

SOECA Membership Meeting 2026-04-06

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/NhPu8GA2NXQ>

Notes below are generated using AI, but were human edited and revised.

Relevant Links:

ESSC Plan presentation slides: [pdf link](#)

ESSC Plan webpage: [link](#)

ESSC Plan preliminary zoning map: [link](#) (note: does not work well on phones)

ESSC Plan survey/feedback form: [link](#)

ESSC Plan Open House meeting on April 21st: [link](#)

ZTA 25-02 information: [link](#)

ZTA 25-02 zoning map: [link](#) (note: doesn't work well on phones)

Community Planning Academy: [link](#) (learn all about MoCo zoning in 10 easy modules)

Quick recap

This SOECA meeting featured two main presentations:

First, Stephanie Helsing from the Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce discussed the current economic challenges facing downtown Silver Spring, including high unemployment rates due to federal layoffs, empty commercial spaces, and the need for economic development. She emphasized the importance of supporting local businesses and advocating for policies that encourage growth in the diverse community.

The second presentation was by the Montgomery County Planning team regarding the Eastern Silver Spring Communities Plan, which covered preliminary recommendations for zoning changes along Colesville Road, including potential new housing types and improved pedestrian connections. The team explained their process for gathering community input and noted that these were preliminary recommendations subject to further refinement based on public feedback. The conversation ended with questions from attendees about parking concerns, school impacts, and the reasoning behind specific zoning recommendations.

Next steps

- Planning Staff (Lauren/Melissa/Team): Refine preliminary recommendations for the Eastern Silver Spring Communities Plan based on community feedback and site-specific concerns (e.g., Hamilton/Ellsworth intersection, paper street status).
- Planning Staff: Review and, if appropriate, recommend vacation of the paper street (unbuilt right-of-way) along Ellsworth just south of Hamilton as identified by residents.
- Planning Staff: Coordinate with transportation planners and MCPS to investigate and implement interim safety measures at the Hamilton/Ellsworth/Franklin intersection, including potential for a walking tour with residents and county staff.

- Planning Staff: Share draft overlay zone language for community review when the working draft of the plan is released.
- Chris Reynolds: Help interested neighbors to create annotated maps of their specific block, noting concerns.
- SOECA/Chris: Collate additional questions and comments from residents after the meeting and submit them to Planning staff.
- Planning Staff: Promote the open house event on April 21st at Long Branch Community Center for further community engagement.
- Residents/Community Members: Submit formal testimony, questions, or alternative plan suggestions to the Planning Board and County Council during the public comment period.
- Councilmember Kate Stewart's office: Work with community to investigate and address immediate traffic/pedestrian safety concerns at identified problem intersections as an interim measure while the master plan process continues.
- Planning Staff: Review and, if feasible, recommend addition of a Flash BRT station south of I-495 as part of the plan, based on community input about transit access.

Summary

Silver Spring Economy Overview

Stephanie Helsing, President and CEO of the Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, presented an overview of the current state of Silver Spring's economy and community challenges. She highlighted that while Silver Spring faces economic difficulties including high unemployment among federal workers and a decline following the departure of Discovery, the community has strong assets including being the most diverse in the country and having a supportive business environment. Stephanie outlined the Chamber's role in promoting economic development through member support, shop local campaigns, and advocacy work, emphasizing the need for economic growth and better representation on the County Council and by the County Executive.

Downtown Silver Spring Development Challenges

Stephanie discussed challenges facing downtown Silver Spring, particularly regarding underinvestment in the Black and Brown community and high commercial vacancy rates. She highlighted issues with county policies, including the MOVE Act causing businesses to relocate within the county away from Silver Spring and the Rent Stabilization Act killing several large residential projects in downtown Silver Spring including the Tastee Diner redevelopment and the planned tower atop Ellsworth Place mall. Stephanie emphasized the need for economic development focused on supporting and growing existing businesses rather than attracting new industries that may not choose to stay when the tax breaks end.

Silver Spring Economic Development Opportunities

Stephanie highlighted opportunities like the upcoming NFL draft and the potential for hosting related events in Silver Spring. She emphasized the importance of collaboration with County Council members and businesses to address challenges, including discrimination and empty storefronts. Stephanie mentioned plans to pursue a state placemaking grant, to consult with the community about the future of Silver Spring, and to ensure continued investment after the Purple Line's completion. She also criticized the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation for its lack of progress and expressed hope that its new leadership would be focused on supporting existing Silver Spring businesses.

Silver Spring Economic Development Plans

Stephanie discussed economic development challenges in Silver Spring, highlighting the need to bring in businesses and improve the area's appearance. She mentioned plans to hire someone with expertise in economic development and the importance of involving various stakeholders, including the County Council and local businesses. The discussion touched on the impact of rent control on new apartment buildings and the conversion of the Hotel Silver Spring into affordable housing. Neighbor Dave Giacomini suggested opening a rock climbing gym in downtown Silver Spring to attract more people, while Stephanie shared insights on local business needs, including a desire for a bookstore, high-end thrift store, and dry cleaner. The conversation also covered workforce development initiatives, including apprenticeships and entrepreneurship programs, with a focus on providing alternative educational paths beyond college for students.

Eastern Silver Spring Communities Plan

The second part of the meeting focused on the Eastern Silver Spring Communities Plan, with team members from Montgomery Planning presenting to the community. They explained that the plan creates a long-term vision for the next 15-20 years, guiding private development and public investment through frameworks for land use, transportation, housing, and community facilities. The team clarified what the plan does not do, including forcing redevelopment, bringing specific businesses, or funding projects directly. They also discussed the plan's implementation process, which includes public investment through CIP projects and private development review processes, while noting that the area contains several established single-family residential neighborhoods that include scattered multifamily properties and important institutional properties including churches and nonprofits.

Montgomery County Planning Process

Lauren Stamm presented an update on the Montgomery County planning process, highlighting that the team is currently in the middle of a multi-phase planning effort that will continue into the fall. Over 1,200 community members have participated in the process through both in-person and virtual engagement activities, with key feedback focusing on preserving diversity and parks, improving non-car transportation options, and addressing concerns about the Purple Line's

impact on housing affordability and potential gentrification. The team is working on preliminary recommendations that will be further refined through continued community engagement and expert analysis, with particular attention to housing needs along transit corridors and near activity centers.

Planning Area Vision Presentation

Lauren presented the plan's preliminary vision for the entire area, focusing on strengthening existing qualities and improving desired features, including high-quality living, mixed-use development at Long Branch, climate resiliency, and affordable housing. The discussion highlighted five districts within the plan area, with a specific focus on Colesville Road and the northernmost section of SOECA. Key recommendations included introducing more housing types, enhancing pedestrian safety, and improving the Hastings Neighborhood Conservation Area. Lauren clarified that zoning changes do not immediately affect existing structures but provide future flexibility, and emphasized the 20-year planning horizon for these recommendations.

CRN Zoning Recommendations

Lauren explained the concept of CRN (Commercial Residential Neighborhood) zones and discussed preliminary recommendations for the area, including housing options, transit connections, and pedestrian improvements. She emphasized the opportunity for community input through an overlay zone and site-specific recommendations, encouraging residents to share their ideas for the area's development. The team will refine recommendations based on community feedback and stakeholder input before releasing a working draft.

Community Concerns Regarding Zoning

Neighbor Elane Ellis expressed strong concerns about zoning recommendations affecting her neighborhood, specifically questioning the source of community input and calling the process "dishonest." She challenged the plan's lack of discussion about parking implications for increased density and asserted that homeowners were not properly consulted. The discussion clarified that while the plan creates opportunities for property owners to change zoning if they choose, it does not mandate any changes, and the goal is to provide options over a 20-year horizon.

Master Plan Recommendation Discussion

Continued discussion focused on master plan recommendations, with Lauren explaining that the plan would go through multiple stages including Planning Board and County Council review before final adoption. Neighbor Angie Kronenberg highlighted potential MCPS's middle school closure plans and the need for coordination between development and school modernization. Neighbor Rick (?) questioned the use of CRN zoning instead of CRT, expressing concern that the restrictive approach might increase traffic while limiting neighborhood amenities. The discussion also touched on the potential for micro-businesses and commercial uses in residential areas, with

Lauren explaining that while CRN zoning doesn't explicitly allow commercial uses, overlay zones could be crafted to accommodate certain business types like in-home child care.

Boundary Determination and Safety Concerns

Lauren explained the master plan process and boundary determination, noting that while public testimony was allowed during scope of work, the planning board ultimately makes boundary decisions. Kate Valdell Cummings shared concerns about pedestrian safety in her neighborhood, and raised a concern about what appeared to be a new mapped road connecting Ellsworth at Hamilton. Lauren acknowledged Kate's feedback and clarified that the mapped area shows right-of-way data from GIS rather than an actual road. There are no plans to make that right-of-way into a road and the county could explore condemnation of the land, which would split it among adjacent property owners.

Safety and Development Concerns Discussion

Neighbor Mae Jones discussed safety concerns around a four-way stop intersection used as a cut-through, explaining that it's not recommended for adding density due to pedestrian safety issues. Lauren offered to investigate interim safety measures and suggested a walking tour with transportation planners to address community concerns. Neighbor Dave Giacomini, a general contractor, raised concerns about the cost and feasibility of proposed housing developments due to the building code in addition to zoning. The Planning team announced they will be [holding an open house on April 21st at the Long Branch Community Center](#) where residents can have one-on-one conversations with staff members about the preliminary East Silver Spring Community plan.

Housing and Zoning Feedback

Meeting discussion continued to focus on community feedback about the potential for new housing near Colesville Road and Franklin Avenue. Lauren explained that the corridor was chosen to create a nexus between proximity to transit and housing development, following policy guidance from Thrive Montgomery 2050. ZTA 25-02 also altered the types of housing allowed along major arterial roads throughout the county, including Colesville Road. Community members raised questions about traffic impacts, why the development wasn't spread more evenly across the area, and why it wasn't located closer to downtown Silver Spring. Lauren clarified that while the master plan sets general boundaries, specific development details including traffic flow would be determined during the later regulatory review process.

Eastern Silver Spring Housing Plans

The meeting continued with participants expressing concerns about height restrictions and property changes. Residents questioned whether proposed housing types like duplexes would be acceptable, particularly regarding height limitations and lot sizes. The discussion also addressed transparency in the planning process, with residents requesting better access to

official correspondence and documentation. The conversation ended with reminders that similar planning processes are happening across the county, and that while residents may not get everything they want, their feedback would help shape the final plan.