designs. The topography of the neighborhood is hilly, with houses built on sloping lots often with partially exposed basements. Streets adhere to a roughly rectilinear grid, which is traversed diagonally by other streets.

Buildings in the community are predominately residential, with a limited number of commercial buildings located along Old Central Avenue, Central Avenue, and a few scattered throughout the community. Some residential buildings in the community have been adopted for commercial use.

The Town is a primarily residential community that closely resembles the development character of a small town, complete with a main street (Old Central Avenue), a street grid, public parks, and a town hall. The Town hosts one senior housing complex. A general land-use map on the following page illustrates the Town’s existing land uses.
The residential neighborhoods within the Town are designated low and medium density. Even though the Town is relatively stable, citizens indicated a desire to improve the quality of life for residents. Many residents noted the Town would be more walkable if sidewalks were installed. The lack of upscale restaurants and specialty shops, single family housing choices, bus services for seniors, and more activities for youths all reduce the quality of life for residents.

Capitol Heights currently offers some of the most affordable housing stock in the County. Decision makers would like to encourage a better mix of housing options to attract a more diverse population to the Town. In 2000, 79.6% of the residents owned their homes while 20.4% were renters.

Prince George’s County has a Historic Preservation Commission. The Historic Preservation Commission uses a specific set of criteria (mandated by Subtitle 29-104 of the County code) in determining the historic and architectural significance of the County’s historic resources. These criteria were developed from a review of National Register criteria, State law, and other plans and ordinances. They provide a broad framework for evaluating all aspects of the County’s cultural heritage.

The Town should submit potential sites and districts to the Prince George’s Historic Commission to determine whether they are worthy of historic designation. By using an established historic program, the Town does not have to obtain the resources to research and evaluate sites that they think are historically significant.

Community Conservation and Preservation
Community conservation and preservation deals with establishing policies and programs to protect, stabilize, and enhance existing neighborhoods. Community conservation and preservation addresses both the physical and social welfare of the community. Citizens should be aware of the ways in which decisions made affect the physical and social strength of the Town.

The Town has a long and rich history dating back to the early 1900s when it was founded. There are scattered sites and areas throughout the Town worthy of preservation. Some of these sites may not be eligible for listing as a historic site, but are still significant to the heritage of the Town. These areas should be identified, preserved, and celebrated.
Central Avenue has the potential to be a great ambassador to the Town if properly designed and marketed. The Town has the capacity to have a great main street. Disinvestment in Old Central Avenue has resulted in the street losing its appeal.

Most of the retail establishments located along Old Central Avenue are marginal neighborhood oriented establishments (liquor store, thrift store, beauty shop, laundromat, car repair shop, and a strip shopping center).

These uses do not offer any consistent theme or continuity that creates the critical mass necessary to announce, “You have arrived at the Town’s Main Street.” The lack of investment (private and public) along Old Central Avenue minimizes its chance to attract new investment.

The Town should be setting the example by installing festive signage, street furniture (ornamental trash receptacles, bus shelters, and planters), additional street trees, and brick pavers at crosswalks along the Town’s Main Street.

The residents voiced a need for family style restaurants and a grocery store within the Town during the community forums. The most attractive buildings along Old Central Avenue are the public buildings (the fire and police station, the town hall and post office).

In order to execute a comprehensive commercial revitalization, a Main Street effort that attracts the types of mixed-use reinvestment opportunities required to reverse years of economic erosion, vacancy and property underutilization, will require vested long term partnerships and commitments between both the public and private sectors. Within a visionary redevelopment plan that seeks to attract retail,

residential and office mixes, the challenge to assemble parcels and create market demand will determine final revitalization success. Actions to establish a Main Street initiative for Old Central Avenue should seek the following neighborhood approaches:

- Establish a mixed use, town center destination-orientated development program and strategy consistent with transit oriented development (TOD) guidelines and Smart Growth policies for vacant and underdeveloped sites.

- Create a site plan and massing scenario that defines a new neighborhood and sub-region center for mixed - use development.

- Determine a detailed implementation strategy that outlines the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and includes specific recommendations for future development; and

- Outline the fiscal and economic impact of reinvestment relevant to commercial retail development, estimated job production, tax revenue, and potential market and affordable rental and/or ownership opportunities.

Existing Conditions 2.6