

# ULI Ellicott City TAP

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An Urban Land Institute  
Technical Assistance Panel



## *Aim High*

REIMAGINING ELLCOTT CITY AFTER THE FLOOD



Prepared by ULI Baltimore

For the Howard County Economic Development Authority

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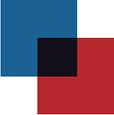
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“In the long run men only hit what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.”

— Henry David Thoreau

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### About ULI Baltimore

ULI Baltimore is the local Baltimore metropolitan regional District Council for the Urban Land Institute and serves Central Maryland and other parts of the state through its outreach efforts; the organization is a 501(c)3. As a trusted source for timely and unbiased land use information, ULI Baltimore provides a critical link to the improvement of state and local land use policy and development practices.

ULI is a nonprofit research and education organization supported by its members. As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum,

ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information and experience among local, national and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better places.

Founded in 1936, the institute now has more than 40,000 members worldwide, representing the entire spectrum of land use and real estate development disciplines in private enterprise and public service. The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land to create and sustain thriving communities worldwide.



### About This Plan

The objective of ULI Baltimore’s Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is to provide expert, multidisciplinary advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the Baltimore Region. Like ULI District Councils throughout the country, ULI Baltimore utilizes its broad membership base to administer one- or two-day panels, and offer objective and responsible advice to local stakeholders and decision makers on a diverse set of land use issues. These issues can range from site-specific projects to public policy strategies. The flexibility of the TAP program enables ULI Baltimore to present a customized approach for each TAP, one that allows panelists to study and address specific contextual issues.

The Howard County Economic Development Authority (HCEDA) spearheaded this report in response to the devastating flood of June 30, 2016. This sudden event claimed the lives of two citizens, damaged or destroyed 90 businesses, and displaced nearly 100 residents. Hundreds more were rendered unemployed. And in the course of a few hours, the physical infrastructure of the historic downtown – its roads, sidewalks, and quaint buildings – had been dramatically scarred.

After a massive mobilization of Federal, State, and County resources, signs of life and renewal quickly began to appear on Main Street. Though damaged, Ellicott City demonstrated an intense resiliency and firm determination to come back. The commitment and dedication shown by local residents, property owners, and businesspeople was matched by their local government, which responded heroically to a dramatic and overwhelming crisis.

It was in this spirit of shared commitment that the Howard County Economic Development Authority asked ULI to assemble a Technical Assistance Panel to consider what the future of the

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retail district might look like. Although a TAP like this cannot substitute for the level of detail that will be incorporated into the upcoming Ellicott City Master Plan, it is an ideal forum for quickly addressing key strategic questions, such as:

- **What does Ellicott City want to be?**
- **What retail mix should it have?**
- **What do we need to do (in the short and medium term) to make that happen?**

The two-day TAP convened on January 11th and 12th at Millworks, HCEDA's new business resource center and co-working space. The Panel spent the morning touring the study area; the afternoon was devoted to interviewing stakeholders. These included local residents, representatives from area businesses and institutions, elected officials, and area property owners. That night, the Panel held an open public meeting at Millworks, attracting some 40 people to discuss the future of Ellicott City. On the second day the Panel re-convened to perform more site tours, meet with County staff, and formulate their recommendations. Stakeholders and the general public were invited to the Council Chambers to hear the Panel's presentation at the end of the day. This document was then drafted to formalize, and further explicate, the results of that presentation, following local planning requirements.

### **Introduction: The Flood is What You Make of It.**

In many ways, the flood of 2016 was a gift. A terrible gift, to be sure, and one that nobody asked for. It was a ruinous gift for many, and a deadly gift for some. But it was a gift nonetheless.

Nobody in Ellicott City ever wanted this gift, but for better or for worse, we now have it. And it would be criminal to let it slip away. Ellicott City must take advantage of the flood, and the fragile moment that it creates. We must use this moment to find a new path forward, returning stronger and more successful than ever before. It is the only way to honor the great sacrifice that made this moment possible.

And this moment will not last forever. The time to act is now, while the world is watching and the community is engaged. When decisions are yet to be made that will define Ellicott City for a generation. When new ideas still have fertile ground within which to take root. This is the moment to do something extraordinary.

From the trauma of the flood comes the chance for an "involuntary reset" – that rare generational opportunity for a community to redefine itself, and chart a new course. And as you chart that course, picking one trajectory from the thousands that lay before you, we urge you in the strongest possible terms to choose carefully.

**Do not aim low.**

**Aim high.**

## What Does Ellicott City Want To Be?

Towns and cities are not static things. They reinvent themselves periodically, in response to changing cultural and economic forces. And since these periods of reinvention are often driven by necessity, they can be somewhat stressful. That is to be expected.

It is simply a fact of life that places, like people, must from time to time decide what they want to be when they grow up.

Ellicott City now faces this question. But in order to answer it, we must first consider what it currently is, and what assets it is capable of deploying in order to change itself.

### 1. Understanding Your Options: What is Ellicott City Like?

In our interviews and public meetings, we heard local residents and business owners use the same phrases repeatedly. They impressed upon us the fact that Ellicott City is unique; that it is historic; that it is beautiful; and that it is authentic.

Of course, just as many people claim to be young and attractive, many towns claim to possess all these attributes. But Ellicott City is genuinely all of these things, and this makes it quite special.

Interestingly, Ellicott City is special in a way that is highly reminiscent of other unique places around the world. For example, it is not dissimilar from Frederick – a Central Maryland city built along an industrial riverfront that reinvented itself as a center of culture and cuisine. It is also reminiscent of St. Michaels, a sleepy rural town that reinvented itself as an upscale destination for visitors across the East Coast (including, interestingly, a growing number of African-American travelers). In both cases, the local community leveraged their unique historic assets to build a new economy.

Ellicott City is also reminiscent of a growing list of industrial mill towns, located in steep river valleys, that have transformed themselves into dynamic and successful Main Street shopping districts. Baltimore's Hampden neighborhood is an example of this phenomenon, as is Philadelphia's Manayunk neighborhood. In both cases, steep terrain and old buildings were part of the authenticity that attracted a new generation of shoppers.

It is also worth noting that the winding, hilly streets of Ellicott City are strikingly similar to beautiful European villages in countries like Ireland and France. Every year, American vacationers pay thousands of dollars and fly across an ocean for the privilege of walking up those steep hills and eating dinner in cramped historic buildings. And they do it gladly, simply because it is beautiful.

Ellicott City has all the qualities it needs to take its place among this illustrious list of travel destinations.

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Main Street

## 2. Understanding Your Assets:

### What Does Ellicott City Have to Work With?

It is hard to think of Ellicott City without thinking about the Main Street shopping district. And certainly, Main Street (along with Tiber Alley) is a tremendous asset. Yet it is too easy to consider the commercial district as simply a long, linear corridor of shops, broken up into segments like a caterpillar. This understates the much larger array of assets at the town's disposal, which include:

- **The B&O Railroad Museum, which is located within a gorgeous historic structure that may well be the oldest railroad station in America;**
- **The Howard County Visitor's Center, located inside of a historic post office;**
- **The Howard County Courthouse, perched majestically atop a hill like the Acropolis in Athens yet scheduled to be relocated; and**
- **Parking Lot D, which may well be one of the most beautiful parking lots in America.**

While we could certainly list others, these four assets are worth noting for the following two reasons. First, each asset is underutilized, and has the potential to serve a higher function for Ellicott City. Second, each is owned by Howard County, giving the County the ability to drive the local economy forward through the creative use of public-private partnerships.

With these assets in mind, Ellicott City need no longer be seen as a caterpillar. Rather, it can function more like a butterfly, with two major parcels (the Courthouse and Lot D) on either side of Main Street, which is itself anchored by high-quality historic buildings. This is a much more robust approach, with greater opportunities for creative placemaking and economic

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Parking Lot D

development. Moreover, the two “wings” of the butterfly have a natural relationship between them, with a crosswalk and lovely stone staircase that already connect them.

**In short, Ellicott City has the assets it needs to be whatever it wants to be.**

### 3. What Ellicott City Wants to Be

Given the options available, and the assets it has to work with, we believe the following:

1. Ellicott City wants to be *relevant*, a place that plays an important role in Howard County and the region;
2. Ellicott City wants to be *upscale*, providing a higher quality of goods and services without sacrificing its quirky and genuine atmosphere;
3. Ellicott City wants to be *vibrant*, with dynamic street life and a daily rhythm of activity;
4. Ellicott City wants to be a *Main Street*, filled with unique local stores, and not just a convenient extension of the highway retail and shopping malls found elsewhere;
5. Ellicott City wants to be a *destination* that customers seek out, and then enthusiastically return to;
6. Ellicott City wants to be *charming*, a place that by its very nature excites people; and
7. Ellicott City wants to be *unique*, a place unlike anywhere else in the world.

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In short:

**Ellicott City wants to be a relevant, upscale, vibrant Main Street destination that leverages its charming and unique assets.**

And it can make this happen within the next five to ten years.

## What Retail Mix Does Ellicott City Need?

To answer this question will require a series of steps. First we will need to analyze the retail corridor itself. Then we will need to consider coordinated steps that can be taken to make our proposed retail strategy more successful.

### 1. Define Three Retail Districts

Instead of thinking of Main Street as one continuous shopping street, Ellicott City needs to be considered as three distinct but interconnected retail neighborhoods: Upper Main, Mid-Main, and Lower Main.

Organizing commerce into three districts has many advantages. First of all, it allows merchants to better communicate their location to customers. Second, it improves the capacity of wayfinding signage to help customers find parking (“Turn Right for Upper Main Parking”) and stores (“This Way to the shops of Lower Main”). But perhaps most importantly, it allows you to define an identity and purpose for each district, which can then be used to create a unique retail mix by encouraging compatible stores to locate near one another.

Although we have not conducted a detailed retail study, we are able to make suggestions about the nature of the three districts, and the retail mix in each. Please note that, in recommending categories of retail, we are not suggesting that existing retailers be removed or that duplicative businesses be attracted to compete with established ones. Rather, we simply wish to suggest the general nature of each district in the long term.

Building off of the existing retail mix, we envision Lower Main to be the principal entertainment district, with boutique shops for window-shopping, restaurants, and venues catering to a younger audience (such as a vinyl shop). Lower Main would also, by extension, include Tiber Alley and other adjacent areas. Mid-Main would have a slightly elevated retail mix for a slightly older audience, with salons, barbershops, a fitness studio, a whiskey bar, and perhaps someday a cultural venue in the Precious Gifts building. While some of its stores might be amenable to window shopping, it would principally be a place that people sought out for a scheduled appointment, class, or event. And Upper Main would, in turn, focus on family-oriented retail and household goods, such as furniture and a specialty food market.

It is not necessary that these three districts be dogmatically strict about their retail mix. Rather, each should strive to create a reinforcing mix of uses that services a targeted audience and creates a distinct sense of identity.

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District	Location	Identity	Target Audience(s)	Retail Mix (Examples Only)
Upper Main	Ellicott Mills to Hamilton Street	Specialty Household	Local Residents, Families from Howard County, Families from Baltimore County	Wine Store Furniture Housewares Gourmet Specialty Market Specialty Hardware Store Clothing Family Restaurant Specialty Bookstore Paint-Your-Own Pottery
Mid-Main	Hamilton Street to Caplan's Department Store		Young Professionals	Salon and Spa Cultural Venue (e.g. Creative Alliance) Barre / Pilates / Fitness Studio Upscale Men's Barbershop (e.g. Quintessential Gentleman) Cigar / Whiskey Bar Unisex Clothing High-End Gift/Specialty Shop
Lower Main	Caplan's Department Store to the Patapsco	Entertainment District	Casual Dinner Crowd, Window Shoppers, Singles and Young Couples	Crafts Antiques Ethnic Food Running Store Record Store Gallery Dinner/Breakfast Speakeasy / High End Cocktail Bar

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B&O Railroad Museum

## 2. Leverage County Property To Create Signature Destination Restaurants

Howard County owns an astonishingly beautiful railroad station, which is positioned right at the foot of Lower Main. While we respect the mission of the museum that occupies the space, we believe this building is best suited to be a signature destination restaurant, operated by a celebrity chef.

Destination restaurants have become the anchors of historic retail districts, establishing their brand and redefining them for a new generation of visitors. Such a restaurant would drive people to Ellicott City, just as Brian Voltaggio's Volt did for Frederick. And, as Frederick discovered, such a restaurant doesn't just cannibalize clientele from existing spaces. Rather, it can create the conditions for other local retail to thrive.

Because the County is the owner, it is in a position to make this happen. Even better, it is in a position to structure the deal so that everyone wins. Rather than focusing on maximizing its own short term rents, the County should structure a transaction that attracts a top-tier restaurateur with an obvious opportunity. This may require the County to pay for certain improvements itself, and/or get paid out of a percentage of revenues rather than a stable monthly rent. The point is not that this should be a giveaway of public assets, but rather that the County should set this transaction up to succeed so that they (and the rest of the businesses) are primary beneficiaries of the success.

The same thing holds true for the Howard County Visitor's Center. This is another historic asset that does not generate the level of economic activity that it should. While the Visitor's Center is a wonderful use, this building provides another opportunity for a signature



Courthouse

destination restaurant. Once again, the County can redeploy this asset in a way that generates a larger rate of return for itself and the Ellicott City economy.

### 3. Leverage County Assets to Create a Boutique Hotel

It is hard to overstate the beauty and elegance of the Howard County Courthouse. This grand building sits proudly atop a lovely hill, with sweeping views in all directions. It is truly a majestic site, and one that is underappreciated in the region.

But the site is also valuable because of its many adjacencies and connections. It sits right next to the beautiful Howard County Historical Society Museum; it is just downhill from the Patapsco Female Institute; it is adjacent to the beautiful Mt. Ida mansion; and it contains the historic jail building. Moreover, it comes with a vast parking lot, and is readily accessible from Route 40 by Rogers Avenue and Court House Drive.

In short, the Courthouse is an excellent location for a boutique hotel and event space. Such a venue could attract overnight and weekend visitors to Ellicott City from across the Mid-Atlantic, just as the Tidewater Inn does for Easton.

This boutique hotel could truly be a landmark destination for weddings and other major community and business events. Crowds of people could attend gala dinners in a ballroom, but without introducing any traffic congestion or parking problems on Main Street. And if the hotel provided a simple shuttle loop, with stops at Lower Main and Mid-Main, it would instantly become fully integrated into the local economy.

The hotel might even include a dramatic architectural elevator, helping visitors travel between Court Avenue and Lot E. A ride in the visually striking glass elevator could become a signature

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### Duquesne Incline in Pittsburgh\*

experience of one's visit to Ellicott City (and the sort of thing that visitors might gleefully post to social media) much like Pittsburgh's Duquesne Incline.

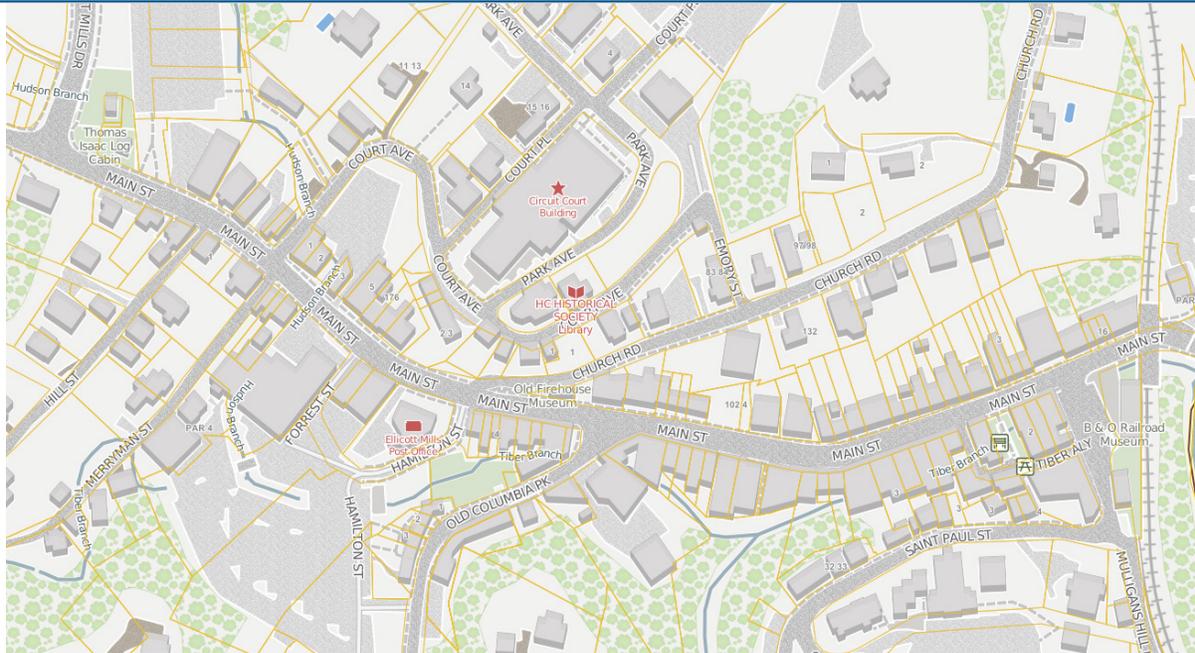
It is worth noting that all of this could be accomplished without adding any impervious surface to the watershed. In fact, if done correctly, it is conceivable that some of the surface parking at the Courthouse could even be removed, providing more space for uphill stormwater management.

Once again, Howard County has the capacity to make this happen. The Courthouse is already scheduled to move. Now is the time to seek out an operator with the skills, vision, and sophistication to create a world-class hotel venue. In fact, such an operator is more likely to appear once they learn that the County is also actively attracting destination restaurants. If the County were careful to structure the deal correctly, it could set up the hotel for amazing success, and allow Ellicott City (and its own tax base) to become the beneficiary.

#### 4. Support Main Street With Regular Markets and Cultural Activities

Lastly, we believe that the Main Street retail environment can be enhanced by a more robust weekly market, featuring both fresh and prepared foods. We would recommend establishing this in Lot D, which is a delightful public space with ample parking, with a central location that can drive traffic to all three districts. This market could also be a place for celebrating (and publicizing) Ellicott City's accomplishments, such as the return of a flood-damaged store or the opening of a new business. It might even be a place where new businesses might test the waters with a pop-up or temporary stand, in order to build a clientele.

\*From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Downtown\\_Pittsburgh\\_from\\_Duquesne\\_Incline\\_in\\_the\\_morning.jpg#filelinks](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Downtown_Pittsburgh_from_Duquesne_Incline_in_the_morning.jpg#filelinks)



Map with County Assets

### What Do We Need To Do To Make This Happen?

Action is impossible without organizations vested with the authority to act. We believe that three critical entities that are in this position, and each of them must be empowered to take constructive action.

#### 1. Howard County

Howard County plays three pivotal roles in this process, and must ultimately step up to the plate as a guiding force for productive change.

##### a. Howard County: The Property Owner

As the owner of several important properties, the County must start to see itself as a vested party. And not just emotionally invested, but literally an investor in Ellicott City. It must learn to examine its holdings, and decide how to generate the best return from them. And it must learn how to leverage its assets to attract private capital, so that it is building a viable economy.

At a very minimum, this means taking a serious look at the Railroad Museum, the Visitor's Center, Lot D, and the Courthouse. If these investments are not currently moving Ellicott City forward, then the County should actively explore other alternatives.

### b. Howard County: The Planner

There are certain things that almost everyone agrees need to happen. Downtown must be made safer for pedestrians, with well-spaced crosswalks and other designs necessary to encourage shopping. It requires better wayfinding and signage, so that visitors understand where they are, where to park, and where to shop/dine. And it requires a thoughtful, well-reasoned, evidence-based plan for how to manage parking, which is developed in a transparent way so that everyone understands the logic behind it.

These are all things that the County can do now, as part of its upcoming Master Planning process.

### c. Howard County: The Cultivator

Lastly, Howard County must continue to play a supporting role in empowering the Ellicott City Partnership (ECP) as it transitions into a mature organization. This means nurturing it along, encouraging it to develop, and supporting it with staff time and financial resources until it is capable of standing on its own.

## 2. Ellicott City Partnership

Ellicott City is not an incorporated municipality. It has no mayor, and no city council. And unlike Columbia, it does not have a private association (Columbia Association) charged with providing municipal services. As a result, it has been hard to organize people at the local level to accomplish vital tasks. There has simply not been an adequate vehicle for effecting change. This is a role that the ECP must fill.

### a. ECP: The Leader

While still young, the ECP has grown and solidified meaningfully over the past four years. And it is now in a position to assume the desperately needed role as the principal local organization overseeing the rebirth of Ellicott City.

This means that the ECP must learn to lead. Leading is a tricky and often uncomfortable business, and it is never perfect. Nonetheless, this is what the ECP must do if it wants to see positive change. It simply cannot expect the County to do everything for them. It must find its own voice, and establish itself as a credible, successful, and action-driven organization.

### b. ECP: The Doer

With modest County support, the ECP can make immediate progress on a number of chronic issues, such as trash pickup and beautification. While these are perhaps modest goals, they are ongoing sources of concern. And it will be critical for the ECP to build momentum and establish its credibility. Discrete, tangible tasks are an important first step.

The ECP can also partner with the County in seeking new directions for the Railroad Museum, Visitor's Center, Lot D, and Courthouse. It should be an active player in the room, encouraging the County to be more visionary and more entrepreneurial.

Lastly, the ECP can work with Howard County Tourism, Inc. to develop a clear set of messages that can be used to market Ellicott City to the rest of the world.

**c. ECP: The Standard-Setter**

ECP must also become the voice of reason that establishes reasonable baselines for professional behavior in the business district. This means setting norms about hours of operation, cleanliness, signage, window displays, and the like.

While the ECP cannot force anyone to adopt such standards, it has the ability to use carrots and sticks to encourage professional behavior. For example, it can provide enhanced marketing benefits to businesses that meet its standards.

Of course, such standards must never be arbitrary, and so a transparent and rational process must be developed to articulate reasonable standards that elevate the overall quality of the retail district without causing unreasonable harm to anyone. A breakfast restaurant must by definition have different hours than a dinner restaurant. Yet both should be expected to maintain clean stoops and quality signage.

### 3. Inter-Jurisdictional Task Force

The ongoing rebirth of Ellicott City is hampered by an arbitrary political boundary, which places Ellicott City in one jurisdiction and Oella in another. As a matter of geographic and cultural reality, both are part of a unified metropolitan area, much as Buda and Pest were eventually recognized as Budapest in 1873. From a decision-making perspective, the distinction between them now does more harm than good.

One pressing example of this is the Wilkins Rogers flour mill. This facility is located in Baltimore County, and so is largely invisible to any planning efforts made by Howard County. But of course, that property has a major role to play in the future of Ellicott City. If it someday ceased to be an active mill, it could be reborn as apartments, or offices, or a parking lot, or a riverwalk. It could be reborn as any number of things, but without a venue for making joint decisions with Baltimore County, Howard County will be left entirely out of that conversation.

This conversation becomes even more urgent in the context of the Patapsco Valley Heritage Area. We agree with supporters of the Heritage Area (including participants in the ULI TAP on this subject from a few years ago) that Howard County needs to capitalize on the Valley from a branding and economic development perspective. Indeed, it could easily be argued that Ellicott City has more in common with Catonsville than with Columbia, and that both towns stand to gain from increased cooperation.

For all of these reasons, we believe that an ongoing inter-jurisdictional task force needs to be developed to help Baltimore County and Howard County take advantage of the valley that connects them. Joint branding, joint marketing efforts, and joint events make all the sense in the world. The Counties need to find an ongoing, proactive way to coordinate their activities on each side of the river.

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### Conclusions

**Ellicott City is unique. It is historic. It is beautiful, and it is authentic. It is all of these things, and more.**

It is also a tremendous opportunity. In an era when cultural tastes are changing, and young people are drawn to urban centers, Howard County lacks the historic fabric and lively downtown environments that consumers increasingly demand. Ellicott City is the one place where Howard County can compete with Annapolis, Frederick, Georgetown, Hampden, and other newly-reborn downtowns. It is a place of great strategic importance for the County.

And so, in honor of those whose lives were upended by the flood – and in the interests of those who will come after us – there is only really one path to follow.

**We must aim high.**



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