

# The Community's City Center Plan Hagerstown, MD Physical Analysis



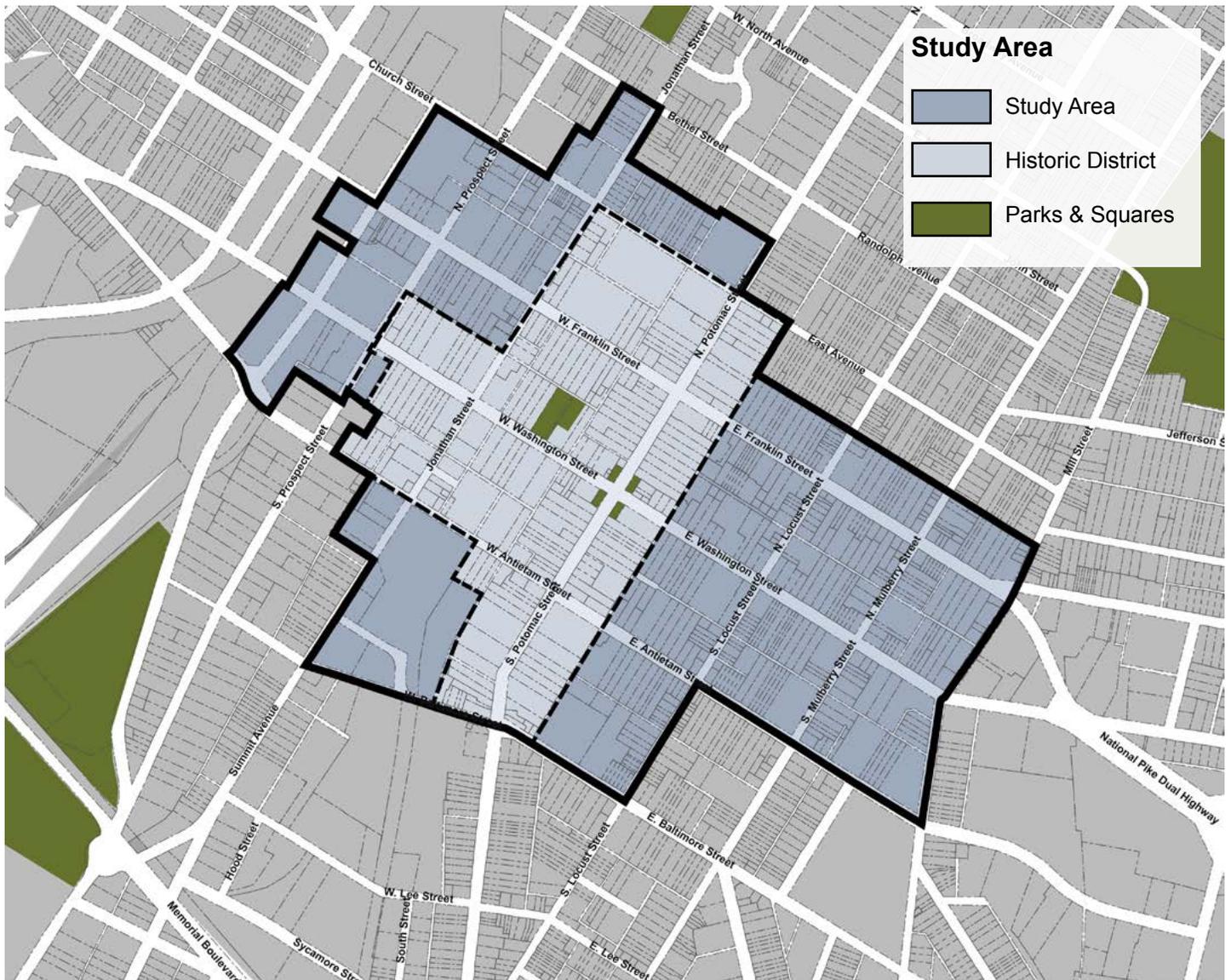
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## Project Summary

The existing physical conditions of Hagerstown will influence and inform the Sustainable Community Plan. This document presents both a narrative and a graphic record of the physical conditions of the study area as well as assumptions and conclusions that may be used in moving the project forward.

The Report is divided into the following sections:

- Project Summary - A Summary of the report and project area
- Assets & Opportunities - A description of the physical infrastructure including buildings and vacant and marginally used parcels
- Parks & Civic Space - An analysis of the park spaces throughout the city and locations in the city that may be underserved
- Connections - A study of the surrounding residential neighborhoods and how people enter the center of town
- Zoning - A brief analysis of the existing zoning code

All mapping information was taken from City documentation including the 2008 Comprehensive Plan. Some information presented in the maps may be out of date.

## Project Area Description

The project area is located in the center of Hagerstown. In the map above, the study area is the area marked in blue, including the Historic District marked by the lighter blue shade. The study area can be broken into three distinct areas; The Historic District, the area west of the Historic District and the area east of the Historic District. Each area is unified by its own distinct development pattern; as described below.

### Historic District

The Historic District is the tallest and most dense area of the city. In this area, it is common for buildings to front against the sidewalk and to each of the side property lines so that one building touches another. Building height in the area may be as low as two to three stories, but some buildings are seven or more stories tall. As the name implies, the most significant feature about the buildings within this area is the historic charm and character to this district.

Besides the buildings within this zone, the public spaces are also important to mention. Many of the sidewalks within the Historic District are wider than other section of the study area and the rest of town. The sidewalks in the Historic District are also lined with trees. All of the parks and civic spaces that are located in the study area are located in the Historic District.

### West of the Historic District

This area of the city is much less dense than the Historic District. Here there are many surface parking lots serving the scattered industrial and commercial single use properties. While there are a few scattered residential buildings in this area, residential development is the exception rather than the rule. Because of the varied development type and density, it feels much less like a coherent neighborhood than the Historic District.

### East of the Historic District

East of the Historic District is a primarily residential neighborhood. The most common building type are townhouses where at least one side of the house shares a wall with its neighbor. The houses are typically two to three stories tall with no setback along the front and stoops that extend into the sidewalk. The buildings within this area are of various conditions. Some are well kept, while others are in need of repair.



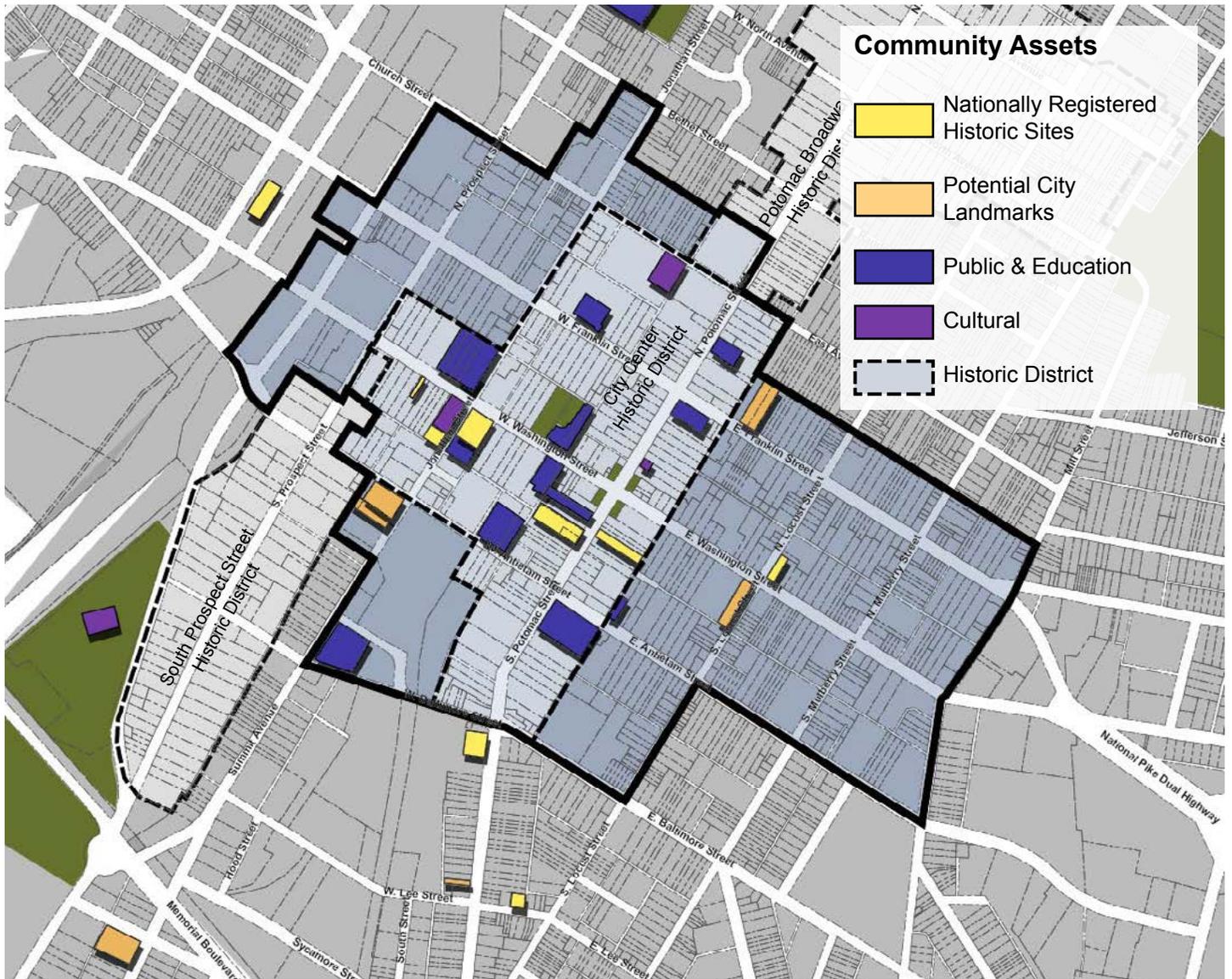
Historic District



West Side of Study Area



East Washington St.



## Assets & Opportunities

The study area has many assets including public, cultural and historic buildings as well as many vacancies that while currently may be a blighting influence may be thought of as future opportunity.

The map above illustrates the current assets in the study area. These assets include the Nationally Registered Historic Sites, potential city landmarks as described from the Comprehensive Plan, public buildings including schools, libraries and government buildings and cultural buildings including theaters, the Discovery Center, the visitors center and the farmers market. While it is not surprising that the Historic District would contain many of these assets, it is noteworthy that it contains nearly all of these assets and that the East and West side of the study area contain so few. Parks should also be considered assets and will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

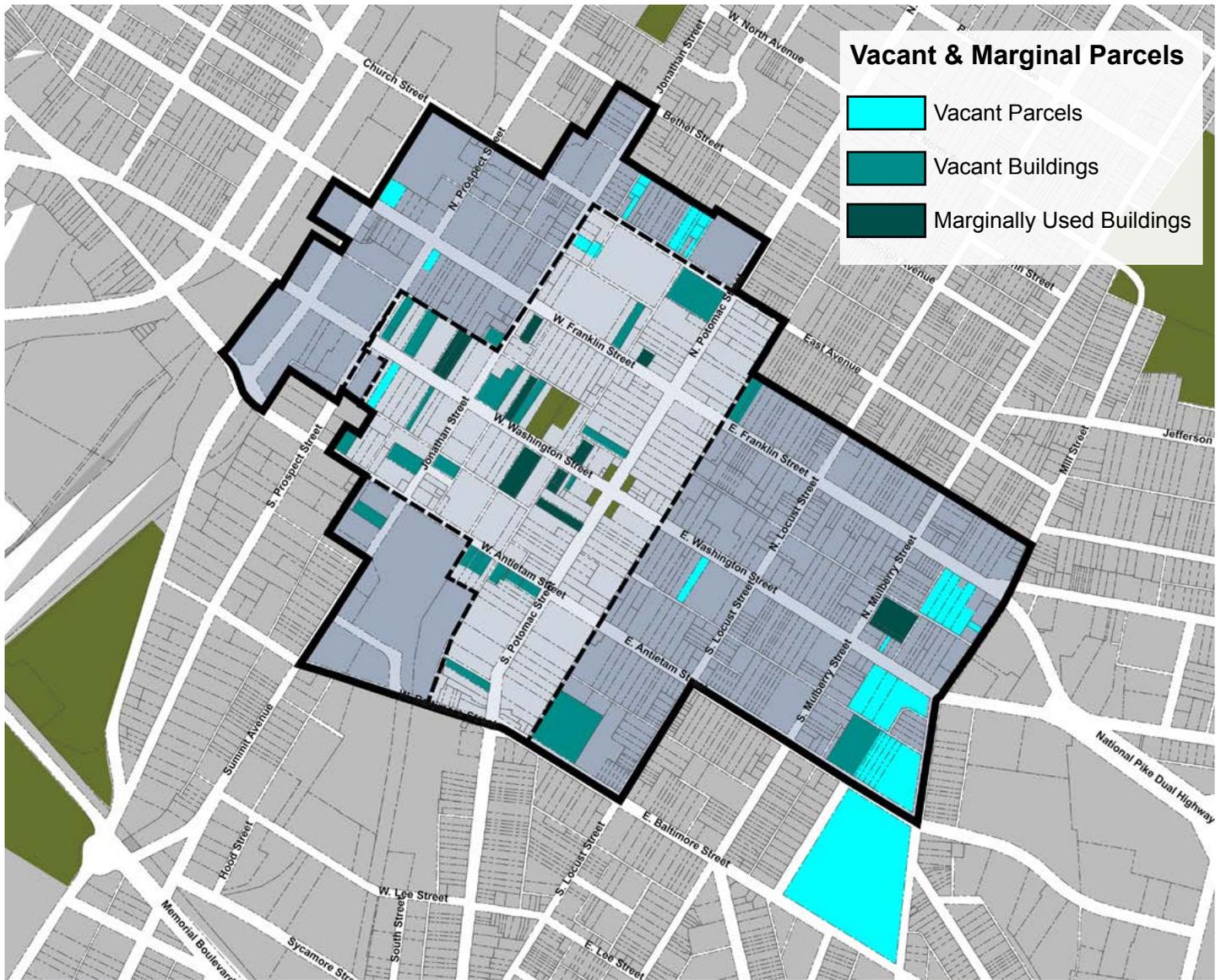
On the other hand, vacant and marginally used properties can detract from the vitality of Hagerstown. These parcels may feel unsafe, look unpleasant and do not contribute to creating a sustainable community.



Colonial Theater



City Hall



While vacant and marginally used properties may have these drawbacks, they can also be seen as opportunities for future development. Vacant and marginally utilized buildings can be renovated and repurposed, supporting the goals of the economic plan, and vacant lots can be transformed into new development or park space.

Similar to the assets, most of the vacant and marginally utilized parcels fall within the Historic District. This is indicative of the fact that many small cities have had similar problems retaining full usage within their core when people and commercial activity moved to surrounding suburbs.

The former Washington County Hospital site is a large vacant site located on the southeast corner of the study area. The Hospital has been demolished, leaving a large vacant lot. The vacant building marked in this location is the parking garage, which a structural analysis may show can be re-used to support a fairly dense development or can be taken down entirely. While the Hospital's departure may have left a hole in the city, it can be re-framed as an opportunity.



Aerial Downtown Historic District

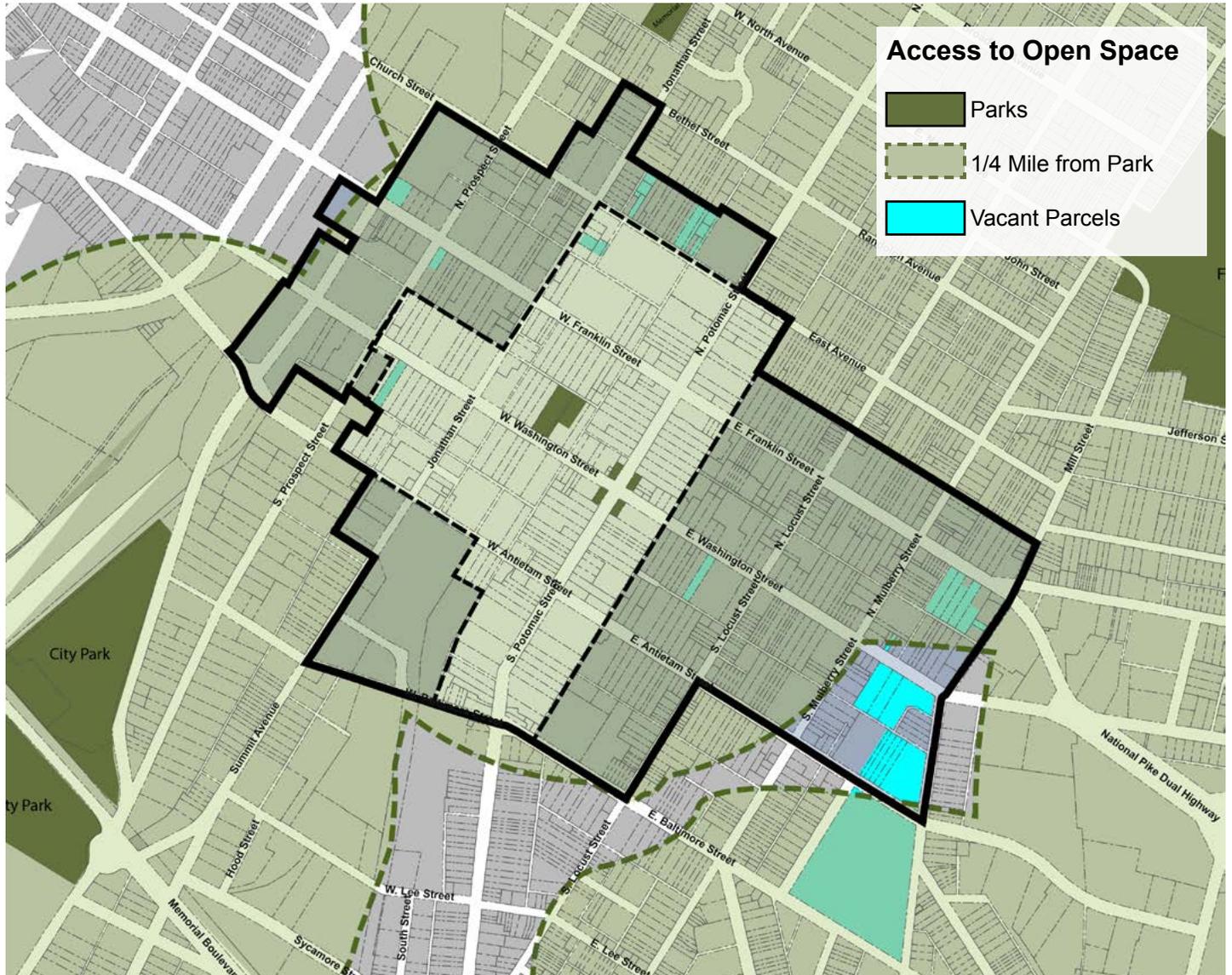


Former Hospital

## Assets & Opportunities Continued

While technically not a vacant lot or a marginally used building, surface parking lots can also be seen as potential development opportunities. These surface parking lots should be viewed as pad ready sites for new development which allow for flexible design and construction but do not require removal of elements that contribute to the historic character which makes the downtown unique. If surface parking can be acquired, it can often support new and denser development. Because the west side of the study area has abundant surface parking, there may be opportunity for new development in this location of the study area. Ultimately, successful new development may improve the market so that historic buildings become more viable to re-purpose.

## Parks & Civic Space



Hagerstown is fortunate in that it has some wonderful and well placed park space throughout the entire city. Within the study area is the Public Square that provides beautiful sunlight and landscaping at the center of town. The Public Square is also a place that can accommodate outdoor seating for cafes and restaurants, providing a place to sit for people passing by and the display of art. The Square appears to be well maintained and is still a striking asset.

While the Public Square is beautiful, it is small and affected by heavy vehicular traffic. University Plaza found just west of the Public Square along Washington Street is a larger and programmable open space. Just outside of the study area are a couple of other important parks. City Park, located to the southwest of the study area is rated one of the most beautiful parks in America and is home to the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts. Fairground Park to the northeast is a large open space that supports sport related activity and other civic events such as the Fourth of July fireworks.

Even with these parks and public spaces, some areas of Hagerstown may be underserved by park space. In the above diagram, a line has been drawn  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile away from every park in Hagerstown;  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile corresponds to the approximate distance an average person can walk in five minutes. The marked green zone around the parks then represents the areas of the city that are less than a five minute walk from a park. Most of the study area is within a five minute walk of a park, with the exception of a portion on the southeast corner. However, this area is also the same area of the city that has an abundance of vacant land left behind from the hospital. If additional park space is desired, some of this land can become park space that could support the local community as well as enhance the opportunity for new development on the remainder of the vacant parcels.



Public Square



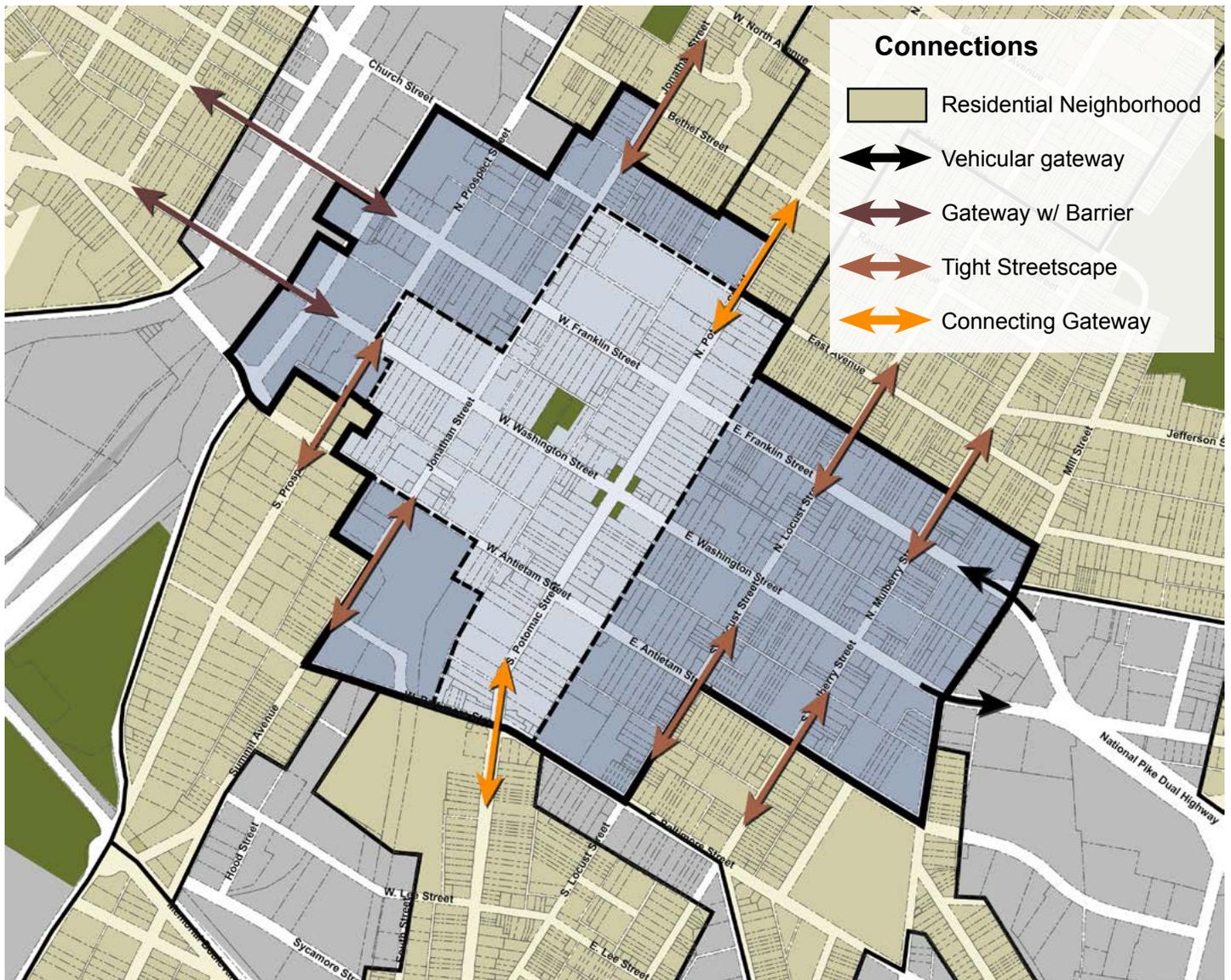
University Plaza



City Park



Fairground Park



## Connections

A community like the center of Hagerstown can thrive if there are enough people to support the commercial and cultural activity, and there are several strategies to attain this critical mass. One strategy is to support mixed use development that has an active ground floor with residential or offices above. The people who live and work about the ground floor will support the retail activity below. Another strategy is to encourage people to come into the center of town from the surrounding neighborhoods or from further locations. The map above begins to show the connections between the study area and the surrounding neighborhoods and evaluates their potential for bringing people into the center of Hagerstown.

People entering the center of Hagerstown come through one of four kinds of “gateways”. The first are the gateways that are vehicular only. National Pike, southeast of the study area, becomes Franklin Street at it comes into the center of town. This gateway is rather non-descript and Dual Highway is not suitable to pedestrians. Since traffic is one-way, Franklin St. is the gateway while Washington St. is the exit.

The northwest edge of the study area is bordered by industry, the rail road, and a strip mall. While it is easier to walk from the neighborhoods from the west than it is from the east, these uses still present an extended barrier to bringing people into the center of Hagerstown. Making these types of gateways more appealing is difficult, but strategies such as public art and lighting under the rail bridge and encouraging denser mixed use development around the edges may help improve the connections from this side of the study area.

The northeast and southwest edges of the study area are directly bordered by residential neighborhoods and present the best opportunity to bring people in from the immediate community. These streets that run across the study area in this direction could allow for people to walk or drive into the center of Hagerstown. However, on many streets the sidewalks are narrow, and the entry stoops that protrude out into the sidewalk make them even narrower. Without sufficient room between a moving vehicle and a pedestrian, the walk along these sidewalks can feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, many of the homes that line these connections have “No Trespassing” or other defensive signs that make these gateways even more uncomfortable. Façade improvements and restrictions on signage may help these connections, but full streetscape improvements, including widening the sidewalk, would go a long way to making these neighborhood connections and gateways feel more comfortable.

Potomac Street is the exception to the rule for the north/south gateways. Potomac Street is wider than most of the other streets including the sidewalks which is much more welcoming. There are often street trees along Potomac Street and parts have a beautiful brick paving. While a streetscape plan that formalizes tree pit design, street furniture and paving could increase the attractiveness of Potomac Street, it is by far the most important and interesting connection between the center of Hagerstown and the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

It is also important to consider how people who live and work within the study area connect to amenities outside the study area. As described in the previous section, City Park and Fairground Park are important open spaces for the City, and City Park contains the significant regional cultural asset of the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts. These assets are important open spaces for the City and should be accessible from within the study area. The connections from the study area to these parks would be through the same streets that connect surrounding neighborhoods to the study area. While these parks are not far from the study area, the streets that connect them often have very constrained sidewalks and defensive signage that discourages walking to these amenities.



East Franklin St.



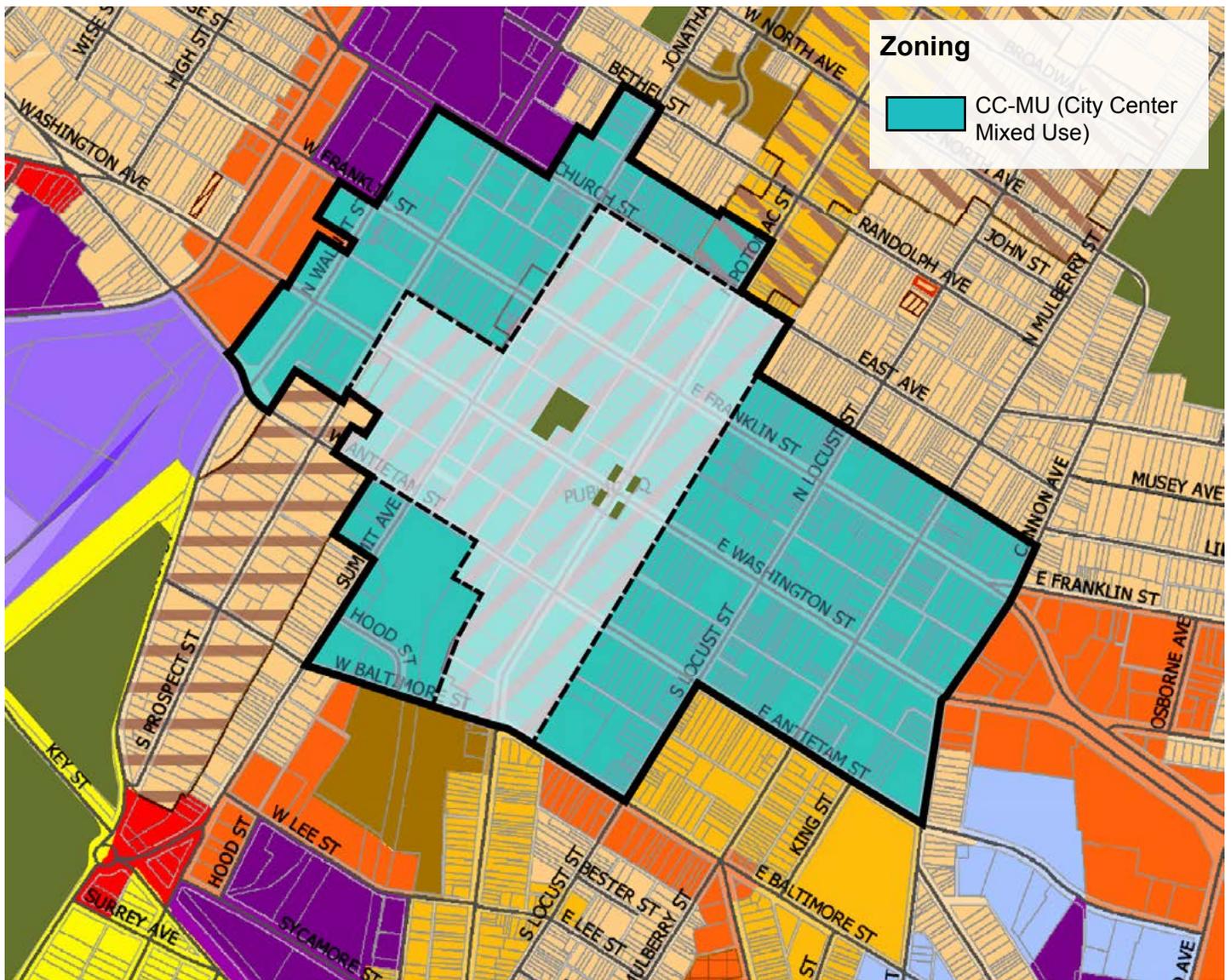
Locust St approaching East Franklin St.



South Potomac Street



Washington County Museum of Fine Arts



## Zoning

The entire study area is in the City Center Mixed use (CC-MU) district, with an overlay for the Historic District. As an overview, this district does allow for dense mixed use development. The code has a maximum height of seven stories, but twelve stories are allowed with a special expectation. Setbacks are not required in this zoning district, which further helps to increase density and walkability.

It should be noted that the special exception for height will likely be need to obtain development of over five stories. This is because the building code sets limitations on the height of wood frame construction; yet wood frame construction is cheaper than alternative construction methods such as steel and concrete. Often it does not make fiscal sense to build a six or seven story building because the increase in revenue over a five story building is not offset by the extra construction costs associated with the requirement to build in steel or concrete. Building taller than six or seven stories will further increase revenue by increasing the amount of sale-able or leas-able space. At a certain threshold, this increase in revenue from a taller building will more than offset the rise in construction costs.

The zoning code also provides design standards that help set the stage for the kind of development desired. These design standards could be expanded, clarified and made more explicit if the City desires more control. More explicit design standards could be incorporated into the zoning code, in which case all development would need to follow the standards or the City could choose to have more explicit design standards incorporated into RFP's for development it initiates. An RFP for a development project can require design standards over and above those set out in the zoning code. In this case, both the standards in the zoning code and those more specific to the RFP would need to be followed.

Determining the proper design standards for the study area is beyond an existing conditions analysis. However, an example of what a more explicit design standard would look like is as follows. Currently the zoning code simply says that building facades should be modulated. Alternatively, the code could be more specific and say that new buildings with walls over "x" feet long should be modulated by "y" feet. It can also be required that the internal program be reflected in this articulation, so that the modulation is not random but creates a coherent building. Similarly, base height, cornice height, amount of glazing on the facade, requirements for front doors on the street and other criteria can specifically and numerically be included into the code or RFP's. Furthermore, graphic diagrams are often included with design standards which clarify the intent of the standards so that they are more easily understood and implemented.

Parking requirements may be the most problematic part of the zoning code in supporting mixed-use development. The number of parking spaces required tends to be relatively high, but not extraordinarily so. Furthermore, there is a requirement for RV parking once a development reaches a certain size. The code itself seems to recognize the parking requirements are too strict for this district as it allows for up to a 50% reduction in the required parking with a study by a traffic engineer supporting this reduction. Parking and economic goals may be more easily met if parking requirements within this district are specified independently and shared parking allocations are explicitly embedded into the code. In this alternative approach, the appropriate amount of parking will be understood upfront without the need for a traffic and parking study or special exceptions. If the code required the right amount of parking for this area as of right, it would be less of a barrier for people who wanted to invest in the center of town. Further review would need to be conducted to determine what the appropriate amount of parking and effective shared parking ratios are for the study area.

