

chapter 1

introduction





INTRODUCTION TO HOCO BY DESIGN

HoCo By Design is a visionary document that guides policy decisions for the next two decades. The General Plan is re-evaluated every ten years and provides general direction for a twenty-year horizon while recognizing that decision-making in the intervening years will be further informed by factors beyond these pages.

HoCo By Design is the **community's County's growth** Plan. It reflects a depth and breadth of public engagement that is unprecedented for Howard County. Throughout the planning process, stakeholders and participants collaborate to create a vision for what they consider to be the ideal future for Howard County. Residents describe Howard County as a welcoming place with thriving neighborhoods, innovative and prosperous businesses, and quality recreational, cultural, educational, and housing opportunities. They celebrate the County's high quality of life, abundant natural resources, and self-sustaining economy. HoCo By Design reflects the values of process participants and seeks to preserve and protect the qualities of Howard County that make the community so special while tackling the challenges ahead.

HoCo By Design starts from the baseline of the previous General Plan – PlanHoward 2030 – and aims to define a growth and conservation path to 2040 that is **more equitable, more predictable, more sustainable, and more achievable** for the County and all its residents. While PlanHoward 2030 emphasized three pillars of sustainability, HoCo By Design aspires to improve upon PlanHoward with a four-pronged, aspirational approach toward greater equity, predictability, sustainability, and achievability.

-  **Equity** is about crafting a future ripe with opportunities for ALL people and ALL communities, including access to attainable housing, amenity-rich neighborhoods, high-quality education, and economically-uplifting employment.
-  **Predictability** informs future land use **with greater detail and specificity of future outcomes**, and guides budget priorities to align decisions for a shared understanding of direction and sequencing.
-  **Sustainability** is about shaping growth and preservation in a manner that protects our valuable natural resources, reduces environmental impacts through vertical and compact development, and responsibly balances and grows our fiscal resources to deliver the government services that enhance our quality of life.
-  **Achievability** aims to provide realistic direction that is grounded in stakeholder input, considers resource limitations, and helps the County measure progress toward attaining the community's vision.

General Plan Facts & Limitations

The General Plan is a long-range, visionary document that outlines how and where the County should develop and grow as it adjusts to evolving economic, environmental, and social conditions over the next 20 years.

The Plan will help to inform subsequent decisions on land use, transportation, open space, agriculture, community facilities, community character, historic preservation, housing, economic development, and quality of life.

While the Plan describes future land uses, it does not change zoning—including what uses are allowed and not allowed—in any area. Changes to the Zoning Regulations occur as part of a separate process following the General Plan's adoption, known as comprehensive rezoning.

HoCo By Design is unique in that it offers illustrative graphics for some focus areas as part of its character-driven approach. Graphics provided in the Plan are for illustrative purposes only. They are intended to convey a general approach or character rather than an obligation to a specific outcome.

Finally, HoCo By Design is an update to PlanHoward 2030. The Downtown Columbia Plan and Ellicott City Watershed Master Plan, which were adopted as amendments to the prior General Plan, are included in the update and will not be modified or replaced by way of this document.

HoCo By Design will be implemented through more detailed plans, studies, ordinances, and budgets that follow, which hone the vision in the General Plan into specific rules, requirements, or initiatives needed to guide future growth, development, or conservation efforts.

The General Plan should be used by County leaders, decision makers, appointed board members, and the community to assess future development policies and community-wide decisions. It should also guide the review of development applications, ordinance amendments, and future investments as the County implements HoCo By Design's vision.



Setting the Stage For the Plan

Each decade brings a unique set of challenges. By early 2020, the County was already grappling with issues presented by the combination of a growing population, dwindling supply of undeveloped land, lack of affordable housing options, and shifting weather patterns associated with climate change. These challenges were then compounded by the unprecedented nature of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting upheaval of daily life, locally and globally, that began in mid-March of 2020 and continued to influence behavior over the course of the planning effort.

Since the launch of the planning process in March of 2020, extensive community feedback, data analysis, and best practice research have coalesced to underscore five major issue areas for Howard County's future. These are detailed in the "Planning Themes" chapters, which respectively outline:



Ecological Health – this chapter identifies opportunities to deepen Howard County's commitment to environmental stewardship, create better compatibility between the natural and built environments, and provide needed measures for climate change mitigation and adaptation.



County in Motion – this chapter highlights the need to manage and provide a safe, equitable, and fiscally sustainable transportation system for all users that is responsive to changing local, regional, and national transportation trends.



Economic Prosperity – this chapter highlights values, policies, and initiatives that continue strengthening Howard County's position as a self-sustaining, diverse employment center for the region.



Dynamic Neighborhoods – this chapter provides guidance on maintaining and supporting vibrant living that meets the needs of current and future residents with a focus on diversifying housing options, increasing housing affordability, creating amenity-rich neighborhoods, improving infrastructure in existing and new neighborhoods, and encouraging a balanced approach to residential development for all income levels and age ranges.



Quality By Design – this chapter aims to preserve character in future developments and adopt design standards that are context sensitive for different areas and development opportunities. Historic resource preservation is emphasized as an important contributor to community character and tradition.

an inflection Point

The County's ability to address challenges is shaped, in part, by available land to accommodate new uses and associated buildings and spaces. Howard County has reached an inflection point, where limited land supply prompts new patterns of land development and natural resource conservation.

Historically a desirable location for households and employers, the County has continued to grow and is projected to witness strong demand for new spaces through 2040. Along with this growth comes the need for supporting infrastructure, such as schools, parks, and transportation investments. Meanwhile, approximately 98% of the County's land supply is already developed, committed for development, or preserved via open space, agricultural, or other type of easement—leaving just 2% of land "undeveloped."

Given the diminishing land supply, HoCo By Design explores redevelopment as a transformative opportunity for the future. Redevelopment can involve the demolition of existing buildings to make way for new, the addition of new buildings on lots that already have structures, or the re-use of a site (like a parking lot). HoCo By Design also embraces mixing uses, where places to live are located with places to work, shop, and dine. These types of mixed-use, walkable redevelopments are called "activity centers" in this Plan and are limited in number and location. While prior General Plans began the process of identifying certain areas for growth and revitalization, these areas were expansive in geography, which resulted in unpredictable growth patterns. **HoCo-By-Design activity centers hone these geographic areas more specifically, furthering more-predictable-growth-patterns-over the-planning-horizon.**

HoCo By Design outlines these redevelopment locations on its Future Land Use Map (FLUM), which categorizes the County into eighteen different "Character Areas." This palette speaks to the wide variety of places in Howard County, from its rural crossroads to its historic communities and suburban retail, office, and residential neighborhoods. This Plan offers guidance for design as well as use in these Character Areas and organizes them under a framework of anticipated change—from "preserve," to "strengthen," to "enhance," and finally, to "transform" ("P-S-E-T"). The FLUM, the Character Areas, and the "P-S-E-T" framework are more fully described in the Growth and Conservation Framework chapter.

An appendix on Focus Areas turns the spotlight to New Town Columbia, Gateway, and Rural Crossroads. Additionally, a plan for Route 1 accompanies the General Plan. Design considerations are provided with illustrative concepts and recommendations offered that are unique to each of these areas.

Planning with a redevelopment mindset requires cautious consideration of infrastructure needs, described in the Supporting Infrastructure and Managing Growth chapters. The Plan concludes with an Implementation chapter that includes a matrix of plan policies.

Every Voice

The name, HoCo By Design, was derived with the following in mind:

- “HoCo” is a colloquialism used by those with ties to Howard County. It makes the “new” General Plan feel familiar and underscores the importance of thinking locally and from within the community about the best path forward.
- “By Design” was included in the name as it succinctly demonstrates that the Plan is crafted and shaped with great intentionality, and its development and implementation will require just as much art as it does science to protect and promote the character of Howard County.

The project’s slogan, “Every Voice, One Vision” set the tone for the planning process.

- County officials wanted to hear from every voice in Howard County to forge a collective vision for the future of the community.
- To maximize participation in the planning process, the HoCo By Design project team took a comprehensive approach to engagement and used various mediums—advisory groups, focus groups, public meetings, and online surveys—to reach numerous community organizations, interest groups, government boards and commissions, and the general public.
- Throughout the HoCo By Design planning process the community was asked about what was most important to them. Engagement initiatives were customized for both populations traditionally engaged in planning processes, and for people and organizations historically under-represented in planning.

Throughout the process, materials documenting the engagement efforts and feedback were posted on the project website, including: an Engagement Summary encompassing the variety of public involvement activities; a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Focus Groups Summary showcasing this central effort to ensure the Plan reflected a cross-section of voices from the community; and a Comment Log listing the many thousands of thoughts received through the process. While the Department of Planning and Zoning made many efforts to engage the community, only 3,000 individuals (1% of the County’s population) actively engaged in the process.



Advisory Groups

Planning Advisory Committee

To initiate the planning process, a 33-member Planning Advisory Committee (PAC) was appointed by the County Executive and Council, which represented community leaders, service providers, industry groups, and the general public. They served as a sounding board to the project team about the community’s needs and desires in the development of the General Plan. PAC members assisted in developing and identifying planning themes, reviewing data and recommendations, and serving as ambassadors for the process.

The PAC also assisted in developing the Future Land Use Map (FLUM) and contributing to recommendations in this General Plan. Specific topics to which members contributed include: the Preserve-Strengthen-Enhance-Transform (P-S-E-T) framework, character area typologies, transportation and water-sewer infrastructure, a growth allocation framework, and growth management strategies.

Technical Advisory Group

The Technical Advisory Group (TAG) consisted of Howard County department staff and partner organizations who are considered subject matter and institutional experts. The HoCo By Design project team consulted with TAG members regularly to verify and validate key findings, ideas, data, and reports.

Strategic Advisory Groups

During the Spring of 2021, three Strategic Advisory Groups (SAGs) were formed to delve into specific opportunities and challenges identified through the planning process. Each SAG comprised a multi-disciplinary group of experts that acted as advisors to the project team, similar to policy think tanks. The SAGs addressed the three different topic areas listed below.



Schools: Planning for School Capacity and Growth



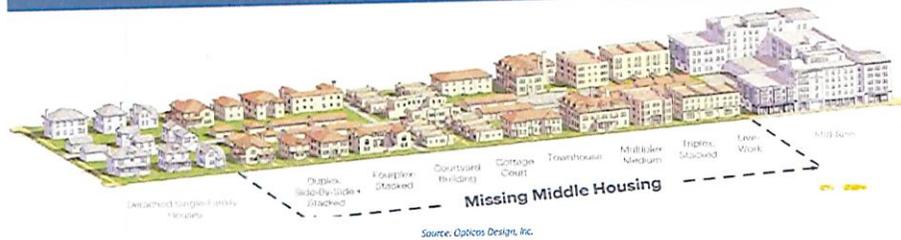
Environment: Examining Climate Change and Natural Resources



Housing: Diversifying Housing Stock and Creating Opportunities for “Missing Middle Housing”

Missing Middle

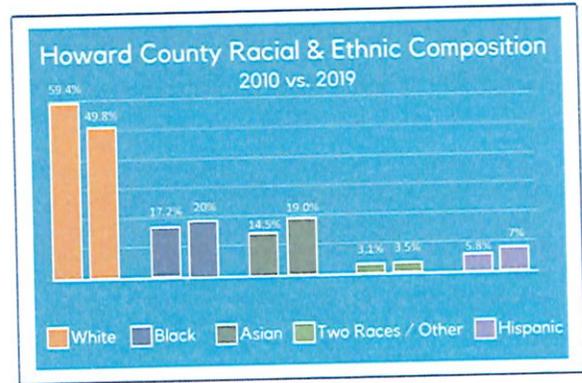
The concept of missing middle housing is referenced throughout the Plan. It is a housing strategy that is intended to create more diverse housing opportunities for our increasingly socioeconomically diverse County. Providing more housing choices is important to support the County's workforce and its future economic development. For the purposes of the General Plan, missing middle housing refers to a range of small- to medium-size home choices that seek to offer different price points for residents living in Howard County. Homes are compatible in scale and character with surrounding neighborhoods, or integrated into new or existing activity centers throughout the County as a transition between different land uses or building types. Missing middle homes may be represented by a single, multi-unit building on a single lot, a multi-unit building on multiple lots, or a cluster of homes oriented around a common green space.



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Howard County continues to be a racially and ethnically diverse place with a growing multicultural community. According to the latest American Community Survey (ACS) (2019), 49.8% of Howard County residents are White, 20% are African American, 19% are Asian, and 7% are Hispanic. Within each of these racial groups, various ethnicities and identities are represented.

As the County becomes more diverse, elected officials have responded by committing to initiatives such as the Racial Equity Task Force and establishing the County's first Equity and Restorative Practices Unit.



In 2020, the County Council voted to approve CR142-2020, legislation establishing the first Racial Equity Task Force for Howard County. The Task Force was charged with recommending legislation to the County Council to address racial disparities and inequities in Howard County. Comprised of over 60 experts, community leaders, students, and activists, the Racial Equity Task Force identified and evaluated actions that the County Council could pursue to advance racial equity in Howard County. The Task Force focused on racial equity in personal and public safety, land-use and housing policy, economic and workforce development, public health and environmental policy, education, and legislative processes.

The Equity and Restorative Practices Unit, established under County Executive Calvin Ball, uses an equity-centered lens to infuse concepts of equity in the County's service delivery, decision-making, and resource distributions. In collaboration with an Equity Advisory Committee, established in 2021, the Unit will be developing a 3-year strategic plan to help make Howard County Government a more equitable and inclusive workplace and service provider to County residents.

It should also be noted that diversity, equity, and inclusion are being integrated into various County policies, plans, and departments. A few examples include the Howard County Complete Streets Policy, which incorporates an Equity Emphasis Area Index, the Howard County Climate Action Plan, and the 2022 Howard County Recreation and Parks Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan (LPPRP), which incorporated an equity lens for making recommendations about park access. Generally speaking, both the Complete Streets and LPPRP initiatives focus on ensuring equitable access to County resources. Additionally, the Department of Community Resources and Services has been leading various efforts and programs to better serve the needs of the County's diverse population.

a regional Focus on Equity

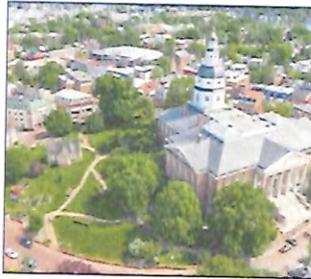
Across the region, jurisdictions are leveraging planning, decision-making, and resource allocation processes to create more equitable policies and programs.

Anne Arundel: Plan2040's policies work together to shape a future for Anne Arundel County that is "Green, Smart, and Equitable". Social and racial equity concerns are addressed throughout the goals, policies, and strategies in a way that is inclusive of all residents, prioritizes investment in historically underserved and under-resourced communities, and removes barriers that limit people's opportunities based on who they are or where they live in the County.

Baltimore City: The Planning Department created an Equity in Action Plan in 2017, which will inform their forthcoming comprehensive plan update in 2022. Since 2019, staff have assessed the equity of the Baltimore Capital Improvement Program, the capital budget of the City, by analyzing investments using neighborhood and demographic indicators.

Baltimore County: Master Plan 2030 will be built around the following principles: equity, sustainability, and vibrant communities. The Plan defines equity as "Being inclusive in our decision-making, ensuring equitable distribution of resources and creating opportunity for all" with a focus on vibrant communities, which ensures all residents have access to high-quality, accessible, and affordable housing.

Montgomery County: Thrive Montgomery 2050's three outcomes are economic health, community equity, and environmental resilience, which have specific recommendations to support them woven throughout the Plan. The outcome of Equitable Communities aims to create a place where all residents have equal access to attainable housing, healthy foods, employment, transportation, education, and more.



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and HoCo By Design

To ensure that the HoCo By Design planning process reflected the values, needs, and priorities of all residents, a specific focus was placed on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This meant that greater efforts were made to ensure that diverse perspectives and voices were heard, people felt included and a part of the planning process, and the outcomes of the process (policies and implementing actions) provided more equitable opportunities for all.

Diversity

To ensure historically under-represented and diverse groups and communities were reached, the HoCo By Design project team conducted a series of focus groups that targeted specific segments of the population. In total, 15 focus groups were conducted in collaboration with 18 community-based organizations. The project team spoke with more than 100 participants who represented people with disabilities, small business owners, renters, students, young adults, nonprofit service providers, and people with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Key findings from these focus groups have been highlighted in the "What We Heard" section in the five planning themes—Ecological Health, County in Motion, Economic Prosperity, Dynamic Neighborhoods, and Quality By Design. However, the complete list of findings can be found in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Focus Group report available through the Department of Planning & Zoning.

Equity

HoCo By Design aspires to be a plan that creates a future ripe with opportunities for all people in all communities. Findings from focus groups that were held with diverse populations were shared with the Planning Advisory Committee, Strategic Advisory Groups, and the public so that all perspectives could be considered throughout the planning process. In this Plan, policies and implementing actions that could contribute to a more equitable future have been highlighted and are based on the findings from the focus groups, best practices, and other engagement activities.

Inclusion

HoCo by Design's overall engagement approach was to ensure that all residents and stakeholders had an opportunity to engage and feel included in the process. The project team chose to use a variety of forums and tools to engage these populations, such as On the Table informal discussion sessions, translated materials administered through the Howard County Library system, and focus groups. Our team found using an informal group format effective, as it allowed for greater flexibility in scheduling; more open, informal dialogue with trusted community-based organizations and government staff; and improved accessibility for residents with less experience participating in local government activities.



What Are Best Practices for Equity in Planning?

Traditionally, comprehensive plans have focused broadly on elements such as transportation and housing, but many contemporary General Plans have explicitly started to address equity considerations within those and other elements.

With increasing national and local attention on deeply rooted inequities in communities, plans can play a role in creating more equitable outcomes through all aspects of the built environment. The project team used guidance from local and national leaders in the community planning field, including the American Planning Association, to identify best practices in equity planning and incorporate them into HoCo By Design. Because General Plan updates occur at most every ten years, it is a crucial opportunity to confront disparities and create actionable approaches that will help level the playing field.

Equity in Action

The best practices listed below were used to help to identify which HoCo By Design policies and actions would contribute to a more equitable future, as it relates to land use, growth, and development.

- Reduce household energy costs with climate mitigation measures.
- Protect populations in vulnerable areas from natural hazards.
- Promote environmental justice.
- Plan for a jobs/housing balance.
- Plan for workforce diversity and development.
- Promote inclusive activation and programming of public spaces for a multicultural population.
- Address the needs of small, minority, **disabled, and women** owned businesses.
- Plan for access to healthy, locally grown foods for all neighborhoods.
- Support frequent, dependable transit options with emphasis on the needs of carless riders.
- Increase connected multi-modal infrastructure that provides access to jobs and amenities.
- Plan for physical activity and healthy lifestyles.
- Remove barriers to affordable housing in zoning and subdivision regulations.
- Provide a range of housing types.
- Ensure authentic spaces connected to community that facilitate cross-cultural interactions.
- Plan for improved health and safety for historically marginalized populations.
- Encourage documentation and preservation of historic resources connected to the history of people of color, women, immigrants, and other traditionally underrecognized members of the community.
- Take a comprehensive approach to mitigating the impacts of gentrification.



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“Planning for equity is intended to challenge those planning practices that result in policies, programs, and regulations that disproportionately impact and stymie the progress of certain segments of the population more than others. Done with intention, equity is a thread that is woven through the fabric of all plans, regulations, developments, and policy options.”

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—ARA Planning for Equity Policy Guide

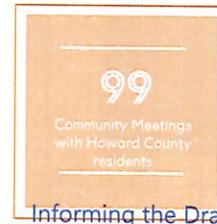
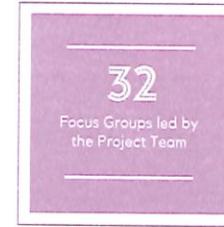
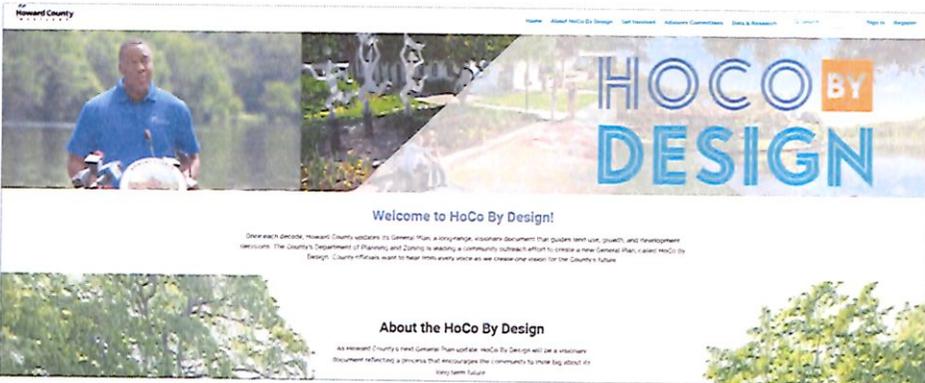
Adapting to COVID-19

Shortly after the HoCo By Design planning effort commenced, the entire County began to experience shutdowns due to the spread of COVID-19. This upheaval to daily life simultaneously provided both opportunities and challenges for engaging the community. Plans for public engagement were already heavily focused on the use of digital engagement tools. As the pandemic progressed, the project team continued to adapt to working in a virtual world and maximized the opportunities and benefits that this cultural shift offered.

Virtual meetings were well-attended, with participation far exceeding typical levels at pre-pandemic, in-person planning meetings. Project awareness was bolstered by a robust project website and social media presence. To supplement the digital outreach, fliers inviting public participation in the planning process accompanied approximately 80,000 water bills, yard signs were posted in County parks, and postcards were placed in local library pick up bags and Roving Radish meal kits.



HoCo By Design Planning Advisory Committee Meeting



Informing the Draft

Between July 2020 and ~~October 2021~~ February 2023, HoCo By Design engaged a wide spectrum of community stakeholders through its website, social media, email list, marketing materials, and public involvement activities. Details of the extensive public engagement used to inform the Plan are outlined in an Engagement Summary available on the project website. The metrics below offer a snapshot of outreach metrics in October 2021 (as detailed in the Engagement Summary that was posted on the project website).

The metrics below offer a snapshot of the results of the engagement:

- ~~8,446~~ 12,259 comments received from HoCo By Design participants across different events and surveys
- ~~78~~ 99 meetings with Howard County community members, including the general public, advisory groups, and focus groups
- ~~607~~ 721 followers on the Facebook group for HoCo By Design
- ~~4,704~~ 1,987 emails subscribed to HoCo By Design's email list via the project's website www.hocobydesign.com
- 81,225 fliers and postcards distributed through Roving Radish meal kits, at local libraries, and with residential utility bills
- ~~2,425~~ 2,864 attendees at HoCo By Design virtual and in-person events
- ~~28~~ 32 focus groups led by the project team

HoCo By Design's engagement efforts continued in 2022, when the County released draft planning theme chapters one at a time for feedback from March to September. Ten public meetings, one Planning Advisory Committee meeting, and five online comment forms were offered to collect input. The HoCo By Design team also met with over nine community boards and commissions. Additionally, the team attended the ArtReach event at Long Reach Village Center and the Change in Columbia speaker series hosted by the Columbia Association at Slayton House to increase awareness of the HoCo By Design effort and planning theme activities. To collect feedback on the public draft plan, HoCo By Design continued to engage community stakeholders through a comment form, Planning Advisory Committee meeting, and an Equity Open House event, between December 2022 and January 2023. As a result of these efforts, by February 2023, outreach and engagement metrics increased to nearly 100 total meetings, 1,834 survey responses, 12,259 total comments collected through the process, 721 Facebook followers, and 1,987 emails subscribed to the HoCo By Design email list.

One Vision

Howard County is a welcoming and inclusive community that residents are proud to call home. People are drawn here by a top-tier school system, thriving neighborhoods, an abundance of open space, innovative and prosperous businesses, and quality recreational, cultural, and housing opportunities accessible to all. An increasingly diverse community works to ensure Howard County remains inclusive and accessible to all.

Howard County offers “a little of everything” from the old to the new—historic crossroad hamlets and rural landscapes, working farms and natural open space, thriving suburbs and walkable neighborhoods, community-serving village centers, and a growing urban downtown. The eclectic mix of environments offers access to shopping, restaurants, and a wide range of activities. In less than thirty minutes, residents can pick produce in an orchard, drive through rolling pastoral hills, visit local small businesses on a quaint, historic main street, view a concert in a large outdoor amphitheater, enjoy a world-class library, or visit a well-maintained public park.

Our collective vision is to accommodate future growth in a manner that retains and improves upon the unique and diverse community character of Howard County. We will continue to support, promote, and act toward creating a community grounded in civility, sustainable development patterns, environmental stewardship, and well-maintained supporting infrastructure.

Policies and investments in the Rural West and the Planned Service area in the east will respect and prioritize the natural environment, historic resources and agricultural heritage, diverse cultures and people, and established community character in an equitable, predictable, sustainable, and achievable way for generations to come. Commitments to renew, reinvest, or rebuild targeted areas of the County must be balanced with the infrastructure needed to support communities in a timely, and fiscally-responsible manner.

Ultimately, the General Plan’s relevance will be measured by its implementation. The County is committed to making this vision and its supporting principles a reality.

