

**mTap: Route 1 Corridor-Alexandria**

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**Summary of the Problem:** In preparation for a future Small Area Plan, the Department of Planning and Zoning in the City of Alexandria requested a technical assistance panel to address a section of Route 1, immediately off of 495 as it enters into Alexandria. Currently, Route 1 is a highly congested 6 lane road that splits residential areas. Key issues include the lack of a “gateway” into Alexandria and Old town, the potential loss of affordable housing along Route 1, underutilized properties, and a lack of an inviting public realm. The mTap team considered those issues as it sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What types of land uses and building types would maximize redevelopment of key sites (while respecting the surrounding character of the neighborhoods)?
- 2) What short and long term improvements would facilitate the revitalization of Route 1 into a welcoming gateway in the City?
- 3) What regional or national examples could serve as revitalization models?



**Approach:** Team members met with key staff members in March 2017 and followed up with a site tour of the corridor. The team reviewed all relevant planning documents for the study area, including Small Area Plans and citywide plans for transportation and housing. Additional data sources including zoning and land use documents, ESRI and CoStar data. The team also researched local and national examples of similar corridors for ideas on urban design and creating a gateway. A comprehensive set of recommendations was developed to address land use, enhance the public realm, create a gateway and replace existing affordable housing.

**Existing Conditions:** The current land use and zoning along route 1 at key development sites is classified as medium residential which is intended for garden style multifamily with a height limit of generally 35-45 feet. There are three commercially zoned sites on Route 1 in the study area which includes two gas stations on the East side and low density commercial development on the west side with surface parking. Residential development is on both the east and west sides of Route 1. On the west side, the residential development is typically characterized as individually owned townhomes. The eastside has several hundred low rise/garden style affordable housing units at risk of being lost through expiring vouchers. High speed traffic and congestion on Route 1 has a negative impact on the pedestrian experience for those traveling along or across the corridor. In spite of the significant use of Route 1 as an entry point into the City, the corridor has a distinct lack of place and no notable “gateway” signaling an arrival into Old Town.

## **Recommendations:**

- Land Use/Zoning recommendations:
  - For key residential sites on the east side of Route 1 and key commercial sites, change the current land uses to “commercial mixed use”
  - Future development should be built out to a 2.5 FAR in order to effectively replace the existing affordable units, as well as add more market rate housing and potential ground floor retail uses
  - Encourage mixed use development on the gas station sites that retain and incorporate the gas station use, based on regional developments that successfully integrated the use
  - Utilize proffers to offset the potential impacts of increased height and density to support affordable housing subsidies and improvements to the public realm or other community benefits.
  - Look to regional developments as examples of how these densities and heights along highly trafficked travelways can succeed. Specifically what was done in Merrifield, Rockville Town Center, and Bethesda south of NIH.
  
- Public Realm/Gateway:
  - Implement a “road diet” to transition traffic flow on approach into Old Town
  - Create a new tree-lined median as an attractive gateway and traffic calming strategy
  - Enhance east-west connections through use of pedestrian refuges along proposed median
  - Incorporate bioretention elements to the median to enhance sustainability
  - Add artistic elements into the sound wall and at the couplet split to anchor corridor gateway
  - Through future redevelopment, create a more inviting “street wall” of new buildings with active ground floor uses and attractive streetscaping, wayfinding, street furniture and lighting
  
- Community Engagement:
  - Through the Small Area Plan, initiate a branding exercise with community members to understand how the residents view the area and how best to “brand” the area as a gateway into Alexandria
  - Employ a wide variety of engagement tools including online, smart phones and radio, both within the community but also to the broader surrounding area
  
- Next Steps - Market/Development Analysis:
  - Analyze vacancy rates and absorption of potential proposed uses
  - Examine viability of car-oriented retail uses
  - Conduct a pro-forma analysis to find the “tipping point” –amount of affordable housing that can be produced without subsidy
  - Determine how much subsidy the City is able to invest to fund additional units
  - Expand the future SAP boundary to include both sides of Washington Street