

# Executive Summary & Introduction

Towson is increasingly viewed as having enormous potential to become a more pedestrian-friendly activity center within the Baltimore region. Yet, downtown Towson is widely regarded as a “9-to-5” district, dominated by office workers during weekdays and with little activity in the evenings and on the weekends. In order to help Towson realize its full potential, community, business, and government leaders now recognize the benefits of Towson becoming a more pedestrian-friendly place, and the need to develop a plan to guide Towson in this direction.

In 2006, Baltimore County was fortunate to secure the assistance of an American Institute of Architects Urban Design Assistance Team (UDAT) in order to begin the visioning process for making Towson more walkable. This effort was remarkably effective at engaging local stakeholders, educating them about the possibilities, and perhaps most importantly, building a strong constituency for walkability. From this effort, interest in making Towson more walkable continued to grow.

After the UDAT, there was also a recognition that, before implementation could begin in earnest, the UDAT recommendations needed to be assessed in greater depth, and a more comprehensive approach to achieving walkability was needed. Baltimore County retained the services of consultants with national expertise in walkability and place making — Hall Planning & Engineering, Inc., the TND Planning Group and JMT Engineering, Inc. — to facilitate a charrette process through which the Walkable Towson Plan was crafted. This process involved several public meetings and feedback sessions, ensuring citizen involvement. What follows are the plan’s findings and recommendations.

## Understanding Walkability

Like virtually every village, town, and city neighborhood that existed in the United States until the middle of the 20th Century, Towson was once an eminently walkable place, with a strong identity and sense of place. Towson developed during the 19th Century as a traditional small town. It had most daily needs within walking distance and good transit connections to other parts of the region.

After World War II, however, the United States shifted to a new paradigm of suburbanization in which one was expected to drive rather than walk. This resulted in dramatic changes to development patterns and roadway networks. Goods and services that were once within walking distance were now separated and walk-

ability became less of a consideration in new development and transportation planning. Urban Planning at the time — including the 1964 Urban Renewal Plan for Towson — embraced the automobile paradigm. Although well-intentioned, the suburban development pattern compromised walkability in Towson and eroded its strong identity. Some of the choices involved in transforming Towson into a “modern” place came with unintended consequences.

The social and economic consequences of the suburban development pattern began to emerge in the 1990’s: rising energy costs, the continued loss of natural landscapes to sprawl, worsening traffic congestion and air quality, increasing evidence of global warming tied to vehicle emissions, and a growing feeling of social isolation in car-dependent suburbs.

In the wake of these challenges, more and more people recognize that compact, walkable communities play a role in addressing them. A growing segment of the population understands that “walkability” means more than merely the feasibility of walking. The term describes a lifestyle choice in which people walk as an effective mode of transportation.

Walkability also refers to the form and character of places offering an environment in which walking, bicycling, and transit usage flourish as convenient alternatives to driving. Finally, walkability contributes to the kind of social and civic interactions that were once a dynamic part of our urban centers and are increasingly seen as key ingredients to making communities healthy.



**Paradigm Shift** — Development of the Hutzler’s building in 1951 — especially the placement of a large surface parking lot at a central downtown crossroads — marked an important milestone in the rise of the suburban development pattern. This section of Joppa Road remains unfriendly to pedestrians.



**Allegheny Gets it Right** — Wide sidewalks, active building fronts with destination appeal and a comfortable parking buffer make Allegheny Avenue one of Towson’s brightest “walkability” gems.

## Planning Approach and Evaluation

There are significant challenges in bringing about walkability in Towson. Re-introducing conditions necessary to make places walkable requires rethinking the status-quo. Baltimore County is fortunate to have the kind of enlightened and progressive leadership that is necessary to do this, and the Towson UDAT was the first step in that process.

The Walkable Towson Plan builds on the important work started by the UDAT. The consultant team started by evaluating the UDAT recommendations and, whenever possible, either reinforced or carried the concept further. The team concurred with approximately 90% of the UDAT recommendations, and after evaluating them, folded them into the far-reaching recommendations that comprise this plan. The design approach and planning philosophy that the consultant team used to develop the plan are built on

*“The team concurred with approximately 90% of the UDAT recommendations.”*

core principles of place-making and New Urbanism, which are about making and restoring compact, walkable places. The UDAT document also emphasized these core principles, and thus, the two bodies of work are mutually reinforcing. After the UDAT, Tomorrow’s Towson helped to quickly enact one of the key recommendations of the UDAT, which was the creation of a formally recognized Walkable District. Moreover, Tomorrow’s Towson has proposed a set of urban design principles, consistent with the tenets of New Urbanism, that would henceforth be applied to redevelopment projects in the Walkable District.

# Urban Design Principles

*These principles set a very important tone as the team began its work developing the Walkable Towson Plan. They helped the team strike a balance between pedestrian safety and access and the reasonable movement of vehicles.*



1. Orient buildings to the existing street/sidewalk grid as the prime pathway for pedestrians. Locate the building's front entrance at the back of the sidewalk, facing the street.
2. Provide sidewalks that are wide enough for a broad pedestrian pathway, street signs and parking meters, and pedestrian amenities such as shade trees with appropriate tree wells that facilitate walking, and lighting. In "main street" areas, sidewalks should be wider than in other areas to accommodate concentrated foot traffic and sidewalk cafes.
3. Locate building facades at the back of, and abutting, the sidewalk, aligned with adjacent existing building facades to a "build-to line." This will create a sense of enclosure along the street so that the street becomes a distinct public "place."
4. Build to at least two stories in height to provide appropriate urban densities and create a consistent street edge and sense of enclosure. Design tall buildings to avoid "canyon effect." Maintain a "pedestrian scale" at street level.
5. In "main street" areas, provide a mix of uses, preferably including residential, in the same project. Mix uses vertically, with retail, including retail services, at street level; residential, retail, and office above. The mix of uses enhances street activity providing for a safer, more stimulating pedestrian environment.
6. Provide doors and windows appropriate to the type and story of the building. In "main street" areas, provide storefront-type windows (storefronts with a higher percentage of glazing at street level), clear and un-tinted, in all buildings to enhance visual interest along the street. Street-level storefronts typically have a greater percentage of glazing than other types of buildings or upper stories.
7. Provide as much on-street parking as possible. Move toward parking boxes that allow use of credit cards in lieu of parking meters.
8. Locate off-street parking (surface or structured) and secondary entrances behind the buildings (on the interior of the block). Eliminate curb cuts that provide separate access for individual properties (such as along York Road from Burke to Towsontown Blvd.). This pattern is unsafe and discourages walking. Create or use a network of rear alleys behind the main buildings to provide rear access for loading and unloading.
9. In cases where surface parking must abut the sidewalk, provide a low wall (3-4 ft. in height) or a transparent decorative fence (4-5 ft. in height). Appropriate wall or fence height will allow for surveillance (eyes on the street) while defining the street edge.
10. To shorten walking distances and increase route options for pedestrians, blocks less than 400 feet in length are preferred. Where possible, restructure long "superblocks" by adding a midblock street or pedestrian walkway.

*a message from Jim Smith and the Baltimore County Council*

Never before has Baltimore County seen so many citizens stepping forward to bring Renaissance to our well-established communities. Over the past five years, thousands of county residents have taken part in large-scale planning efforts striving for revitalization and community development.



**County Executive  
Jim Smith**

Many of you joined us in the summer of 2006 when the county worked in partnership with Tomorrow's Towson, Inc., to bring an Urban Design Assistance Team to the County Seat. Now we are delighted to unveil the results of our latest effort — The Walkable Towson Plan.

Both the UDAT and the walkability charrette involved a very high level of citizen outreach, ensuring that all segments of the Greater Towson community were engaged in the effort.

After distributing the UDAT report to 1,000 people this

winter and attracting hundreds to the follow-up charrette, we can now contact, at a moment's notice, more than 300 Towson citizens who have participated in the Renaissance effort.



**The Baltimore County Council**

In the coming months, we will be working closely with our community partners to review the exciting recommendations in this report with an eye toward expedited implementation of our highest priorities. In the meantime, we will continue progress in revitalizing the streetscape elements along Allegheny Avenue.

Councilman Vince Gardina, the County Council and I remain committed to building consensus through outreach and collaboration. It's the right thing to do, and it's a lot of fun!

## Towson Charrette Attendance Tops 200 on Opening Night

The process used in developing the Walkable Towson Plan is called a "charrette," following the guidelines of the National Charrette Institute (NCI). It was designed to facilitate changes to the status quo in an open and transparent way.

In advance of the charrette, extensive data was collected by the consultant team and county staff, culminating in the establishment of a baseline of current walkability in Towson. A "walkability index" was used to score the relative walkability of street segments within the the Walkable District. The index results showed that walkability in Towson is mixed, with some streets moderately walkable while others are unfriendly to walking. No streets in Towson scored as highly walkable. The walkability index scores were supplemented by intensive field observations before and during the charrette that led the team to identify specific obstacles to pedestrian activity within the entire plan area.

The charrette was held in Towson over a six-day period from June 4th to June 9th, 2007, and included extensive involvement of the public and other stakeholders. The opening presentation and subsequent table sessions on June 4 attracted more than 200 attendees. Pinup sessions were held later in the week, attracting crowds of over 100. These sessions, field observations and the team's experience all contributed to preferred alternatives and plan recommendations. The charrette team and Baltimore County offer our deepest gratitude to Trinity Episcopal Church for graciously hosting the charrette.



**Full House** — Team members exchange ideas with residents during the Tuesday night pinup at Calvary Baptist Church.

*"We've never seen this many people  
at a pinup before!"*

— charrette team

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# Master Plan

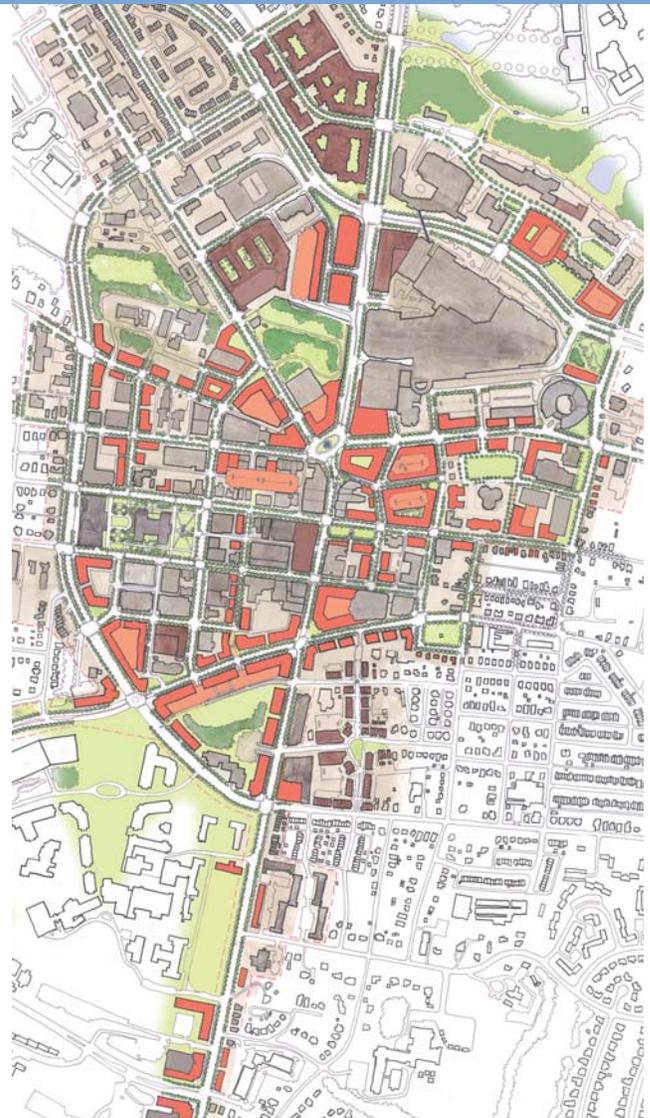
The charrette process resulted in a comprehensive set of recommendations that, collectively, constitute a walkability master plan for Towson. The recommendations include changes to the street network, improvements to the streetscape and building facades, changes in the development pattern, and changes to the regulatory and management framework that will help facilitate the increased pedestrian orientation sought.

It is important to recognize that each recommendation is part of a greater whole, the benefits of which will only be realized when a critical mass of recommendations are implemented. The recommendations address things directly in control of government, and also things that government has less control over but can guide and influence. Implementing the Master Plan will be a long-term process, but one that can begin immediately and happen incrementally.

The Executive Summary & Introduction presents a concise listing of the projects comprising the Master Plan's Short-Term Recommendations. These recommendations offer immediate priorities and guidance to the Greater Towson community and its leadership groups — organizations that will be instrumental in implementing the plan.

The consultant team produced material beyond what is found in this published version of Volume I. That material — including a full assessment of Towson's walkability challenges and a history of the town's development — can be found online at:

[www.baltimorecountymd.gov/go/walkabletowson](http://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/go/walkabletowson)



**Long-Term Buildout** — The Illustrative Master Plan above represents a conceptual view of Towson's long-term buildout with all land use and transportation recommendations implemented. Existing buildings are shown in gray; new buildings that are planned or under construction are brown; and proposed new or renovated buildings are shown in orange.

## Short-Term Recommendations

1. Work with the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) to redesign York Road between the roundabout and Towsontown Boulevard. Reduce travel lanes from four to two by adding full-time, on-street parking.
2. Modify the geometric design of the roundabout in order to slow traffic within the roundabout and at its entry and exit points. In addition, improve the landscape and hardscape within and around the roundabout to further calm traffic and increase the pedestrian orientation of this downtown focal point.
3. East and west of York Road, convert Chesapeake and Pennsylvania Avenues from one-way to two-way streets.
4. Install pedestrian improvements, including enhanced crosswalks, signage and other traffic calming measures, at key crossings along major streets within plan area. Also install enhanced lighting for pedestrians in the downtown district.

5. Undertake and implement a signage and wayfinding plan for downtown Towson. This includes creating a distinctive visual theme for non-commercial signs in the downtown area, as well as installing wayfinding signs to direct visitors to attractions and parking facilities.
6. Design and construct “gateway” features at the southwest corner of Bosley Avenue and York Road at the entrance to Towson University, and at the northwest corner of Fairmount Avenue and Dulaney Valley Road.
7. Redesign Washington and Pennsylvania Avenues in proximity to the Old Courthouse to include angled parking. Along Washington Avenue, implement enhanced bus stop and textured pavement.
8. Redesign the concrete plaza between the County Courts Building and the Old Courthouse as a more usable and inviting public space that includes new landscaping and improved access to the police and fire memorials.
9. Based on planning already done by the Office of Planning, design and implement a Greater Towson Bicycle/Pedestrian Network that improves connections to adjacent neighborhoods and those beyond.

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### Short-Term Policy Recommendations

Besides the short-term, “brick-and-mortar” projects listed above, additional short-term recommendations that are less visible but critical to the success of the implementation process include:

1. Develop design standards and modifications to the zoning ordinance that create predictability in the type of development that is needed to foster walkability within the plan area.
2. Develop and distribute to the public educational materials about walkability. A brochure summarizing plan highlights should be designed and distributed as an insert to the *Towson Times*.
3. Undertake a transit planning study for developing a robust transit system for Towson that supports walkability. A consultant with specific expertise in transit planning for walkable communities should be retained for this.
4. Work with MTA, the private sector and educational institutions to study the proposed Towson Shuttle and the appropriate routing and service frequencies.
5. Implement downtown facade improvements along York Road between Towsontown Boulevard and the roundabout.

6. Integrate a Walkability Index into the local transportation planning process within the plan area.
7. Develop a parking management plan for the entire plan area that addresses the issues of parking supply, demand and pricing. A consultant with experience in developing parking plans that support walkability should be retained.

Short-term recommendations have the potential to bring highly beneficial momentum to the plan implementation process. It is equally important to work toward realization of longer term and more ambitious plan recommendations, many of which represent bold steps that will be truly transformative in nature. The details of these recommendations are presented in the Full Transformation section of the Master Plan.

Finally, the importance of having an effective process for implementing the plan cannot be overstated. Tomorrow’s Towson should continue to be the primary champion of the plan, supported by Baltimore County to move implementation forward. In addition, a consultant with expertise in walkability implementation should be retained on an on-call basis to assist with oversight and guidance on implementation issues as they unfold.

Material beyond what is found in this published version of Volume I — including a full assessment of Towson’s walkability challenges and a history of the town’s development — can be found online at: [www.baltimorecountymd.gov/go/walkabletowson](http://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/go/walkabletowson)