

MEMORANDUM

To: Lisa Rother, Jacqueline Canales, Becca Hertz

From: Deborah Albert, Martha Coello, Allison Davis, Daniel Park, Harry Ross

RE: Quince Orchard/Firstfield Corridor, Gaithersburg, MD mTAP

Date: May 17, 2017

Introduction. The Quince Orchard/Firstfield Corridor comprises 74 acres in the City of Gaithersburg, bounded by Clopper and Quince Orchard Roads. Since the 1960s, the area has been targeted for employment. Three major landowners dominate the site: Federal Realty Investment Trust, Rock Creek Property Group and Alexandria Realty. The 2009 Master Plan shows the area as mainly commercial and industrial-research-office uses. Zoning is generally consistent with the planned land uses, including the C-2 (General Commercial) and E-1 (Urban Employment). However, in 2016, the center portion of the site was rezoned to MXD (Mixed Use Development) to allow 600,000 sf of commercial uses (with a focus on lab/office, retail/restaurant, medical office and hotel) and residential uses. The area has successfully attracted biotech research and development companies. It is close to I-270, but lacks convenient transit. Most buildings were built in the 1970s and 1980s, and while well-maintained, there has been little reinvestment or expansion. The 2016 mixed-use rezoning led the City to ask whether employment should remain the area's focus.



The Firstfield Corridor team was asked to consider a broad range of questions, as follows:

- How can reinvestment in aging light industrial, flex, and Class B office be encouraged?
- What regulatory mechanisms could engage partners and support reinvestment?
- What capital improvements and collaborative actions will best connect various uses?
- What tools could stimulate adaptive reuse of under-performing commercial buildings?
- Should the character/direction of this corridor change from employment?

Approach and Research. The team reviewed relevant documents to understand the policy and regulatory framework, including the land use plan, zoning ordinance and strategic plan, and local and regional transportation context. The team walked the site with City staff and interviewed Alexandria Realty and Federal Realty to gain their insight. Alexandria wants to maintain full occupancy, while minimizing investments and maximizing profits. Federal Realty sees redevelopment opportunities in the 15-year timeframe. Both noted challenges of congestion and lack of transit, identity, and amenities/connectivity between and among the uses.

Finally, the team researched strategies on visioning, land use planning, economic development, business improvement districts, branding, marketing, preserving industrial lands, and compatible uses and design. Recommendations were developed focusing on what the city can do to ensure they are ready for future redevelopment/investment by the developers.

Recommendations. The team made recommendations in five areas, discussed further below.

Identity: Collaborate with the community to create a vision. The area needs a clear identity, which can be developed through a visioning process. The study area can be expanded to incorporate nearby residential communities. Additional stakeholders should include City officials and staff, business owners, employees and developers. Creative engagement strategies could include walkshops, charettes, on-line decision tools, and design workshops.

Consistency: Create an area plan based on that vision. An area plan should address vehicular and pedestrian connectivity, the Firstfield Corridor and land use relationships. An area-wide traffic study is warranted. The plan should address inter-parcel connectivity among all the uses and a modified road section for Firstfield road to further characterize the corridor. Two conceptual land use scenarios were proposed to consolidate density on the R&D parcels; add limited residential development; create a campus ‘feel’ by developing nodes and public spaces to bridge sites; consolidate building bulk at the roadway; and reduce parking ratios to allow for increased open space between buildings.

Amenities: Evaluate and realign the Zoning Ordinance to implement the vision. Adding a targeted purpose to the E-1 zoning district, limiting its general office and retail/restaurant use, and diversifying the use list with compatible uses such as breweries, distilleries, industrial catering, technology incubator and maker spaces can reinforce the vision. Reducing the E-1 district’s setbacks and parking ratios would allow design recommendations to be implemented.

Connectivity: Develop a branding and marketing strategy. The City should distinguish the Firstfield Corridor in its master planning and strategic planning documents. The economic development website can promote the area’s biotech success and position it as a R&D destination. The beginnings of a brand based on existing qualities include R&D uses, employment, proximity to NIST, the Gaithersburg Accelerator, and potential connections to the broader residential neighborhood. While a Business Improvement District is premature, a stakeholder council could be developed to focus on developing a brand for the area. Furthermore, financial incentives can be extended to specifically apply to this area.

Transportation: Encourage Citywide investments. The team identified some broader opportunities for investment that would benefit the city and the study area such as:

- Running a shuttle to connect nearby amenities and reduce car trips;
- Advocating to the County and State to advance the Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT); and
- Promoting existing conference facilities to local employers as an attractive amenity.