



The Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce (MCCC) and
The Greater Bethesda Chamber of Commerce (TGB)
Response to the Washington Post "[The future ghosts of downtown Bethesda](#)" (5/14/17)

Washington Post Letter to the Editor ([published May 19, 2017](#))

The May 14 Metro article "Development could threaten pillars of downtown Bethesda" made only passing references to the many reasons businesses come and go. More important, it neglected to mention that the 2017 Bethesda Downtown Plan strives to ensure that Bethesda will stay relevant for the next generation of talent and the businesses that employ them. It also would benefit current and future residents and the restaurants and retail establishments they frequent.

The professional and thoughtful planning carefully carried out through the master-plan process is the best chance Bethesda, Montgomery County and our region have to adapt to the changing market and our changing world. The business examples cited in the article were already facing a variety of challenges. The plan, which lays out a strategic vision for the future, should not be misconstrued as the culprit.

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Why The Bethesda Plan Matters.

The Bethesda Downtown Plan is an important vision for the future of Bethesda. The plan is set to be approved later this month and a subsequent decision will be made on a Zoning Text Amendment (the Bethesda Overlay Zone). As member-based organizations that represent the breadth of the business community, including the occupants of many of these spaces, MCCC and TGBCC urge the Montgomery County Council to provide as much flexibility as possible to realize the vision of Bethesda of tomorrow. This is important for Bethesda, Montgomery County and the region.

Impact in Bethesda

Businesses confront any number of challenges to stay profitable no matter where they are located. The examples in the article highlight a variety of common issues in today's competitive marketplace. If you buy a book for your e-reader, consider yourself part of the reason Barnes and Noble is closing shop in Bethesda and around the country. The Women's Market is facing a common dilemma: if there is no one to run the business, the business has to close. Lastly, an institution like the Tastee Diner finds it harder to survive when costs of operating the

business continue to increase. Local laws such as paid leave and increased minimum wage and rising health care costs increase the cost of running the business that cannot be passed on easily to the customer. Each of these instances is independent of planned development in Bethesda. In fact, the plan insists upon design excellence to make Bethesda an attractive location. Design guidelines should be used as a goal rather than a specific standard. This will allow the flexibility and innovation that can best accommodate retail favorites across different sites, with the option to try to re-incorporate such uses in new and pending projects as needed.

Impact in Montgomery County

The professional planners at the Montgomery County Planning Department follow the Montgomery County General Plan that concentrates new development in transit served areas because one-third of the land mass in the County is in the Agricultural Reserve. This is a legacy worth preserving as it provides open space and now is even being used to promote farm- to-table and agro tourism in ways not previously imagined. If building in the Ag Reserve is restricted, then more housing supply for a growing population is necessary in the other two-thirds of the county. This is increasingly clear as the rate of available housing stock has been decreasing and is well below what is needed at most price points. The 1994 plan identified Bethesda as a place to add multifamily housing and the current plan further leverages its' proximity to Metro.

Impact in the Region

Today, Metro needs our help. Our region will only function if Metro is safe, reliable, convenient and accessible. That takes riders. As the federal government has withdrawn transit subsidies for federal employees and the system has suffered from disinvestment, ridership has fallen. Fortunately, under new management and with a strong commitment to safety and restoring the system's reputation, Metro will continue to serve our communities. By building much needed housing along Metro lines like the Red Line which serves Bethesda through Friendship Heights, Bethesda, Medical Center, Grosvenor-Strathmore, and White Flint Metro stations, we do our part to contribute to the viability of the system which benefits the entire region. Such intelligent and committed land use decisions help support and underscore the need for a dedicated funding source for Metro.

The 2017 Bethesda Downtown Plan included novel and innovative ideas from the Montgomery County Planning professionals. The Planning Board sent their recommendations to the nine person Montgomery County Council which, in turn, shaped the plan based on extensive and personalized input from surrounding residents. The resulting decisions will make it more difficult to realize some of the original innovative ideas of greenways, a walkable community and more housing at various price points While affordable housing is often heard as a goal, another need is attainable housing for middle-income Montgomery County residents who will continue to settle here.

The professional and thoughtful planning for Bethesda over the last few years is the best chance Bethesda, our County and our region have to adapt to the changing market and our changing world. This should be top of mind for the Montgomery County Council as they review the Bethesda Overlay Zone and finalize the plan. **Our elected officials must seize this opportunity to allow for the necessary flexibility and innovation to create the community of the future.**