The City of Fall Church sought a ULI mTAP to explore the potential for joint development of the City of Falls Church Property Yard with adjacent private properties including those on adjacent parcels in Fairfax County.

The Assignment
Specifically, the City wanted to get a better understanding of the following:

1. What transportation and urban design elements are necessary to integrate this area with the nearby W & OD Trail, and make it a walkable, attractive, and accessible to downtown Falls Church?

2. What strategies exist for combining the Property Yard site with adjacent private properties (such as the Beyer Volvo Properties) in a mutually beneficial joint development project that retains the Property Yard?

3. What are the highest and best uses of these parcels over the next decade and longer term?

4. What are the regional implications for investing in the Gordon Road Triangle?

The Approach
After meeting with City staff, and touring the site to clearly understand both the short-term and long-term needs of the city, it became clear that certain constraints are in place for the full redevelopment of the study area. However, the team has identified certain redevelopment strategies that will allow the area to redevelop and transition over time. Additional design elements are intended to aid with the proximity of the public works type uses with the potential for more mixed use type redevelopment. The overall approach included a City staff presentation, on-site meeting(s), market area review, transportation needs analysis, identification of urban design opportunities, and development of a land plan concept.

THE RESEARCH
The Gordon Triangle offers great opportunities for mixed-use development. To avoid creating an oversupply of retail space, the City should think expansively about how retail is defined so as not to preclude non-traditional uses in retail space. The in-line buildings along Broad Street make the Gordon Triangle a natural destination for local-serving goods and services. Rather than adding more stores and restaurants, which will not be supported by demand, developers can fill the space with services that support the community and activate the space but are not traditional retail, such as doctor or dentist offices, architecture offices, daycare, children’s education, vets, pet salons, accountants, and storefront churches.

The office demand analysis points to a very specific office market opportunity in health care and social services (medical office). Due to the changing demographics and aging population, there is a market-supported, near term opportunity to create senior housing connected to medical office space and/or a continuing care retirement type community.

The WMATA-developed walkshed analysis and the walkscore analysis data indicate that Fall Church’s regional assets are not fully utilized. These assets will be best leveraged through enhanced placemaking. Suggested best practices include: 1) participation in Capital Bikeshare, 2) striping of bike lanes at strategic locations, 3) wayfinding improvements, and 4) walkability enhancements at the West Falls Church Metro station. These recommendations should be approved as a package for the largest return on investment.
Recommendations

- Annexation of the remaining land east of Shreve Road and into the study area is necessary to allow for the best urban design and implementation to occur. A developer should not have to straddle multiple jurisdictional lines that are essentially arbitrary at this point and forego proper planning and land use for the sake of one set of code regulations over another. Any issues with the form and function of the current county land should be identified and with proper design can be accommodated. It is doubtful that any other use will be as impacting as the current use almost entirely consisting of impervious parking lots.

- While many prior studies recommended Gordon Road be extended through the site and connect directly to Broad Street, we suggest a different approach. Due to the fact that the City Public Works Yard and the heavier uses will remain in some form on a portion of the triangle, providing a direct connection through the core of this area is not recommended. Instead these uses can be better managed and be less intrusive to any redeveloped mixed uses by limiting their access to Shreve Road. However, a gridded street network as depicted on the bubble plan provides creates approximately seven land bays 1-2 acres in size each.

- Consider ‘land swaps’ that consolidate Beyer ownership and carefully site the road network to maximize the private developable land bays.

- Expand on the existing trail access point as the corner nearest to the bridge, perhaps creating a pocket park as a trail head/entrance.

- Provide connections into the site that would tie directly into the core commercial tenants in the vicinity of Broad Street and Birch Street.

- Fully utilize community assets that are regional in nature, by promoting Falls Church through placemaking; consideration into participation in Bike Share; focus on the West Falls Church Metro Station and the W&OD interface with the Gordon Road Triangle.

- Develop a Complete Streets policy and/or develop a focused pathway with wayfinding.

- Reconstruct the existing limited pedestrian connection along Shreve Road to create a linear park transitioning from the W & OD Trail to the intersection of Broad Street and Shreve Road. This will provide a natural screening and buffering along this roadway and will soften this edge in an effort to alleviate any concerns the County may have with developing within the triangle.

- Joint opportunity to build a parking garage to accommodate both public works needs as well as private development. This could be built on City owned land with contribution toward the construction and long-term lease of a certain amount of the spaces by the private sector.

- Disguise and limit the footprint of the ‘City Property Yard’ to enhance the redevelopment of adjacent parcels.

- Assign a Mixed Use Development zoning to allow the opportunity for the market to dictate the amount and percentage on the respective land bays.

- Consider as a near term opportunity the creation of senior housing connected to medical office space.

- Recognize that the redevelopment of the triangle from conception to full-build out may take 20 years.