

A Tale of Two Communities

Community Involvement in Preservation Planning

New approaches that encourage citizen participation in planning processes are being used in most jurisdictions today.

Committed community volunteers can insure a project's success long after the professionals involved must turn to other assignments. Two examples of historic preservation planning projects in Prince George's County, Maryland, demonstrate how the initiative and commitment of residents and other volunteers can lead to shaping their community for the future.

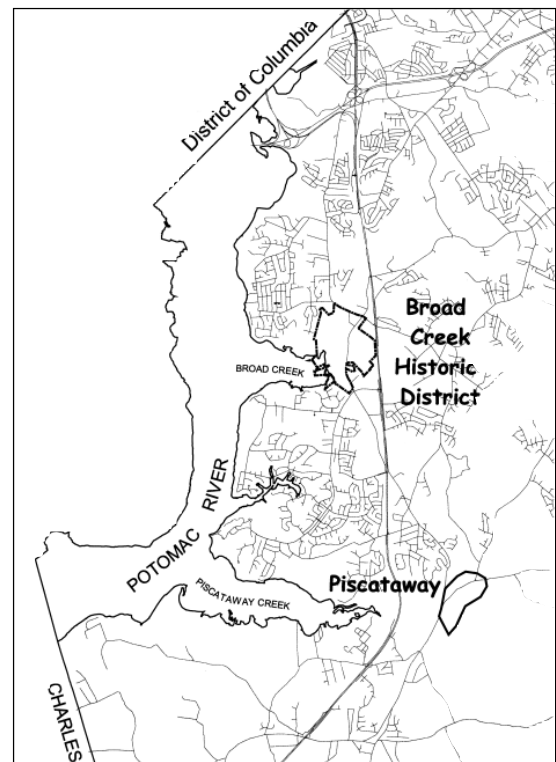
In rural Piscataway Village in southwestern Prince George's County, a small group of property owners and citizen activists recently engaged in such an activity. Situated near Piscataway Creek, a tributary of the Potomac River, Piscataway was prominently noted on early maps of Maryland, lying on the main road from Port Tobacco to Upper Marlboro. Piscataway was established as a port town by the Act for the Advancement of Trade of 1707. The passage of the Tobacco Inspection Act in 1747, designating Piscataway Town an official inspection point, resulted in more rapid growth. In the 19th century, as Piscataway Creek silted in, the tobacco inspection point was transferred farther downstream.

Today, the present village is clustered along Floral Park Road (the approximate route of the old road) and still retains its historic character. Two early taverns, a store, a church, and a number of dwellings remain from the 18th and 19th centuries, and the most recent buildings date from the first half of the 20th century. Until the 1980s, suburban growth had bypassed the village; however, in the early 1990s, a large residential development project adjoining the village was proposed. The approval of the project (called Villages at Piscataway) included provisions for a preservation fund, along with other protective

methods that were made binding through zoning conditions placed on the development project.

In anticipation of the projected new development, in 1990, the Piscataway Citizens Association requested the assistance of the county's planning agency, The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), to help develop a plan for the long-term protection of the village. The M-NCPPC Prince George's County Planning Department undertakes planning projects for towns and unincorporated areas through its budgeted work program. The Planning Department prepared *The Piscataway Village Rural Conservation Study* (July 1991) which documented the history of the village, defined its character, and proposed design concepts for any new construction, as well as strategies for the protection of open space. A key proposal in the

Portion of Prince George's County, Maryland, showing location of the two communities discussed in the article.



study was a bypass of the main road through the village, where houses are situated only a few feet from the existing two-lane rural road. The bypass proposal was later incorporated into the county's official master plan for the area, the *Subregion V Master Plan and Sectional Map Amendment*, September 1993.

As a result of the first study, the Piscataway Citizens Association testified at M-NCPPC budget hearings again. In response, the Planning Department undertook a second phase, developing a detailed set of design guidelines for maintenance, rehabilitation, additions, and site improvements for the 12 historic buildings in the village, as well as guidelines for new construction and street improvements (*Piscataway Village Rural Conservation Study - Part II: Village Design Guidelines*, February 1995). These design guidelines analyze the characteristics of the historic buildings and make recommendations for renovation and compatible new construction. The guidelines are voluntary because the village is not a local historic district. They are intended for use by property owners as a guide for the rehabilitation of their own houses, or for new construction on undeveloped lots. During both the first and second phases of the study, Planning Department staff met with residents to elicit their reactions to preliminary study proposals, and finally to present the study's findings and conclusions.

In 1995, as a third phase, the Piscataway Citizens Association requested the Planning Department's help once more, in working with the residents of the village and immediate area to develop a consensus about the community's physical qualities and design characteristics. For four months in the spring of 1995, a small group of property owners and citizen association representatives met with M-NCPPC staff to develop a vision for the tiny village. Seven visioning workshops were held; several workshops focused on identifying and analyzing the physical design features of the village. Topics included village integrity and character, infill development, streetscape elements, circulation patterns, open space, gateways, and landscape setting.

The community volunteers worked with the Planning Department's planner and landscape architect to shape the vision into a "mini master plan" for the future of their village. The study, titled *Piscataway Village Community Vision Process*, June 1995, included a landscape master plan, design guidelines for site improvements,

implementation strategies and phasing priorities. The group developed a consensus on the strategies and priorities; they also identified public and private sector agencies and organizations that would be responsible for taking the lead in carrying out the strategies, and finally, the group set a target time frame for their implementation. The proposed strategies and actions included both physical and planning actions, such as "Replace historic markers along Floral Park Road" or "Develop National Register nomination for the village" to "Preserve/rehabilitate historic structures in Piscataway" or "Pursue land acquisition to preserve a key piece of open space at the intersection of Livingston and Floral Park Roads." Implementation of some of the strategies depends on the use of the preservation fund which had been proffered as a part of the proposed nearby residential development, Villages at Piscataway.

After the conclusion of the study in 1995, the Piscataway Historic Preservation Group sent out a survey to all the residents to develop a consensus on signage for the village. The group organized a Historic Piscataway Festival Day, which was held for several years. However, after the key leader moved away from the area, the small group has not pursued the proposals in the study. Nevertheless, while they were active, the preservation advocates in the Piscataway Citizens Association were a political force, testifying at budget hearings and during public hearings on development proposals and on the Subregion V Master Plan. Moreover, many design concepts and protection proposals in all three studies await use when the impending development of the neighboring land (Villages at Piscataway) does occur.

In contrast to this experience, farther north in Prince George's County, off another inlet of the Potomac River, lies the rural historic district of Broad Creek. It, too, is situated along an old road, Livingston Road. The area is significant as the site of Aire, one of five towns established in 1706 by the Maryland Colonial Assembly, and in 1747 designated one of the official tobacco inspection stations. The settlement of Aire has long since disappeared, and today the historic district includes only four important 18th-century buildings, one of which, interestingly, was moved to the site in 1932 from the village of Piscataway. Other buildings date from the late-19th to mid-20th centuries, and much of the district is rural and undeveloped. However, in

Broad Creek, a small group consisting of residents, members of a garden club and of a church congregation, had worked together since the 1980s to support the area's designation as a county historic district.

In 1981, the area was proposed as a county historic district in Prince George's County's master plan for historic preservation, the *Historic Sites and Districts Plan*. In 1985, the county council designated the district as Prince George's County's first local historic district, and design guidelines for the district were adopted in 1987. The County Historic Preservation Commission appoints the members of the historic district's advisory committee, which includes representatives of the local church, garden club, and nearby civic associations, as well as of historic and non-historic properties within the district. The committee meets monthly to review and comment on building projects, subdivision referrals, and planning issues affecting the community.

In 1995, the Broad Creek Historic District Advisory Committee asked the Planning Department to undertake a study focused on maintaining the rural character of the historic district. As with the Piscataway studies, the Planning Department carried out this work through its budgeted program, which includes technical assistance to towns and unincorporated areas. A four-month community visioning process was undertaken; brainstorming techniques were used to identify issues of concern to the residents. Ideas generated by the Broad Creek Historic District Advisory Committee members and other residents were recorded and grouped into specific categories which were then broken down into related areas: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats/impacts. The project

landscape architect then analyzed the qualities of the streetscape, focusing on preserving the existing rural character of the historic district. Streetscape guidelines were suggested showing various alternatives for each design concept. The design guidelines include ideas on gateway entrances, fences and brick walls, traffic circles and/or speed humps, guardrails, and landscape plantings.

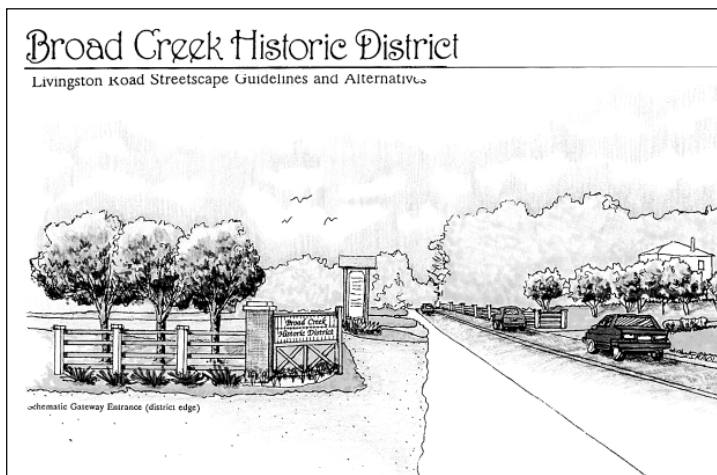
During the last phase of the project, the Advisory Committee identified implementation strategies, future actions, and funding sources with the overall goal of creating a sense of place for the Broad Creek Historic District. Strategies included enhancing visual characteristics, increasing public awareness of the district's rural character, reducing traffic volume and speed along Livingston Road, expanding the historic district boundaries and developing a master plan for the historic district. The resulting report, *Broad Creek Historic District: Livingston Road Streetscape Guidelines and Alternatives*, (M-NCPPC, 1995), documents the process and proposals.

Results and Commentary

In the five years since these studies were completed, the two communities have reacted in different ways. In Piscataway, the primary organizer (who was president of the Piscataway Historic Preservation Group) moved out of the state, and the community has not been actively pursuing any of its implementation proposals. The village has not yet coalesced in its desire to advocate a local or National Register historic district. To put some perspective on the lack of action in Piscataway, the neighboring development proposal, Villages at Piscataway (which would ensure that the bypass would be constructed and would establish a source of preservation funds for the village) has not gone forward.

In Broad Creek, however, the situation is quite different. The historic district was already in existence, having been established by Prince George's County Council action in 1985. The historic district advisory committee, which already meets on a regular basis, has taken the initiative to bring the district's needs to the attention of public officials. Since the publication of *Broad Creek Historic District: Livingston Road Streetscape Guidelines and Alternatives* in 1995, advisory committee members have worked to push the proposals forward in different ways. They have testified at government budget hearings and have hosted government officials for

Gateway entrance concept for Broad Creek Historic District.



walking tours of the historic district. Their work has brought results; in the last four years:

- The M-NCPPC has assisted with a brochure about the historic district .
- Speed humps were installed by the County public works department to calm traffic, a spin-off of the *Livingston Road Streetscape Guidelines*.
- The police department has monitored speeds on Livingston Road.
- Negotiations with a developer may lead to the proffer of “gateway” signage for the district, following the *Livingston Road Streetscape Guidelines*.
- The historic church has followed the guidelines to selectively clear woodland vegetation in order to provide a viewshed to its historic cemetery.
- A public utility has added plantings along its entrance road to enhance the views to Broad Creek, as proposed in the *Guidelines*.
- A conservancy has been incorporated to work with the National Park Service (NPS) in finding a new tenant for Harmony Hall, the historic property in the district owned by the NPS.

In the next fiscal year, the Planning Department, together with the Historic District Advisory Committee and other area stakeholders will produce a preservation plan for the district that updates the planning study completed before the district was designated in 1985. The study will result in an updated guide to the protection and appropriate development of the district.

These two examples demonstrate how preservation planning can help facilitate a community’s determination of its own future. The studies have contributed plans, standards, and guidelines, which can help to serve as a road map for the community’s future. Following such road maps will depend on continued vigilance and advocacy by each community, along with facilitation and professional advice from local planning agencies.

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Illustrations courtesy Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

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Partnership Planning Involving Partners in Meaningful Ways

In 1993, the battle of Chickamauga and the battles for Chattanooga were listed among the 20 most threatened Civil War sites in the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission report to Congress. This finding did not come as a surprise, given the rapid growth and urbanization of the greater Chattanooga and north Georgia region. In 1994, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park initiated a related lands study called the Chattanooga Area Civil War Sites Assessment. This three-year process has proven very effective in developing new relationships with partners and getting valuable information to local decisionmakers to encourage preservation of the 38 sites studied.

This preservation planning effort was successful because of how the partnership planning team was developed and the meaningful roles that every partner played. All 38 sites were visited and assessed by all members of the multidisciplinary core planning team and group recommendations to encourage preservation were collectively developed by team members. Site assessment visits were publicly announced and local preservation groups, developers, and interested citizens joined the planning team in the field and had opportunities for direct input. Planning partners brought new ideas and perspectives, knowledge of local zoning and economic development issues, related planning efforts, and acted as liaison to local decisionmakers.