

Introduction

This Plan expresses a vision for the transformation of the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor into one of the finest mixed-use communities in the Washington Region – a lively, urban place that is an important focus of community life for Alexandria’s West End. The vision establishes a strong sense of place for the community, with two distinctive mixed-use activity centers that unify and serve the surrounding residential neighborhoods. The vision includes tree-lined transit boulevards and a new network of local streets providing easy walking to parks, plazas, shops, and restaurants. Moreover, the Plan envisions an environmentally and economically sustainable community that through its land use, redevelopment, transportation improvements, and network of open spaces create a safe, healthy, vibrant community that meets the needs of residents and visitors.



Bethesda Row, Bethesda, MD



Las Ramblas, Barcelona



Third Street Promenade, Santa Monica, CA



Crown Farm, MD

1.1. The Planning Area

The Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor is an area of the City of Alexandria with tremendous potential. Surrounded by the strong neighborhoods of the West End, it is characterized by automobile-dominated corridors; disconnected commercial, multi-family, and industrial uses; and lack of a sense of place. The opportunities and challenges for the future are to transform the present suburban development pattern into a quality mixed-use urban community that serves the residents of the West End and beyond.

Encompassing about 240 acres of retail, office, residential, and industrial properties, the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor planning area is focused along Van Dorn Street, extending from the Landmark Mall to the Van Dorn Street Metro (see figure 1-1). The planning area comprises the central portion of the Landmark/Van Dorn Small Area Plan.

Because the planning area is fully developed, creation of the new activity centers that redefine and unify the area will depend on a combination of private redevelopment

and public action. Recent development interest expressed by owners of key properties, including Landmark Mall, indicates that the greater Landmark/Van Dorn community faces a critical crossroads in its history. How these properties are redeveloped will determine whether the area will be transformed into a lively mixed-use urban community, or whether the present pattern of surface parking lots and strip commercial development will be continued.

The first challenge for the City of Alexandria is to establish in this Plan the vision and the requirements for the desired character of the area to meet public objectives such as building a greater sense of community and sense of place.

The second challenge is to achieve the desired character by managing the change that is coming. The City has an important role to play in this process through commitment to policies, regulations, incentives, and capital investments that encourage reinvestment, while ensuring

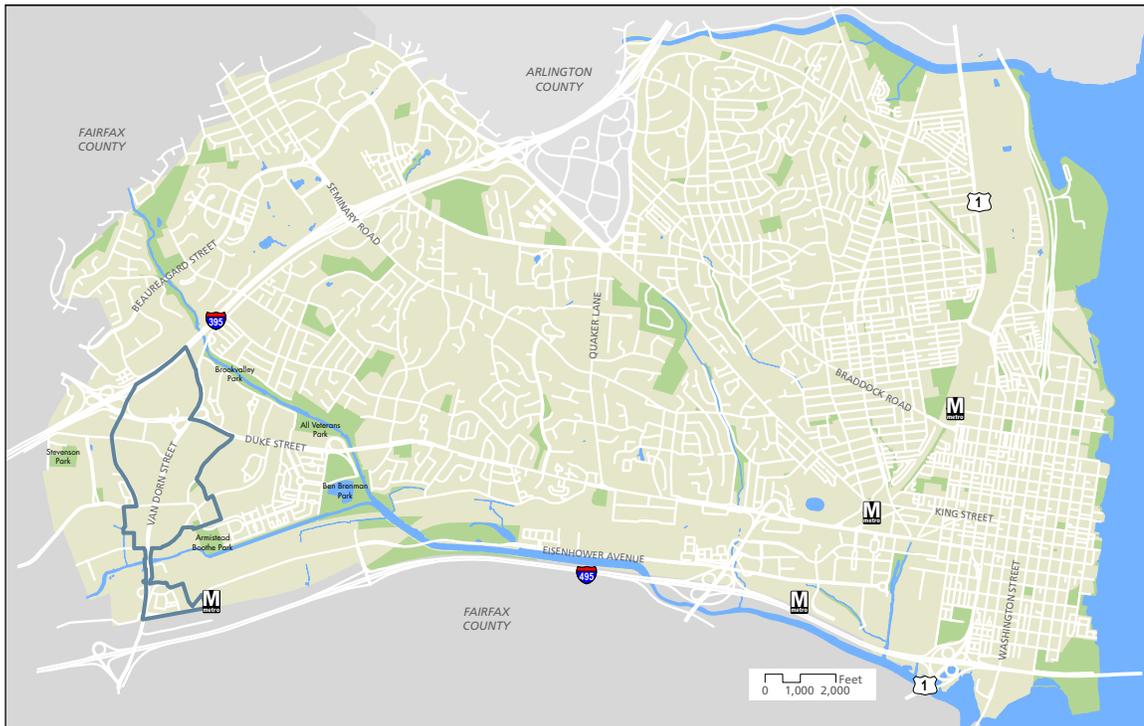


Figure 1-1. Planning Area

that this reinvestment results in the desired type and form of development.

Given the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor's current auto-oriented development pattern and the regional travel demand caused by proximity to the regional highway system (I-395 and the Capital Beltway), transportation is both an opportunity and a constraint for redevelopment. However, a truly walkable community with a successful multi-modal transportation system can be created through mixed-use development policies, improved local connections, improved transit, and transportation demand management techniques.

1.1.1. History of the Area

Today this area is called the West End for the obvious reason that it is in the western portion of the City of Alexandria. Yet, the name has greater meaning. Until 1952 the area was part of Fairfax County and was a crossroads though an agricultural area west of the regional urban center, Alexandria. The name "West End" is actually a historic one associated with the first suburb of Alexandria. Not only was the original West End (today centered along Duke Street around the Carlyle area) just west of Alexandria, the West family were its early owners and 18th century developers. This first West End became a booming center of commerce along what was then Little River Turnpike, now Duke Street. As Alexandria annexed more land and expanded west, the West End name migrated as well.

The West family is also a part of the history of the Landmark/Van Dorn area. A founder of Alexandria, Hugh West operated the first tobacco inspection station and port at his facilities at West Point—now the foot of Oronoco Street--almost 20 years before the establishment of the town. The West family was prominent in Northern Virginia for decades. In the 18th century, John West, as well as John Summers and Michael Reagan, owned large tracts of land in what is now the Van Dorn corridor. The large tracts with plantations and slave quarters were subdivided over the years into smaller

farmsteads. Tobacco was the first crop grown in the colonial era, but people shifted their dependence from one export product to a diversified grain economy.

Good roads and bridges were critical to the movement of goods for commercial purposes and to link east (Alexandria) with the west (this area and beyond). A great period of road development started at the turn of the 19th century, resulting in many private turnpike companies. Little River Turnpike (Duke Street) was chartered in 1795 and first started collecting tolls in 1803. It became a major east-west artery connecting rural hinterlands with Alexandria and continues to be the spine of east-west transportation more than 200 years later.

Although this new turnpike promoted commerce through the area, the local agricultural economy was depressed by the early 19th century as the soils had become depleted from growing tobacco. In the 1840s and 1850s, people from northern states moved into the area and brought new farming methods, such as deep plowing and fertilization. Agriculture was reinvigorated before the Civil War. Wheat was milled locally at places such as Cloud's Mill on Holmes Run and taken for export to the Alexandria wharves. The Orange and Alexandria Railroad was constructed in the early 1850s, and ran parallel and south of the Little River Turnpike.

By the time of the Civil War (1861-1865), military maps show this area with few homes, which were generally situated on the highest uplands separated by streams. A road system, while not at the scale of an urban grid, operated as a grid with two major east-west arteries which were joined by several north-south connectors. Many of today's streets are continuations of these historic roads: Duke, Whiting, Van Dorn, and parts of Edsall and Reynolds. A road once ran in a similar manner to Eisenhower Avenue, and the rail tracks continue the historic pattern. The area just west of Landmark Shopping Center, Linconia, was a small village with taverns, a school, and a church.

The period before World War II saw the beginning of changes which would catapult the Landmark/Van Dorn area from a marginal, rural hinterland to a central location. Shirley Highway (route 395) began construction in 1944 to move large numbers of people to federal jobs. Virginia's first limited access freeway, the Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway, was completed from Woodbridge, Virginia, to the 14th Street Bridge over the Potomac River, in 1952. A four-lane freeway 17.3 miles long, the road was named for Henry Shirley, Virginia Highway Commissioner and major supporter of the interstate highway system, which President Eisenhower championed in the 1950s.

In 1952, the City of Alexandria annexed a portion of Fairfax County. This increased the area's value and led to large-scale developments such as residential high-rises and strip shopping centers. The first projects cut down the highest uplands which once had farmhouses and dramatically altered the landscape. Through the late 20th century, the area added many retail businesses that augmented the regional economy and shifted residential population and retail sales from Old Town to the West End.

Many of the streets were named in the pre-Civil Rights era after Confederate officers: Pickett, Whiting, Van Dorn, Reynolds, Stevens, Jordan and Paxton. But at least one road retains a local historical name. Horace Edsall owned the Mount Hebron plantation and mill. The United States Military Railroad created a rail siding near his property during the Civil War after taking control of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. This became a permanent stop on the rail line that continued through many owners and linked this area to Baltimore through the Wilkes Street Tunnel, a ferry across the Potomac River, and additional rail.

Duke and Van Dorn streets today echo the old cross-roads function of the area linking people and goods both east-west and north-south, while also maintaining its late 20th century retail role. While not the original West End, the area has evolved into a significant

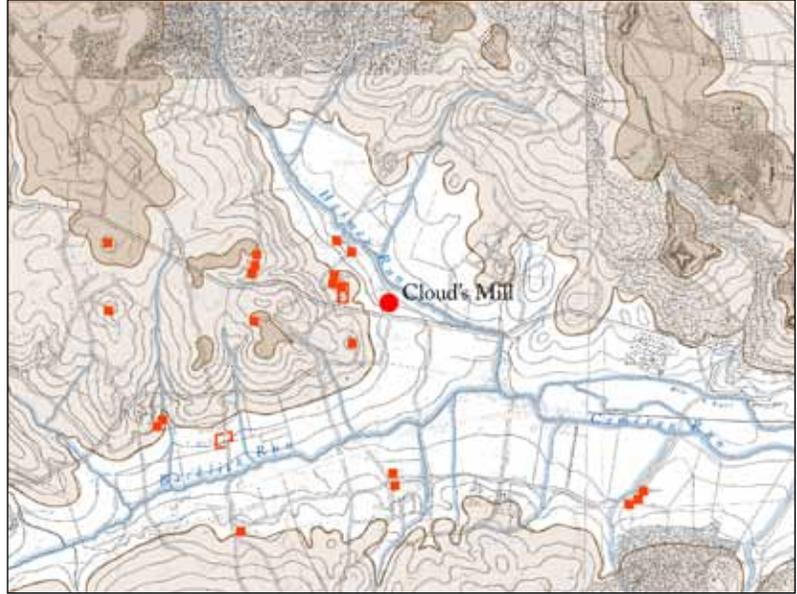


Figure 1-2. Civil War era topographic map showing fortifications of Washington D.C. with settlements in and near the planning area.

transportation corridor and commercial hub like its historic namesake at the other end of Duke Street.

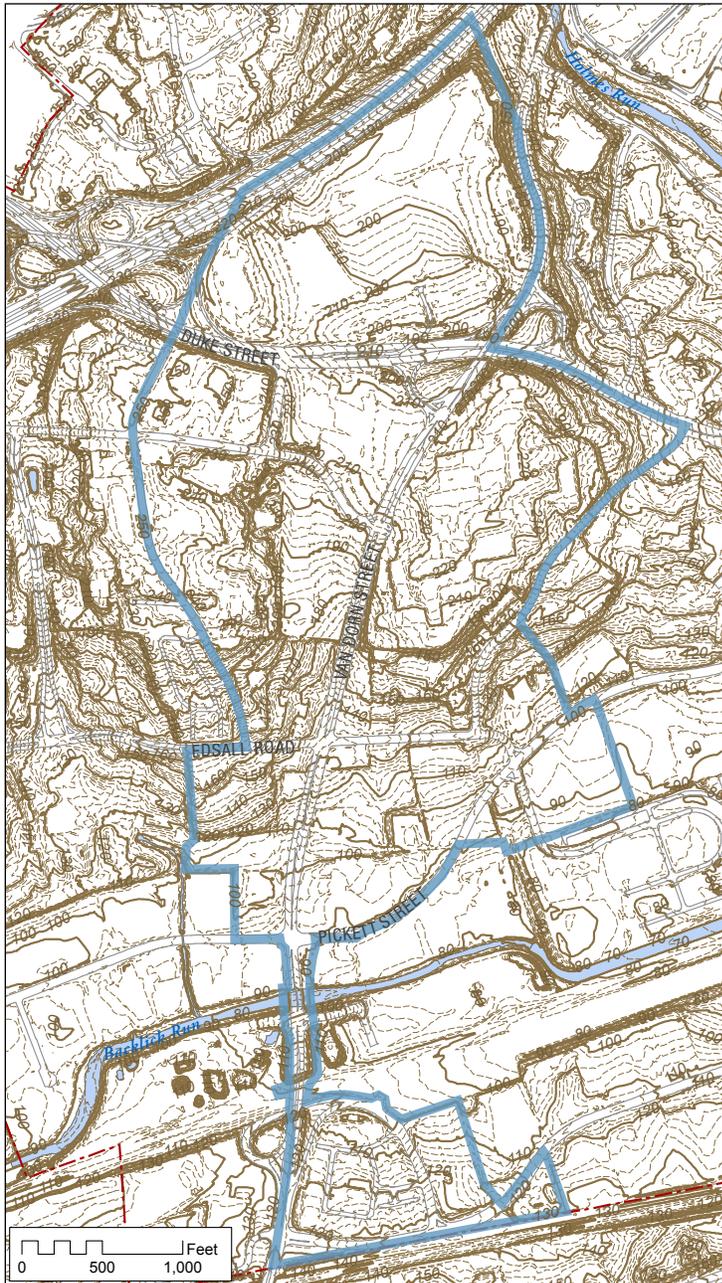


Figure 1-3. Topography. This figure shows elevations in the planning area and the immediate surroundings with two-foot (dashed lines) and ten-foot contours (solid lines). Elevations range from 70 feet at Holmes Run and Backlick Run to 250 feet at the highest elevations on Whiting Street just south of Duke Street. Steep slopes around large sites that have been terraced for development make connecting new streets and pedestrian ways difficult in some locations.

1.1.2 Geography of the Area

Terrain

Terrain within the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor is sufficiently hilly to make it an issue in development and circulation. Elevations range from approximately 80 feet above sea level at Backlick Run up to 250 feet at the top of Whiting Street. Its highest elevations make the area visually prominent for approximately a mile in all directions, and its cluster of high-rise apartments and condominiums, often referred to as “condo canyon,” identify the area as far as the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, five miles to the east. In Alexandria, only the flat ridge top extending from the Virginia Theological Seminary northwest along to Fort Ward Park on Braddock Road is higher, at an elevation of up to 290 feet.

The steepest slopes within the planning area have been softened as natural contours have been terraced to accommodate large-scale development. Steep slopes are concentrated east and southeast of Landmark Mall, on the west side of Reynolds Street, and behind development on both sides of Whiting Street. These slopes create fragmented development areas and barriers to pedestrian and vehicular circulation.

Watercourses

Holmes Run and Backlick Run are locally significant watercourses set in corridors combining natural and landscaped vegetation. These corridors are natural boundaries to the north and south of the planning area. Some of these connected open space areas are currently City parks and open spaces; others present opportunities to provide additional public open space and ensure protection of connections. Smaller drainage systems enter these watercourses and provide opportunities for natural open space and trails that connect to these major features. Small buffer areas along these perennial streams are now protected as Resource Protection Areas under the Chesapeake Bay Protection Act and implementing local regulations.

1.1.3. Demographics of the Area

A demographic analysis was conducted to compare selected population, socio-economic, and housing characteristics of the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor planning area and the surrounding context area to those of the rest of the City and the region. U.S. Census data from 1990 and 2000 were used in the analysis.

The larger context area included census tracts within about one mile of Landmark Mall (Figure 1-1). The context area had a population of 48,845 at the time of the 2000 census.

The demographic characteristics of the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor planning area and the surrounding context area are not radically different from those of the rest of Alexandria. However, there are some differences. The demographic analysis reveals the following characteristics of the population within the context area compared to the rest of City:

- Its population is more ethnically diverse.
- Its population is more transient.
- It has a higher percentage of renters.
- It has somewhat lower household incomes.
- It has somewhat lower levels of educational attainment.
- It has fewer school-age children.
- It has a higher percentage of persons in the 20 to 29-year age group.

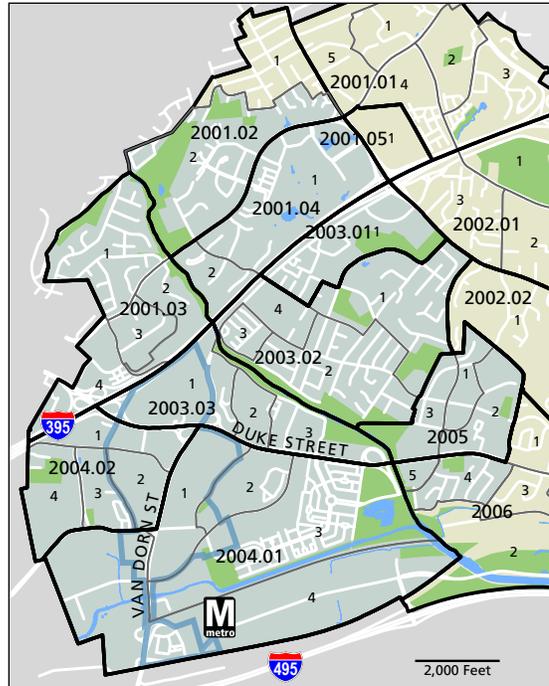


Figure 1-4. Census 2000 tracts defining study areas for statistical analysis. Census tract numbers (with two decimal places) and block group numbers (single digits) within tracts are shown. The Context Area is shown in blue-gray, with the planning area outlined in blue.

1.2. Why a New Plan?

Originally constructed in 1965 as one of the area's first regional shopping centers, Landmark Mall has experienced continuing declining sales in recent years and is – like many older shopping centers around the country – becoming increasingly obsolete as the retail world and consumer preferences continue to evolve and change. The initial impetus for preparing a new plan for the area was provided when General Growth Properties of Chicago, the owner of a portion of the mall site, approached the City of Alexandria in 2004 with a proposal to redevelop with a mix of uses, including retail, restaurants, a theater complex, hotel, and over 1,500 residential units.

Given the importance of Landmark Mall to the West End and Alexandria as a whole, it is important that the redevelopment take advantage of the opportunity to transform the present isolated, inwardly-focused configuration of the mall into a more urban activity center. In addition to the mall, owners of older retail properties along Duke and Van Dorn streets have expressed interest in redevelopment. The potential redevelopment of the mall and nearby strip commercial properties underscores the need for an integrated vision and strategy to guide future change in the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor. Accordingly, the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor Plan has three primary purposes:

1. Develop a long-range vision and plan for the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor, including planning and urban design principles to guide public and private sector investment.
2. Address the future role of the Landmark Mall site and similar older retail properties along Duke and Van Dorn streets in their potential to establish an urban mixed-use corridor that unifies and supports the surrounding established residential neighborhoods.
3. Ensure that public benefits and amenities for the overall community are incorporated into new development.

The Plan has been designed to provide land use policy and guidance through the year 2030. It supports full redevelopment of Landmark Mall and the older retail centers along Duke and Van Dorn streets. The Plan encourages the preservation of the surrounding residential communities as they provide market-rate affordable housing. While the planning area is defined as the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor, it is important that implementation of the Plan also consider the area's larger sphere of influence within Alexandria's West End. Surrounding neighborhoods and uses affect and are affected by the planning area, and can potentially benefit from broader application of the principles and strategies established within the area of the Plan.



Van Dorn Street. Looking south on Van Dorn Street from Edsall Road



Landmark Mall. Looking north toward Landmark Mall from Walker Street

1.3. Past Planning and Policy Directives

This planning effort builds upon the 1992 Landmark/Van Dorn Small Area Plan and has been guided by the principles, goals, and recommendations of other City documents. Several documents frame the context for the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor Plan and form the foundation of its principles, goals, and recommendations:

- Landmark/Van Dorn Small Area Plan (1992)
- City of Alexandria Open Space Plan (2002)
- City of Alexandria Strategic Master Plan for Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities (2003)
- City Council's 2004-2015 Strategic Plan (2004)
- Mayor's Economic Sustainability Work Group Final Report (October, 2007)
- City of Alexandria Transportation Master Plan (2008)
- Pedestrian & Bicycle Mobility Plan (June 2008)
- Eco-City Environmental Charter 2008

The Landmark/Van Dorn Small Area Plan, which was adopted by the City of Alexandria in 1992 as a part of a citywide Master Plan update, addresses a larger planning area than the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor Plan, as it is bordered by I-395 to the north and west, Holmes Run to the north and east, and the city limits to the south and west. A primary focus of the Small Area Plan was on redevelopment of Cameron Station, a former federal military installation, as a mixed-use residential community through rezoning to a Coordinated Development District. The 1992 Small Area Plan largely reaffirmed existing development patterns in the Van Dorn Street corridor, including Landmark Mall as a regional shopping center, general commercial uses along Van Dorn Street, and medium to high density residential uses applied to the apartment communities east and west of Van Dorn Street. The area south of Landmark Mall between Duke Street and Stevenson Avenue was designated for higher intensity mixed uses (retail, office, and residential).

The City Open Space Plan (2002) includes goals for the preservation and provision of open space in the City.

Although, the planning area is approximately 70% impervious, the planning effort seeks to find opportunities to preserve the existing open spaces within it and create additional open spaces through the redevelopment of impervious surfaces. The Open Space Plan encourages the preservation of institutional open space, the protection of environmentally sensitive areas, creation of an open space network in new development areas, protection of existing parks, and development of innovative ways to create additional open space. One specific recommendation of the Open Space Plan is the creation of a "green crescent" which would connect local rivers and streams with open space. The Plan Area is located close to Holmes Run, Backlick Run, and Cameron Run.

The Strategic Master Plan for Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, adopted as an element of the Master Plan in 2003, identifies strategies for the facilities and services operated by the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities. The plan catalogs existing park and recreation facilities and identifies needs for such facilities in the future to respond to expected population growth.

The City Council's 2004-2015 Strategic Plan (adopted in 2004) sets forth the context for this planning effort by articulating a vision, principles, and goals whereby Landmark/Van Dorn can fulfill its potential as a vibrant, exciting, and successful part of the City. The Strategic Plan identifies "Landmark Mall Redevelopment and Area Study" as one of three top priorities in meeting Goal 1 of its Plan for 2004-2009, which states: "There is Quality Development and Redevelopment that is Well Planned and Consistent with Alexandria's Vision." In addition, "Landmark Mall Redevelopment and Area Study" is listed as the top priority of the City of Alexandria Policy Agenda 2004-2005.

The Mayor's Economic Sustainability Work Group Final Report (October 2007) identifies the redevelopment of Landmark Mall into a major economic center as one of its key recommendations. In addition, it asserts that the City must expedite the redevelopment of Landmark

Mall “into a high quality, high density, mixed use City Center development;” revamp the prior Landmark Mall redevelopment plan to include substantial office space, and ensure that the redevelopment creates a product that becomes the “focal point of West End activities and vibrancy.”

The principles of the City of Alexandria Transportation Master Plan (2008) have also guided the transportation recommendations presented herein; including the accommodations for dedicated transit along Duke Street and Van Dorn Street and the creation of a grid-based roadway system that improves pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular connectivity. The relevant guiding principles include the development of “innovative local and regional transit options,” “quality pedestrian and bicycle accommodations,” “environmentally friendly transportation policies,” and “policies that enhance quality of life, support livable, urban land use and encourage neighborhood preservation.”

The Pedestrian & Bicycle Mobility Plan (June 2008) was developed to outline and detail the implementation of the policies within the Transportation Master Plan that are related to pedestrian and bicycle accommodations. The recommendations of the Pedestrian & Bicycle Mobility Plan were also considered in the development of the Landmark/Van Dorn Corridor Plan’s transportation recommendations.

The Eco-City Charter 2008 provides a vision for an environmentally sustainable city. The aspects of the proposed vision that are most relevant to this planning effort include sustainable building practices, protection and provision of natural spaces, improved water quality, clean air, improved transit accommodations and ridership, energy conservation, and waste reduction. The recommendations included herein support the vision presented in the Eco-City Charter.

1.4. The Landmark/Van Dorn Advisory Group and Planning Process

On November 19, 2007, the City Council adopted Resolution No. 2252 establishing the Landmark/Van Dorn Advisory Group to provide broad community input into developing a plan for the future of the area. In accord with the resolution, the Mayor appointed 18 Advisory Group members representing local residents and residential property owners, commercial property owners and developers, business owners, business association representatives, representatives of community associations in Alexandria's West End, and at-large members representing citywide interests. The Advisory Group was charged with:

- working with the Planning and Zoning staff and study consultants in identifying issues, challenges, and opportunities with redevelopment of Landmark Mall and other major sites within the planning area;
- providing advice on options for the future of the planning area and assisting in development of policy recommendations for the Plan; and,
- assisting in keeping the public and groups they represent informed on issues and progress in preparation of the Plan, and advising the Planning Commission and City Council on their analysis and recommendations.

The Advisory Group participated in a total of 18 public meetings and work sessions between December 2007 and December 2008. All meetings and work sessions were advertised and open to the general public. The Department of Planning and Zoning provided the primary administrative and technical support for the Advisory Group. Subsequent to each meeting, summary notes and presentations to the Advisory Group were placed on the department's website.

The first meeting of the Advisory Group, held in mid-December 2007, established the general approach for meetings throughout the planning process, with presentations by the staff and consultants and interactive sessions with the Advisory Group on key issues affecting development of the Plan. The meeting included presentations on the planning process and work program,



Discussion following presentation.



Breakout group developing street framework.



Breakout group developing Town Center land use concept.



Breakout group reporting.



Discussing retail storefront treatments at Reston Town Center.



Viewing central open space at Clarendon Market Common.

background on previous planning efforts, and a summary presentation on the planning area. The Advisory Group members discussed key issues, challenges, and opportunities within the planning area, and the meeting concluded with an opportunity for comments and questions from public attendees.

Subsequent meetings during the first half of 2008 focused on key issues and opportunities within the planning area, with presentations on major issues including the history of the area, land use, affordable housing, transportation and transit, open space, stormwater management, community facilities, urban design, infrastructure financing, and real estate and retail market conditions that would need to be considered in preparation of the new plan. Presentations on potential development of the Landmark Mall and properties near Van Dorn and Pickett streets were made by Advisory Group members representing the landowners. The Advisory Group also held a public tour of successful urban redevelopment projects within the Washington Region.

On two Saturdays in May, the Advisory Group held full-day interactive work sessions involving Advisory Group members and public participants to develop concepts and goals to guide preparation of the Plan. The first session focused on the overall study area. Attendees were divided into groups to explore goals for the planning area and how these goals could be physically achieved in a new land use plan. The five categories of community goals presented in Chapter 4.0 were developed from the work session.

The second work session focused on redevelopment of the Landmark Mall site. Consultants for General Growth Properties gave presentations on consumer research, and parameters and opportunities for redevelopment of the site. The City consultant team provided an overview of goals and key ideas from the earlier work session, potential mall access improvements, and design concepts that could be applied to the mall site. Work groups were asked to explore these issues and report out key ideas and concepts for the mall site. The work groups

