A stylized map of the Towson Urban Center Overlay District. The map features a network of white lines representing streets and roads on a dark blue background. A central area is highlighted with a semi-transparent orange circle. The text 'TOWSON URBAN CENTER OVERLAY DISTRICT' is centered within this circle in white, bold, uppercase letters.

**TOWSON  
URBAN  
CENTER  
OVERLAY  
DISTRICT**

**DRAFT**

Baltimore County Department of Planning  
August 2015

# TOWSON URBAN CENTER OVERLAY DISTRICT

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## 1.1 BACKGROUND

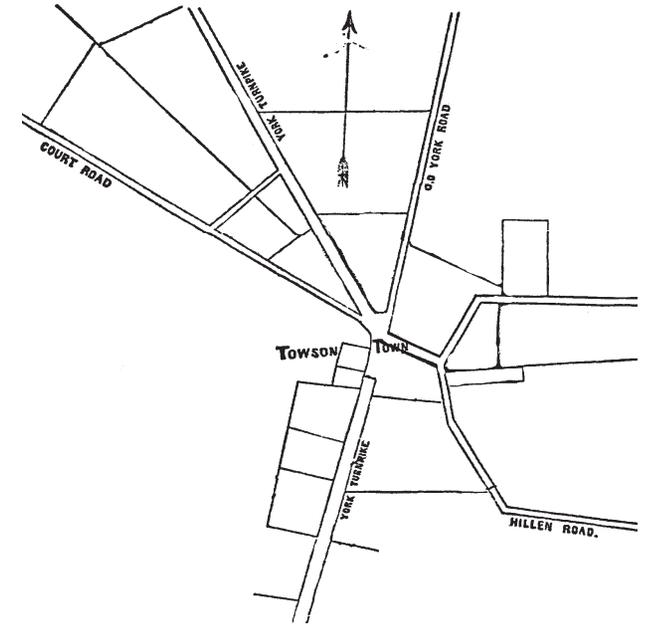
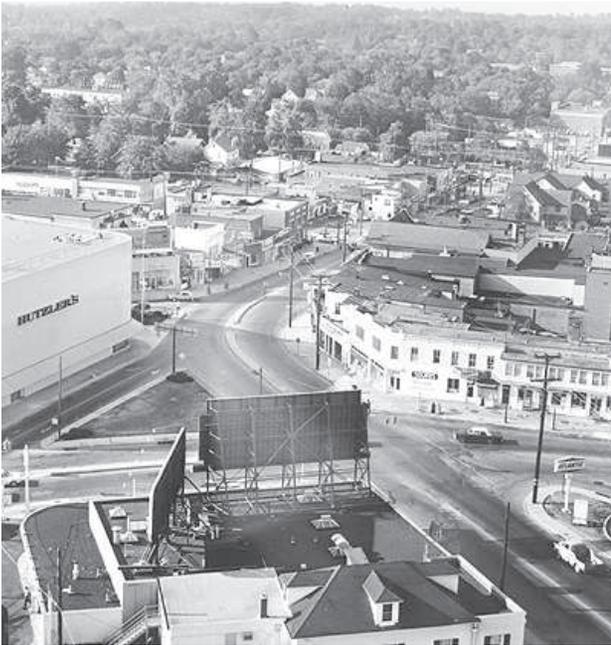
Master Plan 2020, as well as previous master plans, lays out a land management framework and accompanying policy to guide 90 percent of the County's population into one third of the County's land area. This allows the county to preserve natural and agricultural resources in the rural areas, while infrastructure investments, public services and community sustainability are focused in the urban areas.

Towson has historically been the County's only urban center. Guiding principles and resource allocation throughout the last several decades have been preparing downtown Towson to be able to accommodate the growth, density and urban

environment that is now coming to fruition. Development currently in the pipeline will be transformative in taking Towson from its "suburban village" image to the urban center that has been planned and envisioned. As the growth and development continues, it is imperative that the policies and actions of Master Plan 2020 be implemented. The central Master Plan policy for Towson is to strengthen compact mixed use walkable redevelopment that is compatible with Towson's urban character. The specific action to implement this calls for "the development of design standards and modifications to the zoning ordinance that create mixed use zones." (Master Plan 2020, p 84)

County Council Resolution 113-14 requests creation of two new zoning classifications for Towson and this report focuses on the first such zone that is to be solely for the downtown Towson area. The resolution cites the Master Plan goals for Towson and recognizes the failings of achieving them through piecemeal amendments to the existing CT District of Towson. The following report provides a brief history of Towson planning efforts, identifies deficiencies within the current zoning regulations, proposes a new zoning overlay district that is specific to refining the urban character of Towson, and provides design guidelines by which to evaluate development and redevelopment projects in downtown Towson.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

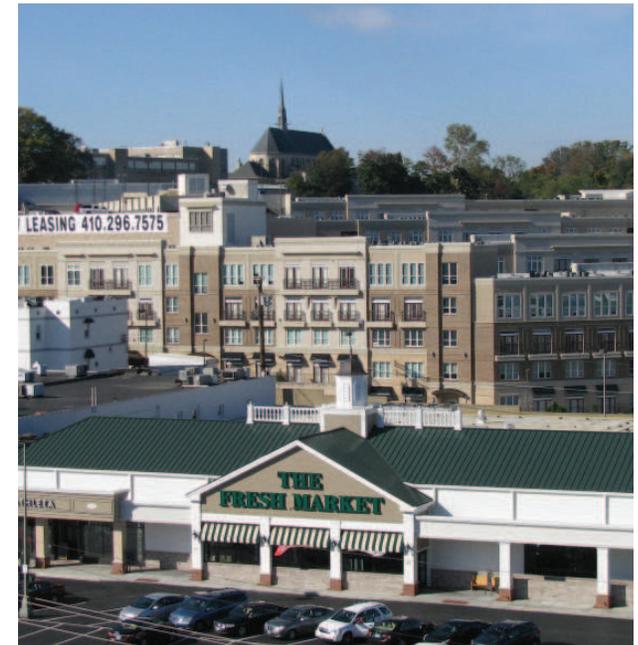


## 1.2 HISTORY

Over the last 20 years, Baltimore County has engaged in numerous planning efforts focusing on Towson. These efforts have ranged in scope from examining regulatory measures such as zoning, urban design standards, and architecture review, to developing financial incentives for targeted blocks, all in an effort to develop Towson as the County's Urban Center.

The following section contains a brief chronology and description of those individual efforts. All of these planning efforts have been in concert with the Baltimore County Master Plan 2020 which outlines recommendations and actions aimed at achieving the vision of making Towson a premier urban center. Each

successive plan has promoted higher density redevelopment, with an ever increasing emphasis on regulatory changes that foster and promote high quality design.



### 1.3 PREVIOUS PLANS

#### *Towson Community Plan*

Adopted in 1992, the plan focused on design to promote growth in downtown while protecting the identity of the residential communities. The Plan addresses urban design in the core area, however, it was adopted over two decades ago, and does not address the realities of Towson today.

#### *The Greater Towson Committee's Opportunity Plan*

This document, developed by the Towson Development Corporation (now the Greater Towson Committee) outlines an inventory of redevelopment sites located in the Towson Core. Each site is detailed with the planning objective, development opportunities and constraints, property

ownership, and acreage. It has been used as a real estate development marketing tool offering site specific information.

#### *Towson UDAT*

A visioning exercise undertaken in 2006, examined Towson's strengths and weaknesses--advocating for the urbanization of downtown Towson. This exercise sought extensive input from the business community and surrounding residential communities during the process.

#### *Walkable Towson Charrette*

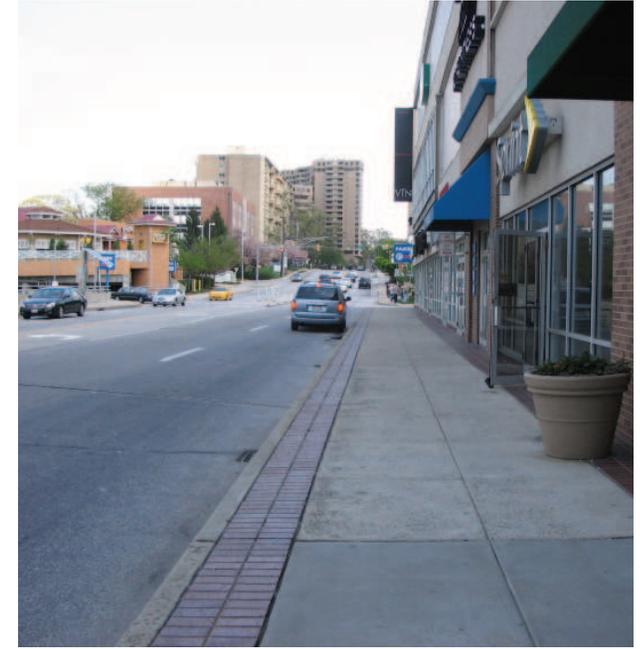
Held in 2007, this workshop developed concepts to improve walkability. The charrette proposed a master plan, a

walkability index, as well as building design principles. As a result, the Walkable Towson Plan was created in 2008 implementing a set of design principles using a form based code approach. The "walkable" area has a smaller boundary and does not include the entire downtown.

#### *Commercial Revitalization District*

Properties located within the district are targeted for revitalization using financial, design, and marketing incentives. This program is designed to incentivize major development projects and improve building facades of small businesses to assist them in staying competitive.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION



## 1.4 EXISTING LAW

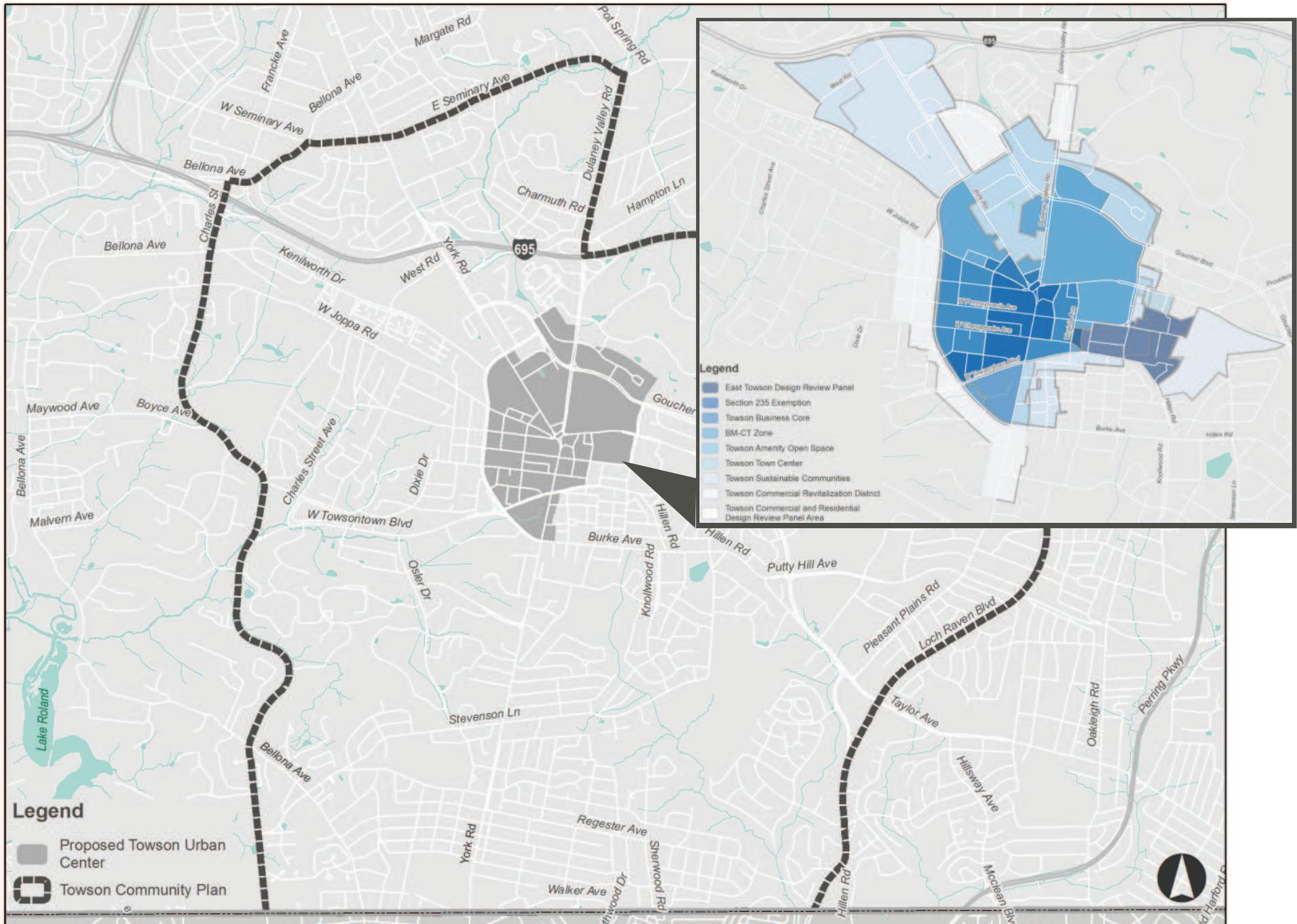
An unintended consequence of the numerous planning processes has unfortunately resulted in the implementation of zoning and special regulations that are fragmented and often contradictory to each other. Currently, there are ten separate designations/zones and overlay districts that currently apply to some part of the Towson urban center including:

1. **Towson Community Plan**
2. **BM-CT Zone**
3. **East Towson Design Review Panel Area**
4. **Exemption Area**
5. **Town Center designation**

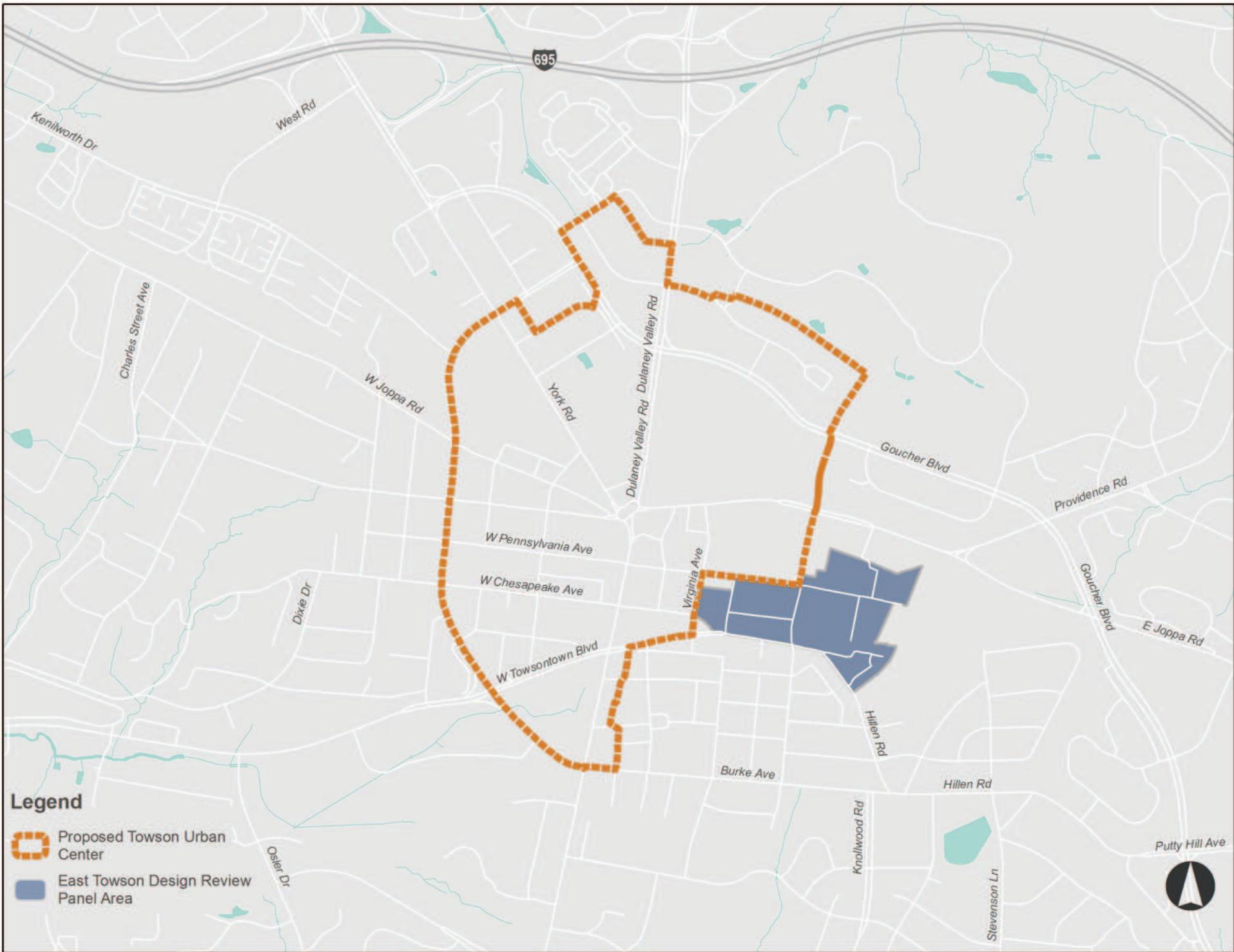
6. **Towson Commercial and Residential Design Review Panel Area**
7. **Towson Business Core/Alternate Process**
8. **Towson Revitalization District**
9. **Towson Amenity Open Space Section of the Comprehensive Manual of Development Policies (CMDP)**
10. **Towson Sustainable Communities Area**

While each of these districts/zones addresses a specific Towson development goal, they do not build on one another, and their fragmented nature hinders the comprehensive redevelopment of Towson.

Problems with the multiple, overlapping districts are numerous: some laws are grandfathered while others are retroactive resulting in different standards for different land parcels. Some are difficult to understand and apply and therefore have not been used by the development community since their inception. There are also multiple approval procedures with different levels of review. County wide regulations originally drafted to address greenfield suburban development are often awkwardly amended to try to “fit” Towson. Finally, many of the districts have slightly different boundaries, creating additional disconnection in an area that should be addressed comprehensively.



MAP 1 EXISTING OVERLAY DISTRICTS

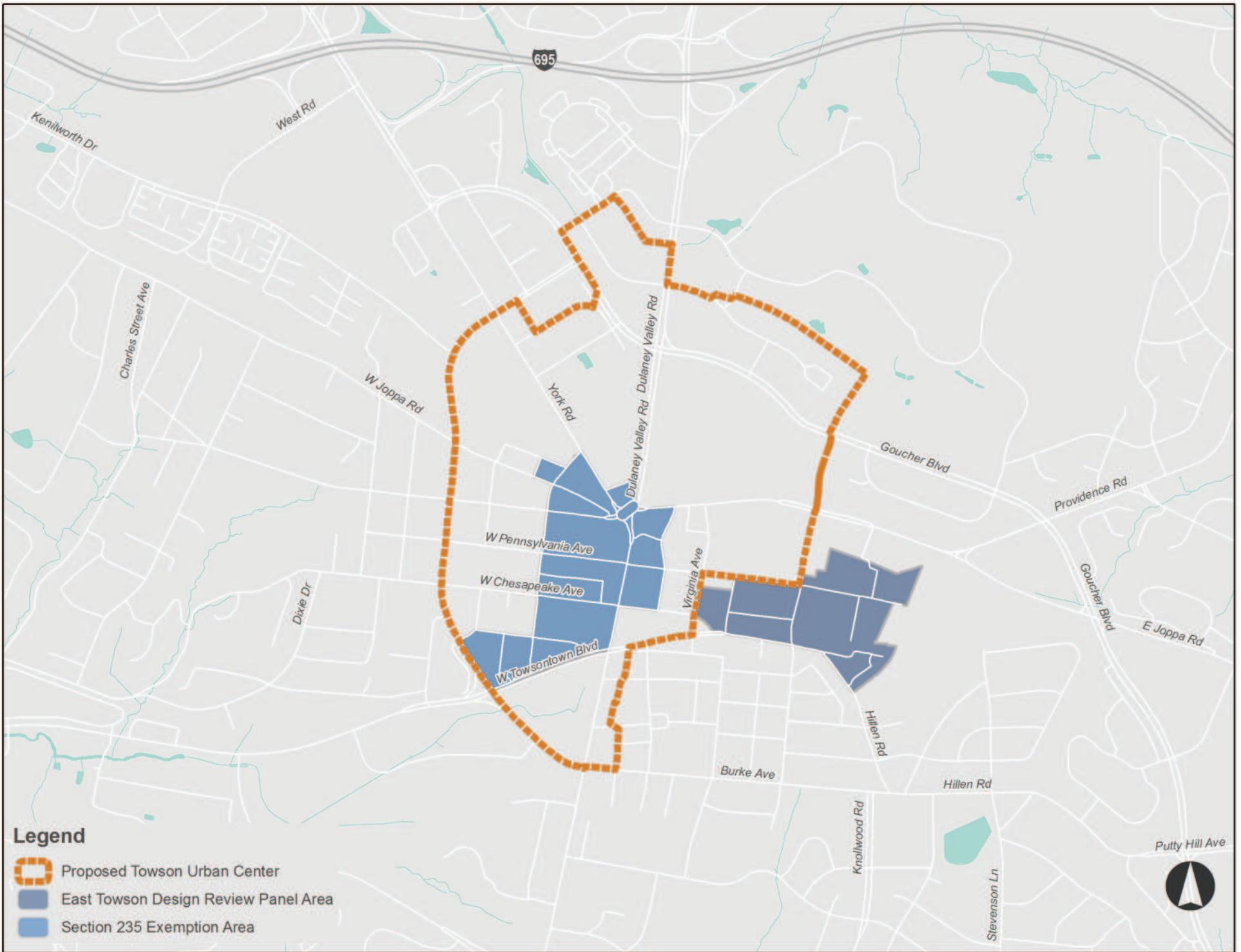


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**Legend**

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area



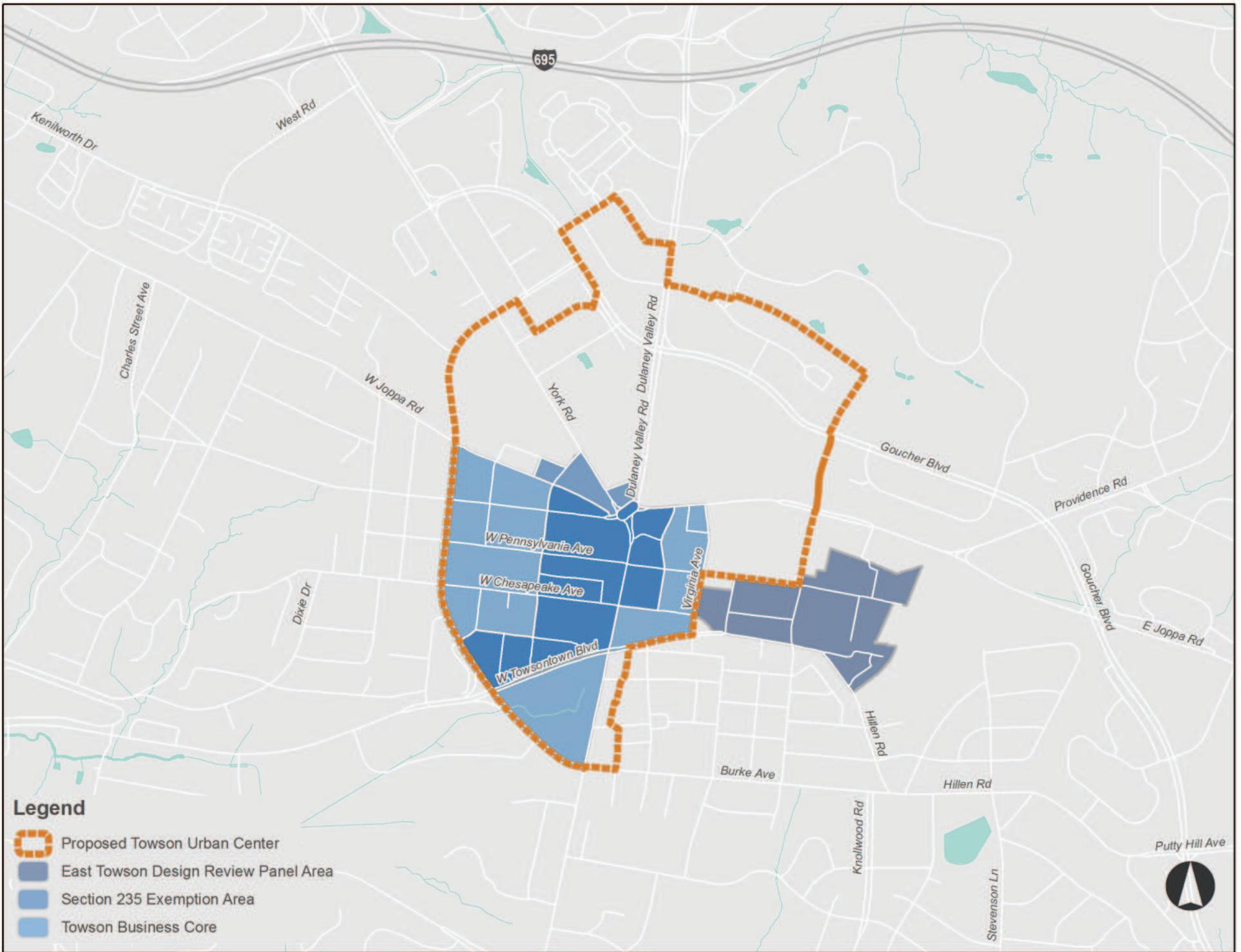


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**Legend**

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area
-  Section 235 Exemption Area

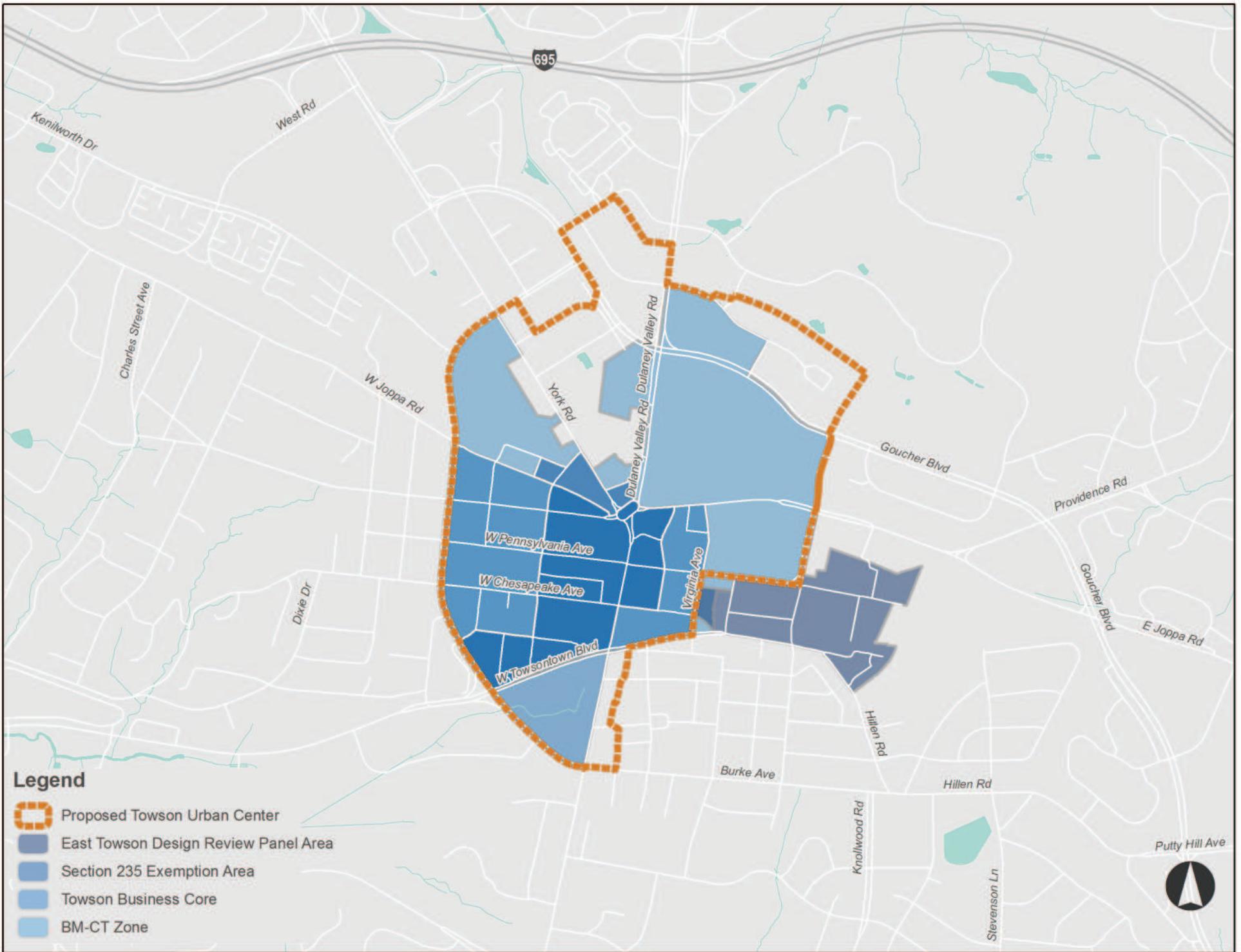




**Legend**

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area
-  Section 235 Exemption Area
-  Towson Business Core



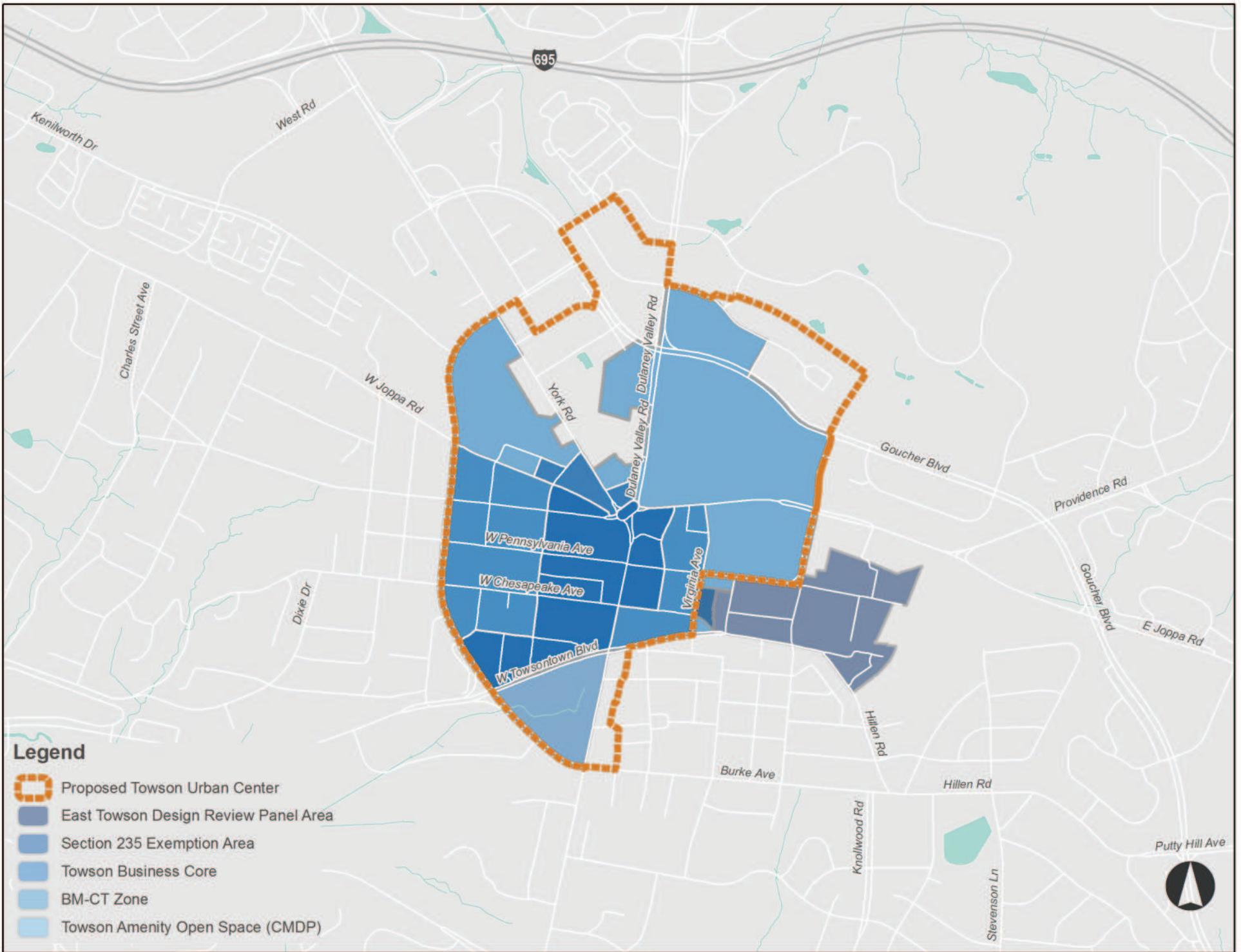


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### Legend

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area
-  Section 235 Exemption Area
-  Towson Business Core
-  BM-CT Zone

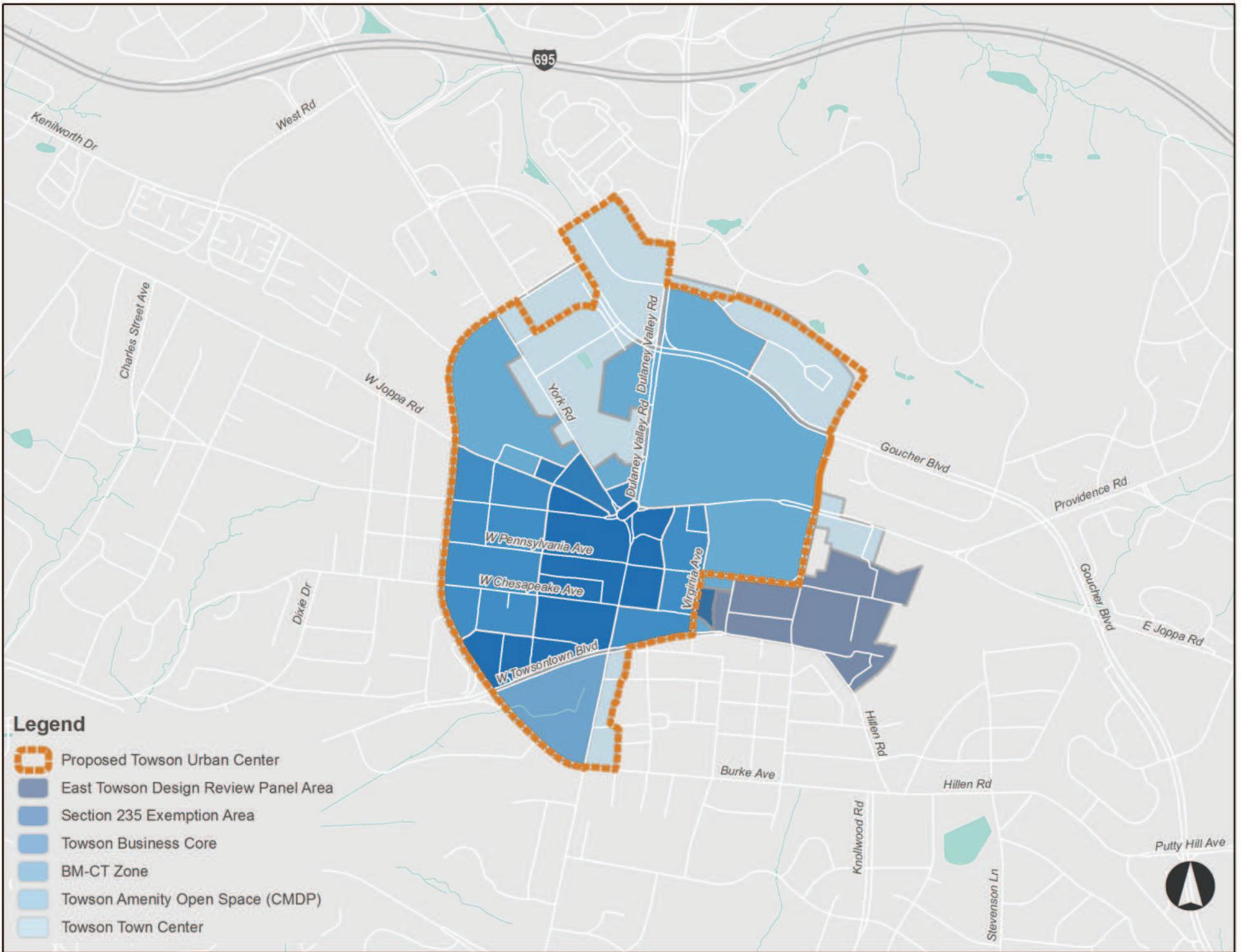


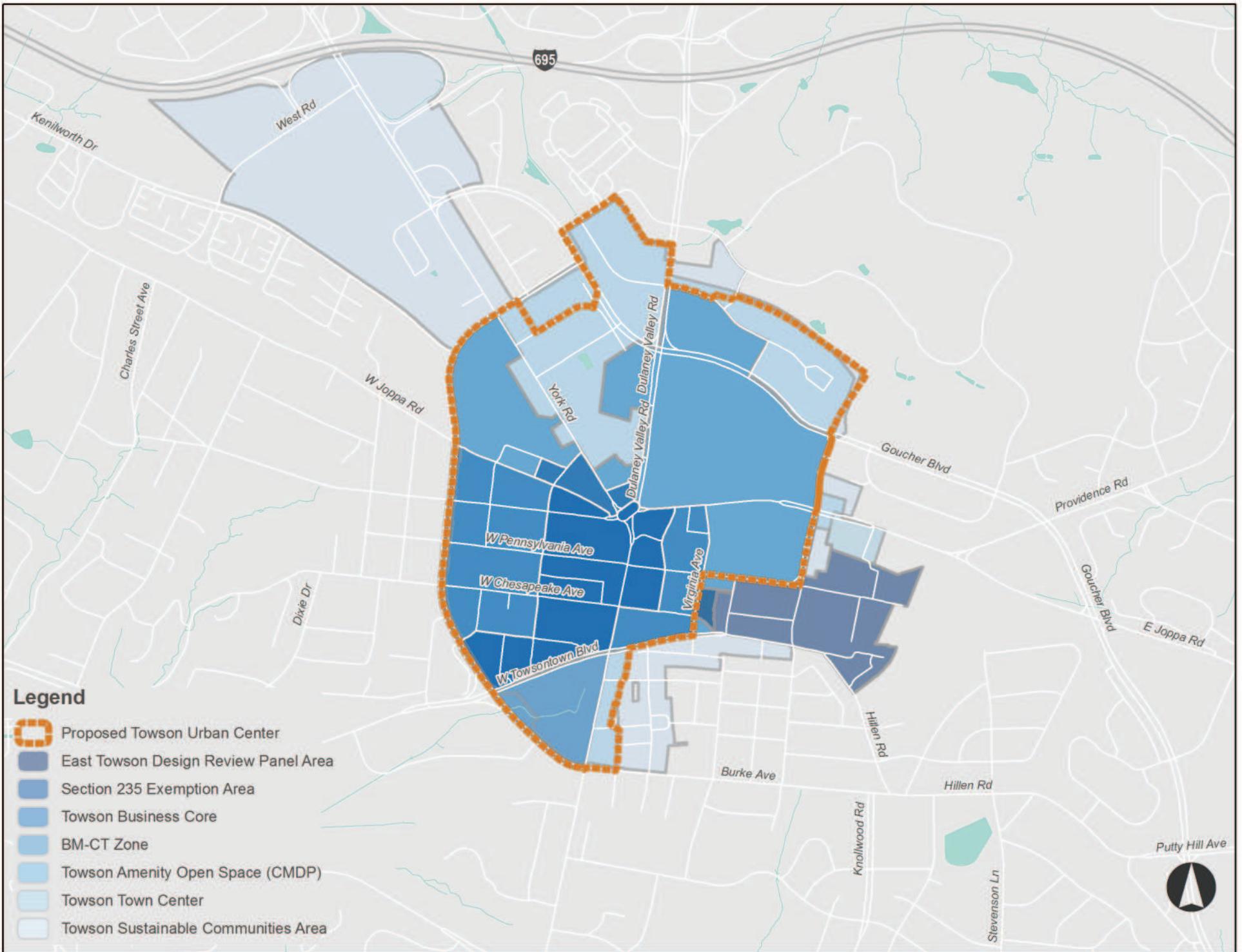


**Legend**

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area
-  Section 235 Exemption Area
-  Towson Business Core
-  BM-CT Zone
-  Towson Amenity Open Space (CMDP)

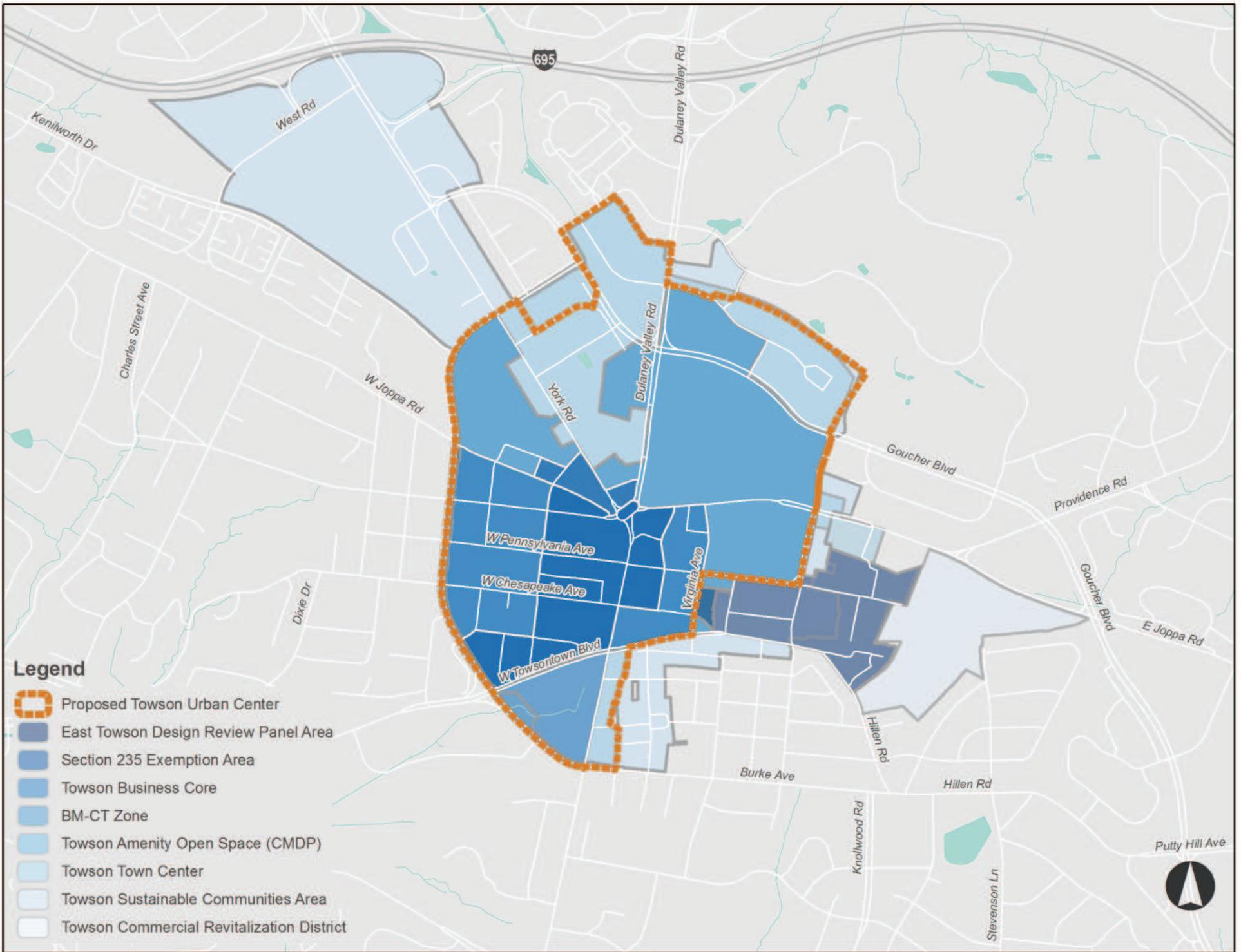






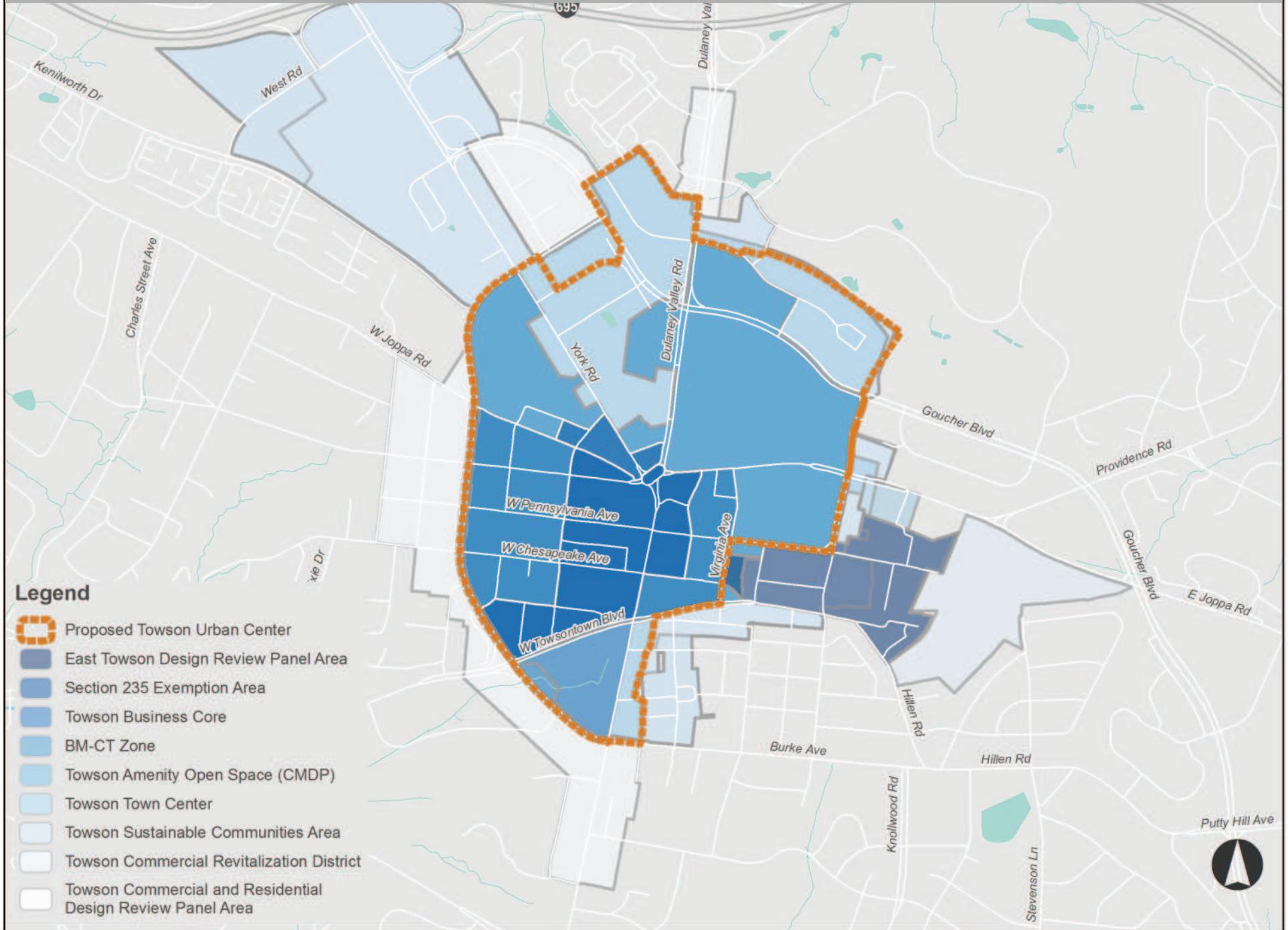
**Legend**

-  Proposed Towson Urban Center
-  East Towson Design Review Panel Area
-  Section 235 Exemption Area
-  Towson Business Core
-  BM-CT Zone
-  Towson Amenity Open Space (CMDP)
-  Towson Town Center
-  Towson Sustainable Communities Area



# 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## MAP 2 PROPOSED TOWSON URBAN CENTER OVERLAY DISTRICT





## 2.1 NEW APPROACH

The Department of Planning suggests a new comprehensive review process in the form of an overlay district that is design oriented. This approach builds upon and unifies the various plans and regulations that have been successively recognizing the importance of high quality urban design in Towson.

The goals of instituting a new approach are to:

1) Encourage mixed use development by providing more flexible development opportunities

2) Foster improved site and architectural design by a) requiring the use of high

quality building materials, b) enabling signature statuesque buildings at strategic locations, and c) integrating urban design components into the public realm

3) Encourage economic vitality through mixed-use development.

This approach acknowledges a very clear and definite distinction between the physical form of downtown Towson and the form of the greater Towson communities that surround it. Development within the Urban Center will be reviewed using urban growth and design principles contained within this document. The surrounding suburban neighborhoods will continue to use community conserva-

tion efforts outlined in the 1992 Towson Community Plan to address quality of life issues.

## 2.0 INTENT



## 2.2 OVERLAY ZONE

As stated previously, Towson is the County's only urban center, and is unique by design. It is proposed that the Towson CT overlay as it currently exists be eliminated and replaced with a new specialized Towson Urban Center (TUC) overlay. See Map 1. The existing underlying zoning will remain in place.

The TUC overlay will exempt development from the traditional suburban and prescriptive zoning regulations governing setbacks, height, floor area ratio, and density, as well as parking. The TUC will instead require a more intensive design review process to regulate all levels of development and redevelopment based on a set of urban design guidelines.

Development within the TUC will be processed through the Administrative Law Judge. Limited Exemptions, CRG or JSPC amendments or refinements, façade improvements, and certain building permit will be subject to Design Guidelines and reviewed as follows:

- **Administrative Staff Review** – exterior painting, new windows, single individual signs, tree removal/planting, deck/outdoor seating areas, fencing, roof replacement (without change in roof line), new street or building lighting, or projects using the County's Commercial Revitalization Architect on Call program.

- **Design Review Panel** – all new buildings or additions, comprehensive exterior alterations, parking structures, surface parking areas, comprehensive landscape plans.



## 2.3 DESIGN

As the Towson Urban Center evolves, the role for high quality design is critical. In an effort to create a vibrant highly desirable mixed use district, less emphasis will be placed on the rules of Euclidian zoning and land use and more on the characteristics of design that make an urban area function well. As Master Plan 2020 suggests, the downtown is poised to be a dynamic, economically viable commercial center. This requires thoughtful architectural design, buildings and spaces with character, efficient pedestrian movement, variety in design that is contextual and complementary, and active street frontages and sidewalks. Each new development and/or building will contribute significantly to the comprehensive look and cohesive

feel of the district. The creation of the TUC overlay district seeks to achieve this high quality and functioning environment through the use of project review by design professionals as part of the County's Design Review Panel (DRP) process.

### THE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL WILL EVALUATE EACH DEVELOPMENT BASED ON FOUR CRITERIA

How does the project relate in scale, height, massing, and design with the surrounding context of downtown Towson which is evolving substantially?

How is the public realm defined and connected with proposed street and sidewalk patterns?

Does the design positively improve Towson's existing character?

Is the landscape and site design appropriate for the surrounding context and proposed uses?

### 2.4 DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

The goal of the Design Review Panel (DRP) is to provide the Administrative Law Judge and the Department of Planning with design expertise in the areas of urban design, architecture, and landscape design for all proposed development and redevelopment projects. Unlike their limited role in the past where only major commercial projects in Towson have been reviewed, under new policy in the TUC overlay, all development will require mandatory design review at either an administrative level or by convening the DRP.

The DRP will render a recommendation to the hearing officer that is non-binding.

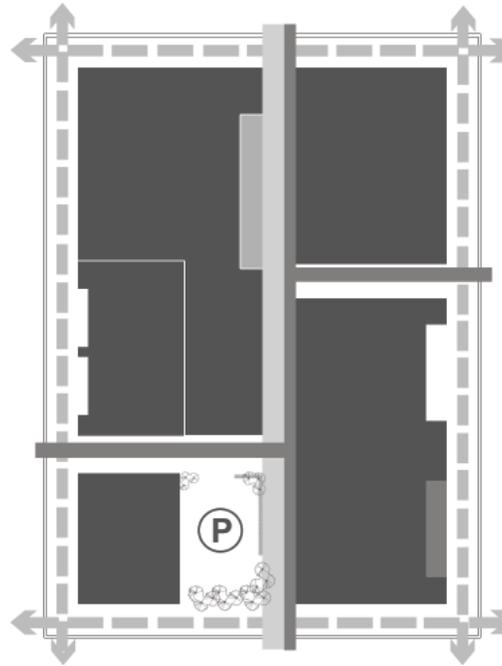
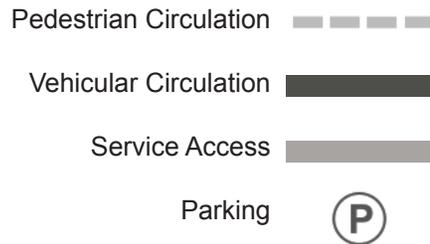
The DRP will use a set of guidelines by which to evaluate projects. Specifically, they will examine site planning, circulation, building elevations and materials, landscaping and civic space.



The purpose of the design guidelines contained within the overlay district is to provide a clear, comprehensive document outlining the level of design quality expected of all proposed improvements located in the TUC. The guidelines acknowledge the evolved character of downtown Towson as well as the blending of activities and mixed use nature. Urban site design and architecture are divided into 6 general categories including:

- Block Configuration/Site Design
- Parking
- Outdoor Site Design/Streetscape
- Building Principles/Architecture
- Building Materials
- Lighting and Signage

## 3.0 GUIDELINES



## 3.1 BLOCK CONFIGURATION & SITE DESIGN

### 3.1.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Block configuration should respect adjacent buildings and shall result in a cohesive pedestrian realm along streets and alleys.

Primary building facades should be oriented toward the street and the pedestrian realm.

Buildings should line the sidewalk and frame the public realm.

Parking areas should be screened by architectural and landscape treatments.

Corners of blocks should be given specific design consideration and should be emphasized by locating unique architectural features, entrances, or special streetscape features at corner locations.

Where there are midblock connections, pedestrian amenities and entrances to uses should be included to break up large building wall expanses.

Pathways from parking areas to the street should have purpose, be safe and be visually interesting.

The number of curb cuts should be minimized to reduce conflicts between pedestrians and vehicles.



3.2 PARKING

3.2.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Parking Structures

The design of parking structures should be architecturally integrated with the design and structure of the buildings they serve. The facade of the parking structure portion of a building should be consistent with the face of the rest of the building.

Facades of a parking structure should be masked in such a way as to maintain a high level of architectural design and finish, minimizing blank walls.

Facades on parking structures should be compatible in character and quality with

adjoining buildings, plazas and streetscapes and activated with ground floor uses and/or pedestrian amenities.

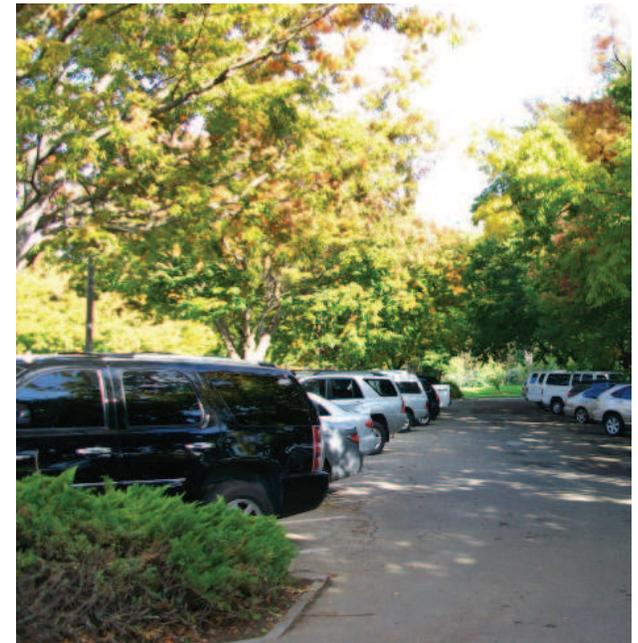
Parking structures should have signage that clearly identify parking opportunities.

The horizontal and vertical elements of the parking structure façade should complement those of adjacent structures.

Parking structures should be designed to conceal the view of all parked cars and angled ramps from adjacent plazas, public rights of way, private streets and plazas or open space.

The location of all parking garage access points should be placed to minimize the impact to the public realm or adjacent uses.

## 3.0 GUIDELINES



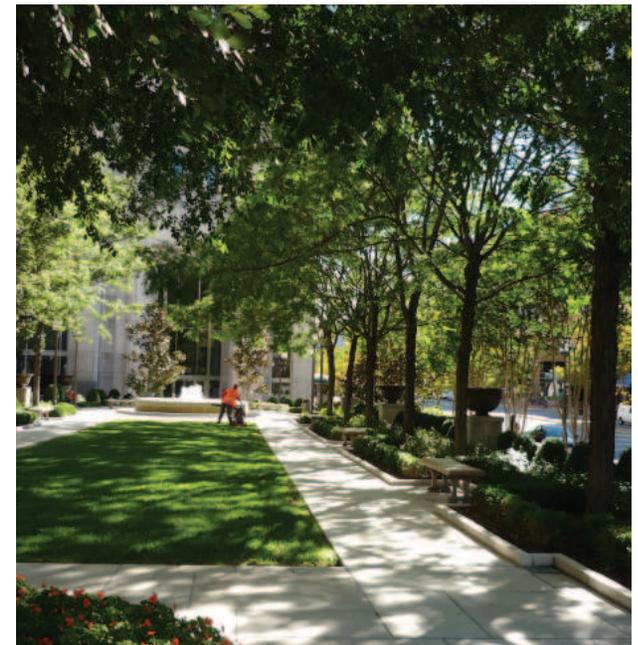
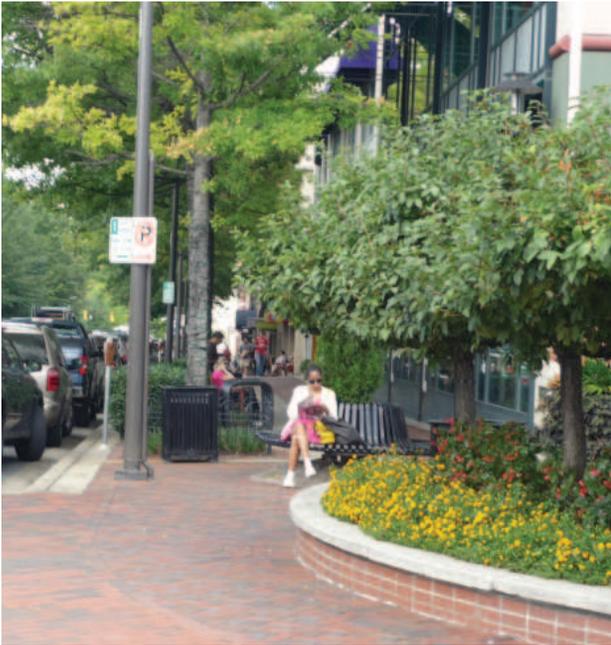
## 3.2 PARKING

### 3.2.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

#### Off Street Surface Parking

Shade trees should be located throughout all surface parking areas.

Existing and proposed surface parking areas should include attractive screening walls and/or landscaping.



**3.3 OUTDOOR SITE DESIGN & STREETScape**

**3.3.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES**

Open spaces such as plazas and courtyards should be provided to give relief and interest to the streetscape.

Each development should provide an open space/gathering area appropriate to the scale and character of the development.

Plazas should be designed to be easily accessible to the public and provide year round use where possible.

Plazas and courtyards should be made comfortable by using architectural and landscape elements to create a sense of

place, enclosure and security.

Blank walls shall be limited and plazas and courtyards should be considered an integrated part of the design.

Buildings should accommodate special amenities such as café seating, sculptures and planters, art and lighting.

The development of outdoor spaces for building users should be integrated into all design.

Trash and recycling receptacles should be strategically placed.

Plazas should feature entrances to retail/

restaurant spaces along their perimeters to activate the space.

Paving material of varied physical texture, color and pattern should be used to guide movement and define functional areas.

## 3.0 GUIDELINES



### 3.3 OUTDOOR SITE DESIGN & STREETSCAPE

#### 3.3.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES (continued)

The use of trees for shading and cooling is encouraged.

The preservation of existing trees where practical is encouraged.

Amenity/recreational space for all ages should be incorporated into the design.

Bicycle racks and storage shall be incorporated into the design of all developments

A consistent framework of materials and treatment is suggested for the public realm of the TUC r in order to blend with what has already been built and landscaped. These standards are taken from Section F (Towson Streetscape Standards) of the Comprehensive Manual of Development Policies (CMDP) and are as follows:

Street trees, 30-50 feet on center.

Brick paving edge along the curb, 16 inches in width.

Decorative lighting, 60 feet on center.



### 3.4 BUILDING PRINCIPLES & ARCHITECTURE

#### 3.4.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

A wide variety of appropriate architectural styles, materials and details throughout the district are encouraged to create a thriving, attractive district.

New buildings should be contextual in scale and style to the surrounding structures.

Variation in building scaling and detail should relate to the scale and function of pedestrian active uses along the streets.

All sides of the building should be given design consideration, including the roofs. All building sides should be designed

purposefully.

New buildings should fit within the context in terms of mass and scale to enhance the character of a block or street.

The location of buildings should define and contain the street space in order to concentrate and reinforce pedestrian activity.

Portions of the building that are not aligned with the right of way line should be related to the building uses that complement pedestrian activities along the street such as plazas, patios, and building entries.

Buildings that are immediately adjacent to the East Towson Historic District should minimize the impact of the building height and shadow on adjacent properties.

Use of structural bays, expressed columns, window mullions, horizontal fenestration etc. should be utilized to promote a pedestrian scale.

## 3.0 GUIDELINES



## 3.4 BUILDING PRINCIPLES & ARCHITECTURE

### 3.4.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES (continued)

Rooftop equipment should be fully screened from horizontal view. Screenings should be expressed as part of the buildings composition and fully integrated architecturally.

Building corners should be given special treatment. This may include signature entries, special roof shapes and taller, iconic architectural elements.

Variations in fenestration patterns should be used to emphasize building features such as entries, shifts in building form or differences in function and use.

Building rooftops and parapets should enhance the character of the skyline and strengthen the identity of individual buildings.

Ground floor use should be activated and activities in new developments should be integrated with existing retail uses and activities along the street front and provide flexibility for changing market demands.

The ground level of buildings should be developed to provide visual interest to pedestrians. This means either outdoor dining areas, retail display windows or service oriented activities that can be viewed through storefront glazing. If the

building face at the sidewalk edge cannot be glazed, then the blank wall should be treated in an interesting way with decorative architectural finishes, screens, display cases, sculpture, murals or plant material.

If the façade wall is to be set back from the property line to create courtyards or niches, then other elements (such as columns, planters, changes in paving materials, or railings) should be used to define the street wall.



### 3.5 BUILDING MATERIALS

#### 3.5.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Innovative use of high quality materials should be encouraged.

The character and image should be reinforced by using high quality materials, texture, patterns, and colors in well-designed innovative ways including the utilization of natural materials that will age well.

Finishes and materials should reinforce those used in that architectural style originally. For example, a colonial style building should utilize brick. The consistent use of quality materials appropriate to the urban environment should be ensured.

Human scaled building should be encouraged through the use of well detailed and articulated materials, individually and in combination. Material selection on the ground floor should be given careful consideration to aid in creating a pleasing pedestrian environment in addition to being able to weather well.

All facades of a building should be treated equally in terms of materials, color and design detail. The building should have a finished appearance on all sides.

The use of replacement materials that imitate or falsely replicate natural material applications should be avoided.

## 3.0 GUIDELINES



### 3.6 LIGHTING & SIGNAGE

#### 3.6.1 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Lighting should be used to provide illumination that complements the aesthetic appeal and safety, thereby promoting comfortable, safe pedestrian activity at night.

Highlighting of significant architectural features, trees and artwork with accent lighting should be considered.

Fixtures should be designed and installed in scale and context with the architecture of the building.

Light sources on private development

should complement lighting within the public realm of the district.

Lighting as a nighttime amenity should be considered.



## 3.6 LIGHTING &amp; SIGNAGE

## 3.6.2 DESIGN GUIDELINES

Signs shall be oriented towards and scaled for the pedestrian realm.

Signs should be integrated within the architectural features of the façade and complement the building's architecture.

Signs should not be designed to maximize square footage but instead be to enhance their graphic impact to the public (pedestrian realm).

Signs should add visual interest, facilitate way finding and enhance the character of the area.

