

## Memo: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vision for Friendship Heights

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**Background:** Much of present-day Friendship Heights is shaped by disjointed legacy planning and development decisions that once made it a regional destination across the District and Maryland, but now impede its ability to reinvent itself. High-intensity uses and big-box, predominantly auto-oriented destination retail centers are disconnected from one another by wide arterial roads and surrounded by low-density, single-family housing. Today, the Friendship Heights constituency is very resistant to any new development, particularly if it means additional density, but retail vacancy is climbing as the submarket loses market share to recently redeveloped, pedestrian-oriented competitors like Bethesda Row and City Center. Without corrective action driven by a common, cross-jurisdictional voice, the Friendship Heights central business district (CBD) will continue to wither.

**Vision Statement:** Elevate Friendship Heights to a cohesive, cross-jurisdictional, transit-oriented regional hub that sets a new standard in promoting health, wellness and inclusivity and continues to cater to the local community's interest in neighborhood amenity by increasing connectivity and promoting outdoor amenity.

**Recommendations:** We suggest a phased redevelopment strategy that builds on a new, inclusive community vision, one which: prioritizes coordinated placemaking; increases public space, as well as pedestrian and bicycle connectivity; repositions underutilized parcels; provides greater neighborhood retail; and helps fulfill the long-term housing needs of the region. We envision these phases as:

1. **(Re)Brand:** Due to the intrinsic ties that bind the District and Maryland sides of Friendship Heights, a single neighborhood alliance organization is a prerequisite for economic gain. The alliance would advocate to DC and Maryland on behalf of its constituents' planning needs and would act as a cooperative marketing organization for defining a cross-jurisdictional brand. A coordinated branding campaign could utilize streetscape painting, storefront displays, standardized signage, wayfinding and street light banners to help define the neighborhood and the existing pedestrian connectivity routes. Branding could build upon existing neighborhood amenities such as park space, bike paths, and open spaces for site activation, ie. Weekend Farmer's Market in the lot west of Mazza, and event space at the Geico parking lot. Brand the 'Friendship Loop' (Wisconsin Circle to Wisconsin Ave to Jennifer Street to Western Ave) as the figurative and geographic center of Friendship Heights. This area could be closed off to vehicular traffic for special events, and reconceptualized as part of a longer-range regional transit plan to reduce automobile dependence.
2. **(Re)Connect:** Create greater intuitive pedestrian connectivity between the four quadrants defined by the intersection of Wisconsin and Western Avenues. Currently, pedestrians must navigate a confusing maze of backstreets, alleyways, plazas, stairs and grade changes when moving between one quadrant to another; the experience is even more challenging for cyclists and those with disabilities. Creating a concentric series of clearly marked 'ring road' pedestrian paths radiating out from the Friendship Loop would create more opportunities for logical pedestrian connection within and between quadrants. Additional measures on Wisconsin and Western Avenues, such as raised and well-marked crossings, dedicated bike lanes and even shared streets will contribute to traffic calming.
3. **(Re)Develop:** Encourage high density development on the Wisconsin/Western facades to stay in keeping with legacy planning and development but emphasize pedestrian experience and neighborhood-serving retail on Jennifer Street and Friendship Boulevard as part of future mixed-use redevelopment projects (with significant affordable components). Relocate WMATA Western Bus Division to the Lord & Taylor site as part of mixed-use redevelopment. WMATA and Geico sites should be developed in subsequent stages into mixed-use multifamily buildings. Propose 2 Wisconsin Circle redevelop bus depot into a public plaza and green space (along with lot west of Mazza) with new atrium food hall space at Metro entrance.
4. **(Re)Position:** Revitalize Friendship Heights with a unified retail strategy, focused around green transit (WMATA ridership, cycling and walking along the 'Green Mile') and uses supported by the community, ie. health and fitness, arts and culture, family fun. Limited big box retailers (such as The St. James for health/fitness, The Lane Social Club for family fun) will anchor, and in some cases repurpose legacy centers like Mazza Gallery and Chevy Chase Pavilion, while food halls, art/makerspace (allied with local schools) and medical office/practitioners could repurpose some of the underutilized retail space.