

ReFocus: Friendship Heights

Team 3

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Several challenges have postponed development plans throughout the past several years in Friendship Heights. There's no defined identity of the area and coordinating land-use changes are difficult since it's located in two jurisdictions. The location and demographics of Friendship Heights makes it an area with the potential to address the needs of its stakeholders while also making it a more desirable destination of the region. Team Friendship has identified challenges that can be refocused into providing a new vision for Friendship Heights.

The first vision is to refocus Friendship Heights from being a regional attraction, to a sub-regional node for retail spaces that provide services and civic uses that cater to the community and stakeholders. Unlike retail hubs of the area such as Bethesda, City Center or Tysons Corner, Friendship Heights should become a center for low and moderate density that provides sub-regional transit connectivity and infrastructure. The abundance of public transportation is one of Friendship Heights' greatest strengths that could be utilized in providing more low-density, transit-oriented development opportunities.

The area should also refocus to become a community that embraces and serves older adults. The current demographics show that Friendship Heights is surrounded by established residents that are aging in place. Since 2010 the percentage of residents that are age 65 and older has increased from 20% to 25% of the area's population. This "Silver Tsunami" provides an opportunity to refocus the area's retail and commercial spaces into uses that are senior-friendly. Aligning residential, retail and services to serve the area's older population will invite the need for more multi-family housing, medical offices and public spaces that provide educational and civic uses.

Friendship Heights also needs to be refocused into an area that diversifies land-use and reduces the reliance on big-brand retail stores. Currently Friendship Heights consists of outdated buildings, spaces that need to be more inviting to the public and the need for pedestrian and bike infrastructure. One of the most obvious existing conditions is the vast amount of vacant retail space. Friendship Heights highlights the trend of store closures that is occurring throughout the retail industry, but this also offers the opportunity to develop a new vision for the area. The occurrence of covid-19 has shown the need for flexible and adaptable spaces will be significant for the future and necessary for the economy. Converting parking lots into dining spaces, sidewalks to outdoor retail areas or hosting recurring outdoor public events that allow people to safely practice social distancing is the new reality.

Improving governance and management is essential for a successful development plan of Friendship Heights. Implementing innovative strategies to encourage stakeholder and community involvement will help develop a unified vision for the area. Cross-jurisdictional coordination must create improvements to development procedures, such as a development BID process that doesn't require creating two different BIDs or considering cohesive urban design standards that solidify the identity of Friendship Heights. Both jurisdictions' planning and transportation agencies need to collaborate on one plan that provides public realm and transportation benefits.