

Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan: Area II

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Setting and Historical Notes

Fairfax County, Virginia has experienced extremely rapid development and population growth, beginning with the post-World War II boom (Table 1). Comprising slightly less than 400 mi² of land (about 1000 km²) in the western Washington, D.C. suburbs, it is endowed with environmental diversity and a rich cultural and historical heritage; the County has become an important part of the business and political capitals.

Year	Population
1940	40,929
1950	98,557
1960	275,002
1970	455,021
1980	596,901
1990	818,584
2000	969,683
2009	1,037,605

Table 1: Fairfax County Population
(sources: [Forstall95] and [Census11])

After a 20-fold expansion in a 50-year period, growth has begun to slow somewhat in the past two decades, as nearly all available land has been built on. The challenge for planners is to expand the housing supply (55% of the current stock is single-family detached units) and to manage infill development and redevelopment, especially in areas centered on Metrorail stations.

Heretofore, the story of locating rail stations in Fairfax County and managing the growth around them has been one of missed opportunities; planners and politicians have emphasized cheap right-of-way and avoidance of political conflict [Schrag06]. Now, with Phase I of Silver Line construction in full swing, the County has an opportunity to reimagine Tysons Corner, to

encourage transit-oriented development in this auto-dominated edge city.

This paper considers in some detail the Comprehensive Plan guidance for four parts of the County's Area II: Vienna Transit Station, McLean Community Business Center, West Falls Church Transit Station, and Tysons Corner Urban Center.

Organization of the Comprehensive Plan

Planning as a discipline began in Fairfax County in the 1950s. In its current form, the Policy Plan (first adopted in 1990) [Fairfax07a] specifies county-wide planning objectives in order to meet goals established by the governing body, the Board of Supervisors. First among those goals is "an outstanding quality of life." The Policy Plan breaks out functional plans for eleven areas; in addition to the expected areas of transportation, housing, etc., are the noteworthy areas of heritage resources and visual and performing arts. Also, a Commonwealth-mandated Chesapeake Bay Supplement addresses such areas as water pollution and shoreline protection; the County has earned "Gold" certification as a Bay partner community.

Graphically, the Concept Map for Future Development provides a big-picture summary of past and future. Rather than follow the oft-prescribed corridors-and-wedges pattern of development, the built environment consists of roughly concentric rings, with two bands of relatively low-scale development: one mid-county and another along the southwestern boundary, following the Occoquan River. Another striking pattern: while Fairfax County has a compact outer boundary, its interior is punctuated by several large enclaves that escape the purview of County planners, chief among these the City of Fairfax (separated from the County in 1962), the Towns of Herndon and Vienna, Washington Dulles International Airport, George Mason University, and Fort Belvoir.

Two other maps complete the county-level plans, the Transportation Plan [Fairfax06] and the Trails Plan [Fairfax02]. The Transportation Plan calls out roads that have won Virginia Byway designation (e.g., Hunter Mill Road, Route 674). The Byways are "road corridors containing aesthetic or cultural value near areas of historical, natural, or recreational significance." [VDOT10] While the designation carries few definite land use restrictions, the expectation is that localities zone to maintain the scenic value of the highway and the diversity of motorist experiences.

For more detailed recommendations, the County is divided into four areas, each with their own plan documents. Area II [Fairfax07b] comprises three Planning Districts: McLean, Vienna, and Fairfax, and

covers land from the Potomac River to south of Fairfax City. Each of the Districts is divided into several Community Planning Sectors (CPS) (denoted by a letter-number code). Portions of land designated for special planning documentation may cut across Sector boundaries (e.g., Flint Hill Suburban Center, which is part of sectors F3 and F4).

Obstacles to Effective Planning

County planners face various obstacles in the path of designing and implementing improvements to the built environment and residents' way of life.

Regional authorities largely ineffective: In 2008, a multi-county authority that would have provided funding for transportation projects was sidelined by the Supreme Court of Virginia, which held that the elected body had not the power to tax [Coombs08], although some may argue that the authority was too heavily pro-highways. The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, representing nearly two dozen jurisdictions across the Commonwealth, the District of Columbia, and the State of Maryland, has no political, fiscal, or regulatory authority; in the view of Roger K. Lewis, it is no more than a well-intentioned cheerleader [Lewis10]. On the other hand, the functional plan for parks and recreation [Fairfax07a] endorses the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority (one of nine organizations responsible for various green spaces in the County) in its efforts to perform long-range open space planning and to supplement and enhance local park systems.

Cooperation with multiple entities at all levels: The timing and placement of public school facilities must be worked out in cooperation with the School Board, which has the final say [Fairfax07a]. As noted above, the County must negotiate with various federal, Commonwealth, and other organizations regarding planning for large tracts of land within Fairfax's borders.

Limited County powers, by Constitution: The question of self-determination in the matter of zoning and growth management is vexed. Though some argue that Virginia, being a Dillon's Rule state, goes too far in limiting localities' efforts to curb sprawl (by such means as a requirement that public infrastructure be in place before a property can be developed), Jesse L. Richardson, Jr., [Richardson00] makes the case that only state-level management can be effective. However, the chilly relations between Northern Virginia and Richmond make Commonwealth action in this area very unlikely.

In any event, resourceful, aggressive individuals, among them lawyer-turned-developer John T. ("Til") Hazel, have been effective in using the courts to remove development barriers [Garreau91]. For instance, in 1972 Hazel overturned a moratorium on rezonings that was intended to give planners time to draft five-year strategic-level plans.

Environmental Quality Corridors

Beyond the protections afforded by Resource Protection Areas (RPAs) per the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Ordinance, Environmental Quality Corridors (EQCs) extend management into additional stream channels and their vegetated riparian buffers. Land can be included in an EQC if it offers any of the following: preservation or restoration of habitat, e.g., for endangered species; connectivity for wildlife movement; improved hydrology or stream buffering; or pollution reduction. Developers are incented to place lands under EQC protection by partial transfer of density rights.

Area II Plan

At a conceptual level, plans for land use are structured into the Land Classification System, a suite of categories [Fairfax07b]:

- Suburban Neighborhoods: the County's "stable residential neighborhoods;" 0.5-1.0 du/ac to 16-20 du/ac
- Low Density Residential Areas: serve to protect environmentally sensitive areas; 0.1-0.2 du/ac to 0.2-0.5 du/ac
- Suburban Centers: low- to moderate-intensity office, retail, and residential; 0.30-0.80 FAR (core), 0.15-0.30 FAR (non-core)
- Community Business Centers: retail, office, cultural, and residential in a "community-scale, pedestrian-oriented setting;" 0.70 FAR (core), 0.20-0.50 FAR (non-core)
- Transit Station Areas; 0.30-2.0 FAR, 8-45 du/ac
- Industrial Areas
- Large Institutional Land Areas
- Tysons Corner Urban Center: a one-of-a-kind category

The distinction between Suburban Centers and Community Business Centers is subtle. Judging from the Concept Map, it would seem that in the former, office parks predominate, while in the latter, strip malls and convenience retail are more common.

Area II is divided into approximately 20 CPSs, overlaid by

- McLean Planning District
 - McLean Community Business Center
 - West Falls Church Transit Station Area
- Tysons Corner Urban Center (part of McLean Planning District)
- Vienna Planning District
 - Vienna Transit Station Area
- Fairfax Planning District
 - Flint Hill Suburban Center

Merrifield Suburban Center and Fairfax Center Area lie partly within Area II, but are documented as part of other Areas. As for the CPSs, all carry a Concept for Future Development as some combination of Suburban Neighborhoods and Low Density Residential Areas, with the exception of F7: George Mason CPS, which is mostly a Large Institutional Land Area. There are no significant Industrial Areas in Area II.

Each of the three Planning Districts catalogue and map their heritage resources, such as Eight Oaks, one of the few remaining nineteenth-century farmhouses in the County. Many of these are listed with the National Register of Historic Places and/or the Virginia Landmarks Register and are protected by Historic Overlay Districts.

The plans for the West Falls Church and Vienna Transit Station Areas seek to intensify development on nearby available tracts while gingerly avoiding disruption to "stable neighborhoods" close to their respective Metro stations.

For West Falls Church's Land Unit A, a potential adult education center is under consideration, to be developed as a partnership among WMATA, the City of Falls Church, and private owners. Admirably, one of the conditions specified is tree preservation, per recommendations of the County Arborist, including "every effort to preserve a specimen Sycamore tree located at the center of the site." ([Fairfax07b], McLean Planning District, p. 84) The plan analyzes pedestrian movement: a diamond-shaped plaza is called for at the intersection of three axes of circulation, serving as a gateway to the station environs from Haycock Road.

Present development around the Vienna terminus of the Orange Line is less dense, in most places 5-8 du/ac, and a network of feeder roads and ramps connects with Interstate 66 (the West Falls Church station has no direct expressway connection). Land Unit C is 70 acres of consolidated parcels that include the former Fairlee subdivision. A four-lane Vaden Drive Extended is planned through this Unit, providing a direct connection to Lee Highway and (it is hoped) reducing traffic pressure on other routes. In addition to a Residential Baseline, options are available for more intense development of Unit C: a Residential Option and a Metro-oriented Mixed Use Option. The Metro Option calls for additional parcel consolidation and a partnered development of 3 ac of WMATA-owned property, currently in surface parking; building heights step in three tiers from 110-135 ft at Saintsbury Drive down to 90-105 ft at the quarter-mile radius.

By contrast, McLean Community Business Center is focused on the old crossroads of Old Dominion Drive and Chain Bridge Road; a bypass parallel to Chain Bridge Road is Dolley Madison Boulevard (Route 123), and it serves to mark the district's northwestern edge. Low-density strip-style retail lines the major streets in the area, and it is not surprising that planners have crafted specifications to strengthen the sense of place in downtown McLean. To that end, ambitious changes to vehicle and pedestrian traffic patterns are indicated, chief among them a new (privately-owned) "Main Street" perpendicular to Chain Bridge Road, and a traffic circle at the old crossroads. The Main Street is anchored at one end by one of several "Civic Places." The plan is somewhat open-ended about the nature of these Civic Places, but the relocation of Dolley Madison Library is discussed. It's unfortunate that the planning area does not extend across Route 123, where just to the north are already a community center and parkland. An extensive separate document ("McLean Open Space Design Standards") specifies the urban design via a mix of concept-level pattern language elements and quite detailed specs for brick pavers and street furniture.

The redevelopment of Tysons Corner Urban Center, to whatever degree it is ultimately realized, will be a substantial undertaking. Located at the highest natural point in the County, Tysons comprises a triangle of about 2100 ac (850 ha) situated at the convergence¹ of two expressways (the Capital Beltway [Interstate 495] and the Dulles Airport Access and Toll Roads [Route 267]) and two major highways (Leesburg Pike [Route 7] and Chain Bridge Road [Route 123]). Within that area, at the turn of the decade, there are 46 million ft² of office and retail space and 167,000 parking spaces taking up nearly as much space, 40 million ft². As Table 2 indicates, the edge city provides 105,000 jobs but is home to only 17,000 residents. At present, the auto-dependent, widely-dispersed shopping and office space is served by conventional, commuter, and shuttle bus service operated by at least three jurisdictions, but it is the coming of Metrorail's "Silver Line" that will transform the streetscape. Four stations, two each along Routes 7 and 123, are scheduled to open in 2013.

To capitalize upon the opportunity to make Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) a success, last summer the Board of Supervisors adopted amendments to the Area II plan ([Fairfax07b], "Tysons Corner Urban Center") as well as the Zoning Ordinance, establishing the Planned Tysons Corner Urban District.

The vision of this plan includes the transformation of Tysons into "a 24/7 urban center marked by the diversity of residents and workers, a wide range of ideas, opportunities, and activities, the quality of buildings, aesthetics, and open spaces, and connections and accessibility for all." (p. 6) Though the planning focus of the document is two decades, it may take 40 years to substantially accomplish the plan objectives. Over that period, the plan calls for the jobs-residents ratio to move into closer balance, from a lopsided 13 jobs per household in 2010, to 4 jobs per household in 2050 (Table 2).

¹ According to [Garreau91], p. 377, the placement of Tysons Corner was by chance. Highway engineers choosing the route of the Capital Beltway in the 1950s did not recognize that the triple crossroads of I-495 and Routes 7 and 123 offered easy driving access to Tysons Corner from anywhere in the region.

Year	Population (000)	Jobs (000)	Jobs/ household
2010	17	105	13
2020	31	140	
2030	44	167	
2040	64	189	
2050	100	200	4

Table 2: Tysons Corner Population and Jobs, Actual and Projected

The plan divides Tysons into eight districts, one each for the four Metro stations, and four to be developed less intensively.

The plan's most striking alteration of the status quo is the filling in of the current superblocks with a grid-influenced pattern of surface streets, with block lengths of 400-600 ft (120-180 m) and designed to "complete street" standards (sidewalks, bike lanes, etc.).

Routes 123 and 7, designated Boulevards in the plan, would swell to eight travel lanes, but also be tree-lined and built to the building line. (Curiously, there is no accounting in the plan for the fact that Metro tracks will be elevated above significant portions of these two roads.) New interchanges with the roads to Dulles Airport are on the map. A bicycle master plan study has been initiated, but (in my opinion) cycling will see limited adoption, given some of the area's steep grades (e.g., the west end of Westpark Drive). Near Metro stations, minimum parking specs are replaced with maximum parking requirements to reduce the current oversupply. Nevertheless, despite Transit Demand Management (TDM) measures, Tysons may still face an onslaught of vehicles. The plan provides for monitoring vehicle trips and suggests the prospect of congestion pricing (p. 71) – relatively easy to accomplish, since there are a limited number of entry points. A concept-level route map for circulators is drawn; there is an optimistic but uncertain path of development from buses running on shared right of way (signal priority is called for) to some kind of dedicated right of way system (bus or light rail).

Buildings built to maximum heights in the four Metro station districts will soar above the current skyline, topping out at 400 feet (120 m). However, two distinctive gateway buildings, a Sheraton hotel (215 feet, 65 m) and the Phillip Johnson-designed Tycon Tower (205 feet, 62 m) – perhaps the only two buildings in Tysons of architectural distinction – are protected against overshadowing.

Preservation and expansion of green space falls mainly to the West Side and East Side districts, building on their present Old Courthouse and Scotts Run Stream Valley Parks, respectively. Ambitiously, expansion of the tree canopy cover beyond the current 20% is planned. Thought is given to how to provide the projected 20 new athletic fields that the new residents will require; the planners' suggestion of rooftop fields with artificial turf seems unlikely to come to fruition, in my view. The heights of Tysons Corner form the headwaters of several County watersheds, and present a stormwater management challenge. A goal is set to retain on-site and/or reuse the first inch of rainfall. Low Impact Development (LID) techniques may be required.

The plan designates the Tysons West district as an arts and entertainment district, but otherwise is thin on details about how this will come about. Even more than big-ticket performing arts venues, an arts district needs cheap, flexible space for fledging organizations. Planners should follow the lead of 1st Stage Theater, which has converted low-density warehouse/retail space on Spring Hill Road into an attractive black box theater. Similarly, the guidance for the placement of a "centrally located signature park" in one of the civic plazas is somewhat vague, as is the location of public buildings. Relocation/replacement of the current Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library is mooted. Something else that's missing: a tourist magnet not dependent on retail, like a major museum, would put the 7 in the 24/7 equation.

Considerable thought towards implementation strategies and tactics has been given. The plan calls for a Tysons-wide Community Development Authority (CDA) as well as district-level CDAs. The CDAs would provide some of the funds for transportation improvements. A "keeper of the vision" agency is identified as the implementation entity, though it's not clear how this agency will be constituted. A detailed timeline of the phasing of transportation improvements (pp. 68-69) matches infrastructure to development. Public-private partnerships and "private-private" partnerships (e.g., cooperation among landowners, parcel consolidation, coordinated development plans) are key to the implementation strategy.

Futures

The prospects for the success of what we might call "Tysons 2.0" are uncertain. Economic forecasts remain somewhat gloomy – very little might get built at all. The new plans and zoning regs have not yet undergone court challenges. The plan's reliance on private-private partnerships might prove unrealistic. Meanwhile, the great impervious surface that is today's Tysons Corner continues to stress area watersheds.

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