Pollo



1. Overview

a. Introduction

The Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Montgomery County Department of Transportation request \$2 million in Reconnecting Communities Pilot (RCP) grant program funds for the **Wheaton and Glenmont Community Connection**



Figure 1: MD 97 (Georgia Avenue) in Wheaton, MD

Plan (the Project), a \$2.5 million Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study in Montgomery County, MD. Guided by community visioning and outreach, the Project would reimagine portions of the Georgia Avenue (MD 97) corridor (the Corridor) that cuts through this multi-cultural and vibrant downtown area, provide for new economic development opportunities, and improve access to both the Wheaton and Glenmont multimodal transit hubs on MD 586 (Veirs Mill Road) and MD 97, respectively. Montgomery County will provide a \$500,000 local match to support this important project (see Letter of Commitment).

b. Project History

This Project builds upon ongoing work to create safe multi-modal connections on MD 97. SHA has taken major steps to increase safety on the Corridor with its investment in the MD 97 Montgomery Hills Safety and Accessibility Project immediately south of the Project area, which will include sidewalk improvements, a new two-way separated bicycle lane, transit improvements, and green space. **The Project** builds upon this Montgomery Hills Complete Streets project, extending the multi-modal design vision north of Montgomery Hills to create a more cohesive, multi-modal design for MD 97 up to the Glenmont Metro station. These first-and last-mile pedestrian and bicycle connections to Metro also build upon momentum created by the recent bus priority lanes implemented on MD 97 by reimagining the design of the Corridor and adding safe multi-modal infrastructure for essential neighborhood connections. This Project will develop a plan for how to transition these cut-through roads into streets that support local and regional economic development, multi-modal access and connected communities, multi-

family housing units, and thriving businesses. These Project components will help to create new housing opportunities, make a diverse community more livable and safer for all modes of travel, and improve pedestrian and bicycle connections to the Metro stations that are essential for services and employment. These approaches are consistent with the Moore-Miller Administration's vision to Leave No One Behind, which calls for a focus on equity in transportation planning, on safety, and on

"Realizing the vision of making MD 97 safe to walk, bike, roll, take transit and drive is tremendously urgent as my community is dying on these dangerous roadways. People are afraid of walking to the grocery stores and our Wheaton library. Even waiting at the bus stop on MD 97 is harrowing as cars speed by. My community relies heavily on walking, biking and public transit, but we are located between and at the crossroads of major state highways that heavily prioritize car mobility and speed."

> Councilmember Natali Fani-Gonzales (Montgomery County District 6)

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strengthening our communities and transit systems, as well as the County's commitment to road safety through Complete Streets.

c. Transportation Need

The area surrounding the Corridor is a diverse urban center that is the heart of the Hispanic community in Montgomery County. Home to many small, often immigrant-owned, local businesses and major retail, housing, and employment centers like the Westfield Mall, downtown Wheaton brings Montgomery County citizens together. The study area includes two Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) Red Line Metro stations on the Georgia Avenue corridor – Wheaton and Glenmont. In spring 2024, SHA, in partnership with WMATA, launched a bus lane pilot on MD 97 to support shuttle bus operations between Glenmont and Takoma Metro stations through dedicated bus lanes. The RCP grant presents an opportunity to fully examine the transit and multi-modal needs of the Corridor and build-off the success of this bus lane pilot, which will continue through December 2024.

The existing roadway network of high-capacity arterials has disconnected elements of the downtown, diminished multi-modal safety, and failed to provide multi-modal connections to support transit access and neighborhood cohesiveness (see Figure 1). Roadways on the Corridor can be up to 8 lanes wide, presenting significant barriers to access, mobility, economic development, and creating obstacles to community connectivity. These conditions divide a vibrant commercial area, making it challenging and unsafe to travel within the area on foot and by bicycle.

d. Proposed Improvements

With the RCP grant funding, SHA, in partnership with Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), will perform a **Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) study** for MD 97 from Plyers Mill Road (southern limit) to Hewitt Avenue (northern limit). The study will consult key stakeholders like WMATA and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC). The study will establish pedestrian, bicycle, and transit needs within the Corridor, building off the coming improvements of the MD 97 Montgomery Hills and bus lane pilot projects, and identify public infrastructure improvements at the Wheaton and Glenmont stations to increase walkability and pedestrian safety, enhance accessibility to parks and trails, and foster economic development opportunities for all Marylanders. The resulting refined set of concept-level alternatives could then advance into NEPA analysis. This study will include the following activities:

- Conduct an analysis of a road diet and narrowing lanes;
- ▶ Identify sidewalk gaps and evaluate the need for wider sidewalks on the Corridor;
- Assess potential need for permanent bus lanes and shelter improvements;
- Determine the need and type of bicycle (cycle track, buffered bike lanes, shared use path), recreational, and trail connections in the Corridor;
- Identify new potential crosswalk locations; and
- Evaluate need for pedestrian and bicyclist access improvements at the WMATA stations.



2. Location and Map

The Project is in Montgomery County, MD and includes 3.9 miles of the Georgia Avenue (MD 97) corridor from south of the Wheaton Metro station to north of the Glenmont Metro station, running through downtown Wheaton (Figure 2). As of the 2020 decennial census, 36,533 people live within half a mile of the Project Corridor, and over 70% of residents are non-white or of Hispanic/Latino origin.¹ Located just north of Washington, D.C., this area of eastern Montgomery County is a multi-cultural hub with a diverse population of Hispanic (45%), African American (17.6%), and Asian (10.6%) residents. The "Wheaton Triangle," which encompasses the three state highways of MD 586, MD 193, and MD 97, is a commercial hub in the area and the focal point of Wheaton's Central Business District.

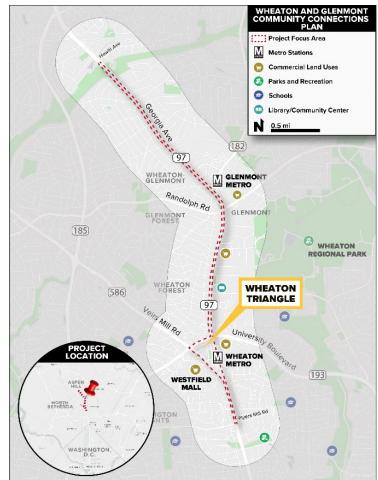


Figure 2: Project Location Map

The Corridor is served by high-quality transit, including the WMATA Metrorail Red Line and Metrobus and Montgomery County's Ride On local bus service. Bus rapid transit is planned on the three major arterial roadways in the Project area, and a pilot bus lane was implemented on MD 97 in 2024. The Corridor has micro-mobility and shared mobility (bike share), especially near Metro stations; however, MD 97 lacks safe infrastructure for bicycles and e-scooters.

SHA is already investing in Complete Streets improvements in Montgomery Hills, immediately south of the Corridor, which provides safe pedestrian, bicycle, and transit infrastructure to Georgia Avenue from Grace Church Road to Forest Glen Road. The proposed **Project** will add to existing efforts by advancing safe street design options for MD 97 from Plyers Mill Road to Hewitt Avenue. The County is currently working on concept designs for bikeways on Amherst and Grandview avenues, which will provide safe bicycle and micro-mobility connections on both sides of MD 97, significantly improving connectivity from the surrounding residential neighborhoods to the businesses, services, and amenities within downtown Wheaton.

¹ https://maps.dot.gov/fhwa/steap/#:~:text=Overview,and%20other%20socioeconomic%20data%20analyses.



3. Response to Merit Criteria

a. Equity and Justice40

The Corridor has roots in harmful historic policies that excluded non-white residents from residential opportunities. MD 97 was widened from two to six lanes in the mid-1950s as an influx of residents moved to the suburban communities of Silver Spring, many of which had racially restrictive covenants that prohibited non-white residents from purchasing homes. Although Eastern Montgomery County is an ethnically diverse urban area of its own now, roadway infrastructure designed for auto-oriented suburbs 70 years ago creates a barrier to safe travel and prohibits vibrant communities and commercial centers today.

According to the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool, the Corridor runs through three census tracts (7032.07, 7032.14, and 7032.15) identified as Historically Disadvantaged Communities, and one census tract that is also an Area of Persistent Poverty (Figure 3).²

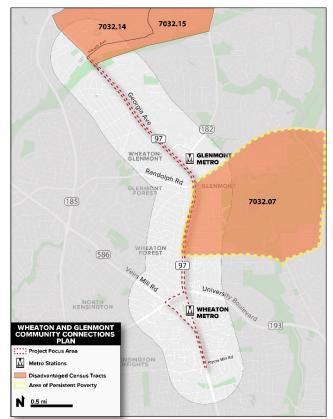


Figure 3: Historically Disadvantaged and Areas of Persistent Poverty in the Corridor

Over 70% of residents within a half mile of the Project corridor are people of color, compared to only 45% in Montgomery County (Table 1). Also, nearly 11% of households do not have a vehicle, showing the importance of strengthening multi-modal connections to Metro stations in the study area.

 Table 1: Key Community Statistics in Project Area (Source: U.S. Census, 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates & Screening Tool for Equity Analysis of Projects (STEAP))

 Households With

Community	Non-White Population	Persons in Poverty	Hispanic Pop.	Households With No Vehicles Available
¹ ⁄ ₂ Mile Buffer around Project Corridor	70.3%	10.8%	45.1%	10.5%
Montgomery County	44.9%	8.5%	20%	7.4%
Maryland	42.7%	10.3%	10.0%	8.7%
USA	24.5%	11.6%	19.1%	8.3%

² https://maps.dot.gov/BTS/GrantProjectLocationVerification/ & https://screeningtool.geoplatform.gov/en/#12.7/39.05622/-77.03774.



b. Access

Increasing Safe Connectivity for All Users

This Project will expand safe access for non-motorized users, including people walking, cycling, and using mobility devices such as wheelchairs, to the commercial, recreational, and transit assets by redesigning the Corridor as a safer, Complete Street for all, including vulnerable road users such as children and elderly residents. Such access is particularly important because of the high rate of transit users and residents without a vehicle within a half mile of the Project area. Existing roadways do not have bicycle infrastructure and there are gaps in the sidewalk network, making it challenging to make first- and last-mile connections to the two Metro stations and MNCPPC trails and parks on the Corridor. MDOT's Bicycle Level of Traffic Stress (LTS), a measure to assess comfort of the roadway for bicycle riders, shows that the Corridor and intersecting arterials have an LTS score of 4, the highest level of traffic stress (Figure 4).³ Key destinations near the Corridor include:

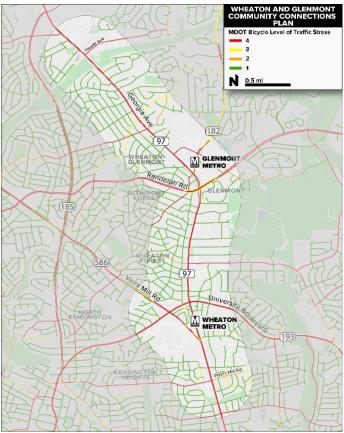


Figure 4: MDOT Bicycle Level of Traffic Stress

- Metrorail stations: Glenmont and Wheaton Metro;
- **Commercial and retail**: Wheaton Mall, Safeway, H Mart, and Giant;
- Healthcare centers: Medstar Urgent Care in Wheaton
- Parks and green spaces: Wheaton Regional Park, Evans Parkway Neighborhood Park, Matthew Henson State Park;
- Community and recreation centers: Wheaton Library, Marian Fryer Town Plaza, and Wheaton Arts and Entertainment District;
- Affordable housing: The County is making major investments in new affordable housing on County-owned sites, several of which are adjacent to the Corridor (Blueridge-Hickerson lot, Price-Fern lot, University lot, and Ennalls lot.)⁴

77.045375%2C13.86.

³ https://data.imap.maryland.gov/datasets/maryland-bicycle-level-of-traffic-stress-lts/explore?location=39.031327%2C-

⁴ https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/DGS/OPD/AffordableHousing.html.



c. Facility Suitability

Barriers to Access, Mobility, and Economic Development

MD 97 currently presents significant barriers to access and non-motorized mobility in eastern Montgomery County. This wide, high-capacity state highway and its interchanges do not suit this commercial and residential area, or foster neighborhood cohesiveness. Plans for downtown Wheaton emphasize the vision for the area to become a major mixed-use center with safe and accessible multi-modal infrastructure to support a walkable and bikeable environment. However, these plans are hindered by wide roadways with long pedestrian crossing distances, long distances between intersections, some pedestrian crossings with no



Figure 5: MD 97 and Randolph Rd Intersection

signals, and no protected bicycle infrastructure. Georgia Avenue ranges from 6 to 8 lanes wide, creating pedestrian crossing distances over 140 feet long at intersections that make it challenging to access destinations on foot (Figure 5).

Both the State and the County are actively working to build Complete Streets to maximize the safety, sustainability, and vitality of its population centers, and MD 97 is a priority corridor for Complete Streets. Also, Wheaton is one of many Bicycle and Pedestrian Priority Areas in Montgomery County, established to enhance safe bicycle and pedestrian access, improve connectivity, and replace aging infrastructure. The Project will leverage ongoing efforts to comprehensively address this roadway barrier and reconstruct these State highways to provide safe, accessible multi-modal connections.

d. Community Engagement and Community-based Stewardship, Management, and Partnerships

MDOT will create a comprehensive Community Participation Plan at the start of the Project to guide outreach throughout the Project's life cycle, building on the work performed by community advocates and placemaking organizations, like the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC), calling for improved roadway safety and outreach for neighboring development projects. ⁵

This Project emerged from grassroots advocacy for safer streets in Wheaton, spurred by high crash rates on these roadways. MD 97 along the Corridor has averaged 228 crashes per year since 2015, with nearly 6% involving pedestrians or bicyclists (Table 2). In May 2023, Maryland

Year	Total Crashes	Bike/Ped Crashes
2015	288	19
2016	246	8
2017	235	12
2018	228	16
2019	236	13
2020	173	14
2021	216	14
2022	200	8
2023	213	12
Yearly Avg.	228	13

Table 2: Reported Crashes within ½ Mile of Project Area, 2015-2023 (Source: SHA)

⁵ https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/midcounty/boards/wudacindex.html.



Governor Moore visited MD 97 by request from local leadership in Wheaton to better understand the dangerous conditions facing pedestrians.⁶ Advocacy groups such as Montgomery County Families for Safe Streets are pushing for safety improvements, notably calling for the installation of a sidewalk on Veirs Mill Road between Pendleton-Schoolhouse and MD 97.⁷ The Project would leverage the existing urgency surrounding road safety to work with local leadership and advocacy groups to ensure that broad community needs are fully represented. This will include continuous engagement and coordination with the Montgomery County Council, including Council President Andrew Friedson and District 6 councilmember Natali Fani-Gonzalez.

Recent outreach efforts for the Montgomery Hills project, including open house workshops, public hearings, and virtual public meetings, provide a strong foundation for continued outreach to community members and other stakeholders for the Project, and the budget includes \$345,000 for public engagement to support an equitable and community-supported transportation investment.

Leveraging the existing WUDAC, MDOT will create a Stakeholder Advisory Group to help guide the Project, including representatives from active local businesses, communities, and organizations. This group will help the project team understand the priorities of the groups they are representing and provide input on key decision points.

Wheaton's 2022 Downtown Study, which explores furthering Wheaton's economic diversity by strategically leveraging new investment, also included a robust community engagement process.⁸ Based on the lessons learned from that outreach, this Project's outreach will include:

The Screening Tool for Equity Analysis of Projects (<u>STEAP</u>) shows that within ½ mile of the study corridors, **over 40% of the population above the age of five do not speak English at home**, compared to only 19% for the state of Maryland.

- Visioning and goals workshop with the Stakeholder Advisory Group;
- Public open house to introduce the project and gather information from the public;
- Online surveys to receive feedback from community members;
- Coordination with staff from the Mid-County Regional Services Center, the Wheaton Urban District, and the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee;
- Engagement with groups offering support to businesses such as the Latino Economic Development Center and the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation;
- Open house to share the draft plan and gather public input on the recommendations.

Recognizing the diversity of the affected communities, SHA will translate project materials into languages in the impacted communities and provide on-site translators at public meetings.

⁶ <u>https://dcist.com/story/23/06/01/gov-wes-moore-walks-georgia-avenue-to-get-sense-of-dangers-facing-pedestrians-in-wheaton/.</u>

⁷ https://mocofamiliesforsafestreets.org/.

⁸ https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/communities/midcounty/wheaton/wheaton-plan/wheaton-downtown-study-2022/#strategies.



e. Equitable Development

Local/Regional/State Equitable Development

The Maryland Department of Planning's *Better Maryland* State development plan includes an equitable development framework, providing recommendations for creating workforce and affordable housing, tackling economic development needs, and addressing infrastructure challenges that SHA will consult in developing this Project.⁹

Community Restoration, Stabilization, and Anti-Displacement

The Project will consider ways to integrate Montgomery County's Moderately Priced Dwelling Units (MPDUs) program, which implements inclusionary zoning that ensures affordable housing and anti-displacement strategies where possible. The MPDU program requires a percentage of housing in residential developments for low- and moderate-income households. One example is the Residences of Forest Glen on MD 97, providing one of the largest affordable units in Montgomery County. Also, SHA will identify steps needed to ensure proposed improvements are consistent with the Wheaton Sector Plan (2023), which encourages high-density, high-quality growth that blends new development with existing small and family-owned businesses.¹⁰ The Wheaton Sector Plan rezoned most of the central business district to Commercial-Residential, adding significant development capacity and height.

Combined, the MPDU program and Sector Plan address displacement within the Corridor. SHA will partner with the County and use program resources to proactively leverage public resources in support of more affordable housing. The Project's proximity to high-quality transit, support for anti-displacement efforts, and development potential in a multicultural community present an opportunity to build safe, multi-modal access for all residents and modes of transportation.

Community-Supported Approaches to Placemaking

The Project will identify opportunities to incorporate placemaking that celebrate the multicultural community through public art and new green space. MDOT will provide the opportunity for local artists to create pieces within MDOT-owned rights of way around the Corridor (e.g., bike lanes, sidewalks, medians, crosswalks). These integrated artworks will contribute to placemaking, cultural expression, and provide means for local artists to share their work and reach new audiences. SHA will leverage the County's optional method standards of Zoning Ordinances in 1974 which grant developers higher densities in exchange for significant public amenities and facilities. MDOT will also consider use of Spanish language roadway signage opportunities as a part of the study.

MDOT will use the Wheaton Sector Plan (2023) and the Wheaton Districts and Improvement Focus Area to guide strategies that seek to enhance existing public use spaces and develop additional public use spaces within the downtown area.

⁹ https://abetter.maryland.gov/Pages/default.aspx.

¹⁰ https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/communities/midcounty/wheaton/wheaton-plan/.



f. Climate Change Mitigation and/or Adaptation and Resilience

Environmental Burden

Georgia Avenue creates an environmental burden on the community because of the high traffic volumes it channels through downtown Wheaton, Forest Glen, Aspen Hill, and Glenmont, generating high rates of diesel particulate matter and ozone. Annual Average Daily Traffic on this portion of Georgia Avenue is over 50,000 vehicles per day,¹¹ generating over 46.7 metric tons of CO2 emissions daily. According to the EPA's EJScreen tool, the Census tracts adjacent to the corridors are in the 80th-90th percentiles for diesel particulate matter, ozone, and traffic proximity. The Project will identify options to reduce the number of travel lanes to reduce traffic volumes and associated greenhouse gas emissions, remove impervious surfaces, and expand the tree canopy on the roadways to address these environmental burdens.

Vulnerabilities

The Project will assess how to address these roadways' vulnerability to flooding and identify design solutions to better manage stormwater. Montgomery County lists Georgia Avenue as prone to flooding and provides warnings to the public to avoid it when it rains. The planning process will examine opportunities to address flooding using solutions such as reduction of impervious surface, bioretention, and green infrastructure.

Alignment with Existing Climate Plans

The State of Maryland's "Climate Pollution Reduction Plan" has an ambitious climate goal to reduce statewide greenhouse gas emissions 60% by 2031 and create a path to net-zero by 2045.¹² The 2023 report "Maryland's Climate Pathway" published by the Maryland Department of the Environment finds that a significant level of investment in walkability and Complete Streets is essential to meeting climate commitments.¹³ In particular, the report calls for "government funding for 'Complete Streets' with protected space for biking and walking." Similarly, the 2021 Montgomery County Climate Action Plan commits the County to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2027 and 100% by 2035.¹⁴ Expanding active transportation and micromobility networks is one of the key strategies needed to meet these climate commitments.

Overall, this Project will identify options for improving active transportation and transit infrastructure, aligning with State and County commitments in a study that considers:

- Reducing transportation-related emissions by designing infrastructure that supports a mode shift away from private vehicles towards walking, biking, and public transit.
- Alleviating noise pollution generated by vehicles by reducing the number of travel lanes.
- **Decreasing impervious surface** on the Corridor to reduce hot spot areas of extreme heat.
- Adding green infrastructure to the corridor, expanding tree canopy on the roadways, and incorporating best management practices for stormwater management.

¹⁴ https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/.

¹¹ https://data.imap.maryland.gov/datasets/maryland::maryland-bicycle-level-of-traffic-stress-lts/about.

¹²https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/air/ClimateChange/Maryland%20Climate%20Reduction%20Plan/Maryland%27s%20Climate%20Pollution %20Reduction%20Plan%20-%20Final%20-%20Dec%2028%202023.pdf.

¹³ https://mde.maryland.gov/programs/air/ClimateChange/Pages/Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-Reduction-Act-(GGRA)-Plan.aspx.



g. Workforce Development and Economic Opportunity

MDOT is committed to Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) and Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) participation and maintains a robust MBE Program believed to be the oldest in the country. Its purpose is to ensure full and fair participation of small, minorityand women-owned firms in both State- and USDOT- funded projects. MDOT administers Maryland MBE and DBE participation goals for contracts that receive USDOT assistance. SHA has an overall DBE goal of 26.34% for 2023-2024, and MDOT's project-based workforce development program, launching at end of 2024, designates up to \$4 million per year of FHWA 504(e) funds for workforce development in its Consolidated Transportation Program.¹⁵ MDOT is actively working with the Maryland Department of Labor on an apprenticeship program leveraging non-profit and labor organizations to create pathways to good-paying transportation jobs.

h. Planning Integration

The Project is firmly integrated into and aligns with multiple pre-existing plans, including State (2024 Complete Streets Policy;¹⁶ Statewide Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan;¹⁷ and the Pedestrian Safety Action Plan;¹⁸) and County (2023 Pedestrian Master Plan;¹⁹ Bicycle Master Plan;²⁰ and Vision Zero²¹) plans. Also, the Project is included in the Transportation Planning Board's (TPB) 2023-2026 Transportation Improvement Program under "bicycle and pedestrian priority area improvements."²² Finally, this Project has broad support from community stakeholders and regional planning representatives and letters of support from MWCOG, Governor Moore's office, the Montgomery County Council, and Montgomery County Departments of Transportation and Planning, among others.

4. Project Budget

The \$2 million **Forest Glen, Wheaton, and Glenmont Community Connection Plan** will be funded with \$2 million from the RCP Program and \$500,000 in Montgomery County local match funds. Table 3 presents budget sources and uses.

Project Activities	RCP Award	Non-Federal Share Funds	Total Project Costs
Planning and Environmental Linkages Study	\$1,655,000	\$500,000	\$2,155,000
Public Involvement	\$345,000	-	\$345,000
Total Cost	\$2,000,000	\$500,000	\$2,500,000

Table 3: Budget Sources and Uses Table

²¹ https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/transportation/vision-zero/.

¹⁵ https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovativeprograms/centers/workforce_dev/policy_guidance_regulations.aspx.

¹⁶ https://policymanual.mdot.maryland.gov/mediawiki/index.php?title=MDOT_750_Complete_Streets.

¹⁷ https://www.mdot.maryland.gov/OPCP/MDOT_State_Bike_Ped_Master_Plan_FULL_FINAL_VERSION.pdf.

¹⁸ https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/a4c07b80731b4a109a79bf6c86aad4c9/.

¹⁹ https://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Pedestrian-Master-Plan-WEB-MASTER-9-11-24.pdf.

²⁰ https://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Bicycle-Master-Plan-Biennial-Monitoring-Report-2021-2022-FINAL.pdf.

²² https://www.mwcog.org/documents/2022/06/15/fy-2023-2026-transportation-improvement-program-tip-visualize-2045/.