

# Old Town Takoma Park Reimagining Laurel Avenue

CITY OF TAKOMA PARK, MD





# CONTENTS

<b>Purpose of Initiative</b>	4
<b>Engagement Summary</b>	7
Listening Sessions/Community Survey	8
<b>Concept Development Process</b>	13
<b>Final Concept</b>	14
<b>Concept Package</b>	21
<b>Next Steps</b>	38

U T K P K U







# PURPOSE OF THE LAUREL AVENUE REDESIGN INITIATIVE





This initiative to reimagine Laurel Avenue as a public plaza came in response to the partial street closure which began in 2020. An experiment in the early months of the pandemic, the northbound lane of Laurel Avenue was closed to traffic in order to create a new outdoor public space -- a “Streeterly”. This helped restaurants stay open when indoor dining was restricted and provided a new outdoor area where people could gather. The newly pedestrianized area was furnished with temporary tents, tables, and chairs to encourage hanging out while allowing for social distancing. The experiment was embraced and, over the next couple of years, became more established. It has become part of Takoma Park’s fabric and is still a popular place to sit, eat, work, play, and socialize.

Experience over the last three years has revealed some pedestrian safety and traffic concerns. Foremost is the visual ambiguity of the pedestrian area and the active traffic lane. The bollards around the median are intended to define the edge of the traffic lane, but they are a porous boundary that pedestrians don’t always notice. As a result, adults and children stray into the active traffic lane with some frequency. The designed median, which did not see a lot of public use prior to the northbound lane closure, now is a functional part of a larger, contiguous public space, though its design as a median is now obsolete. One unintended consequence of the partial closure is some diverted northbound traffic now cuts through nearby residential streets.

Inspired by the overall success of the Streeterly and the desire to make a safer public space, Old Takoma Business Association applied for and was awarded a grant from the State of Maryland’s Community Safety Works Program to reimagine Laurel Avenue as a complete public space. OTBA engaged The Lakota Group to develop a concept that could serve as a vision for the street. This work began in August 2022.

In addition to The Lakota Group, the team included transportation engineers from RK&K, a Baltimore-based engineering firm. The assignment was staffed by Mike Gifford, a Hyattsville resident who works out of RK&K’s DC office.









## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

*A new design has to work for the Takoma Park community, so the design process included several types of community engagement.*



## LISTENING SESSIONS

In September 2022, we held eight small-group meetings as well as one-on-one meetings, organized by OTBA. These included elected officials, nearby neighbors, immigrant residents and persons of color, farmers who sell at the Takoma Park Farmers Market, City staff, and leadership from the Takoma Park Seventh Day Adventist Church. These conversations were wide-ranging, as were the perspectives. They included the following:

1. Response to the partial street closure has been overwhelmingly positive. The new public space has changed how people interact with the street, which has enhanced the quality of life for many residents and has had a positive impact on Laurel Avenue businesses.
2. We met with eight Laurel Avenue business and property owners and all strongly support full closure of the street.
3. The median was not generally used as a public space prior to the lane closure and it is now that it is accessible. A redesigned space should be safe and accessible for all generations and abilities.
4. A redesigned space should express Takoma Park's creative bent and its commitment to sustainability.
5. The relocation of the farmers market to the parking lot behind the stores has pros and cons. Shoppers and farmers appreciate having the extra space to maneuver, but the market is hidden from view and the City is currently paying the cost to rent the parking lot.
6. The current outdoor furnishings look temporary and lack a cohesive quality of design.
7. The Church leadership was supportive of the partial closure and supports the concept of full closure. It has a small to minimal effect on their operations, but greatly enhances the space.
8. Nearby neighbors are generally against full closure because of traffic diversion, and many favor reopening to traffic the lane that is currently closed.

Many of the comments were echoed in the results of a community survey, below.

## COMMUNITY SURVEY

In order to gain more insight into the preferences and concerns raised during the Listening Sessions, we conducted an online survey in March 2023 to gather quantitative input as well as additional qualitative input. The survey was distributed by OTBA to its email contact lists, and links were posted to social media. The survey received an overwhelming response: 1,202 people took the survey, almost 900 of them in the first few days alone. The size of the sample is enough to overcome potential biases.

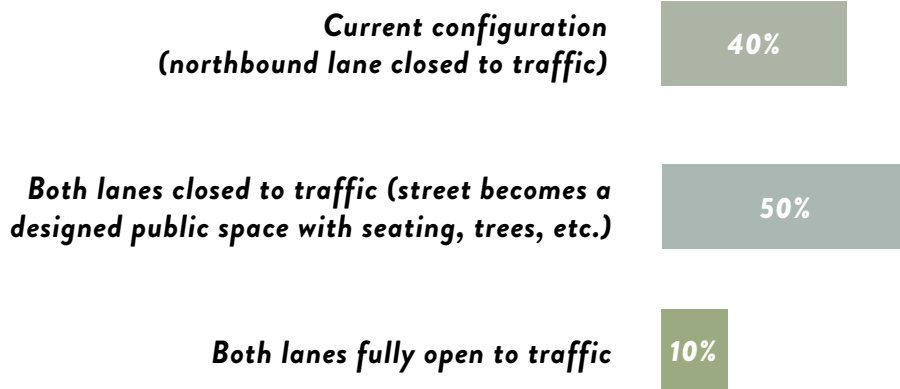
Most survey respondents live in Takoma Park (74%), and a smaller portion live in Washington DC (20%). Most respondents live near Laurel Avenue: 18% live within a block or two of Laurel Avenue and another 47% live within a 10-minute walk / one-half mile radius. Therefore, a combined 65% of respondents live within a half-mile of Laurel Avenue.



## Views on the Street Closure

A slight majority of people prefer closing both lanes to traffic (and transforming the street into a public plaza) over the current configuration, where just the northbound lane is closed. The preference ratio was 50% to 41%. Perhaps more notably, less than 10% of respondents preferred reopening the entire street to traffic. This result suggests that 91% of respondents prefer keeping at least one lane of Laurel Avenue closed.

### Which of the Following Would You Prefer?



When asked “How safe do you feel on Laurel Avenue as a pedestrian with the partial street closure?”, the average safety scoring was 83 out of 100.





The survey also asked, “What do you like or not like about the current partial street closure and public space?” This open-ended question allowed for more nuanced responses. The question received 1,100 comments. We identified the following common themes:

## Positives/Likes

- » Public seating and ability to be outdoors
- » Expansion of public space
- » Pedestrian friendliness, walkability
- » Eating options
- » Supports small businesses
- » Fosters community-building
- » Small-town, park-like feel
- » Vibrancy and activity
- » Reduced noise and car exhaust when sitting outside
- » Spend more time downtown
- » Very helpful during the pandemic

## Negatives/Dislikes

- » Diverts traffic to residential streets
- » Benefits some businesses and not others
- » Unattractive design, especially temporary tents
- » Inconvenient for drivers
- » Impacts access to handicapped parking

## Neutral or Mixed Feelings

- » Mixed feelings about open traffic lane: some cars drive too fast and endanger pedestrians
- » Mixed feelings on impact on cyclists
- » Appreciate that some traffic is still permitted because it makes short errands easier
- » Don't like going around the church, but feel bad about using residential streets

## Expressed Wishes

- » More shade
- » More heaters
- » More seating
- » More green space, activation, art work, play areas



## Views on the Farmers Market

About 93% of respondents shop at the Sunday Farmers Market regularly or occasionally. Respondents expressed a strong preference for keeping the Farmers Market in the parking lot location.

In open-ended comments, many people said that while they liked the visibility and vibrancy of the market when it was on Laurel Avenue, they found it crowded and hard to navigate, especially with a stroller or small child. They like that the parking lot location offers more space and better flow.

### ***Which Location Do You Prefer For The Sunday Farmers Market?***



It should be noted that respondents were expressing their views on the current configuration of the farmers market in the rear parking lot and comparing it to the previous configuration of the market when it was on Laurel Avenue. By most reports, the old configuration was cramped and chaotic. The new concept plan presents a more organized, less cluttered market format, if it were to return to Laurel Avenue.











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## CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

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*The conceptual design process was iterative: We reviewed draft drawings at several stages with OTBA and City staff, making revisions in response to the conversations.*



## Priorities that informed the design process included:

- » Create a unified, designed public plaza for the full street
- » Retain access for maintenance and emergency vehicles
- » Return the farmers market to Laurel Avenue
- » Consider options for keeping the southbound lane open with occasional or weekend closures
- » Accommodate multi-modal access: pedestrians, bicycles, transit (bus stop)
- » Accommodate some very short-term parking for pickup and drop-off
- » Preserve as many existing trees as possible
- » Consider impact on traffic patterns resulting from a full street closure
- » Consider a phased implementation
- » Consider simplicity of maintenance and upkeep

The final concept plan envisions a flexible space with multiple seating, activity, and planted areas. Natural shade from trees and added shade from canvas “sails” are also part of the design.





## Seating for Restaurant Dining

Seating for restaurant diners is more formalized in the concept plan. We recognize that, over time, retail and dining tenants change and there may be more or fewer restaurants in the future, in different storefronts. Where there will be alcohol service, the space will need to be contained to comply with licensing laws. Fee transparency will be important so the public knows that restaurants are paying City permit fees for the use of public space.

Because the street will no longer be open to traffic, safety shielding of the outdoor dining area will not be a factor (as it is for “parklet” dining). For consistent design and aesthetics, some communities have experimented with offering simple architect-designed plans for seating areas that restaurateurs can build at their own expense.





## CORNER OF LAUREL AND CARROLL AVENUES

The intersection design shows clear, straight-on access to the parking lot when traveling east on Carroll Avenue. The plan shows a pull-off space immediately north of the parking lot driveway. This is intended for quick loading and unloading.

The southeast corner of Laurel and Carrol Avenues (church side) has been redesigned to accommodate a bus shelter and easier bus access. It also includes a curved pathway to access the plaza, and to provide additional tent space for the Farmers Market, if needed. This configuration will impinge on the church's property and should be approved through an agreement. It will also require relocation of the church's sign at that corner, and this should be incorporated into the plan costs.

### Phasing

Building the full streetscape project is estimated to cost \$4,240,284. At this point, the City has not committed to implementing the concept and funding has not been secured.

Because street construction will be disruptive to businesses, the church, and others (and because breaking the project into smaller phases would increase construction costs), the concept will realistically be built as one undertaking. However, before securing funding or committing to construction, temporary closures can acclimate people to the idea and test the functionality. For example:

- » Weekend closures are a good way to ease into a permanent closure. In order to activate the space and attract people to use it, it will need additional moveable furniture and regular activation (e.g., food trucks, flea market, etc.). The risk of closure without activation is that -- to the community -- it will look like a closure without a purpose, bringing only the inconveniences and not the benefits.
- » Painting and striping a version of the concept design -- and adding furniture and activation -- would be the next step, perhaps for the year prior to construction, while funding is secured. In addition to striping, colorful patterns painted on the road can help make the open area feel more like a public space and less like a road. Like weekend closures, this approach will also require giving consideration to making the space feel welcoming, as it will not yet have the plantings and "outdoor rooms" planned for the final plaza.

### Parking

The plaza plan will eliminate eight parallel parking spaces (including one handicapped space) currently available on the southbound side of Laurel Avenue. In the design, these spaces are partially offset by the addition of six new parallel parking spaces: five along Eastern Avenue at the south end of Laurel Avenue, and one on Carroll Avenue near the bus stop. These spaces are intended for short stops like picking up food from a restaurant or dropping mail at the post office.

### Farmers Market

The plaza design plan accommodates 34 ten-foot-square tents, or 340 linear feet of market space. This is enough space for 17 to 34 farmers, depending if vendors require one or two tents. The farmers market in the parking lot location currently shows 420 linear feet of vendors. One of the necessary trade-offs in the new concept design is a smaller footprint for the Farmers Market. In order to provide 420 linear feet of vendor space on Laurel Avenue, the plan would have to sacrifice most of its designed landscaping and seating space, while the market only takes place one day per week.



Based on a discussion with three farmers who are longtime vendors at the Takoma Park market, they proposed a product offloading solution that is workable for them: In this scenario, offloading is sequenced for all farmers by time slots. Farm trucks will enter the service lane of the plaza from the north, unload, and continue south to exit on Eastern Avenue. As they exit, the next set of trucks will enter from the north, until all vendors have unloaded. The service lane can accommodate up to five box trucks 34.5 feet long and eight feet wide, while allowing 10 feet between each for unloading.

We recommend the Farmers Market not return to Laurel Avenue until construction is completed. Space is too tight in the current configuration and will lead to crowded conditions, which shoppers did not like.

## Performance Space

The plaza design includes a flexible performance space, which can be scheduled or used spontaneously. When not being used for music or other performances, it can be set with chairs and tables for additional seating, or could be used for outdoor yoga or exercise classes. Some places are experimenting with self-scheduling of public spaces by scanning a QR code sign which pulls up a scheduling calendar.

## Furnishings

The concept design depicts colorful, moveable furniture. (Specification references are provided, if the City wishes to source the exact furnishings.) The plan aims to offer seating that can be rearranged by users of the space to accommodate people sitting alone or forming groups. Benches shown in the plan provide omnidirectional seating, which fosters interactivity. The church side of the street takes a different design treatment because there are no storefronts to face. Instead, seating along this edge faces the interior. Panels to hide the church's mechanical systems are colorful and sculptural.

For the Sunday Farmers Market, moving the furniture out of the way will require an operational plan and (probably) assistance from Public Works, part-time staff, or volunteers.

## Traffic Management

For the traffic routing after full closure, additional signage is not expected to be needed given the nature of the closure and the routing around it. If the City felt it was needed, two wayfinding signs could be added at the north and south intersections saying, "To Carrol Ave" or "To Eastern Ave".

To reduce cut-through traffic on nearby residential streets like Walnut and Westmoreland Avenues, signage is the best deterrent. Both roads already have speed bumps which will help prevent cut throughs. Enforcement should be applied early after Laurel Ave is closed, as this will help define user behavior and create new patterns. Another option would be to show "Local Traffic Only Signs" in place of the "No Thru Traffic" signs currently in place. The choice of sign messaging is a matter of preference.

## Bicycle Access

The plan does not include a dedicated bike lane through the plaza. A bike lane would encourage higher speeds in an area where pedestrians and children will be present and may wander inadvertently into the lane. Cyclists and those riding on scooters will read the visual signals that this is a pedestrian zone and they should dismount or ride slowly through the space.



## Church Property

The redesign of the Carroll Avenue intersection affects church property and the plaza design shows 840 square feet encroached along Laurel Avenue. For the space given over to public use (presumably through a negotiated easement), the church will expect consideration, which is reflected in the cost opinion worksheet. In addition, the plan shows a portion of the weekly farmers market encroaching on church property at the Carroll Avenue intersection. This may be accomplished through a memorandum of understanding, with or without consideration. If this plan were not acceptable to church leadership, the entire design could be shifted “down” (east), which would require either reducing the number of tents on market days or reducing the size of the garden and performance space areas.

## Maintenance Access

The Laurel Avenue intersection at Carrol Avenue has been designed to allow access for trash and maintenance vehicles. The entrance is currently designed as a colorful, placemaking gate, but could also be configured with bollards. Trash receptacles and bike racks are also illustrated.

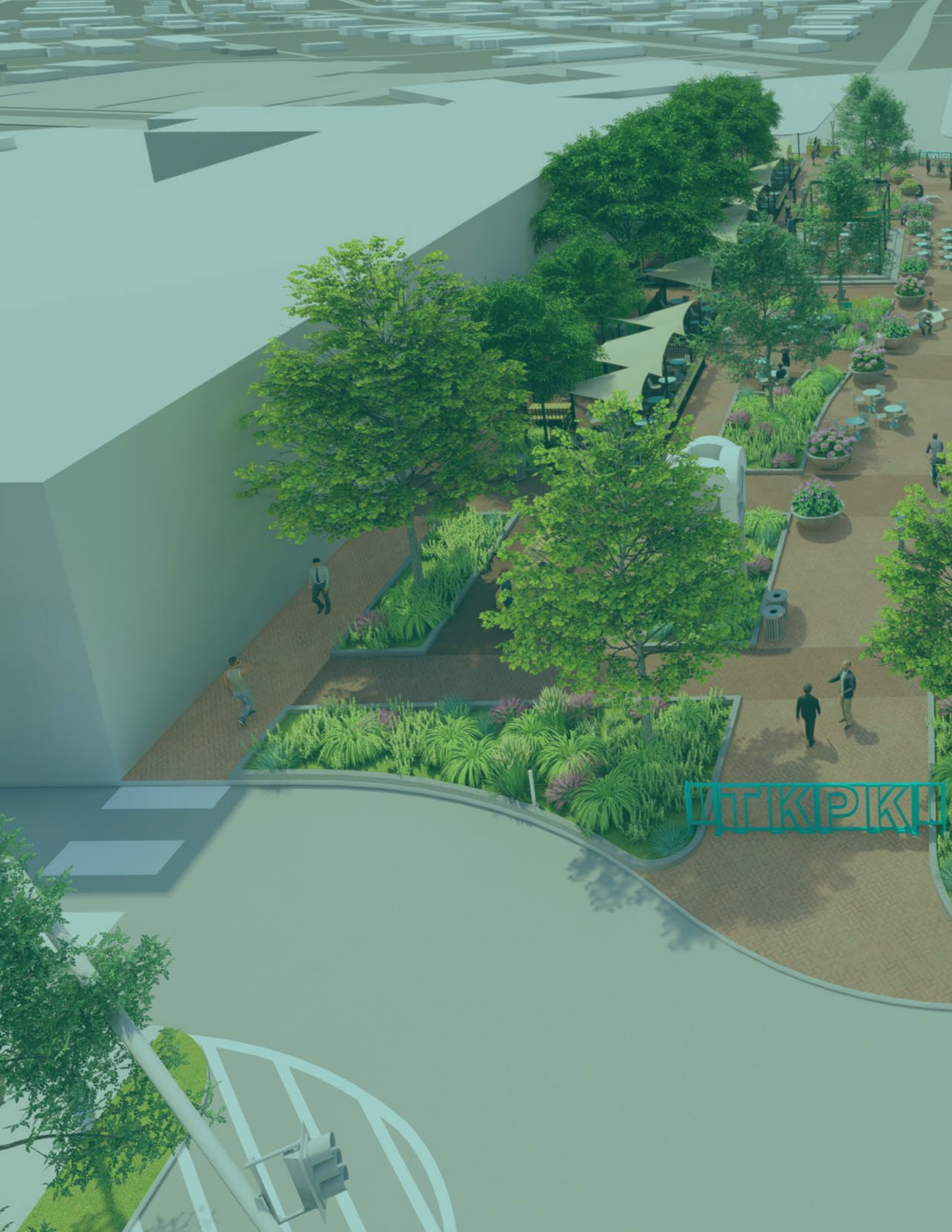
The concept design shows precast pavers. If the City wishes, a permeable-surface option can be specified in construction drawings. Installation and maintenance costs of permeable surfaces are significantly higher, but would have the advantages of reducing water run-off and fitting Takoma Park’s environmental priorities.











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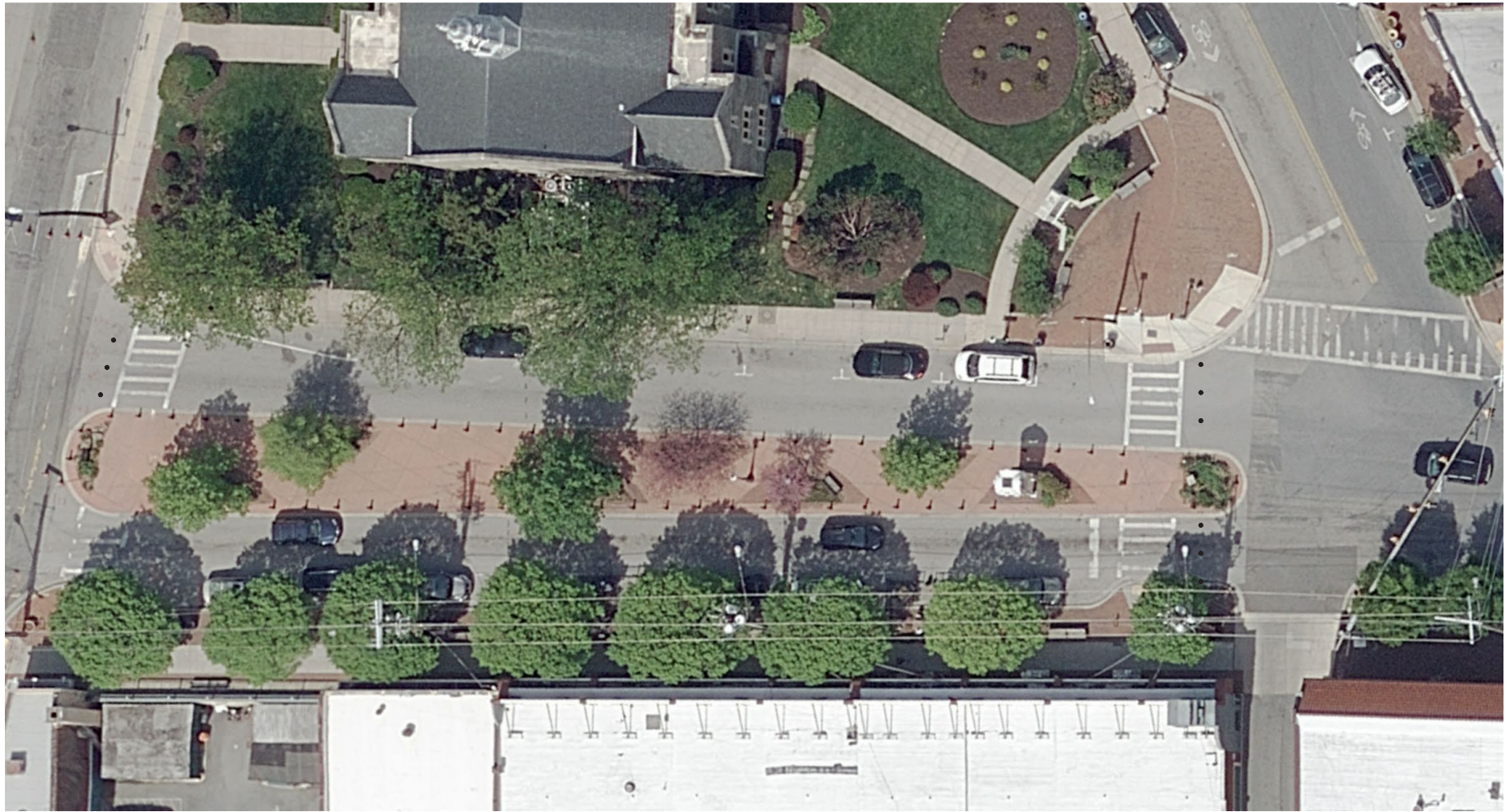


An aerial perspective rendering of a public plaza. The scene features a large, modern building with a white facade and a prominent gabled roof on the left. A wide, paved walkway curves through the plaza, lined with various trees and lush landscaping, including purple flowers and green shrubs. Several people are shown walking along the path. In the foreground, a white car is parked on the right, and a blue and white bus is visible. The overall atmosphere is bright and open, with a clear sky.

## CONCEPT PACKAGE

*The Laurel Avenue public plaza concept is illustrated on the following pages, including plan and perspective views and examples of furnishings. The drawings also illustrate the return of the weekly farmers market to Laurel Avenue.*





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# EXISTING CONDITIONS

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20' NORTH

MAY 27, 2023

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**CONCEPT PLAN**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20'  
NORTH

MAY 27, 2023

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**LEGEND**

- A** PRECAST PAVER BANDS BANDS WITH 10' ACCESS LANE
- B** FLEX SPACE WITH RAISED STAGE, PERGOLA / SHADE STRUCTURE W/ LIGHTING
- C** VEGETATIVE SCREENING
- D** DECORATIVE SCREEN PANEL
- E** SEATING NODES WITH MOVEABLE SEATING
- F** TEMP PARKING
- G** DELIVERY PARKING
- H** RELOCATED ROOSTER SCULPTURE
- I** RELOCATED CLOCK TOWER
- J** COMMUNAL DINING
- K** RESTAURANT DINING WITH FENCING AND SHADE STRUCTURE
- L** PUBLIC DINING WITH MOVEABLE SEATING
- M** BIKE RACKS/BIKE SHARE
- N** BUS SHELTER
- O** SCULPTURAL SEATING
- P** SHRUB / PERENNIAL PLANTINGS
- Q** EXISTING TREE
- R** PROPOSED CANOPY TREE



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**CONCEPT PLAN**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=30'  
0' 5' 10' 15' 30' NORTH

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10' X 10' TENTS - 34 TOTAL

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# CONCEPT PLAN - FARMER'S MARKET

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

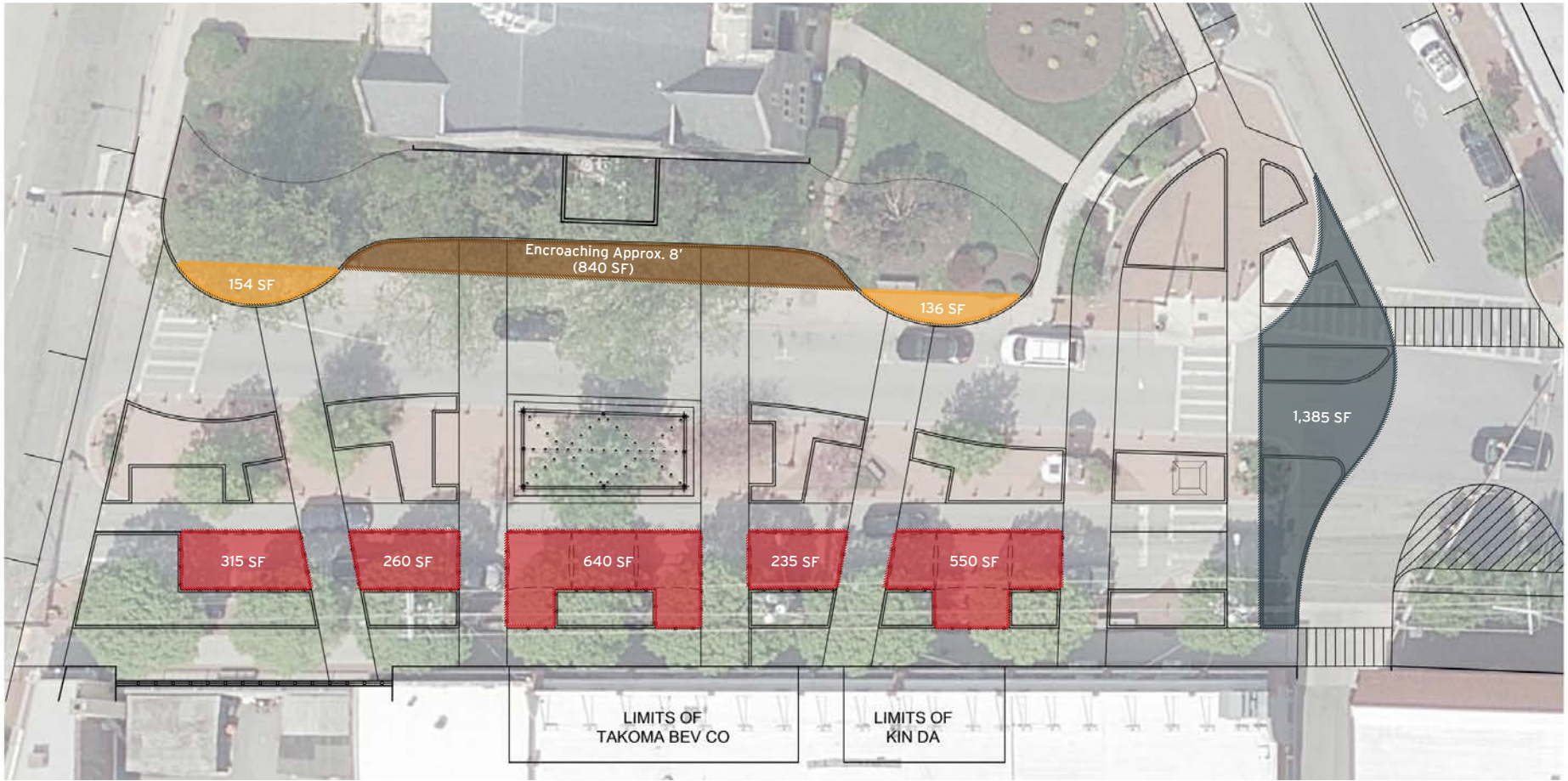
SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20' NORTH

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**CHURCH PROPERTY**

Encroaching Approx. 8' 840 SF  
 Additional Landscape 290 SF

**DESIGNATED FENCED DINING**

Takoma Beverage Company & Kin Da Frontage 1,425 SF  
 Other Fenced Dining 575 SF  
 Total Designated Fenced Dining 2,000 SF

**INTERSECTION RECONFIGURATION**

Plaza Spaced Added Due to Reconfiguration of Intersection 1,385 SF

**LEGEND**

- CHURCH PROPERTY INCREASE LANDSCAPE
- DESIGNATED FENCED DINING
- CHURCH PROPERTY ENCROACHMENT
- ADDITIONAL PLAZA SPACE DUE TO INTERSECTION RECONFIGURATION

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**CONCEPT PLAN - KEY CALCULATIONS**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND



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## CONCEPT - VIEW 1

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20'  
NORTH

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**CONCEPT - VIEW 2**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20'  
NORTH

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**CONCEPT - VIEW 3**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20' NORTH

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**CONCEPT - VIEW 4**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20'  
NORTH

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# OPTION A - VIEW 5

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1" = 20'  
0' 5' 10' 20' NORTH

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**CONCEPT - VIEW 6**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=20'  
0' 5' 10' 20'  
NORTH

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SEATING ELEMENTS



Sculptural Bench



Bench



Round Bench



Lounge & Picnic Seating



Picnic Seating

SEATING ELEMENTS CONT.



Tiered Seating



Tiered Seating



Seat Wall



Bistro Seating

PERGOLA



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**CHARACTER IMAGERY**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=16'  
0' 4' 8' 16'  
NORTH

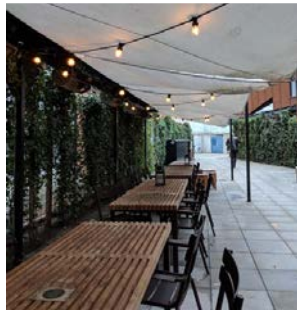
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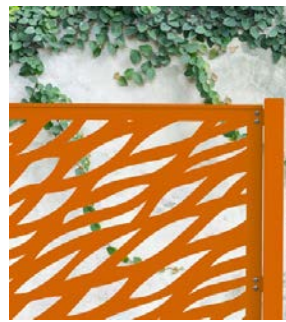
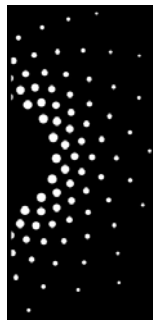
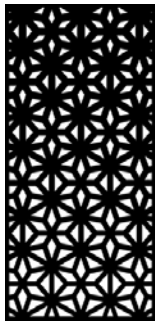
OUTDOOR DINING SHADE



FARMER'S MARKET



DECORATIVE SCREEN PANELS



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**CHARACTER IMAGERY**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=16'  
0' 4' 8' 16'  
NORTH

MAY 27, 2023

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LIGHTING



Pole Mounted Ped Light



Light Column



String Lighting

PLANTERS



SCULPTURAL GATE



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**CHARACTER IMAGERY**

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=16'  
0' 4' 8' 16'  
NORTH

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REMOVEABLE BOLLARDS



SCULPTURAL ELEMENT



PLAZA ACTIVITIES



PAINTED STREET



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# CHARACTER IMAGERY

TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

SCALE: 1"=16'  
0' 4' 8' 16' NORTH

MAY 27, 2023

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# NEXT STEPS





- 1. Involve the near-neighbors.** Before rolling out the plan to the broader public, it will be critical to get the support of the nearby neighbors. This might be done through house meetings or door-to-door conversations. Neighbors might have ideas, in addition to those discussed above, for mitigating cut-through traffic.
- 2. Socialize the plan.** OTBA should present the plan to the public at an open house, with a presentation walking through the design process, the survey results, and how the concept considered multiple configurations before arriving at this solution. It is important that the meeting have broad representation from the Takoma Park community, as it's important to have diverse perspectives. It is a space that will be used by all. In addition to an open house, OTBA could consider hosting online presentations with live discussion. In addition to presenting the concept plan, these meetings (including the neighbors meetings suggested above) will also be an opportunity to clarify misconceptions that may exist, such as permitting of outdoor dining space, costs associated with the Farmers Market, and others.
- 3. Schedule weekend closures.** Regular weekend closures will get people used to the idea of a new public space and new traffic patterns. It is important, however, that the road not simply be closed without a purpose. It will require activation through any number of “tactical urbanism” tools, which should include moveable furniture and tents to occupy the larger area and make it inviting. Other interventions could include painting colorful patterns on the street, installing temporary outdoor lighting such as string lights, hosting food trucks, scheduling special events and musical performances, etc. It is too early to move the Farmers Market back to Laurel Avenue as the space will be too cramped.
- 4. Plan for capital expenditures and apply for funding.** When it is ready to move ahead, the City will include the Laurel Avenue plan in its capital budget. The City and/or OTBA can apply for state funding to offset some or all of the construction costs.





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