

CA Position Statement on the Howard County General Plan Focusing on Columbia and Its Environs

Over fifty years ago, Columbia was founded on the principles of diversity, valued open space, neighborhood character, and a land use mix that would enable people to live, work, and play locally. As stated in the Downtown Columbia Plan, Columbia's visionary founder, Jim Rouse, *"hoped to make Columbia a new kind of American community that would, through rational planning, avoid the problems associated with the decay that was settling upon America's big cities and the unplanned and often unsightly sprawl that marked its ever ever-burgeoning suburbs..."*

Though primarily motivated by social concerns, Rouse was also a successful businessman who knew that Columbia had to be financially feasible if it were to survive and thrive.

Columbia did survive and thrive over the past 50+ years, becoming "a city in a garden" that is frequently cited as one of the best places to live in America.

Rouse said he hoped Columbia would never be finished, that the community would continue to evolve and that the residents who call Columbia home would be actively engaged in the process. Today, we can review Columbia's history to see what has worked and what requires improvement as we meet the needs and wishes of successive generations. We can also take advantage of city planning tools that have been developed over the ensuing years.

Seeking to fulfill this vision of ongoing active engagement, Columbia Association's Board of Directors has considered its values and priorities to understand how they align with Howard County's General Plan Update (HoCo by Design) PSET framework – Preserve, Strengthen, Enhance, and Transform. We offer the following as our position statement.

Preserving Columbia

1. The General Plan should recommend development of a community master plan/sector plan(s) for the greater Columbia area, including outparcels.
2. The greater Columbia community should be planned comprehensively, with outparcels and New Town-zoned land ultimately subject to the same standards that embody a complementary aesthetic. In addition, clear and transparent enforcement mechanisms are needed to guide future development.
3. The General Plan should recommend a design manual to regulate the character of the greater Columbia area.
4. Open Space preservation is deeply important for Columbia's community
 - a. The existing linked open space system is fundamental to Columbia and its identity.

- b. The existing civic areas (Lakefront, Symphony Woods, etc.) provide cultural hubs.
 - c. The existing parkways provide green thoroughfares.
 - d. The existing tree canopy provides shelter, increases property values, and connects residents with nature.
 - e. Stream valleys, environmentally sensitive areas, and open space connections should not be interrupted by roadways in traditional village neighborhoods and where they offer connections to destinations.
5. The General Plan should recommend policies and set the stage for a regulatory framework that preserves Columbia's range of full spectrum housing, both in type and cost.
 6. Retain balance of land use for industrial, commercial, and various types of residential.
 7. Retain the many characteristics that give Columbia its unique sense of place such as underground utilities, pathway connections, diverse housing and public realm guidelines (examples of such guidelines include landscape buffers that separate parkways from commercial development, restricted access between major roads and lots).

Strengthening Columbia

1. The General Plan should recommend the establishment of new environmental and bio-diversity strategies such as reforestation, habitat enhancement, erosion control, green building, wildlife corridors, dark sky lighting, etc. for all new and existing open space areas.
2. New and redevelopment projects need to ensure that they link with landscaping, sidewalks/pathways, parking lots, etc. to neighboring parcels.
3. The General Plan should recommend a holistic and robust transportation study for the greater Columbia area with the goal of reducing vehicle dependence and transforming the transit system.
4. Strengthen the housing market via mixed-income development that blends into existing neighborhoods.
5. Identify and prioritize opportunities to strengthen existing transit and multi-modal options connecting neighborhoods and activity centers.

Enhancing Columbia

1. Open Space enhancements are greatly valued by Columbia's community.
 - a. New open space (including in outparcels) should be linked into the existing system.
 - b. Repurpose underutilized land to enhance the open space system.
2. Enhance the existing pathway system by linking it to County and other pathways.
3. Implement the Walk Howard and Bike Howard plans; update these plans on a regular basis (5 to 10 years).

4. Prioritize enhanced mobility options and a robust transit system, particularly around new developments/redevelopments in Downtown, Gateway, and activity centers.
5. Enhance full spectrum housing by ensuring that it is spread across the entire Columbia area and throughout all of Howard County, without concentrations in any particular neighborhood.

Transforming Columbia

1. The General Plan should recommend the establishment of “focus area” plans for aging commercial centers and Gateway.
2. The Village Centers need to be transformed to respond to the latest market trends and demand for retail, recreational and housing that serve that particular community. The transformation needs to comply with the village center plan and developed under CB29-2009 that was submitted by a village to the County.
3. The General Plan should recommend a holistic and robust transportation study for the greater Columbia area with the goal of reducing vehicle dependence and transforming the transit system.
4. Streets should be designed under the Complete Streets philosophy to better meet future community needs.

Summary

Over fifty years ago, Columbia was founded by a visionary developer who sought to build a “city where people could grow.” As Howard County and Columbia move into the next 50 years, it is our priority that Columbia retain the characteristics/values that make it special. Columbia’s underlying values include a rational land use mix, meaningful open space, socioeconomic diversity, respect for the environment, distinctive neighborhood character and a strong sense of place.

While the General Plan is a broad-sweeping document, the values outlined above include several other studies that will focus on topics or geographic areas. We encourage the County to include recommendations for the creation of these documents in the General Plan, setting the stage for their development in the coming months and years. This includes a **Design Manual**, **Area or Sector Plans**, and **Environmental Studies**. Each of these more focused undertakings will be useful in establishing standards geared toward preserving, strengthening, enhancing, or transforming Columbia. In addition, the General Plan needs to acknowledge that development must not outpace infrastructure.

In short, we believe that good design is critical to retaining the aesthetic of Columbia; we seek to prioritize the preservation of our open space network and the connectedness it affords; we aim to reflect the importance of our village centers as hubs of community activity and commerce; we believe it is critical to ensure that the provision of housing meets the needs of all people and spreads benefits and impacts equally throughout the community; and, we endeavor to make traveling to and through Columbia easy through a variety of transit modes and options.

We ask you to consider these values and priorities as you prepare the HoCo by Design General Plan Update, and to incorporate them into your document as a reflection of our collective community vision.