

Image Credit: Fairfax County
Note: Revised with new photograph October, 2026

1 INTRODUCTION

1A Structure of the Guidelines

1B Using these Guidelines

1C Coordination with Outside Agencies

1D Maintenance Responsibility

1E Key Values and Priorities

1F By-right Development

INTRODUCTION

The practice of urban design addresses the physical features that define the character of streets, public spaces, neighborhoods and communities. Urban design is used to align the desired scale and character of development with the social, economic and aesthetic values of a community.

Fairfax County is committed to achieving a high standard of urban design and architectural quality in its Commercial Revitalization Districts (CRDs) and Commercial Revitalization Areas (CRAs). Urban Design Guidelines for these areas are a means to provide best practices and detailed design suggestions for new development, redevelopment and capital projects to ensure integration with their surroundings, functionality, compatible aesthetics, community vitality, and improved livability of an area.

Purpose of these Guidelines

The Volume I Urban Design Guidelines for Fairfax County Commercial Revitalization Districts and Areas (Guidelines) are intended to guide the appearance, arrangement and function of the built environment. The Guidelines serve as a companion document to the *Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan (Plan)* by elaborating upon the Plan's more general recommendations. The Guidelines further articulate the intent, objectives and performance recommendations contained in the Plan by conveying design ideas in greater detail, especially with regard to street and streetscape design, building form and design, and site features, including interim development conditions.

As stated in the *Countywide Strategic Plan*, flexibility and agility in zoning and development review is necessary to respond to evolving development trends and technologies. The content in this document is non-regulatory and is not meant to apply like a "one size fits all" requirement. The Guidelines offer design guidance with flexibility in how or whether a design element or recommendation is realized.

The Guidelines are intended to:

- provide a common language with which to discuss how to create developments that contribute to an attractive, vibrant and livable area;
- offer clarity on important aspects to consider in the design of developments;

1A STRUCTURE OF THESE GUIDELINES

- help facilitate the dialogue that occurs among stakeholders in the development review process;
- provide solutions that balance the desire for a high-quality environment with the need for developments to be economically feasible;
- foster compatible development that responds to the surrounding context; and,
- encourage the design of communities of the highest quality, where each building and public space contributes positively to the overall character of the area.

The Urban Design Guidelines are comprised of two documents:

- **Volume I: Urban Design Guidelines for Fairfax County Commercial Revitalization Districts and Areas** describes urban design principles and best practices.
- **Volume II: District Design Guidelines** contains urban design guidelines for the CRDs and CRAs that are tailored specifically to the individual area.

Thus, the Guidelines applicable to each CRD or CRA include not only the common design language articulated in Volume I, but also the distinct, district-specific guidelines included in Volume II.

Volume I, Chapter 1 includes the purpose and use of the document. Chapters 2 through 6 contain urban design principles and strategies addressing specific topics including street and streetscape design (Chapter 2), parks and open space design (Chapter 3), building design (Chapter 4), parking and access (Chapter 5), and additional placemaking elements, such as public signage, public art and water features (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 provides guidance on interim development conditions. An accompanying Appendix contains additional details, a toolbox of sustainable design strategies, and reference materials. Chapters 2 through 6 are organized in the following manner:

- **Intent:** An introduction to each chapter describes the overarching purpose and intent of the chapter.
- **Topical Sections:** Each chapter is divided into sections that address a specific subject matter.
- **Design Principles:** The topical sections include design principles defining the goals and general urban design conditions necessary to achieve desired outcomes.
- **Design Strategies:** Each topical section also provides specific design strategies which, in some instances, include suggested materials and dimensional requirements for implementing the design principles.

Within the topical sections, local and national references are offered for additional information. Additional specifications—a tree plant list and planting details—are included in the Appendix, along with a toolbox of sustainable design strategies. References are hyperlinked within each section. The complete listing of all references and their web addresses is located in the Appendix.

1B USING THESE GUIDELINES

The Guidelines apply to development proposals for all properties located within the boundaries of the CRDs and CRAs. They may be appropriate to apply to other select mixed-use centers including Suburban Centers, Community Business Centers (CBCs), and Transit Station Areas (TSAs) when referenced in the Comprehensive Plan. They are intended for use by citizens, developers, landowners, designers, Fairfax County staff, the Fairfax County Planning Commission, and the Board of Supervisors when either proposing, designing or reviewing development proposals.

Where applicable, the two volumes of the Guidelines should be used together to inform strategic design decisions in planning for redevelopment, land use, transportation, and infrastructure. There may be instances where guidance provided in Volume II of the Guidelines may elaborate upon or contradict material provided in Volume I. In such instances, the guidance in Volume II supersedes the guidance in Volume I. Some areas will not have a Volume II.

The Guidelines are not a substitute for the codes and ordinance provisions associated with the development review process. The Guidelines are meant to offer design guidance only. There is flexibility in how a design element may be realized, provided the design intent can be achieved. As such, the Guidelines are not prescriptive; architectural style, specific street furnishings, plant species, or exact paver types are not dictated. Rather, the Guidelines present a palette of design options that provide flexibility and allow for innovation. Designers and property owners are encouraged to use the Guidelines as a frame of reference when making specific design decisions as long as the selections meet the intent laid out in the Guidelines.

FLEXIBILITY

There will be instances where the urban design and streetscape recommendations outlined in the Plan and these Guidelines cannot be accommodated in the manner envisioned, even with reasonable adjustment and flexibility. They may include pre-existing site constraints, infill or building expansion constraints, or needed modifications to the streetscape guidance to conform to applicable County and/or Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) requirements. In these cases, variations may be permitted on a case-by-case basis using the following criteria:

- The inability to conform to the recommendations is demonstrated through written and/or graphic evidence; and,
- Deviations are as minimal as possible; and,
- Modifications still meet the intent of the Plan and the Guidelines.

FUTURE AMENDMENTS

As places develop and evolve, the Guidelines may need amendments to respond to changing conditions. In addition, new technologies, maintenance challenges, and innovations may



Chapel Hill, NC

provide opportunities for different design strategies, new products, materials, etc., which should be reflected in updated versions of these Guidelines.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE PUBLIC FACILITIES MANUAL

The Guidelines may differ from the requirements set forth in the Fairfax County Public Facility Manual (PFM) based upon the unique characteristics of the urban environment. The treatments and designs described in the District Guidelines may be substituted for details found in the PFM. Criteria for using them as an alternative to the PFM is found in PFM Sec. 2-1100 Applicability of the Urban Design Guidelines.

LEFT
The Guidelines encourage the use of durable, renewable materials in public spaces such as this LEED-ND project
Image Credit: Peyton Chung



Liverpool, England

BOTTOM
The Guidelines provide recommendations to improve the public realm, including streetscape areas such as this example from England
Image Credit: ADP Architecture

1C COORDINATION WITH OUTSIDE AGENCIES

The potential exists for conflicts to occur between utilities and pedestrian features, particularly in the public right-of-way. To avoid such conflicts, utility easements, utility boxes, and access to equipment require special consideration in the design process. Dominion Energy, Washington Gas, Fairfax Water, communications providers, and other utility companies should be consulted early in the design process. On-going planning and coordination among project designers, the County and the various utility providers is essential to ensure that utilities and utility equipment are located appropriately.

Coordination with VDOT is critical for projects that include the installation of improvements within its right-of-way. VDOT requires a permit for any installation proposed within its right-of-way, including trees, planting beds, paving, and street furniture. Developers may construct on-street parking, landscape panels, sidewalks, and sometimes bicycle facilities that border travel lanes, in the right-of-way and which are subject to VDOT's inspection and acceptance into its secondary road system.

RIGHT
The development process requires early and ongoing coordination with Fairfax County, VDOT, and a range of utility providers, including Fairfax Water, Washington Gas, and Dominion Energy

1D MAINTENANCE RESPONSIBILITY

Establishing maintenance responsibility and expectations is critical to the long-term success of streetscapes and pathways. Depending on the type of infrastructure, maintenance may be the responsibility of the property owner, Fairfax County, VDOT, or utilities such as Dominion Energy.

Unless otherwise specified, it is preferred that maintenance of all facilities that are proffered and constructed as part of a new development be maintained by the property owner in perpetuity. This includes features within the right-of-way. The Building Zone, located outside of the right-of-way, should be privately owned and maintained.

ROADWAYS AND STREETSCAPES

VDOT classifies streetscapes within its right-of-way as either standard or non-standard. Standard streetscapes include grass, some landscaping, and concrete sidewalks. Non-standard streetscapes are those that deviate from the standard by incorporating additional components or unique materials such as brick pavers, street trees, street furnishings, utility easements required for new installations of electric distribution duct-banks and manholes, and other special features.

VDOT requires that all non-standard streetscapes be maintained by the property owner, and in instances where non-standard hardscape or furnishings is proposed, a maintenance bond is required. In these instances, the property owner must enter into a 'Covenant of Perpetual Maintenance' with VDOT obligating the property owner to on-going maintenance of the streetscape.

Did you Know? In CRDs, Fairfax County's Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) operates a program for maintenance of non-standard features including portions of the streetscape, gateway signs, and certain public spaces, much of which is located within the right-of-way. Additional routine maintenance services such as street sweeping, trash removal, remediation of trip hazards, landscaping, and crack weed spraying are also provided.

OVERHEAD UTILITIES IN THE RIGHT-OF-WAY

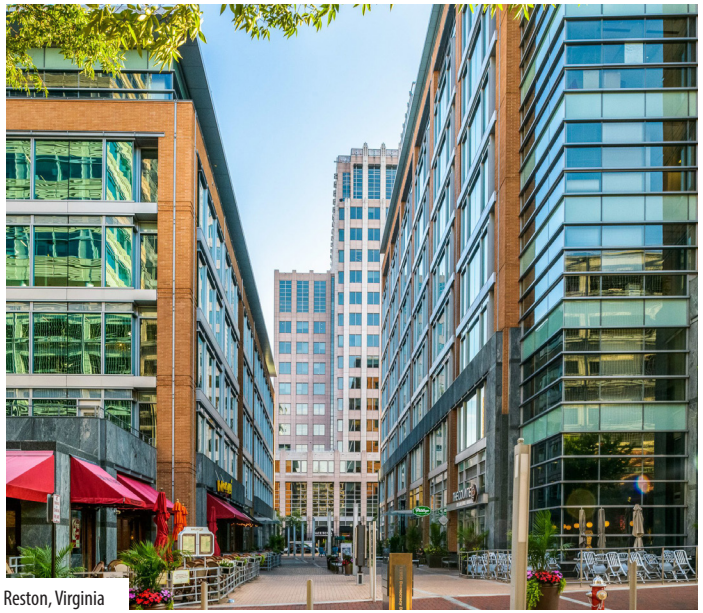
In many instances, the Comprehensive Plan recommends that overhead utility lines be buried in duct-banks and decorative streetlights be installed. Dominion Energy requires easements over the duct-banks and associated manholes or vaults which are typically located under the sidewalk. VDOT will not accept easements in its road system; therefore, maintenance of these encumbered spaces is the obligation of the property owner.

During the rezoning process, developers should account for the required dimensions of duct-banks and manholes and ensure maintenance responsibility is articulated. See Chapter 2 for more information about utility locations in the streetscape.



McLean, Virginia

TOP
Non-standard streetscape within McLean CBC
Image Credit: Fairfax County



Reston, Virginia

BOTTOM
Pedestrian pathway at Reston Town Center Development
Image Credit: Boston Properties

STREETLIGHTS

Chapter 7-0800 of the PFM outlines requirements for new developments to install street lighting. PFM Section 7-0804 states that streetlights are limited to three standard fixture styles. However, styles recommended in the Urban Design Guidelines are permitted as alternates in accordance with Section 2-1100. The LED streetlight models referenced in the Guidelines are listed in Dominion Energy's standard streetlight catalog or available as part of Dominion Energy's Schedule 153. Using Dominion-approved fixtures ensures that the county will pay for monthly operating costs and that Dominion Energy will maintain the fixtures, including the replacement of damaged or non-working fixtures. Where non-standard fixtures are installed, private operation and maintenance is required.

PEDESTRIAN PATHWAYS (OUTSIDE OF THE RIGHT-OF-WAY)

Off-street pedestrian pathways are an important part of the pedestrian circulation system in many areas. They often include paving, lighting, furnishings, trees, landscaping, and other enhancements. Pathways may be planned entirely within a new development or may connect across multiple developments. In either instance, proffered pathways must stipulate who is responsible for maintaining the pathway surface and any landscaping or other special features and operating light fixtures. Public access easements should be recorded for pedestrian pathways that are intended for public use. Easements should extend beyond the pathway to include adjacent publicly accessible areas.

1E KEY VALUES AND PRIORITIES

The Guidelines advance four key values that reflect County priorities. These provide an underlying framework that is reflected in the design principles and strategies articulated in the remainder of this document.

SOCIAL EQUITY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

Design decisions affecting the built and natural environment should consider the impacts to social equity and community health. Efforts should focus on creating accessible spaces that support a high quality of life. Additional efforts include promoting employment opportunities, access to housing, and amenities and services available to people of all backgrounds and abilities. CRDs, CRAs and other mixed-use activity centers are uniquely positioned to support active living and provide opportunities for growth and mobility because of their higher level of transit accessibility, access to jobs and services, range of housing types and prices, and recreational opportunities.

In 2017, the One Fairfax Policy was adopted jointly by the Board of Supervisors, the School Board, and the Park Authority. This policy established the framework that is used to consider equity in decision-making in both the County government and the school system. These Guidelines incorporate the principles of One Fairfax, particularly as they relate to improvements to multimodal connectivity, parks and open spaces. Development proposals should embrace the One Fairfax policy by contributing to the creation of equitable places.







TOP LEFT
Sustainable practices, such as ensuring that new trees are planted with sufficient root space to promote sustained long term growth, are a key aspect of these Guidelines
Image Credit: Silva Cell

BOTTOM LEFT
Stakeholders participating in development of design concepts for the vision for a community
Image Credit: Fairfax County

BOTTOM RIGHT
One Fairfax is a policy established to consider equity as part of the County's decision-making process
Image Credit: Fairfax County

SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Fairfax County is committed to achieving a sustainable and resilient community. In 2017, the Board of Supervisors updated its Environmental Vision which includes, "an overarching vision to attain a quality environment that provides for a high quality of life and is sustainable for future generations. These aspects of a quality environment are essential for everyone living and working in Fairfax County. No matter what income, age, gender, ethnicity, or address, everyone has a need and right to breathe clean air, to drink clean water, and to live and work in a quality environment."



New York, NY

BOTTOM
Streetscape with low-maintenance plantings that also function as bioretention facility, capturing runoff from the adjacent non-porous surfaces while reducing urban heat island effect and increasing native pollinators
Image Credit: Yuka Yoneda, Inhabitat

New developments should contribute to this County vision. This can take many forms, such as creating a walkable and bikeable environment; supporting and increasing public transit options; achieving compact development; protecting and increasing green space, green infrastructure, and tree canopy; promoting the design and construction of green buildings, including integrating water and energy efficiency measures and on-site renewable energy production; protecting habitat and natural resources; reducing and recycling waste; creating climate-ready and adaptable communities with resilient design; and, integrating existing architecturally and culturally significant themes and buildings into new development.

There are many resources that elaborate on the County's sustainability and resilience goals and that provide specific guidance for achieving the desired outcomes. These include: the Community-wide Energy and Climate Action Plan (CECAP), the Resilient Fairfax Plan, the Operational Energy Strategy; the Sustainable Development Policy for Capital Projects, the Environment Section of the Policy Plan of the Comprehensive Plan, and the Heritage Resources Section of the Policy Plan, among others.

MAINTENANCE AND DURABILITY

An urban environment that is low-maintenance and consists of durable materials that weather and age well over time is important in achieving a sustainable public realm. Public spaces should accommodate changing demands, as the use of these spaces evolves over time. The use of high quality and wear-resistant materials for streetscape surfaces should be a priority for all projects.

The long-term maintenance of sidewalks, trees, landscaping, paving, furnishings, lighting, park facilities, and other components of the public realm is a chief consideration of these Guidelines. Specifications were selected based in part on the anticipated level of durability and maintenance.



San Francisco, CA

SMART CITY

Smart City technologies utilize electronic data collection to supply information which is used to manage assets and resources efficiently. These technologies improve sustainability, encourage economic development, and enhance quality of life factors for people living and working in such areas. Collected data can be used to monitor and manage transportation systems; power and water supply; waste management; law enforcement; and systems as diverse as schools, hospitals, and other community services. Examples of this technology that relate to these Guidelines include, but are not limited to, the incorporation of wifi services into benches, programmable street lighting, smart trash bins that monitor capacity, and transit facilities that provide real-time information for passengers. Smart City features are rapidly evolving; developments should incorporate these evolving technologies where feasible.



Minneapolis, MN

LEFT
Scored, poured-in-place concrete sidewalks provide a consistent, durable, and low-maintenance surface most suitable for persons with disabilities and strollers
Image Credit: Prado Group

RIGHT
Bus stop with real-time information - an example of smart city technology
Image Credit: NACTO

1F BY-RIGHT DEVELOPMENT

By-right developments are those that conform to the property's zoning regulations and can be built without a rezoning, special exception, special permit, or variance process. While by-right development does not require the approvals of a rezoning application, it is strongly advised that anyone proposing a by-right development consult these Guidelines and implement their recommendations to the extent feasible. Feasibility is often dependent on site-specific factors such as the size of the proposed development and the proposed uses. As always, there is flexibility in achieving the specific objectives of the Guidelines. *(See Graphic 1: By-Right Development)*.

All by-right development projects should address the following:

1. **Comprehensive Plan Recommendations:** include components of the Comprehensive Plan's ultimate condition wherever feasible and facilitate completion of long-term planning objectives such as transportation improvements, utility undergrounding, and plazas or parks, among other public facilities.
2. **Pedestrian and Bicycle Connectivity:** provide multimodal connectivity to ensure that pedestrian and bicycle facilities are consistent and continuous across the site and to adjacent properties. For example, this may include providing bicycle facilities along the street consistent with Active Fairfax Plan recommendations or providing a pedestrian walkway through a parking lot.
3. **Streetscape Design and Dimensions:** to ensure consistency across an area, wide sidewalks, and associated trees, landscaping, and furnishings should be provided, as they are essential to achieving a consistent, safe, and walkable environment for pedestrians, and for placemaking. The Volume II Urban Design Guidelines include preferred tree species, paving materials and furnishing style/specifications. See Chapter 2F for more information.
4. **Streetlights:** to ensure visual continuity for the area, use the preferred streetlight. If no light is specified in the Volume II Urban Design Guidelines, the full cut-off acorn light should be used. See Chapter 2F for more information.
5. **Building Setbacks:** a building's frontage should be located at the build-to line or setback as depicted in the street cross-section. Build-to lines or setbacks are typically located at the edge of the Building Zone. Parking should not be located between the building and the street. Building entrances should face the primary street. See Chapter 4A for more information.
6. **Parking Location and Screening:** when surface parking is unavoidable, design opportunities should be employed to creatively integrate parking and vehicle circulation into the site, so it is less obtrusive to the visual appearance of the area and provides safe and comfortable pedestrian access to the building and along the street frontage. For example, locating the parking on the side or rear of the site and placing the building at the front edge of the Building Zone is essential to transforming areas to a more urban form. See Chapter 5 for more information.
7. **Ground Floor Design:** ground floors of buildings should work symbiotically with the adjacent streetscape and public spaces to provide an experience that is active, safe, comfortable, and engaging for pedestrians. Non-residential ground floors should have floor-to-floor heights of 14 to 16 feet and be at least 60% transparent. Residential ground floors should have individual unit entrances facing the street. Residential entrances should be elevated where feasible and include porches or stoops. See Chapter 4C for more information.

GRAPHIC 1: BY-RIGHT DEVELOPMENT

