

**MEMORANDUM**

October 19, 2020

**TO:** Government Operations and Fiscal Policy (GO) Committee  
Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee

**FROM:** Gene Smith, Legislative Analyst  
Carlos Camacho, Legislative Analyst

**SUBJECT:** Wheaton revitalization

**PURPOSE:** Receive update and discuss the County's continued efforts in Wheaton

**Those expected for this discussion:**

- Rich Madaleno, Chief Administrative Officer, Office of the County Executive
- Chris Conklin, Director, Department of Transportation (DOT)
- David Dise, Director, Department of General Services (DGS)
- Luisa Montero-Diaz, Director, Mid-County Regional Services Center (MCRSC)
- Gwen Wright, Director, Montgomery County Planning Department (Planning)

The GO and PHED Committees requested an update and discussion based on the community's concerns received by the Executive and the Council regarding the County's efforts in Wheaton's revitalization. Executive staff will be available to answer questions from the committees about its efforts and future expectations.

**I. Background**

The County has invested significant time and resources in the development and revitalization of Wheaton. Many of these efforts date back to prior decades, with substantial deliberations and investments occurring in the last ten years. Below are some of the highlights from the County's actions.

- Wheaton Enterprise Zone. The County applied and the State designated Wheaton's central business district as a State Enterprise Zone in 1998 and redesignated it in 2009. Through this designation, businesses were awarded certain property and income tax credits to increase private investment in development – both construction projects and new jobs.

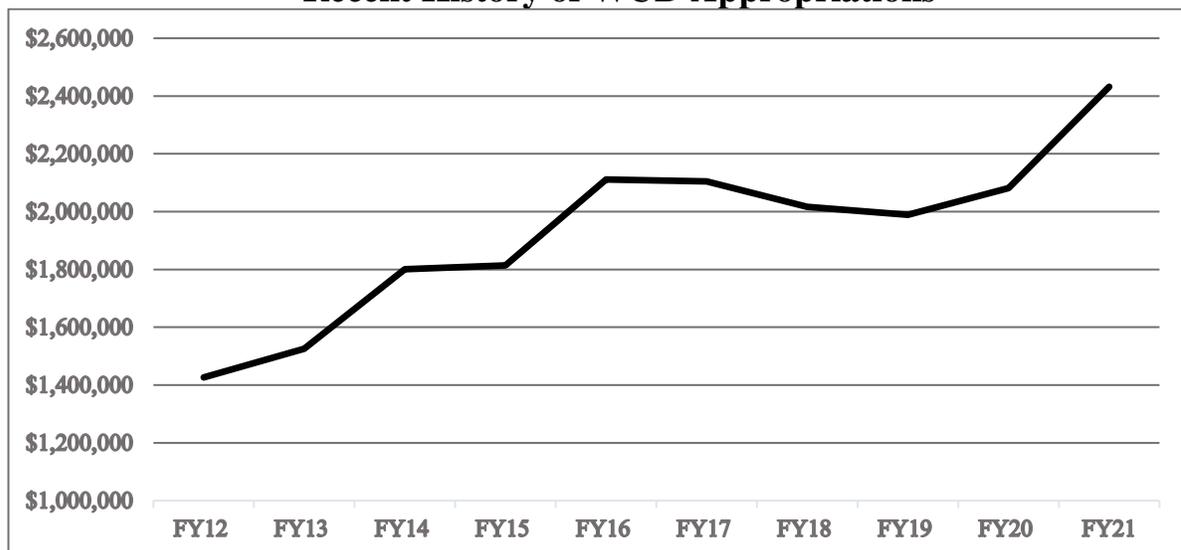
- Wheaton Redevelopment Program. This project in the County’s Capital Improvements Programs (CIP) has been ongoing since 2000. Most of the investments in the early years focused on maintenance and minor improvements to spur private investment.

In the early-2010s, the Council worked with the County Executive and Planning to construct a new government office building because it believed that a significant County investment would be required to activate the core and further advance Wheaton’s revitalization. The Council’s deliberations about the project focused primarily on: 1) who should lead on the construction of the building (i.e., the County or Planning); 2) the envelope of the building; 3) which County offices, if any, should relocate to the building; and 4) the size of the town plaza.

This \$180 million construction project is nearing completion. Planning and some of the County offices have relocated to Wheaton with the remaining relocations anticipated by the end of 2020.

- Small Business Assistance Program. Then-Council Vice President Navarro and four of her colleagues sponsored the creation of the Small Business Assistance Program (SBAP) in 2012. This program provides technical and financial assistance to small businesses impacted by County or County-funded construction projects. The program has been instrumental in assisting more than 100 small businesses through the redevelopment project in Wheaton.
- Wheaton Urban District. The Wheaton Urban District (WUD) supports and enhances Wheaton’s downtown area, ensuring a prosperous, livable urban center. In the FY21 Operating Budget, the Council appropriated \$2,432,088 to carry out its mission by maintaining streetscape and its investments; providing additional public amenities such as plantings, seating, shelters, and works of art; promoting the commercial and residential interest; and programming cultural and community activities. The FY21 appropriation was a 16.8% increase compared to the FY20 appropriation of \$2,081,992. This increase was primarily due to \$300,000 appropriated for operations related costs for the Town Plaza and Veteran’s Park linked to the redevelopment project. Below is a graph displaying the change in WUD appropriation from FY12-FY21.

**Recent History of WUD Appropriations**



In the last 10 fiscal years, the WUD appropriation has trended upward. WUD appropriations increased each year from FY12 to FY16, increasing by 48% during that time frame. Appropriations decreased by approximately 6% from FY16 to FY19 before increasing by 5% in FY20 and 17% in FY21. Overall, the WUD appropriation in FY21 is more than \$1,000,000 than the FY12 appropriation.

The table below shows WUD appropriations from FY17 to FY21 disaggregated by the Urban District’s six program areas: 1) Promotion of Community and Business Activities; 2) Sidewalk Repair; 3) Streetscape Maintenance; 4) Tree Maintenance; 5) Enhanced Security; and 6) Administration.

<b>Wheaton Urban District Approved Appropriations by Program Area</b>					
	<b>FY17</b>	<b>FY18</b>	<b>FY19</b>	<b>FY20</b>	<b>FY21</b>
<i>Promotion of Community and Business Activities</i>	\$1,063,071	\$1,035,157	\$982,202	\$1,053,034	\$318,776
<i>Sidewalk Repair</i>	\$29,569	\$29,569	\$29,569	\$29,569	-
<i>Streetscape Maintenance</i>	\$165,089	\$165,089	\$165,089	\$154,938	\$1,108,783
<i>Tree Maintenance</i>	\$13,160	\$13,160	\$13,160	\$13,160	-
<i>Enhanced Security and Ambassadorship</i>	\$509,956	\$536,302	\$581,304	\$596,158	\$614,925
<i>Administration</i>	\$324,178	\$237,157	\$217,746	\$235,133	\$389,604
<b>District Program Area Total</b>	<b>\$2,105,023</b>	<b>\$2,016,434</b>	<b>\$1,989,070</b>	<b>\$2,081,992</b>	<b>\$2,432,088</b>

The most significant changes can be seen in Sidewalk Repair, Streetscape Maintenance, Tree Maintenance, and Promotion of Community and Business Activities. Sidewalk Repair, Streetscape Maintenance, and Tree Maintenance received a consistent level of appropriations across all years, except for FY20 where appropriations decreased by 6%. In FY21, the three program areas were combined into one<sup>1</sup> – Streetscape Maintenance – and funding was increased primarily due to the Town Plaza and Veteran’s Park.

Approximately 50% of WUD appropriations in any given year is allocated to Promotion of Community and Business Activities. However, in FY21, Promotion of Community and Business Activities only represented 13% of total appropriations primarily due to changes in staffing levels related to COVID-19.

- Wheaton Arts and Cultural Facility. In FY19, a feasibility study was completed to assess the need, composition, and size of a cultural and arts facility in Wheaton.<sup>2</sup> The study was a collaborative effort supported by the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee, DGS,

<sup>1</sup> For more information refer to the September 24, 2020 Staff Report to the PHED Committee - [https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/cm/2020/20200924/20200924\\_PHED1.pdf](https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/council/Resources/Files/agenda/cm/2020/20200924/20200924_PHED1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Arts & Cultural Facilities Feasibility Study: Findings & Preliminary Recommendations - <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/DGS/Resources/Files/OPD/WheatonArtsFacilityStudyFindingPreliminaryFINAL.pdf>.

external consultants, and a stakeholder group of artists, businesses, and residents. The process included focus groups, town halls, community survey, numerous one-on-one interviews, benchmarking of other arts facilities, and a market analysis. The Council approved \$100,000 for facility planning for the center as part of the County's FY21-26 CIP.

## **II. Items recently raised by the community**

The Council received information that certain elements of the Wheaton revitalization efforts were incomplete or inconsistent with the community's expectations. Council staff has summarized the issues into broad categories for today's discussion. Due to time constraints, Executive staff was unable to provide written responses regarding these issues but are prepared to address them during the committee session.

- Town Plaza. There is concern that the level of County investment of the infrastructure and equipment for the town plaza is insufficient to support the long-term multi-user utilization of this public resource, including additional signage to communicate the uses of the site.
- Pedestrian safety and traffic flow. There is concern that certain intersections in Wheaton have not received the investment required to protect pedestrians and aid in traffic flow, including the potential placement for public art related to the new office building near Reddie Drive.
- Adequate annual maintenance and program funding. Given the pandemic, there is concern that budgets may be reduced while the responsibilities of the WUD increases. Council staff notes that the Council included additional resources to the district in FY21 when many budgets were flatlined, recognizing the maturing nature of the district's needs.
- Retail and day care in the government office building. Given the pandemic, there is concern that these spaces will remain vacant for the foreseeable future. The new government office building includes retail on the first floor. DGS is responsible for leasing and managing this space. There is also a day care center that is the responsibility of Planning to manage through a contract.
- Communication. There is concern about clear communication between the community and the multiple agencies and government departments/offices now all operating in Wheaton. Between governmental agencies, there is a delineation of expectations and responsibilities; however, this is not always clear or understood by the community.

GO & PHED #1  
October 22, 2020  
**ADDENDUM**

**MEMORANDUM**

October 22, 2020

**TO:** Government Operations and Fiscal Policy (GO) Committee  
Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee

**FROM:** Gene Smith, Legislative Analyst  
Carlos Camacho, Legislative Analyst

**SUBJECT:** Wheaton revitalization

Council staff received the attached responses from the Executive for the Wheaton revitalization update.

## Responses to GO/PHED Wheaton Project Questions October 20, 2020

- I. ***Install infrastructure and purchase equipment including Lighting, Sound and Marley-type Stage, power etc. for the new Town Plaza stage.*** *The stage on the plaza has colorful up-lighting for the covering. However, in spite of continual urging over the years and misleading comments by the previous MCDOT Department Director and the Stonebridge development team, there is no existing built-in infrastructure or equipment for sound or lighting for performances on the stage. This requires outrageous expenses for every user, including every County Agency to pay vendors for these services and equipment. Simple infrastructure installation for grids, speaker stacks, etc. would reduce future costs. Multiple local businesses have been prepared to present proposals for equipment and labor at package pricing through County RFP procurement process if the county decides not to invest in the equipment directly.*

### **Stage Flooring**

The original specification for the Town Square stage was a brushed/troweled concrete surface. This is a very durable surface utilized in many public plazas on multi use stages. At a presentation of the Town Square to WUDAC during the design process, WUDAC board members requested that the concrete floor be changed to a different surface. The particular conversation at the meeting was that the concrete floor would be hard on the performers that perform more actively on stage like dancers. The request was for a more forgiving floor material. The design team took into consideration a roll type rubberized material and an IPE wood material, both recognized as surfaces for activity.

Following research on materials for both aesthetics, durability, optionality for use of stage, maintenance considerations and with discussions with the public including the local dancing studio the team selected the IPE material for the stage. This Brazilian walnut wood flooring is a dense and resilient material that weathers well in the outdoor elements and looks beautiful.

### **Stage Sound and Lighting**

During the course of the design and construction of the stage there have been numerous discussions related to stage sound and performance lighting. However, it was decided at several points in the design process that given the variety of events that utilize a stage and the desire by many performers for their own equipment that purchasing specialized equipment to permanently install for sound and lighting was not a productive approach.

The team presented options for lighting and the consensus was to provide the stage with general lighting and tensile structure up-lighting. This provides background lighting for events and for some not highly technical events. The lighting package for the stage also includes a dimming package and controlled “scene” package. The dimming package allows other lights in the area and the general stage lights to be dimmed during specialized performances. The “scene” package allows specific lighting schemes to be utilized by Wheaton Urban District for specialized events or even for daily use.

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With respect to sound equipment, in the discussions with Wheaton Urban District and the community and performers who have participated in past Wheaton events, it was evident that the sound equipment necessary would be specific and could vary related to a type of event. So, after discussion on this topic the development team installed additional circuits in the electrical room behind the stage to provide the capacity for sound equipment that could be utilized at various events.

Moving forward with respect to lighting and sound there are the following options:

1. Allow performers to bring specific light and sound equipment and utilize the infrastructure provided to power and utilize the equipment for performances.
2. The County through the Wheaton Urban District (UD) could purchase a portable, universal sound & lighting package that would fit the needs for basic performances. This equipment would be managed and maintained by the UD. This option would cost approximately \$25,000.
3. The Wheaton RSC/UD could contract or connect all scheduled performers with a local vendor that could rent out equipment specific to each individual performance.

MCDOT does not recommend installing a permanent lighting and sound system which could be cost prohibitive to install and will be difficult to maintain. MCDOT with the RSC/UD and an independent lighting specialist will participate in a field visit to evaluate the current stage lighting and identify any improvements that could be made to augment the current stage lighting. With respect to sound, MCDOT with the RSC/UD will identify a portable sound system that could be used for performances and plugged into the existing electrical outlets available on the stage.

*II. **Alternative placement of the public art piece commissioned.** It is currently scheduled to be placed in the **center of the walkway area** between the building and the Metro in the plaza at the edge of Reddie Drive. This will probably cause most pedestrians, after dodging traffic to cross Reddie, to walk through this artwork as there is minimal space to walk around it on the way to and from the building. Immediate consideration should be given to reconsidering placement prior to pending installation.*

At project's conception in 2014, the designers of the project highlighted a location for Artwork in the Town Square. During the project's design phase, MCDOT with the assistance of the Montgomery County Arts and Humanities Commission conducted a nationwide search for a public artist to develop a concept for the artwork for Wheaton. The artist, Norie Sato has spent more than three years planning the art for Wheaton Town Square with herself and two local artists that are contributing artists for the sculpture.

The art was initially thought to be located in the SW corner of the Town Square near the Apex of the ramping system, near the stage. With the development of the art, and at the request of the

## Responses to GO/PHED Wheaton Project Questions October 20, 2020

Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC) and other community members the art location was restudied. The artist and landscape designer suggested two alternates for the artwork location based on the size and the desire for individuals to walk through the artwork and visibility from various locations. The consensus was the current location of the artwork.

The selected location has at least a 14' clearance between the artwork and the planting grate allowing for safe pedestrian movement and access for installation & maintenance.

To relocate the artwork, a new foundation and electrical conduit feed would need to be installed at new location. Performing the work now will also require selective demolition of the pavers and substructure for both the foundation and for electrical (from utility room to artwork), and then involve both the foundation concrete pour and conduit installation. The cost would vary based on the selected location and do not have the ability to accurately price a relocation until options are identified. The original foundation and electrical conduit cost approximately \$35,000, however it was coordinated prior to the installation of the pavers and their substructure of asphalt and concrete, any relocation would be substantially higher.

The artwork is currently on-schedule to be installed on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. MCDOT recommends that the artwork be installed as planned so that it could be experienced as designed and planned by the artist. Any potential relocation including identifying costs and funding could be considered if the community decides that the current location is inappropriate for the artwork.

*III. Safety, repaving and realignment of Grandview/Blueridge area promised by previous MCDOT Department Director at the beginning of the project. Specifically, MCDOT needs approval and funding to prioritize multiple safety and traffic improvements currently identified as associated with the new building. There is currently no funding for design or construction in any CIP or Operating budget, yet they were promised and are required immediately, especially as the building begins to fill with agency staffs. Additionally, MCDOT should engage SHA in discussions to resolve the University/Georgia northbound intersection instead of forcing drivers onto County roads.*

MCDOT proposes the addition of a through lane on Grandview Avenue that extends to Blueridge Avenue. Design for this effort will be completed by spring/summer 2021, with construction completion by 2022.

Additionally, MCDOT will install a rectangular rapid flashing pedestrian beacon (RRFB) near the Wheaton Office Building. The RRFB hybrid beacon is planned for installation in spring 2021.

*IV. Address pedestrian safety issues raised by Reddie Drive. There were supposed to be bollards that were able to be raised and lowered, as well as traffic restraints and markings for crossing Reddie. None of this has occurred.....presenting multiple problems including maintenance trucks access to plaza, loading/unloading issues, pedestrian safety, etc. The*

## Responses to GO/PHED Wheaton Project Questions October 20, 2020

*proposed temporary pre-Covid “plan” to close Reddie from Viers Mill to Triangle Lane should probably be reevaluated due to current real situations*

MCDOT will install a crosswalk and a pedestrian hybrid beacon along Reddie Drive at the Plaza crossing. The crosswalks will be installed in November 2020 and the pedestrian hybrid beacon will be completed in winter/spring 2021.

In anticipation of weekend closures along Reddie Drive between Grandview Avenue and Triangle Lane, MCDOT is in the process of purchasing a mobile barrier system to define areas closed to traffic. This barrier system will be obtained by February 2021.

MCDOT will begin an immediate evaluation of the maintenance truck access to the Wheaton Office Building, including issues associated with loading and unloading. MCDOT will work with the Wheaton Office Building staff to identify potential conflicts and times of day when these conflicts occur. A proposal for additional traffic treatments, if appropriate, will be developed for implementation by the end of November 2020.

As noted earlier, several intersection improvements were slated for the transportation network in concert with the intersection operational analysis completed in 2015. These locations are listed below, along with the agency responsible for design and construction.

### Veirs Mill Road and Mall Entrance, Weaving Barrier

MCDOT will install a monolithic curb to prevent weaving for vehicles traveling south on Georgia Avenue who are trying to access the Westfield Mall entrance along Veirs Mill Road located just north of Georgia Avenue. Construction of this curb is anticipated in spring/ summer 2021.

### Georgia Avenue and Blueridge Avenue, Signal Reconstruction

MCDOT proposes to add an additional left-turn lane along Blueridge Avenue from Grandview Avenue to Georgia Avenue, resulting in the need for reconstruction of the traffic signal at Georgia Avenue. Design for this effort will be completed by summer 2021, with construction completion by 2022.

### Georgia Avenue and Reddie Drive, Signal Modification

MCDOT initially planned pavement marking and operational changes that would require only minor physical modifications to the signal at this location. However, as a result of a structural failure during a wind event it was determined that for any modifications to be made a full signal reconstruction would be required. As MCDOT begins the process to design and construct a new signal we will continue to monitor pedestrian and vehicle movements along Reddie Drive to inform how the traffic signal should be rebuilt to provide maximum safety and mobility. An assessment of findings and a path forward for signal treatments will be completed by summer 2021.

***V. Place Signage on Plaza. Once the Plaza is turned over to the County, signage needs to be installed regarding skateboarding, sleeping on stage, etc.***

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- **What is the estimated cost to place signage as requested?**  
 MCDOT is working on costs in concert with WUD which is providing the number needed, size, signage designs. (WUD is following what has been done on Veterans Plaza in Silver Spring)
- **Will this request be included in the FY22 Urban Districts budget, or will it be addressed differently?**  
 There is an initial one-time cost for producing and installing signs which will be covered by MCDOT. Ongoing needs will be in the WUD budget.

VI. ***Programming support and physical plant maintenance needs to be continued and sustained in future Operating budgets, not just a one-time expense.***

- **What is the current annual estimate for these services?**  
 PROGRAMMING = \$122,000 for events + \$75 k for marketing.  
 Veterans Park = \$21,200  
 Plaza Maintenance /Repairs = \$130,000 for FY21 and FY22 request \$153,751
- **Will this request be included in the FY22 Urban Districts budget, or will it be addressed differently?**  
 It is in the FY21 budget and will be in the FY22 Budget

For FY21 due to cancellations of Plaza events, the delay of its opening and expenses associated with the fountain which were not needed, we had a cost savings. This is detailed below:

Summer Concerts	11,000
Reduce Banner Rotation	8,200
New Banners	24,000
Outdoor Movie	10,000
Fall/Winter Festival & Halloween Event	20,000
Fountain Operation	30,000
Clean Team – Unfunded Position	41,950*
Total	103,200

\* Not included in total.

- **Is there any additional background that Executive staff want to share regarding this item?**  
 For the FY 21 and FY22 budgets, additional staffing was requested to transition the Clean team from 5 to 6 days of coverage considering the projection of increased pedestrian traffic and usage; this was not funded. There was also a request for a

Responses to GO/PHED Wheaton Project Questions  
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Prog Manager I to support the administrative function. Total for staffing = \$275K. NOT in the budget

VII. **Adequate funding** of the Wheaton Urban District so they can manage and carry out the new responsibilities they have been assigned to “manage, maintain, program, market and support 2 new locations....specifically the new Marian Fryer Town Plaza and the Wheaton Urban Veterans Park.”

- **What is the current annual estimate for these services?**

- Maintenance \$152,751 increase of \$22,624
- 3 Clean Team FTE \$176,976
- 2 Safe Team FTE \$121,650
- 1 Program Manager I \$98,322

**Total \$419,572**

- **Is there any additional background that Executive staff want to share regarding this item?**

(SAME AS ABOVE): For the FY 21 and FY22 budgets, additional staffing was requested to transition the Clean team from 5 to 6 days of coverage considering the projection of increased pedestrian traffic and usage; this was not funded. There was also the inclusion of a Prog Manager I to support the administrative function. Total for staffing = \$275K. NOT in the budget

VIII. **Improve coordination and communication** between multiple County Agencies including M-NCPPC, DGS, MCDOT, Recreation, WUD, MC RSC, WUDAC, CUPF and the community.

- **What is the communication plan(s) between the noted entities to ensure smooth operations and service delivery?**

- For the last 18 months to 2 years, MCDOT has held monthly and then bi-monthly meetings with all the tenants of the building and including OMB, DGS, the developer and other pertinent agencies. These have been internal meetings to discuss construction issues.
- Keith Compton attended WUDAC meetings regularly...updates on the Wheaton project was on the agenda for the majority of meetings over the last 18 months.
- Now that construction is over, a new team of agencies will be formed to address operational issues in the building. There is also a building website hosted by MNCPPC.
- All agencies listed above have also and continue to communicate as needed.
- The wheatonproject.com website provided updates on a weekly basis on the construction.

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- The weekly updates were made available to Triangle businesses, principally with the assistance of LEDC
- Preliminary space planning for the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center is ongoing. Based on the developable area of the site, a two-story WCAC is likely, with housing above. The immediate challenge is identifying an interested private partner to develop the housing.
- Updates will be provided as they are available.

*IX. Ongoing community concern regarding the retail and day care spaces planned in the new building, which may remain vacant for years due to Covid, economic impact and immense build-out costs.*

- **Which entity is responsible for leasing the retail and day care space (we think it is M-NCPPC for day care and DGS for retail but want to check)?**  
DGS is handling the leasing of retail space.
- **What is the plan to attract tenants to the space?**  
DGS' broker has been seeking prospective lessors for some time. Efforts are ongoing but results are not robust due to uncertainties in the market.
- **Is there a rent/square foot that is required in order to fill the space?**  
Markets rents are around \$30/foot. Every tenant is different, so we try to avoid quoting rates unless they are in negotiations with us.
- **Is there any additional background that Executive staff want to share regarding this item?**  
Updates will be provided as they are available.

*X. This letter does not address the **promise of a Wheaton Cultural Arts Center**, combined with incubator, education and maker space as well as artist and residential housing. The initial Revitalization project included 2 buildings and we hope/expect to continue progress on this vision, recognizing the multiple conflicting priorities in the County....but thinking long term without losing momentum along the way.*

- **Is there any additional background that Executive staff want to share regarding this item?**  
Preliminary space planning for the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center is ongoing. Based on the developable area of the site, a two-story WCAC is likely, with housing above. The immediate challenge is identifying an interested private partner to develop the housing.