

# FALLS CHURCH 2040

## *Introduction and Vision Chapter of the City's Comprehensive Plan*

*Adopted xxx, xx, xxxx*

### **Falls Church Vision 2040**



## **The Comprehensive Plan**

A Comprehensive Plan is a policy mechanism that allows a community to guide growth and development in a coordinated manner that is consistent with the aspirations and visions of the community. The Plan aims to promote efficient growth and sustainable development. It is a long-range plan covering a period of 20 to 30 years; however, many of the strategies contained within this Plan may be targeted for implementation much sooner. In Falls Church, the Plan is also updated through the preparation of Small Area Plans.

A Comprehensive Plan considers a community's existing and future needs for dwellings, commerce, industry, public and semi-public facilities, environmental protection, energy efficiency, historic preservation, transportation, parks and recreation, and social and economic sustainability.

## **Legal Basis for Planning**

Section 15.2-2223 of the Virginia Code requires all localities to prepare a Comprehensive Plan. As outlined in Section 15.2-2230 of Virginia Code and pursuant to the Falls Church Charter, Chapter 17 Planning, Zoning and Subdivision, the Planning Commission is responsible for preparing and recommending the City's Comprehensive Plan.

## **Legal Impacts of Plan**

The Comprehensive Plan lays out a blueprint for future development and change. It informs land use, controls infrastructure, and guides public investment.

The Comprehensive Plan recommends future land use, assigning various uses (e.g., residential, commercial, mixed use) to particular areas of the City, which are reflected in a Future Land Use Map. The Zoning Ordinance codifies land development by providing requirements and constraints on different uses. The Zoning Ordinance should conform to the land use plan.

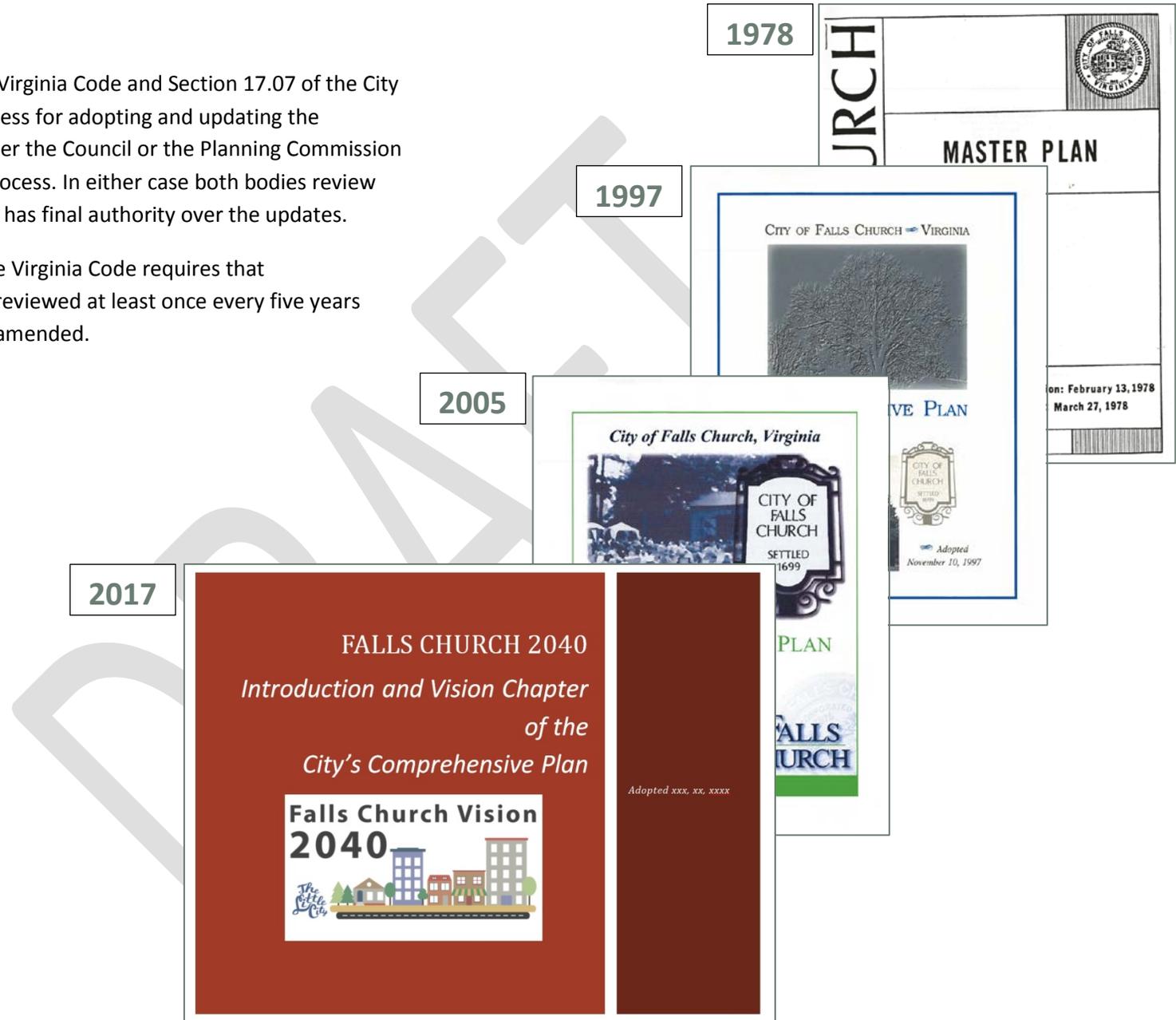
The Comprehensive Plan specifies and controls the location of public infrastructure. Section 2232 of the Virginia Code and Section 17.07 of the City Charter requires that after adoption of the Plan, no street or street extension, square, park or other public way, ground, open space, school, public building or structure, or public utility facility (except railroad facility or underground natural gas or electric distribution facility) shall be constructed or authorized unless and until the general location, character and extent thereof has been approved by the Planning Commission, as being in conformance with the Comprehensive Plan.

Because of these restrictions on infrastructure location and character, the Comprehensive Plan guides development of the City's five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and, thus, public investment.

## Updating the Plan

Section 15.2-2229 of the Virginia Code and Section 17.07 of the City Charter describe the process for adopting and updating the Comprehensive Plan. Either the Council or the Planning Commission can initiate the update process. In either case both bodies review the plans and the Council has final authority over the updates.

Section 15.2 – 2230 of the Virginia Code requires that comprehensive plans be reviewed at least once every five years and, where appropriate, amended.



## Development History

The City of Falls Church has gone through several distinct development eras, described below.

### 1699 – European Settlement

The City's roots go back to its settlement in 1699 when this area was an early colonial establishment shared with native Indians. The center of the community and its namesake was The Falls Church (Episcopal), attended by both President George Washington and Virginia statesman George Mason. It was built in 1734 and remains important in the City's landscape today.



Figure 1: An early photo of The Falls Church during the Civil War.

### 1800s – Population Growth

Growth in the township and the surrounding area occurred as the result of the community's strategic location just seven miles from the District of Columbia. The Leesburg Turnpike (today's Leesburg Pike/Route 7) was built to bring commerce from Leesburg to the port of Alexandria. In 1860 the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire

(later the Washington and Old Dominion) Railroad brought rail service to Falls Church, connecting it to Alexandria and Leesburg. After the Civil War, a direct rail link to Washington, D.C., attracted numerous new residents who found the tranquil village a welcome relief from the bustle of the nation's capital. Trolley services came to the town in the early twentieth century.



Figure 2: The West Falls Church train station ca. 1900.

### 1950s–1990s – Post-WWII Suburban Development

Falls Church became a city in 1948. In the years following World War II, Falls Church's cohesiveness and character were increasingly impacted by the Northern Virginia building boom and the advent of automobile-related commercial development. During the 1950s Northern Virginia experienced a dramatic increase in suburban growth, both residential and commercial. Commercial development also began to take shape in the form of "strip commercial", or

commercial development occurring in narrow bands along major roadways. Development in Falls Church followed these trends.

The area's highways were being constructed to provide convenient transportation within the region and especially to the District of Columbia, the region's largest employment center. During the 1970s and 1980s the City of Falls Church continued to experience small amounts of residential and commercial growth, but this growth was limited by the amount of available vacant land. This level of growth became even smaller during the 1990s as the number of vacant parcels declined.



Figure 3: Tyler Gardens, now Winter Hill, under construction along West Broad Street in the 1940's.



Figure 4: An aerial view of the commercial corridor, facing east along West Broad Street, in the 1970's.

### **2000s and Beyond - Mixed Use**

A substantial number of redevelopment projects have occurred in the City during the last 15 years. Falls Church has benefited from an unprecedented wave of new development and investment that has occurred along its primary commercial corridors (N. and S. Washington Street and W. Broad Street) over the past decade: primarily mixed use, with office, retail, and residential in the same development complex on underutilized infill sites.



Figure 5: 301 West Broad Street opened in 2016, the largest mixed-use project in the City at the time.

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## Geography of the City

Falls Church is an independent city located approximately seven miles west of the nation's capital. This proximity has been a major influence on its development. Falls Church is small in area (2.3 square miles) and population (approximately 13,900 as of the 2015 Census estimate); its center remains at the junction of Route 7 (Broad Street) and Route 29 (Washington Street/Lee Highway). The City is bounded by Arlington County and Fairfax County and is roughly equidistant from the major commercial centers of Ballston in Arlington County and Tysons in Fairfax County.

In January 2014, the City boundary with Fairfax County was adjusted to include the property yard and approximately 34.62 acres of land. The area included was the joint George Mason High School / Mary Ellen Henderson Middle School Campus. With this change, the City now owns and has legal jurisdiction over the entire site. By agreement with Fairfax County, up to 30 percent of the land can be used for new commercial development.

The City is serviced by several major transportation links, including I-66, the East and West Falls Church Metro Stations, and the W&OD Trail. I-66 connects the City to the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor, Washington, D.C. and the Capital Beltway. The East and West Falls Church Metro Stations provide connections to the Metro Orange Line and Silver Line, which run through the Rosslyn-Ballston Corridor, Washington, D.C., Tysons, and Reston. The W&OD Trail is the spine of the region's bike network and provides connection to many surrounding communities.

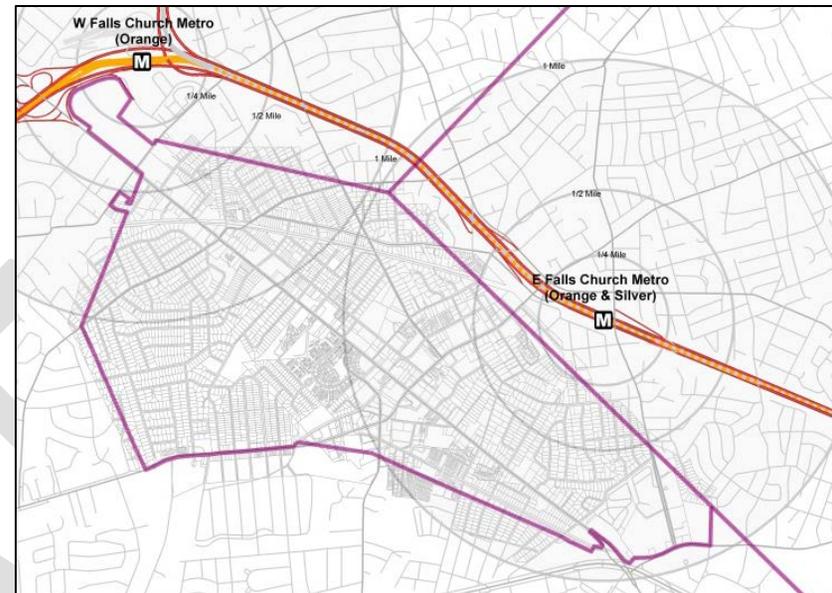


Figure 6: The City of Falls Church.

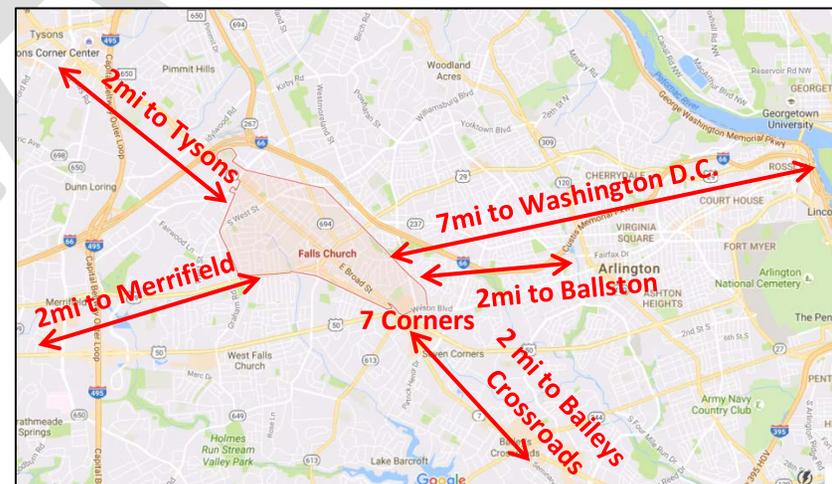


Figure 7: Regional map showing the City of Falls Church in relation to the region.

## Planning the City: Past, Present, and Future

### Planning Past

In 1934 Fairfax County, including a portion of what would become the City of Falls Church, adopted a zoning ordinance pursuant to the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Master Plans were subsequently adopted by the City in 1947, 1959, 1978, 1988, 1997, and 2005. The 1947 and 1959 Master Plans were comprised of a series of maps with no text, whereas the 1978 and 1988 Plans contained limited text including primary and secondary policy objectives and brief descriptions of programs and activities to achieve those objectives. The 1997 and 2005 Comprehensive Plans went into much greater detail about existing conditions within the City. These plans were also the first to cover topic areas such as historic preservation and community character.

Prior to 2000, a number of planning-related studies have been completed by City staff and consultants.

#### 1980s

- Draft Master Plan Review: Land Uses in the City's Business Areas, October 1984 (Planning Department)
- North Washington Street Corridor Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, January 1986 (Planning Department)
- East Falls Church Land Use Study, January, 1986 (Arlington County Department of Community Affairs, Housing and Community Development Division, Planning Section)
- The Arlington-Falls Church Ad-Hoc Planning Committee, Final Report, June 1987

- South Washington Street Corridor Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, July 1987 (Planning Department)
- Central Business District Special Strategy Area Report, Phase I, October 1988 (Planning Department)

#### 1990s

- Fiscal Year 91-92 Master Plan Review: Status Report on Implementation of the Master Plan (Planning Department)
- Building the Vision: The Washington Street Corridor, January 1991 (Hyett-Palma, Inc.)
- The Future of the City: Genesis for Progress in Falls Church - North Washington Street, March 1993 (The Falls Church Village Preservation and Improvement Society)
- Redevelopment in Falls Church: Four Illustrative Opportunities, November, 1997 (David Holmes and Larry Keller)

### Planning Present and Recent Past

Comprehensive planning is an ongoing effort. This Comprehensive Plan builds on prior comprehensive plans prepared by the City as well as the Small Area Plans, Master Plans, and other planning documents that have been developed.

#### Ongoing Review and Update of the Comprehensive Plan

Planning in the City is constantly evolving with changing community preferences and regional conditions. To keep pace with these changes, the City is updating its Comprehensive Plan on an ongoing, chapter-by-chapter basis. Most recently, the following chapters have been updated

- Chapter 6, Transportation, “Mobility for All Modes” (adopted 2014)
- Chapter 7, Parks, Open Space, and Recreation, “Parks for People” (adopted 2015).

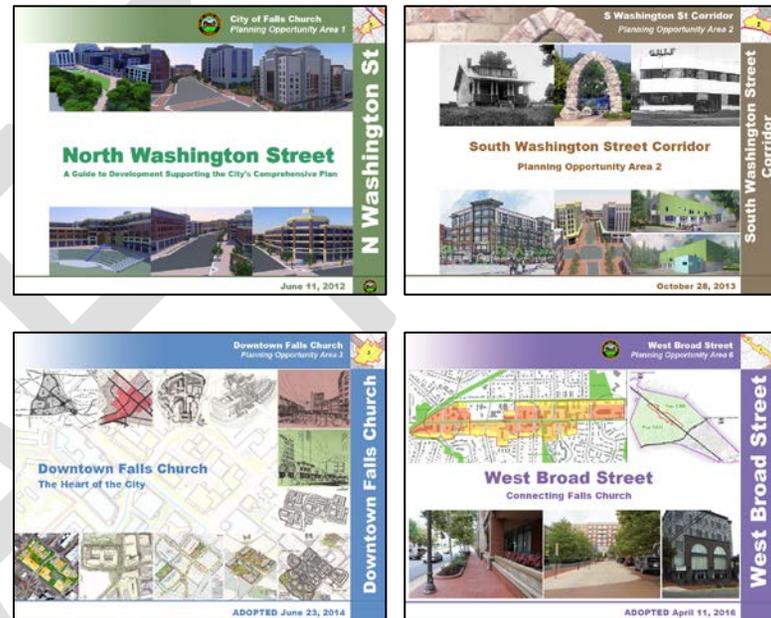


### Small Area Plans

The Comprehensive Plan defines several Planning Opportunity Areas (POAs) that are appropriate for additional development or redevelopment. Economic analysis has shown these areas to be critical to the City’s economic sustainability. Accordingly, Small Area Plans have been developed for several of the POAs.

Since 2012, the following Small Area Plans have been adopted:

- North Washington Street Small Area Plan – 2012
- South Washington Street Small Area Plan – 2013
- Downtown Opportunity Area Plan – 2014
- West Broad Street Small Area Plan – 2015

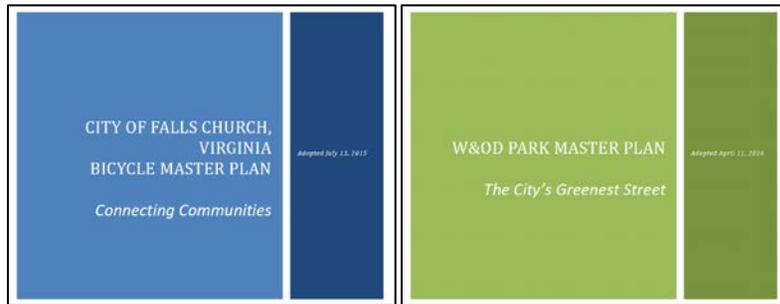
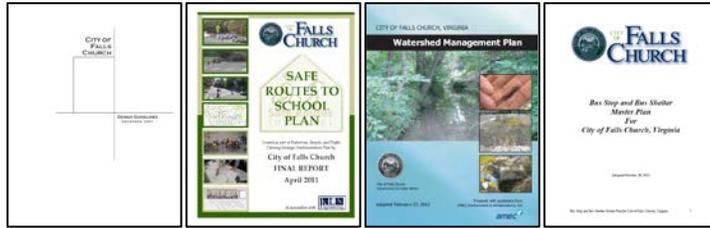


### Master Plans

In addition, the City has recently adopted a series of Master Plans. Master Plans focus on specific topic areas and are functional in nature. Like Small Area Plans, they supplement the Comprehensive Plan. A number of them have focused on issues of enhanced mobility. Recently adopted Master Plans include:

- Design Guidelines – 2001
- Safe Routes to School Plan – 2011
- City Council’s Strategic Plan – 2012
- Watershed Management Plan - 2012

- Bus Stop and Bus Shelter Master Plan – 2013
- Bicycle Master Plan: *Connecting Communities* – 2015
- W&OD Master Plan: *The City's Greenest Street* – 2016



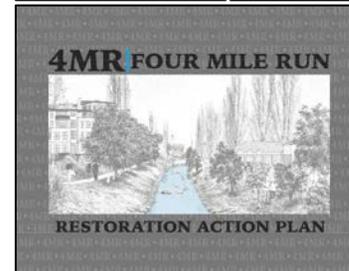
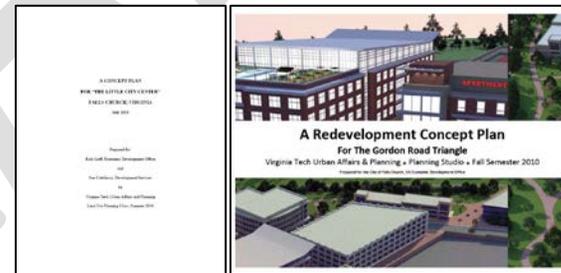
### Virginia Tech Partnership

The City has benefited tremendously from ongoing collaboration with Virginia Tech, specifically the Urban Affairs and Planning program satellite campus in Old Town Alexandria. Through class studio projects and individual student capstone projects, the City has been introduced to the latest developments in urban planning. Additionally, several students from that program have worked as interns for the City and/or been hired by the City as full time staff.

Student studies help the City benefit from the latest thinking in urban planning. The studies themselves are not adopted policies,

but they often inform City planning efforts. Recent studies and reports include the following:

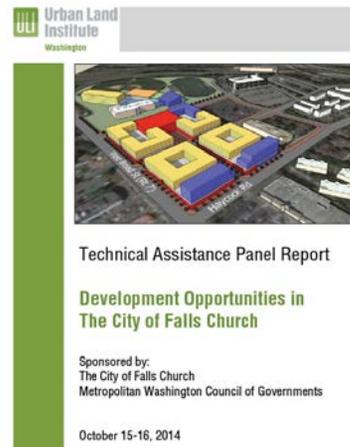
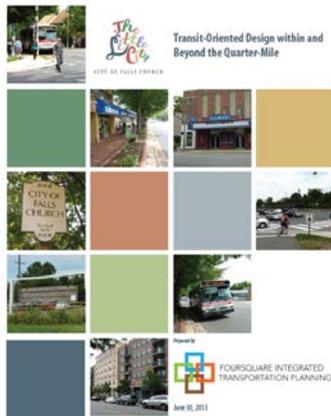
- Eastern Gateway (2009)
- West Jefferson Street (2010)
- Little City Center (2010)
- Gordon Road Triangle (2010)
- Four Mile Run Action Plan (2015)



## Other Studies and Reports

The City benefits from special studies and reports performed by industry experts and in-house staff. Like the student studies, these efforts inform city planning efforts. Recent studies and reports include:

- Falls Church City Center Strategic Plan, February. 2002. Street-Works.
- Transit-Oriented Design within and Beyond the Quarter Mile. 2013. MWCOG Transportation and Land Use Connection (TLC).
- Park Avenue: A Civic Great Street. 2015. In-house staff.
- Development Analysis and Opportunities for Falls Church. 2015. Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel (ULI TAP).



## Planning Future

City staff will continue to update the Comprehensive Plan through chapter revisions and Small Area Plans. This Vision chapter is a revision. As of this chapter's adoption, other chapters remaining to be updated include: Demographics; Community Character, Appearance, and Design; Land Use and Economic Development; Natural Resources and Environment; Community Facilities, Public Utilities, and Government Services; Historic Preservation; and Housing.

Small Area Plans remaining to be completed include: East End; West End; Gordon Road Triangle; and the School Property.

## The Planning Process

City Council, Planning Commission, and staff are committed to engaging the public in the planning process and developing plans and policies that serve the public interest.

For this Vision Chapter, the public involvement process included two public meetings, a public survey, and ad hoc “pop-up” events throughout the City. The draft chapter was circulated to City staff and City Boards and Commissions.

Development of Small Area Plans, Master Plans, and other planning documents involves substantial public involvement, including public meetings, meetings with City Boards and Commissions and City staff, and in some cases public surveys. All of these have helped to inform the City’s vision of the future as well as this Comprehensive Plan.

In addition to community feedback, the City’s vision is informed by an understanding of regional trends and best practices in planning.



Figure 8: Community Meeting on June 18, 2016



Figure 9: Community Meeting on October 1, 2016

## Gathering Input and Feedback

Through a variety of planning events and public engagement tools, City staff collected feedback from hundreds of people. The below chart summarizes the events held and the number of participants in each event.

Through the events, people provided feedback on what they value most, what they are concerned about, what changes they would like to see, and what aspects of the City they would like to see preserved. All of the feedback received was used to develop the City’s vision statement and core values. The pictures on this page summarize some of the inputs received.

Event	# of Participants	Date
Community Meeting #1	80	June 18, 2016
School Town Hall	125	June 17 and 20, 2016
4 Pop-Ups on Building the Vision	129	August 6, 17, 24, and 31, 2016
Survey	472	August 1 through September 9, 2016
Community Meeting #2	51	October 1, 2016
Pop-Up on Reviewing the Vision	61	November 5, 2016
<b>Total</b>	<b>918</b>	

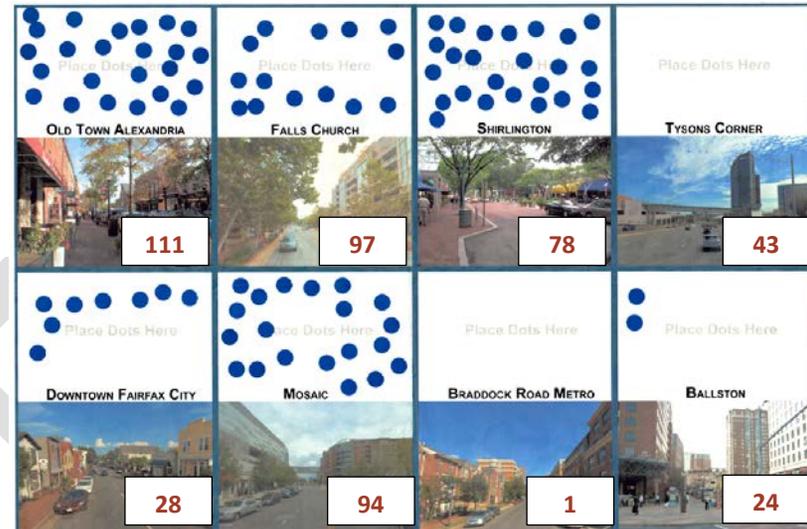


Figure 10: Dot-Voting Results from the June 18, 2016 Community Meeting. Numbers on photos represent total dots placed across all meetings. Each participant was asked to place 3 dots. Approximately 160 people participated.

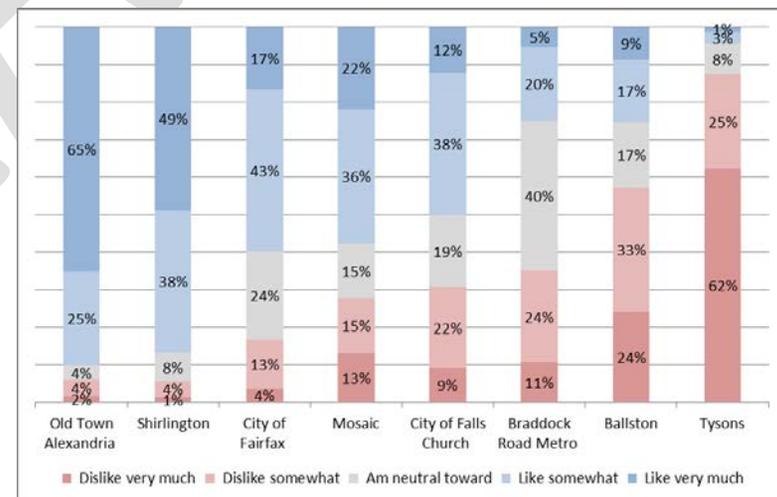


Figure 11: Results from the online survey. A total of 472 responses were received.

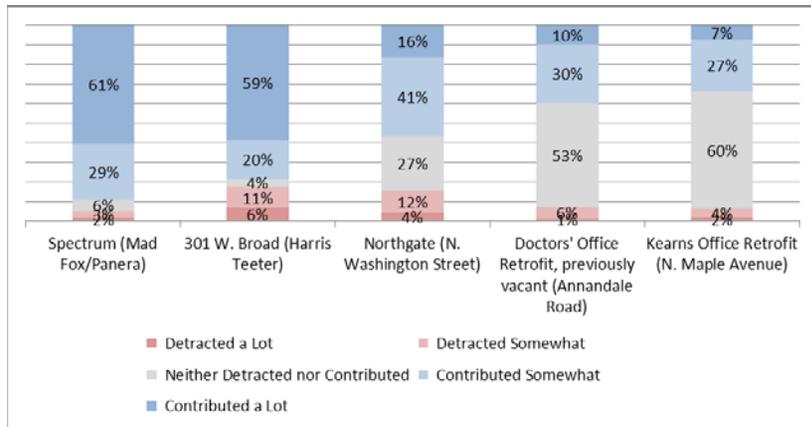


Figure 12: Results from the online survey showed strong support for recently completed projects. Text comments on the survey expressed concern for the future look and feel of the City.

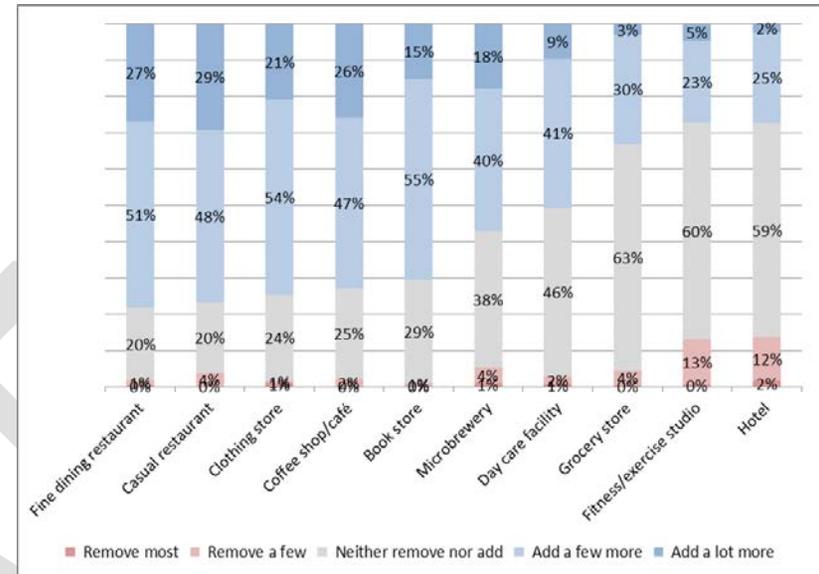


Figure 13: Results from the online survey revealed broad desire for more retail options.

## Vision and Core Values

The Vision Statement for the City Falls Church is as follows:

*In the year 2040, the City of Falls Church is a vibrant, walkable, safe, small city in Northern Virginia. Falls Church keeps pace with regional growth, while strengthening its identity as a special place. The City invests in its schools, neighborhoods, and natural environment. The City celebrates its history, community character, and cultural diversity. A growing population and economy and the continual rejuvenation of commercial areas support the City's high quality of life.*

Inherent in this Vision Statement is a set of core values that embody what the City of Falls Church is striving to achieve over the next 20 years. These values include:



### Community Character/Urban Form

- Vibrant and thriving place
- Community involvement and spirit
- Attractive balance of uses
- Cohesive architecture and urban design
- Historic preservation
- Revitalization districts as focal points
- Human scale and pedestrian orientation
- Mixed use through redevelopment
- Substantial investment in the arts



### Economic Sustainability

- Flourishing commercial base
- Regional attractions
- Office, shops, restaurants clustered
- Public-private collaboration
- Business development
- Skilled labor force
- Public gathering places for cultural events
- Tourism economy



### Education

- High quality public facilities
- Continued academic excellence
- Focus for social and cultural activities
- Higher education services and resources
- Drawing new ideas from the region
- City library an integral component



### Efficient Transportation

- High accessibility across City
- Public and private transportation alternatives
- Linkage via public transit, paths, and bikeways
- Improved air quality

- Regional cooperation and regional solutions



### **Environmental Sustainability**

- Protection, preservation, and restoration
- Trees as a valued resource
- Development that respects natural topography
- Stream restoration and improved water quality
- Network of trails and greenways
- Active recreation and sports planning
- Energy efficiency



### **Diversity/Housing and Social Sustainability**

- Wide range of family types, cultures and generations
- Ethnic and cultural diversity
- Diverse housing stock for all income levels
- New housing harmonious in scale to existing neighborhoods



### **Public Health and Safety**

- Ample opportunities for physical activity
- Access to fresh, local foods
- Low crime rates
- Responsive police force
- Access to quality health care



### **Good and Responsive Governance**

- Fiscal responsibility
- Accessible and responsive public servants
- Lots of volunteer opportunities
- Openness and transparency

## **Community Indicators**

Community Indicators track progress against adopted goals. Regular Community Indicators reports allow the City to periodically revisit its adopted goals and assess progress against them.

The following indicators will be used to track progress against the City's vision principles. City staff will prepare a report every 2 years. Staff will present the report to the City Council and the Planning Commission and post it on the City's website.

### **Community Character/Urban Form**

- Mixed use development (%)
- Dedicated City funding for the arts
- Attendance at arts/cultural events
- Historic buildings rehabilitated
- Percent of streetscape matching design guidelines

### **Economic Sustainability**

- Job/housing balance (ratio of jobs to people)
- Employment rate
- Commercial tax revenue
- Net number of companies moving to the City
- New businesses started (per capita)

### **Education**

- High school graduation rate
- Standardized test scores
- Performance of ESL/minority students
- Residents with undergraduate and graduate degrees (%)

### **Efficient Transportation**

- Transit ridership (Journey to Work or COG data)
- Percent of bicycle network completed
- Sidewalks (linear miles)
- Number of BikeShare stations

### **Environmental Sustainability**

- Parks and open space (acres or acres per capita)
- Water quality (e.g., fecal coliform counts)
- Tree canopy coverage
- Development within the 100-year floodplain
- GHG emissions
- Percent of houses using alternative energy
- Number of green buildings

### **Diversity/Housing and Social Sustainability**

- Median housing values
- Median rent
- Percent non-white
- Percent of households with children

### **Public Health and Safety**

- Percent of residents overweight or obese
- Acres of community garden plots
- Crime rate
- Homeless count

### **Good and Responsive Governance**

- Variance between budgeted and actual expenses
- Available debt capacity

- Number of Board and Commission seats vacant for more than six months

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## **How to Use This Plan**

This Comprehensive Plan, along with other adopted policy documents, is meant to be used to achieve the overall vision for the City's future. It is the official policy guide for decisions related to public and private investment and is used to evaluate applications for development projects. It is a guide for decision makers to determine what is best for the City's physical and social fabric, including its economy, natural resources, public facilities, transportation network, historic resources, housing, and the use of land.

## **Plan Structure**

The Comprehensive Plan is organized by chapters, which pertain to different subject areas. These topics include community character, land use and economic development, transportation, parks, open space and recreation, historic preservation, and housing, among other important aspects of the City's development and redevelopment.

This vision chapter is the first chapter of the plan. This chapter lays out the overarching vision for the City over the next 20 to 25 years and puts forth the principal values behind that vision. The chapter is followed by a series of interrelated chapters that examine various topics. Goals, strategies, and objectives in subsequent chapters should reinforce and support the vision and principles defined in this chapter.