

# **Old Town Fairfax Vision Statement**

November 2019

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# Executive Summary

The Old Town Visioning Committee is a sixteen-member committee recommended by the City Manager and created by the City Council with the goal of providing immediate guidance on development in Old Town Fairfax. It was formed in accordance with Resolution No. R-19-01, Resolution to Approve the Establishment of a Downtown Visioning Committee, and met nine times between May and November 2019. Each meeting, led by a facilitator, had committee members engage in a series of exercises and analyses to determine the group's priorities for Old Town's success. As the meetings progressed, the committee members considered common themes emerging from these exercises and analyses and distilled them into a high-level **Vision Statement** for Old Town, five **Guiding Principles** outlining the Committee's goals for Old Town, and **Recommendations** on how to best implement the Guiding Principles.

Additional information about the Committee's work can be found in Appendices 1-4 of this report and on the Old Town Visioning Committee webpage on the City's website. <https://www.fairfaxva.gov/government/community-development-planning/planning/current-studies-projects-plans/old-town-visioning-committee>

# Old Town Fairfax Visioning Committee Members

- Mark Angres, City of Fairfax Planning Commission
- Jinson Chan, Old Town Business Association
- Rick Dickson, Old Town Property Owner
- Deborah Dillard, City of Fairfax Commission on the Arts
- Mike Fabio, Fairfax City Citizens for Smarter Growth
- Jeff Hermann, City of Fairfax Economic Development Authority
- Aisha Hill, Old Town Property Owner
- Ryan Horner, City of Fairfax Board of Architectural Review
- John Keith, Historic Fairfax City, Inc.
- Doug Lipscomb, George Mason University
- Carey Needham, Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services
- Evan Pritchard, NAIOP Representative
- James Rich, City of Fairfax Community Appearance Committee
- Jennifer Rose, Central Fairfax Chamber of Commerce
- Ellen vanHully-Bronson, Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services
- Larry Weaver, City of Fairfax Civic Association

# Old Town Fairfax Vision & Guiding Principles

## **VISION STATEMENT**

A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Build Strong Partnerships

Grow Business

Enhance Culture

Provide Convenient and Safe Accessibility and Connectivity

Create Unique Experiences

# Old Town Fairfax Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1: BUILD STRONG PARTNERSHIPS**

Strong partnerships are created by meaningful relationships, in particular with George Mason University, Northern Virginia Community College, and Fairfax County.

### ***Recommendations***

- Bring George Mason University into Old Town and create a partnership that provides redevelopment, education, and places to live for students, faculty, staff, and City residents
- Create a transportation plan between the City and George Mason University
- Build a stronger relationship with Northern Virginia Community College
- Encourage incubator space – create innovation and maximize research opportunities
- Create a strong liaison with the State and Fairfax County to benefit infrastructure, business development, and tourism



# Old Town Fairfax Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 2: GROW BUSINESS

Think creatively in order to attract diverse businesses and help business grow and thrive.

### *Recommendations*

- Increase residential and commercial density in Old Town to support the Old Town business community
- Substantially increase funding for and provide incentives to increase the variety of independent shops and small businesses
- Increase the City's resources to support business owners
- Explore grant programs and other state and federal funding opportunities
- Establish entertainment anchors to activate Old Town and attract patrons on evenings and weekends

## FAIRFAX CITY-OPOLY

SHOP SMALL AND WIN BIG

NOV 24  
AND  
NOV 25

Small Business Saturday Welcome Station at Old Town Square from 9:30 am to 1:30 pm on Saturday, Nov 24

For details visit  
[fairfaxcityconnected.com/fairfaxcityopoly](http://fairfaxcityconnected.com/fairfaxcityopoly)

#shopsmallfairfaxcity



# Old Town Fairfax Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 3: ENHANCE CULTURE

Embrace existing and build new cultural assets and opportunities including George Mason University, historical buildings, and a vibrant arts scene.

### *Recommendations*

- Partner with George Mason University to attract multiple entertainment venues
- Partner with Fairfax County to enhance historical interpretation
- Focus on utilizing technology to promote culture and history
- Create street art and building art program





# Old Town Fairfax Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 4: PROVIDE CONVENIENT AND SAFE ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY

Make Old Town Fairfax a safe and easily navigable place for all modes of transportation.

### *Recommendations*

- Improve mobility by designing and completing a grid of streets and shortening blocks for easier walking while creating pathways/wayfinding where appropriate
- Ensure a safe and comfortable walking environment
- Create wayfinding plans to make navigating by vehicle and foot clear and convenient
- Reorient parking into parking structures; particularly in conjunction with higher density mixed-use development, as appropriate



# Old Town Fairfax Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences

## GUIDING PRINCIPLE 5: CREATE UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

Make Old Town Fairfax a destination for experiences you cannot get anywhere else in Northern Virginia.

### *Recommendations*

- Create a network of interconnected, active open spaces
- Anchor Old Town with experience-based uses, such as performances, sports, recreation, entertainment, food, and shopping





**Old Town Visioning Committee  
Notes from June 13, 2019 Meeting**

**PART 1: WALKING SWOT ANALYSIS**

*Old Town Strengths*

- Small businesses (mom and pop)
- Lots of growth potential (physically) – empty space
- GMU as a draw – brings business, entrainment
- Great scale and character
- Good restaurants
- Walking downtown
- OK parking (free)
- Bus connections to GMU
- Proximity to courthouse
- Nucleus: defined downtown (Hub)
- Diverse population
- High income demographics
- High traffic
- Small government
- Rich history and culture
- Many community events
- Engaged community (elected and public)
- Central location in County to draw from
- Name recognition – “Fairfax”
- Hometown feel
- Strong staff and economic development structure in place
- Lower community rents
- Physical location of downtown – 2 schools, government, biggest parks, walkable single-family neighborhoods
- Workforce at Courts / Detention Center
- Relative proximity to I-66

*Old Town Weaknesses*

- Signage is confusing and inadequate (wayfinding) – directional, traffic, parking
- Guidelines are more restrictive (land use)
  - Zone density between zones (historic and transition)
- Regulation overreach
  - Affects development – cost of doing business
  - Taxes/property valuations
- Traffic – speed/volume, granite curbs a hazard for drivers
- Candidness of work between private sector and government officials



- Lack of business diversity, and long-term leases control the shopping center
- Designated downtown – needs more area to make impact
- Lack of economic incentives for new and existing businesses
- Lack of walkability and cohesion
- Lack of entertainment venues and unique retail
- Difficult for developers to deal with
- Insufficient street grid or bypasses
- All pass through traffic/no strong reason to stop
- 18% of registered voters vote
- Street closures/detours
- Limited housing
- Requires heavy marketing to make people aware of the location and its attributes.
- Desired redevelopment may not be the highest and best use at this time
- Needs more parallel street/teaser parking

#### Old Town Opportunities

- GMU integration
  - Business startups – incubator
  - Benefits for GMU faculty , staff, City residents
  - Physical GMU – schools/learning center inside City limits
- Increased residential density with redevelopment
- Increased walkability
- Increased retail density with redevelopment (independent small business)
- Integrate Massey site with Old Town
- Marketing to Oakton, North Hill
- Create identity/branding/sense of place
- Embrace technology (e.g. autonomous vehicles)
- SMART city
- Leverage history – tourism opportunity
- Schools
- Increase open space
- Capstone
- Street entertainment
- Pop up galleries
- Business/student connection
- Connecting to regional trails
- Cultural tourism – art , DC
- Proximity to air travel
- Regional partners = county, GMU, Inova
- Amazon and tech growth
- Highly educated workforce
- Tech economic development sector (defense, tech, etc.)
- Hometown feel



- Involved business owners
- Cross marketing with City planning for town square and library as well as other businesses.
- Convenience of grocery store and pharmacy

### Old Town Threats

- Fairfax County as competition/aggressive economic development
- Mosaic District as competition/aggressive economic development
- Structural / Market changes
- External Investment (outside City limits)
  - Arlington, Silver line, Orange line expansion
- Federal Government shutdown
- Metro not in Old Town
- Regional traffic gridlock
- Gas prices/Disposable income
- GMU can meet its needs internally with entertainment / dining – not relying on City
- Online retail
- Food delivery services
- Changing spending habits – generational
- Economic volatility
- Competition with other City Activity Centers
- Status quo/complacency/NIMBY-ism
- High profile/visible commercial vacancies
- Lots of businesses come and go

## **PART 2: DEBRIEF CONVERSATION ABOUT SWOT DATA**

### Leveraging Strengths to Maximize Opportunities

- 1) **Integrate George Mason** more fully into the life of the City
  - a. Capstone – 700+ beds, more retail
  - b. Need for more housing in City for both students and faculty
  - c. Could capitalize on student/faculty/parents as customers
- 2) **Economic Growth** – increase density with redevelopment
  - a. Increase retail/residential density
  - b. Tech growth – more people
  - c. GMU – tech side of university growing due to more regional jobs in tech
- 3) **History & Culture**
  - a. increase cultural tourism,
  - b. Use technology to connect people who want to come here/tour (perhaps by working with GMU to create apps?)
- 4) **Capitalize on having a hub/nucleus** – create a sense of space
  - a. Provide a sense of “city”/urban environment that attracts millennials, all ages
  - b. Increase density – encourage more people to live here



- c. Create more “entry level” and regionally-affordable housing
  - d. Fewer cars
  - e. GMU faculty/students here more will add to a sense of community
- 5) **High traffic** – people go through here, so we need to attract people to live here/stay here

#### Leveraging Strengths to Minimize Threats

- 1) **Learning from threats** – what has already been done that we can do better given our strengths?
- 2) **Maximize cultural/historic draw** – City’s cultural/historical uniqueness can’t be replicated by Mosaic, etc.
- 3) **Take advantage of our structure** – Small, independent City can be nimble/flexible, not beholden to investors
- 4) **Better maximize relationship with GMU** – stable, diversifies our economic base
- 5) **Maximize Regional partnerships around technology economy** – tech focus – yield more workers, business/jobs

#### Maximize Opportunities to Overcome Weaknesses

- 1) **Leverage better marketing** – signage, banners, marketing to business community (“we are open for business”)
- 2) **Become more business friendly**
  - a. Tipping point/time of change with new City leadership
  - b. Possibility of being more progressive now?
- 3) **Increase walkability**
- 4) **Increase hotel/conference space**
  - a. Address lack of business diversity and amount of pass through traffic
- 5) **30,000 consumers are 1 mile away**
  - a. What will draw GMU students to create entertainment and a more walkable environment?
  - b. How to diversify ourselves to create an economic strategy that brings housing, diversity, attracts businesses and people to be able to compete with other places



**Old Town Visioning Committee  
Notes from June 27, 2019 Meeting**

**PART 1: DEBRIEF CONVERSATION ABOUT SWOT DATA (continued from June 13 meeting)**

Maximizing Opportunities to Overcome Weaknesses

- 1) **Increase walkability by rezoning**
  - a. More physical building space to attract more people to Old Town
  - b. Change material of sidewalks (for example, from brick to concrete)
- 2) **Increase connection to locations from where we will draw people** (transportation from Metro, bus routes, etc.)
- 3) **Traffic**
  - a. Use smart apps/technology to move traffic along
  - b. Look at possibilities to minimize/re-route traffic (provide other opportunities)
- 4) **Regional trails – fewer cars**
- 5) **Commit money to regional and national marketing in order to attract more people**
- 6) **Opportunity to significantly improve signage/wayfinding**

Minimizing Weaknesses to Avoid Threats

- 1) **Minimize traffic to minimize gridlock**
- 2) **Increase flexibility and collaborate with developers and property owners**
- 3) **Improve connectivity between GMU/infrastructure to draw students to walk into Old Town**
  - a. Sidewalks, buses
- 4) **Identify the kinds of experiences GMU students want to have that we can provide to compete with other centers**
  - a. What do we want to “sell”?
- 5) **Create more housing (condos and apartments)**

**PART 2: KEY PRINCIPLES GUIDING OLD TOWN DEVELOPMENT**

Aggregate list from the 3 groups

- Embracing history of the area
- Art/public art/performance art
- Embrace connection to GMU and engage in more dialogue with Mason
- Unique shops
- Collaborative/business-friendly/partnership w/business community
- Engage in candid dialogue with partners (state, Fairfax County, development community)
- High-quality
- Open, safe gathering space
- Anchor(s) to drive people to Old Town and provide unique experiences
- Being open to expansion of urban center
- Convenience for parking and walking



### **PART 3: COMBINED/OVERALL LIST OF KEY PRINCIPLES**

*The key principles we believe should guide Old Town development are as follows:*

- 1) **Build Strong Partnerships** (GMU, County, state)
- 2) **Enhance Culture**
  - √ Embrace our history
  - √ Art – public art and performance art
  - √ High-quality offerings
- 3) **Grow Business**
  - √ Anchors and unique shops
  - √ Create strong partnerships with GMU/state/County/business community that will help us thrive
- 4) **Create Unique Experiences**
  - √ Open, safe gathering spaces
  - √ Compelling anchors that bring people
  - √ Urban center – expanding to offer more
  - √ Art and entertainment
  - √ High-quality offerings
- 5) **Provide Convenience and Connectivity**
  - √ Great walkability
  - √ Convenient parking
  - √ Clear signage/wayfinding
- 6) **Quality of Living**
  - √ Diversity of housing choices
  - √ Dining options
  - √ Art





**Old Town Visioning Committee  
Notes from July 11, 2019 Meeting**

**DRAFT VISION STATEMENTS:**

- Vision Draft #1: A modern destination for business, family, and innovation.
- Vision Draft #2: Old Town Fairfax is a place that attracts people to live, learn, work, and play.
- Vision Draft #3: A diversity of uses, purposeful places, variety of gatherings, and a destination for people.

**FINAL CONSENSUS: A destination for all people to live, learn, work, and play.**



## Old Town Visioning Committee Notes from July 25, 2019 Meeting

### **PART 1: Vision Check-in**

The meeting started off with a check-in for comments/reactions on the vision work the Committee completed last meeting. Several Committee members expressed that they have reflected about the vision and felt it lacked distinctiveness/inspiration/aspirational qualities.

A discussion ensued about what was missing and what would enable the vision to be one that is more unique/inspiring, including the following ideas and versions:

- Notion of vibrancy, a magnet, innovation
- A vibrant destination – generating purposeful places, generating unique experiences; generates opportunities, innovation, innovative partnerships/connections
- A vibrant destination of purposeful places that generates unique experiences for people to live, learn, work, and play
- A vibrant community in which to live, learn, work, and play
- A vibrant destination for people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences
- A vibrant destination that attracts/connects people, fosters ideas/innovation, and creates unique experiences – to live, learn, work and play?
- A vibrant destination that generates opportunities to connect; and live, learn, work, and enjoy unique experiences

**Consensus Decision for the Vision: A vibrant destination for all people to connect, innovate, and share unique experiences**

### **PART 2: Development of goals for each Guiding Principle (to be narrowed down and adopted at next meeting)**

*Build Strong Partnerships (w/GMU, Fairfax County, State, etc.)*

1. Establish shared goals with GMU
  - a. Physical presence in Old town
  - b. Housing
  - c. Under-21 entertainment
  - d. Places to live in the City
2. Create a transportation plan between the City and GMU
3. Encourage incubator space that leads to permanent HQs



### *Grow Business*

1. Offer business incentives to increase variety of independent retail shops and businesses
  - a. Developer/owner cost
  - b. Establish funding/City budget for business incentives
2. Designate City employees to facilitate process/assist business owners
  - a. Streamline process for starting a business – reduce red tape
  - b. Increase resources for business owners/increase financial support for business support groups (OTFBA, CFCC, EDA)
    - i. Support development of business plans, etc.
  - c. Marketing/advertising: create marketing campaign and modernize infrastructure to attract and support innovative, sustainable businesses
3. Bring GMU into Old Town (physical presence) – creation of partnership between City and GMU that provides redevelopment, education, and places to live for students, faculty, staff, and City residents
4. Lobby the legislature for unique funding stream
5. Establish entertainment anchor

### *Enhance Culture*

1. Attract multiple entertainment venues – partnership with GMU and Fairfax County
2. Marketing plan \$
3. Create app that promotes culture and history (“walking tour,” events promo, fun facts) – connects people to local businesses
4. Create calendar of recurring cultural celebrations
5. Establish an Old Town Community Center

### *Quality of Living*

1. Create a variety of unique residential communities within downtown to include workforce/affordable housing in meaningful quantities
2. Create street art and building art program

### *Provide Convenience and Connectivity*

1. Create a safe, accessible, and comfortable walking environment
  - a. Shorter blocks
  - b. Create roadmap
  - c. Traffic control (safety)
  - d. Midblock connections/pathways
2. Create a wayfinding plan to make navigating by vehicle and foot convenient and clear
3. Complete the grid – clear guidelines on creation of new street connectivity
4. Dedicated funding for marketing – long term



*Create Unique Experiences*

1. Create a network of open spaces with active programming that is surrounded by anchor uses
2. Attract experience based retail, restaurants, events
  - a. Wine bar, music, performances, sports, recreation