

Bethesda

URBAN PARTNERSHIP

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2029

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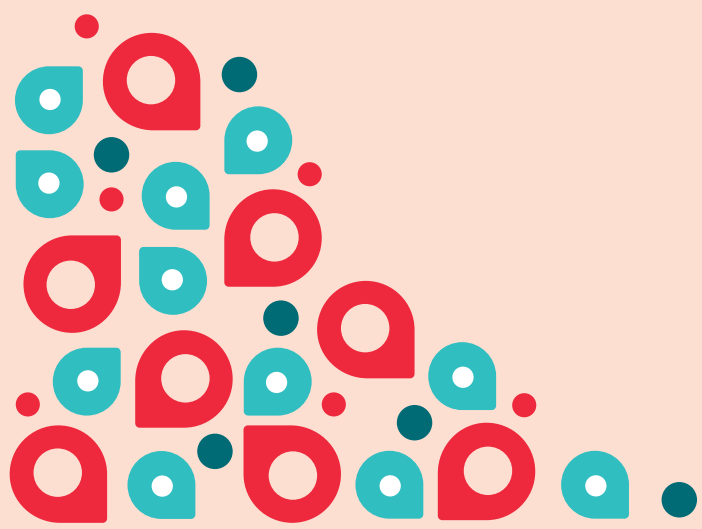
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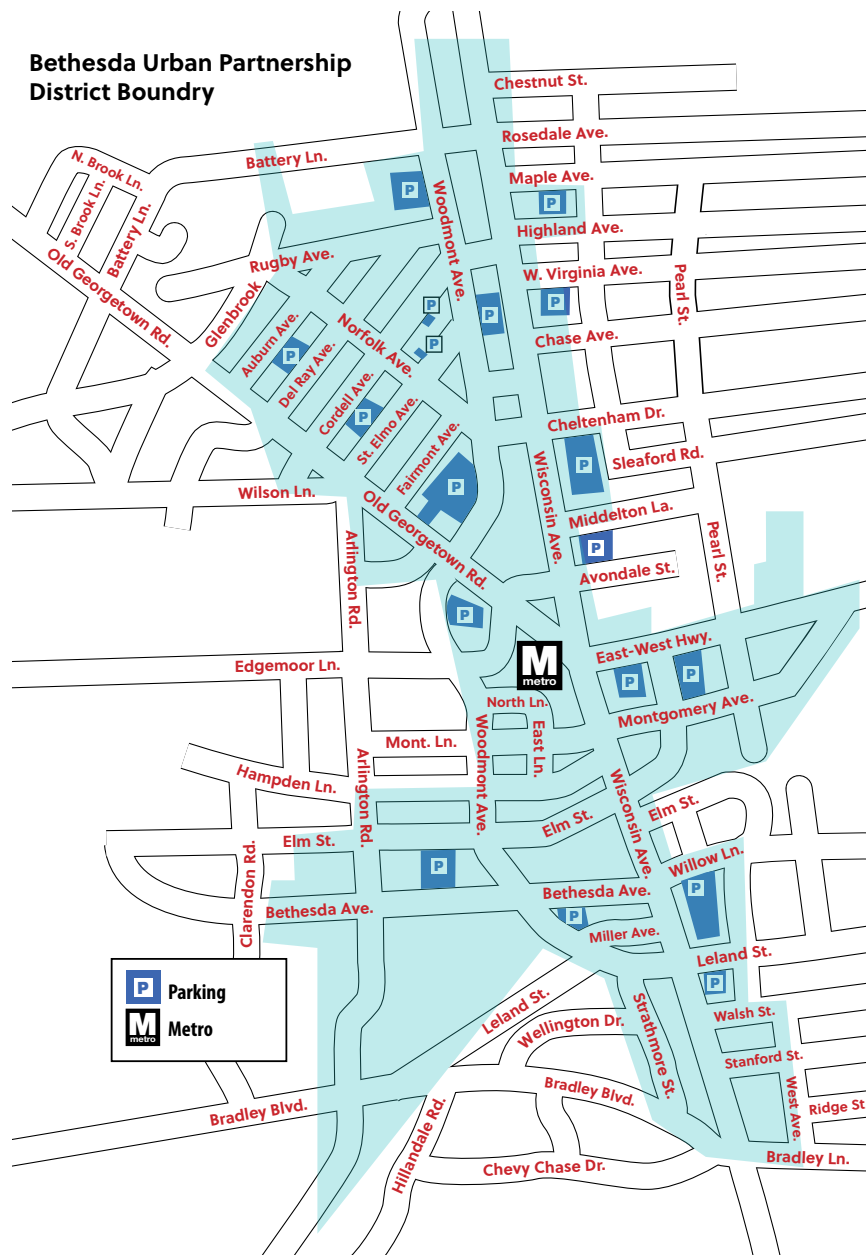


BACKGROUND

The **Bethesda Urban Partnership (“BUP”)** is a not-for-profit downtown management organization, established by Montgomery County in 1994 to market and maintain downtown Bethesda. Throughout the last 29 years, BUP’s 35 employees who work in marketing, maintenance and field operations, transportation management, and administration have continued to promote and support a beautiful and vibrant downtown.

The **Maintenance team’s** responsibilities include landscaping, trash removal, street sweeping, sidewalk repairs, and the general beautification of downtown Bethesda. The Ask Me Team provides information to downtown visitors and offers other general assistance during nights and weekends. BUP’s **Marketing team** plans, implements, and manages special events and Bethesda Arts & Entertainment District initiatives. This includes managing an annual calendar of programming, promoting downtown’s restaurants, retailers, and arts organizations, and operating downtown Bethesda’s website and social media. The state-designated Arts & Entertainment District produces arts and cultural programming, as well as manages art spaces throughout downtown including Gallery B, Studio B, and the Triangle Art Studios. The **Mobility team** – Bethesda Transportation Solutions (BTS) – works with businesses and individuals to promote alternative modes of transportation for commuting into downtown Bethesda. BUP also manages the Bethesda Circulator, a free bus service that makes a frequent 3.1-mile loop through downtown six days a week.

BUP is operated by an 11-member Board of Directors comprised of residents, businesses, and developers appointed by the County Executive and County Council. The organization is funded primarily by revenue generated from Bethesda Parking Lot District fees, in addition to the commercial Urban District property tax. (The Urban District, as shown in the map to the right, is a 387-acre area encompassing downtown Bethesda). Private sponsors also partner with BUP to support signature events.



STRATEGIC PLAN OBJECTIVES

BUP develops a new strategic plan every five years to guide the organization forward and adjust to new challenges, opportunities, and priorities. The last strategic plan was completed in 2019. Since then, downtown Bethesda (and cities and downtowns in general) has experienced tremendous change.

There has been significant development within downtown Bethesda in the last five years including high rise apartment and condominium buildings. Additionally, Marriott International recently completed its new corporate headquarters. This new complex includes 700,000 sq. ft. of office space, in addition to a 200-room, Marriott hotel. Additionally, under the new Downtown Bethesda Plan developed by Montgomery County's Planning Department, 4,100,000 sq. ft. of new density has been approved for specific developments, and another 2,200,000 sq. ft. of density may also be approved under the Plan in the future.

Furthermore, downtowns across the world have transformed in the last three years, and are rethinking the way visitors, residents, and employees interact with urban districts in a post-COVID pandemic era. For these reasons, timing was right for a holistic strategic planning process to evaluate the role of BUP moving forward. The strategic plan is intended to set the direction and priorities of BUP for the next five years. It does so by laying out clear vision and mission statements, and a new framework of goals and strategies for the organization to realize this vision for downtown Bethesda. While the Bethesda Urban Partnership is well-positioned to manage downtown Bethesda, there are some areas in the plan where BUP does not have the ability to make changes, but will work closely with county and state partners in areas such as affordability, public safety, economic development and construction.

To assist in the strategic planning process, BUP contracted with Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.), a Denver-based real estate economics and planning firm specializing in strategic planning for downtown partnerships across the country.

PLANNING PROCESS

The plan was informed by broad community input. This included capturing feedback from more than 1,000 stakeholders about the needs and opportunities in downtown Bethesda. Five separate focus groups were held with different constituent groups (see list to the right). A brainstorming session was also held with BUP staff. Three additional focus group sessions were held with each of the three boards/advisory committees that make up BUP, including the BUP Board of Directors, the Arts & Entertainment (A&E) District Board of Directors, and Bethesda Transportation Solutions Advisory Committee. A community-wide online survey was also distributed through BUP communications channels, capturing input from a wide range of Downtown property and business owners, residents, employees, and regular visitors to downtown. The various focus groups and brainstorming sessions took place during two P.U.M.A. site visits in February and March 2023. In total, the strategic planning process lasted six months and the plan was completed in July 2023.

FOCUS GROUPS INCLUDED:

- County Partners
- Developers
- Downtown Residents
- Local Business Owners
- Visitors
- BUP Board of Directors
- A&E Board of Directors
- BTS Advisory Committee
- BUP Staff

DOWNTOWN SNAPSHOT

Density Assessment

Office	8,603,942 sq. ft.
Retail	1,701,874 sq. ft.
Residential	10,280 units
Hotels	7 hotels; 1,605 rooms

Sources: Maryland State Department of Assessment & Taxation, May 2023 (for office, retail, residential); CoStar, retrieved May 2023 (for hotels)

Population by Age

Under 5	3%
5 – 14	5%
15 – 24	9%
25 – 34	26%
35 – 44	19%
45 – 54	11%
55 – 64	10%
65 – 74	10%
75 and up	7%

Source: Esri, 2022 estimates

Future Development

There are 16 developments either approved (11) or pending approval (5) in downtown Bethesda. All of these developments include residential units in the project, 10 include retail, two office, and one hospitality.

- 3,740 New Residential Units
- 160,000 sq. ft. of New Retail
- 688,000 sq. ft. of New Office
- 233,000 sq. ft. of New Hotel Space



Stakeholder Engagement Summary

Stakeholder engagement was the core element of the strategic planning process. Throughout the process, varied Bethesda stakeholders were asked for input, capturing a wide range of perspectives on downtown’s present and future. Engagement took place primarily in-person in varied formats, including focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and via a community-wide online survey. The following summarizes key themes from stakeholder engagement.

FOCUS GROUP THEMES

Focus groups were held with different downtown constituent groups, partners, board leadership, and staff. Each group was taken through similar exercises, focused on identifying downtown Bethesda’s current strengths, challenges, and future opportunities.

Downtown’s Strengths and Challenges

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A balanced, mixed-use neighborhood • A walkable, pedestrian-friendly environment • Clean and well-maintained • Landscaping, flowers, and other beautification efforts • Generally safe • International cuisine and dining hub for Montgomery County • Old town/small town feel • Strong mix of retail • Lots of events and activities for the community • Strong residential base and continued growth in housing sector • Employment centers and HQs in and adjacent to downtown – NIH, Suburban Hospital, Naval Support Activity Bethesda, Marriott HQ • Diversity of two distinct activity hubs (Woodmont Triangle and Bethesda Row) – each with their own vibe and clientele • Location within the region/proximity to Washington, D.C. • Booming • Wealth in surrounding area • Good school choices • Metro access • The Streeteries • Capital Crescent Trail • Bethesda Circulator • Public parking garages • Minimal impact of homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly unaffordable – for housing, businesses, and customers • Growing pressures on local independent businesses • Loss of character, uniqueness, authenticity, and quaintness of the neighborhood • Rate of change makes it harder to maintain sense of community and place • Congestion/traffic • Construction disruptions • More regional competition now – has diluted Bethesda’s hold on the market – other urban districts and destinations that are dining and shopping destinations (Pike and Rose, DC neighborhoods, Crown, etc.) • Harder to draw younger demographics • Lack of evening activity and nightlife • Metro experience • Not enough public space, greenspace • Lack of dog park • Lack of connection between downtown’s two main districts • Wisconsin Ave. – a barrier between east and west; congestion; pedestrian safety • Parking – perception and frustration with cost, rather than supply issue • Bike lanes – add to congestion • Loss of daytime office workers • Crime increasing • Lack of diversity • Pedestrian safety

Top Priority Improvements by Focus Group

Focus group participants were taken through a prioritization exercise. Ideas for improvements were brainstormed, then each participant was given three votes to help identify which should be top priorities over the next five years.

Focus Group	Priority Improvements (in order)
County Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on operational aspects of an increasingly urban area • More joint development opportunities to leverage community benefits and create more usable public space • Curbside management
Developers/Commercial Real Estate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger police presence • More nightlife and entertainment • Reform permitting to make it easier for small businesses to open • Enforceable hours of loading/unloading
Residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More cultural and entertainment venues, things to do in the evenings • Create a vision – town concept • Protect/promote places for small, unique businesses
Retail Business Owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce crime – police/security presence, cameras, strengthen enforcement • More events • Better utilize public spaces
Visitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fill storefronts/vacancies • More greenspace, parks, and dog park • More crime enforcement • Fill retail gaps – i.e., places to hang out, bookstore
BUP Board of Directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New residential development and more affordability • Promote and improve safety of alternative modes of transportation • More green space • Better connection between two major downtown Bethesda areas (Woodmont Triangle and Bethesda Row) • Attract primary jobs/another major HQ
A&E Board of Directors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purple Line pedestrian tunnel • More affordable housing • More nightlife activities • Black box/community theater, or similar
BTS Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce traffic/congestion on Wisconsin Avenue • Widen Capital Crescent Trail • Widen the Trolley Trail • Mitigate crime – security cameras
BUP Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beautify the Metro • Dog park • Civic plaza/central gathering space • Community space/cultural hub



Priority Improvement Themes

The following are common themes that arose across the various focus group discussions and voting exercises:

- Create more public spaces – green spaces, parks, a dog park, and outdoor gathering spaces such as a civic plaza
- Find ways to protect and promote small businesses, ensuring that unique and local businesses have the chance to thrive in downtown Bethesda
- Create more evening and nightlife entertainment options and activities, including live music, theaters, community hubs, and nighttime-oriented businesses like breweries, etc.
- Better connect downtown’s two distinct activity centers, Woodmont Triangle and Bethesda Row
- Deter crime, via a larger police/security presence and other tactics such as security cameras
- Improve the Bethesda Metro Station experience
- Establish a community vision and cohesive plan for what downtown Bethesda’s future should be

ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

The online survey ran during March and April 2023, and collected 1,020 responses. The survey was open to anyone interested and was distributed through various BUP communication channels. Participants represented a cross-section of downtown Bethesda stakeholders. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents live in Bethesda outside of downtown, 38% regularly visit downtown, and 26% were downtown residents. 10% worked downtown and 3% owned or managed a business or commercial property downtown.

Downtown Bethesda Today

The most common words used to describe downtown Bethesda today were **restaurant, expensive, walkable, construction,** and **clean**. Overall, respondents have positive impressions of downtown Bethesda but view it as lacking diverse destinations (especially in terms of price), evening/nighttime activity, and attractive public gathering spaces.

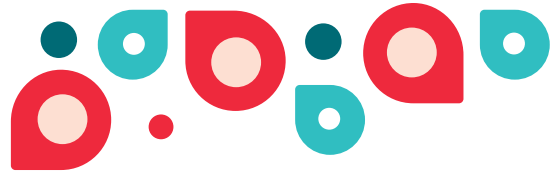
When asked to rate various downtown conditions, all those listed scored favorably. **Cleanliness, transit access,** and **restaurants/dining** received the highest ratings. **Public spaces, housing options,** and **tourism** received mostly “Fair” scores.

Respondents are very pleased with BUP’s **Maintenance services**: this service received 86% “good” or “very good” responses. **The Norfolk Avenue Streetery** is also much-loved, receiving the second highest number of “good” and “very good” responses (75%). **Cultural events, festivals,** and **programming** also scored well, while the **Bethesda Circulator** and the **Ask Me Team** received many “Don’t Know” responses, but were rated very highly by those who were familiar with the services.

Downtown Bethesda Tomorrow

The most common words used to describe respondents’ vision for downtown Bethesda in the year 2030 were **safe, walkable, diverse, affordable, vibrant,** and **green**.

When asked to choose a single project that will be most important for the future of downtown Bethesda, two projects tied for greatest importance: **Create more green spaces** and **Broaden housing options**. Close behind in third place was **Make downtown more pedestrian-friendly and bikeable**.



ENGAGEMENT RECAP



Downtown Bethesda is extremely well-positioned for the future:

The neighborhood's fundamentals are strong. It is widely considered clean, safe, attractive, and walkable. Downtown is a balanced, mixed-use neighborhood with a strong residential base, both in downtown and in neighborhoods immediately adjacent. Bethesda is well-located within the Greater Washington, D.C. area and has good access to the region via the Metro, trails, and streets. The street-level economy is vibrant with a critical mass of dining and retail uses throughout the district, primarily concentrated in downtown's two major activity centers – Woodmont Triangle and Bethesda Row, each of which has its own character and appeal distinct from the other.

This is at a time when many other downtowns nationally have struggled through the Covid-19 pandemic and recovery, and are burdened by high-dependency on office, sluggish return-to-work rates, lack of street vibrancy, public safety concerns, and growing unhoused populations. While return-to-office is slow, downtown Bethesda is in a fortunate position where it's not having to deal with the immense challenges facing many other downtown districts.



Rapid economic growth creates challenges: Downtown Bethesda continues to grow into a denser urban district, with new development underway throughout downtown. While economic development and vitality are good things, the rate of growth does present challenges. Construction's impact is felt throughout the neighborhood, impacting storefront businesses, residents, and commuters traveling by foot and car. Rapid growth is also increasing displacement pressures on local businesses. This was a chief concern amongst stakeholders – the #1 most important service or program amongst a choice of nine in the online survey was, "promote and encourage more local businesses." Local and one-of-a-kind storefront businesses have long made Bethesda a unique draw, especially when it comes to restaurants, where the district has been seen as a dining destination for the greater region. To that end, stakeholders are concerned that, with the growth and rate of change (and with increasing regional competition), it is becoming more challenging to maintain Bethesda's unique sense of place, or more simply, its "special sauce."



Affordability: Along with rapid growth and development, often comes an increase in prices. Stakeholders expressed a concern about Bethesda fast becoming an unaffordable neighborhood. In the survey, "broaden housing choices" was the second most-popular choice when it came to downtown's future (behind only "create more green spaces" – more on this below). "Diverse" and "affordable" were two of the four most commonly-cited words when survey respondents were



asked to describe their vision for downtown Bethesda in the year 2030. Affordability doesn't just impact the housing sector and residential base either. Real estate value increases put added pressure on local independent businesses – and increasing rents lead to a retail mix that itself becomes less affordable and one-dimensional. Altogether, this impacts not just who can afford to live in downtown Bethesda, but who is attracted to shop, dine, and play in the neighborhood.

An emphasis on the public realm and outdoor activations: This theme was heard throughout stakeholder engagement. While there's a feeling that downtown's public realm is attractive, it doesn't have enough outdoor gathering spaces, parks, and greenspaces. In the online survey, when asked to choose the most important physical improvement for the future of downtown Bethesda, the top choice was "create more green spaces." More events and activity downtown, wider sidewalks, increased tree canopy, and a (formal) dog park were often mentioned as well. Lastly, the Streeteries – a pandemic-era experiment – have been hugely popular and, while there are some individuals who do not support the change, the Streeteries generated a strong sense of community that is widely celebrated and appreciated by residents and visitor alike.

Community-building: Maybe it's the lingering impact of the pandemic, or the rapid rate of growth and change in Bethesda, but stakeholders emphasized the importance of community-building elements when it comes to downtown's future. Evening and nighttime activities and entertainment options were a widely-cited missing piece in downtown Bethesda. Specific examples mentioned include live music, theaters, community centers or hubs, and community-oriented businesses such as bookstores, breweries, and the like. Outdoor gathering places, such as the Norfolk Avenue Streetry or a future central plaza or dog park, are a piece of this too. To sum up, as one focus group participant simply put it, downtown needs "more places to hang out."

BUP as an asset for the community: Stakeholders are widely pleased with BUP's services and programs, and view the organization as important to the continued success of downtown. In the online survey, all BUP services and programs were rated favorably, from maintenance to marketing. Just like the neighborhood itself, BUP is well-positioned to serve downtown in the future by continuing to provide enhanced services in the district. It can also place further emphasis on addressing some of the growing challenges arising in Bethesda and the priority improvements from the community, noted above. The following new, strategic plan framework, goals, and strategies aim to build on BUP's current strengths while growing its role in new areas of focus.





Vision, Mission & Values

A new vision statement, a refreshed mission statement, and reaffirmed core values are provided below. These updates align with themes that arose in stakeholder engagement and sync with BUP's new goals and strategies framework, detailed in the following pages.

VISION:

Downtown Bethesda is a vibrant hub of community activity for residents, workers, and visitors alike – a mixed-use district that is clean, safe, beautiful, walkable, and increasingly diverse.

MISSION:

Create an environment, experience, and economy in which downtown Bethesda businesses, residents, and visitors can thrive and prosper.

BUP ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES:

Service – BUP strives to provide exemplary service to all of our constituents.

Stewardship – BUP takes pride in caring for the environment and resources entrusted to us.

Spark – BUP continually works to improve its services, programming, and initiatives while also prioritizing new and creative ideas.



Strategic Plan Framework

The graphic below illustrates the new strategic plan framework for BUP. Overarching is the **vision** for downtown Bethesda, and BUP's organizational **mission** and **values**.

To support the mission and achieve the vision are nine new goals, organized into three **categories** – environment, experience, and economy – illustrating the fundamental areas of work for the organization:

- **Environment:** Foster a clean, safe, and green environment
- **Experience:** Ensure a welcoming experience that is unique and memorable
- **Economy:** Support continued economic vitality throughout downtown

Within each category, there are three goals, capturing where BUP should focus its energy, efforts, and resources over the next five years. Each goal has a set of **strategies** that drill into more specifics and will help BUP be successful in that given area. Goals and strategies have a longer-term time horizon and are intended to be a constant throughout the five-year term of the strategic plan. Specific **tactics and actions** are not included in this five-year plan, and instead should be developed internally by staff as a part of BUP's annual work planning and budget process. Tactics and actions are adaptable and fluid and more short-term in nature, and therefore are best developed in real-time by staff.

Importantly, the new goals framework also aligns with BUP's **organizational core values** – service, stewardship, and spark – with one goal within each category aligning with a different value, as the chart on the following page illustrates. Therefore, the new Five-Year Strategic Plan is both consistent with – but also brings added clarity to – BUP's core values, through which everything that the organization is striving for should flow. While BUP will focus on achieving all of these goals, it is important to note that some objectives fall outside of BUP's purview, and our role will be as a facilitator and communicator with County and State governments to meet the goals of the Plan.



Organizational Goals & Strategies

BUP's new goals and strategies are detailed below and on the following pages.



Environment

Foster a clean, safe, and green environment

Cleaning & Maintenance – *stewardship*

- Continue to manage a clean and well-maintained public realm
- Remain vigilant with sustainability efforts in public realm maintenance and beautification
- Ensure sidewalk infrastructure and public realm furnishings are hazard free and in top condition

Public Safety – *service*

- Work with Montgomery County Police Department to implement public safety measures in downtown, including but not limited to, evaluating the feasibility of bolstering downtown’s officer presence
- Evaluate strategies to fortify security camera network, and other technologies to enhance safety in downtown

Beautification – *spark*

- Enhance downtown Bethesda’s landscaping with free-standing planters and flowers and ground cover in tree wells and other public areas as applicable
- Multiply Downtown’s tree canopy, with developer support, with new trees and help existing trees to grow and flourish

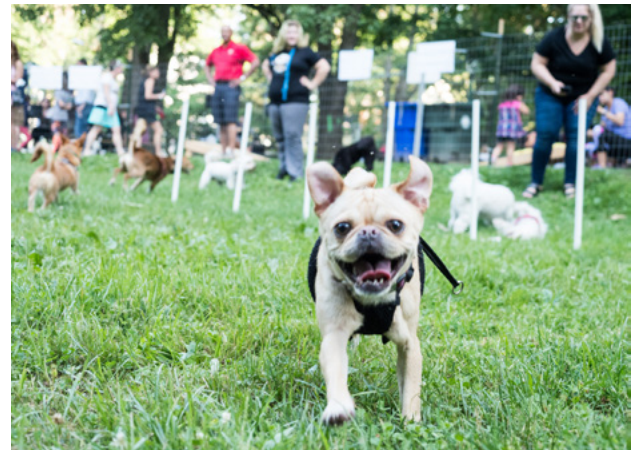


Experience

Ensure a welcoming experience that is unique and memorable

Programming & Events – *stewardship*

- Continue to provide and enhance a diverse calendar of year-round events
- Activate downtown’s public spaces to encourage small-scale, ongoing use and promote these activations to community members
- Explore ways to create evening and nighttime entertainment options tailored to local residents and visitors



Mobility & Access – *service*

- Continue operation of the Circulator and implement tactics to increase ridership
- Collaborate with partners to improve the Metro Station experience
- Enhance pedestrian safety along Wisconsin Avenue
- Establish clear connections between Bethesda’s two main restaurant and retail areas – Bethesda Row and Woodmont Triangle
- Identify and promote links to surrounding neighborhoods and the Greater Washington, D.C. region
- Support Montgomery County’s curbside management efforts as needed, to mitigate challenges with loading and unloading



The Arts – *spark*

- Integrate more murals and public art installations throughout Downtown – that are diverse and varied, and help create a unique sense of place
- Continue to incubate the arts by offering affordable and attractive spaces for artists to both produce and display their artwork
- Collaborate with property owners and the arts community to fill vacant storefronts and office lobbies with temporary or permanent arts installations or pop-up activations



Economy

Support continued economic vitality throughout downtown

Marketing & Communications – *stewardship*

- Be intentional in celebrating BUP successes and elevate the public's knowledge of BUP and its programs
- Provide more communications about BUP initiatives and programs
- More actively promote downtown's businesses
- Increase connection and expand communication with residents in and adjacent to downtown



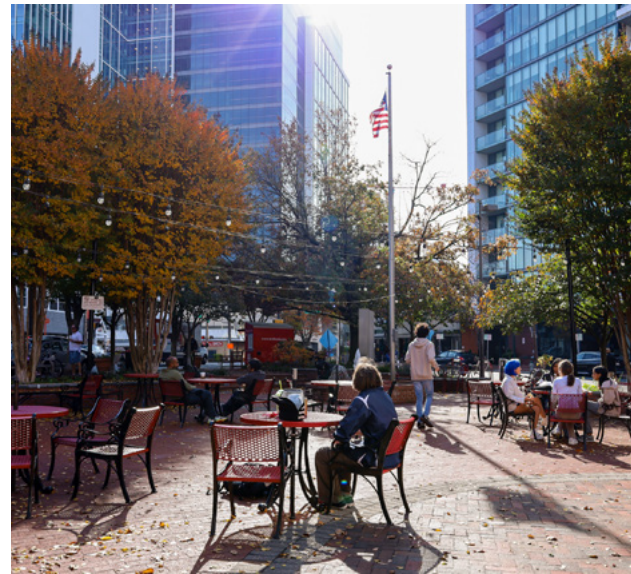
Small Business Support – *service*

- Promote, encourage, and find ways to increase and support local businesses
- Create more evening and nightlife entertainment options and activities
- Advocate and support efforts to fill downtown's missing business types that are strongly desired by the community (e.g., a bookstore)



Community-Building – *spark*

- Further establish the Norfolk Avenue Streeetry as a permanent and activated hub for the community
- Utilize current parks and Norfolk Avenue Streeetry for more activations; create new public gathering spaces as needed
- Advance efforts to create a downtown community hub/center
- Evaluate permanent solutions to establish a Bethesda dog park
- Encourage broader housing options to meet the needs of varying demographics and income levels





CONCLUDING STATEMENT

After profound change – locally and globally – over the last five years, timing was right for a new BUP strategic plan. Downtown Bethesda is flourishing and is well-positioned for the future as a dynamic urban, mixed-use district.

The work of BUP – providing a range of enhanced services and programs for downtown – remains critical. This strategic plan sets the stage for BUP to build on its strengths and also work more intently towards addressing the challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities of today and tomorrow in downtown Bethesda.





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