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# **Vacant to Vibrant**

## **Adaptive Reuse Opportunities in Prince George's County, Maryland**

**COURSE**

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Kathryn Howell, NCSG Executive Director

Kim Fisher, PALS Director



**Partnership for  
Action Learning  
in Sustainability**

**Prince George's County, MD**

 **PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY  
Planning Department**

## **AUTHORS**

Matthew Bald, Desmond Jordan, Imaan Shikoh, Kaleb Tucker

## **UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF**

Martin Sanders

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## **ABOUT PALS**

The Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) is administered by the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). It is a campus-wide initiative that harnesses the expertise of UMD faculty and the energy and ingenuity of UMD students to help Maryland communities become more environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable. PALS is designed to provide innovative, low-cost assistance to local governments while creating real-world problem-solving experiences for University of Maryland graduate and undergraduate students.

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## **Abstract**

Prince George's County, Maryland, faces a growing crisis of vacant and underutilized properties, contributing to urban decline, declining property values, and, increasingly, safety concerns. Legal barriers, high redevelopment costs, and limited coordination across agencies have hindered efforts to transform these properties despite the county's commitment to sustainability and infrastructure development. This report explores adaptive reuse as a sustainable and community-centered solution for property revitalization in the Capitol Heights/Blue Line Corridor area. It asserts that adaptive reuse can convert underutilized commercial spaces into mixed-use residential developments that revitalize neighborhoods and support equitable and sustainable growth. The analysis highlights promising strategies such as transit-oriented development, flexible zoning policies, and addressing challenges such as regulatory and financial limitations and gentrification. Finally, we outline a redevelopment guidebook that offers strategic, replicable, and equity-focused recommendations to support middle-income housing, small-scale development, and more effective land use.

*Keywords:* adaptive reuse, vacant properties, redevelopment, sustainable development, regulatory frameworks, middle-income housing.

## Introduction

Vacant properties in Prince George's County have contributed to patterns of urban decline, undermining property values and raising safety concerns. Despite the County's goals towards equity and sustainability, legal barriers, redevelopment costs, and the lack of a clear strategic vision for reuse have hindered upcycling efforts. For the county to capitalize on the potential of vacant and underutilized spaces, new frameworks must be grounded in feasibility, community engagement, and interagency collaboration. This research identifies four key problem elements that shape planning, development, and policy literature: sustainability and infrastructure, regulatory and legal considerations, social and community impact, and economic impact. These themes are crucial to informing the development of the proposed framework.

The research team collected and analyzed a range of data, including expert interviews, land use and zoning data, property inventories, socioeconomic indicators, and regional market studies. These sources offered a multidimensional understanding of the obstacles and opportunities for adaptive reuse within the Capitol Heights/Blue Line Corridor area in Prince George's County.

Several critical trends warrant further analysis and discussion during the data collection process. First, the research underscores the necessity of local engagement and community-based analysis. Different areas in Prince George's County face distinct challenges, and it's imperative that all community stakeholders actively contribute to the analysis and decision-making process. Second, multiple interviews with field experts emphasized that market conditions, and the broader social, political, and economic context must be central considerations when examining potential upcycling and reuse cases. Finally, this report identifies a pressing need for creative solutions to navigating existing regulatory boundaries. The tension between county-wide objectives and municipal-level regulations frequently obstructs redevelopment efforts.

Overall, this report proposes a framework that enables stakeholders at the county and municipal levels to evaluate local challenges and identify potential barriers to redeveloping vacant and abandoned properties. The framework relies on constituent input and collaboration between

different agencies and stakeholders. If implemented effectively, it holds significant promise as a tool for addressing structural issues throughout Prince George's County. This framework is the foundation for a typology-based redevelopment guidebook designed to offer strategic, replicable, and equity-centered recommendations for adaptive reuse in the Capitol Heights and Blue Line Corridor area.

# **Literature Review**

## **Introduction**

According to recent estimates, the abundance of vacant properties across Prince George's County, over 4,500 sites, reflects the impact of national economic trends like remote work, retail decline, and long-standing planning decisions that have failed to anticipate changing community needs (Domen, 2023). The resulting development pattern is spatial and social fragmentation: suburban sprawl, low-density zoning, car-dependent infrastructure, and housing stock that doesn't meet demand (Prince George's County Planning Department, 2019; Southworth, 2005).

These vacancies, while often viewed as liabilities, have considerable potential. When developers and planners apply adaptive reuse and placemaking strategies, these properties can become tools that address interconnected social, economic, and environmental concerns (Bullen, 2007). This literature review explores these possibilities through four key lenses: sustainability and infrastructure, regulatory and legal frameworks, community impact, and economic feasibility while considering the development context and zoning structures of Prince George's County.

## **Problem Statement**

Vacant properties in Prince George's County contribute to patterns of urban decline, with impacts including decreasing property value and increased safety concerns. Legal barriers, redevelopment costs, and the lack of a clear strategic vision for reuse hinder upcycling efforts despite the county's goals for equity and sustainability. Unlocking the potential of these spaces requires new frameworks rooted in feasibility, community engagement, and interagency collaboration.

## **Sustainability and Infrastructure**

The suburban form of Prince George's County makes sustainability particularly relevant to redevelopment conversations. The county's car-centric layout contributes to traffic congestion, pollution, and a lack of access to community amenities (Greater Washington Partnership & EY, 2020). Planners can counter these trends by focusing on adaptive reuse efforts around existing transportation corridors.

Southworth (2005) provides a foundational framework for walkability, emphasizing connectivity and integration with other transport modes. While conceptual, his criteria inform planning strategies that emphasize people over cars. More directly applicable is the Greater Washington Partnership (2020) report that outlines how transit-oriented development (TOD) can increase housing density, reduce car reliance, and support inclusive economic growth when located near transit hubs in areas already zoned for higher-intensity development.

In theory, Prince George's County's zoning regulations support this idea; Section 27-4302 explicitly allows for creative, mixed-use approaches that support TOD and prioritize open space and public amenities (Prince George's County Code, n.d.). However, gaps in coordination between transit authorities, planning agencies, and developers have slowed the implementation of TOD strategies (Greater Washington Partnership & EY, 2020).

Bullen (2007) points to adaptive reuse as a method for sustainable growth. It reduces resource consumption, construction waste, and environmental disruption, critical concerns in a region affected by overdevelopment and disinvestment (Vasa, n.d.). The Grow Iverson case illustrates how community-led transformation of a vacant commercial site into green space can align redevelopment with environmental and social objectives (The Neighborhood Design Center, n.d.).

### **Regulatory and Legal Considerations**

Prince George's County has regulatory tools for adaptive reuse, but inconsistent application and procedural delays reduce their effectiveness (Domen, 2023). The Residential Planned Development (RPD) framework allows for flexible redevelopment of residential and mixed-use spaces. Yet, few projects take advantage of this opportunity due to barriers in land acquisition, tax delinquency enforcement, and transparency in land disposition (Prince George's County Code, n.d.).

Romem et al. (2022) developed a feasibility tool for converting strip malls into housing in California, a relevant model considering the prevalence of aging commercial plazas across



Prince George's County. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2022) introduced a decision-making tool for converting industrial properties into rental housing. These models provide structured ways to assess economic and planning constraints, but they rely on statewide metrics that limit direct application to Prince George's County without local calibration.

Stakeholder meeting notes emphasize prioritizing publicly owned parcels, particularly in areas affected by new zoning ordinances like CB15. This ordinance reclassifies any residential lot under 6,500 square feet as non-conforming, effectively removing thousands of parcels from standard redevelopment pathways unless variances or rezoning occur (Prince George's County Code, n.d.). Redevelopment success depends on well-timed project sequencing. The Fairmont Heights High School study shows how poorly timed adaptive reuse can lead to stalled projects and funding gaps, especially in economically stagnant submarkets. Prince George's County should aim to prevent similar outcomes. The county must develop pre-screening tools that assess market readiness, funding access, and zoning alignment, particularly for the medium and small lots that are most common across Prince George's County (The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, 2019).

### **Social and Community Impact**

Community impact is a sensitive and complex dimension of adaptive reuse. Without intentional policy safeguards, redevelopment may result in displacement, increased rents, and the loss of cultural and economic diversity (Kim et al., 2020). Rising property values in select neighborhoods already place Prince George's County at risk for these issues, while other areas remain disinvested (Moos et al., 2018).

Kim et al. (2020) highlight this tension in their review of revitalization strategies in legacy cities. While they advocate for equitable development and engagement practices, they caution that most redevelopment policies lack mechanisms to prevent gentrification and forced relocation (Barrie et al., 2023). Barrie et al. (2023) and Moos et al. (2018) offer deeper insight into mixed-use buildings' design and zoning impacts. Their studies show that mixed-use projects promote social interaction and property value increases but often exclude lower-income residents unless affordability requirements or housing trust mechanisms are in place.

The county's efforts to address vacancy enforcement through property data collection and regulation of negligent owners have produced inconsistent results. Domen (2023) notes that the challenge is less about writing new laws and more about enforcing existing ones through better data, staffing, and cross-agency coordination. As the county evaluates redevelopment pathways, it should prioritize affordability. This includes exploring tools such as community land trusts, inclusionary zoning, and public-private partnerships with Community Development Corporations (CDCs), which can ensure that new developments serve both long-time and future residents (Meeting Notes, personal communication, March 14, 2025).

### **Economic Considerations**

From a market perspective, Prince George's County's housing stock reflects a mismatch between supply and demand. The county lacks middle-income housing, which falls between low-income tax credit developments and high-end market-rate properties (The Prince George's County Planning Department, 2019). This missing middle contributes to overcrowding, widens affordability gaps, and limits opportunities for upward mobility (Vasa n.d.). The Planning Department's Missing Middle Housing report and *Plan 2035* both identify these trends and advocate for gentle density strategies, especially in transitional neighborhoods and near transit nodes (Prince George's County Planning Department, 2019). Freemark (2018) shows that mixed-use affordable housing remains rare despite widespread policy support. Financial institutions prefer single-use developments because they offer more predictable returns, while developers avoid mixed commercial-residential projects due to their complexity. The result is a financing system that disincentivizes precisely the kinds of adaptive reuse strategies that could benefit places like Prince George's County (Taylor et al., 2022).

Vasa (n.d.) argues for missing middle housing as a bridge between affordability and neighborhood cohesion. His focus on small-scale multifamily structures such as triplexes or stacked flats offers a feasible model for adaptive reuse of commercial buildings and infill development that does not require drastic upzoning (Prince George's County Planning Department, n.d.). This model could provide housing in underutilized commercial corridors while preserving neighborhood character and encouraging small business growth.

Financing remains a persistent barrier. Redevelopment projects must navigate a fragmented system of tax credits, zoning incentives, and grant applications. For this reason, CDCs, nonprofit developers, and public housing authorities are often better suited to lead adaptive reuse efforts than traditional market actors.

## **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Adaptive reuse is a practical and scalable solution to Prince George's County's vacant property challenges. However, successful implementation requires coordinated action across zoning, financing, planning, and community engagement (Bullen, 2007). Literature shows that the foundations are in place through TOD, mixed-use zoning, and *Plan 2035*, but gaps remain in implementation and equitable access (Prince George's County Planning Department, 2019).

What is needed next is an evaluation framework tailored to Prince George's County's parcels, one that balances feasibility with social impact, considers lot size and ownership, and integrates stakeholders throughout the planning process. With the right tools, policies, and community partnerships, vacant properties can become platforms for inclusive, sustainable development (Romem et al., 2022).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Methodology**

Our team used a mixed-methods data collection strategy, drawing from qualitative and quantitative sources to inform the analysis and make recommendations. We used four main sources of data: reports, case studies, interviews, and datasets.

## **Reports**

The County's Planning Department's reports on commercial vacancy trends, zoning policies, and ongoing development were particularly significant to understanding the current condition of redevelopment and identifying the area of geographic focus: The Blue Line Corridor and Capitol Heights area.

## **Case Studies**

To supplement these reports, we analyzed case studies from comparable jurisdictions, particularly within Prince George's County and the Washington metropolitan region, to identify replicable best practices. These studies offered valuable insights into successful adaptive reuse efforts, focusing on mixed-use development and placemaking approaches.

We also conducted targeted expert interviews with key stakeholders in ongoing, successful, and relevant redevelopment projects for their qualitative insights. These interviews included M-NCPPC and Redevelopment Authority staff members who know local redevelopment challenges, community needs, and perceived barriers to adaptive reuse. Their insights helped ground our analysis of the challenges of undertaking adaptive reuse projects and the projects' socioeconomic impact.

## **Interviews**

Insights from various public forums, media, and conversations were used to assess community attitudes to redevelopment along with interviews of three stakeholders:

- John Parks, CCEO, Prince George's County Planning Department, Planner II, Neighborhood Revitalization Section, Community Planning Division
- Daniel Sames, Prince George's County Planning Department, Planner IV, Neighborhood Revitalization Section, Community Planning Division
- Ashlee Green, Prince George's County Redevelopment Authority, Real Estate Development Project and Program Manager

This allowed a collection of common themes, concerns, aspirations, and a more nuanced view

of community needs to complement official data on Prince George's County's projects and needs based on the perspectives of its residents and stakeholders. The interview data provides valuable insights into the practical and policy-related challenges and opportunities for redevelopment in Prince George's County.

John Parks noted that funding remains a key barrier, particularly given that financing is managed by the federal Department of Housing and Community Development, which maintains high eligibility standards. He recommended that redevelopment efforts prioritize county-owned properties, particularly those outside incorporated municipalities. Parks also suggested reviewing and potentially revising property designations to better align with redevelopment goals, indicating that some regulatory classifications may be outdated or unnecessarily restrictive.

Daniel Sams highlighted that, due to zoning limitations, many vacant lots aren't immediately suitable for development. He explained that changing zoning designations often requires extensive, municipality-led community initiatives, making the process slow and complex. Sams underscored the need for detailed market analyses to better understand better the conditions driving vacancies.

Ashlee Green expanded on these points, citing current economic conditions as major contributors to funding constraints. She also identified coordination failures across entities as a significant barrier, especially when redeveloping buildings. She pointed out that much of the Blue Line Corridor's vacant land is municipally owned and emphasized that municipalities are often open to discussion and engagement if approached. She recommended forming a strong and diverse development team. Green also stressed that the most impactful redevelopment projects are not necessarily the largest. Instead, smaller, well-coordinated teams composed of developers, engineers, finance experts, architects, and historic preservationists can often be more effective. Finally, she noted that timing is critical and that most developments will not be completed by their projected opening dates, making coordination and market study essential.

## **Data Analysis**

The geographic focus of this project was narrowed to the Metro Blue Line Corridor in Prince George's County due to its strategic importance in the County's broader revitalization efforts. The corridor, in proximity to several Metro stations and located inside the Beltway, has been identified as a priority growth area in Prince George's County plans, supported with significant public investment. This policy and support establish the area as ideal for transit-oriented development, and yet, despite efforts, the area continues to have high vacancy rates. This report's focus on the Blue Line Corridor aligns its research with ongoing public initiatives and contributes to strategies unlocking the corridor's potential for adaptive reuse.

Sites along the Blue Line Corridor can be categorized into three main types: vacant lots, unused buildings, and abandoned buildings. Vacant lots include sites such as 15 Akin Avenue, a semi-cleared parcel ideal for multifamily housing, and 4619 Southern Avenue, a property zoned for both commercial and residential uses, with a strategic location near the DC border. Another promising site is 117 Tunic Avenue located only 100 feet from the Capitol Heights Metro station, and in an area designated as a transportation overlay zone and proposed for multifamily housing.

Unused buildings are represented by properties like 4924 to 4930 Marlboro Pike, zoned for commercial neighborhood use and well-suited for mixed-use projects that serve residents. Another key site is 5825 to 5837 Martin Luther King Jr. Highway, which includes an existing structure and could be subdivided into five lots, potentially rezoned for commercial neighborhood development to enhance mixed-use capabilities.

Abandoned buildings include 11 Akin Avenue, a recently renovated single-family home that was foreclosed on, and 223 Westhampton Avenue, a 42,000-square-foot industrial facility on 1.51 acres zoned for industrial employment. The latter is situated in an Opportunity Zone near FedEx Field, providing substantial redevelopment potential and preferential tax treatment.

## **Recommendation**

### **Vacant to Vibrant: A Stakeholder Guidebook**

The following recommendations use the findings and current policies to propose a guidebook tailored to the three typologies: vacant lots, unused buildings, and abandoned buildings. This guidebook emphasizes stakeholder collaboration, equitable development, and sustainable practices.

The guidebook will be divided into two parts: analysis and recommendations. The analysis is designed to assist local municipalities, developers, and other stakeholders in the reuse and redevelopment process to determine the issues facing a given area. It will list the potential issues that an area may have, as well as examples of the challenges or outcomes that could arise from those issues. It will not prescribe solutions or diagnose specific problems. Its purpose is to equip stakeholders with a diagnostic framework to assess local conditions and appropriately plan next steps.

Key analysis categories will include:

- regulatory and legal requirements, including zoning limitations and inconsistencies, complex ownership structures, and outdated regulatory classifications
- infrastructure and sustainability analysis, including potential concerns about inadequate public infrastructure, environmental contamination and remediation challenges, and integration with existing transit-oriented developments, which is especially important given the previous and current Blue Line Corridor development
- an analysis of community and social factors, such as the potential for community displacement or gentrification, the engagement and participation of residents, and ensuring alignment with community goals and values
- evaluation of an area's potential economic and financial constraints, including limited funding availability and financing challenges, shifting market demand and feasibility analysis, and the costs of code compliance and property improvements.

These four analysis sections are meant to provide a consistent structure that stakeholders can use to analyze specific areas and their needs.

The recommendations section will be more comprehensive and action oriented. It will be organized around three types of properties: vacant land with no prior construction, developed

properties that are vacant and without a designated use, and abandoned buildings that once served a specific purpose. Examples include undeveloped lots adjacent to residential neighborhoods, unused office buildings or warehouses, and abandoned hospitals.

For each property type, the guidebook will outline potential advantages and disadvantages, highlight common barriers to redevelopment, and identify the key organizations and stakeholders that should be engaged early in the process. The advantages and disadvantages are comprehensive, but necessary to ensure the best possible outcome for a chosen parcel.

The first property type, vacant lots, include everything from infill parcels in established neighborhoods, to farmland and open tracts in outlying areas. Redeveloping these sites involves complying with current zoning designations, satisfying subdivision and infrastructure requirements, and aligning with county land use policies that dictate where growth should occur. The advantage to focusing development on these lots is flexibility in their potential development, which provides an opportunity for strategic, transit-oriented development that aligns with current Blue Line Corridor projects. Disadvantages include infrastructure deficiencies, fragmented ownership across the public and private sectors, and most importantly, zoning restrictions.

Recommendations for developing this land include prioritizing mixed-use zoning near transit hubs to avoid restrictions and ensure efficient redevelopment. It's also important to invest strategically in public infrastructure enhancements and maintain an integrated Geographic Information System (GIS) inventory to categorize and log available parcels. Applying financial incentives would also be an important tool, including revitalization redevelopment tax credits and conducting thorough market studies to align zoning updates with actual demand. Through these recommendations, vacant properties should be properly accounted for regarding their redevelopment potential.

Unused properties are properties that have existing structures but aren't in active use. Examples include an empty storefront or a strip mall with no tenants, an office building sitting idle without a new occupant, or other unused properties that lack any defined purpose. The advantages to



redeveloping these properties are existing infrastructure, which leads to quicker project turnaround, and a clear zoning history that could be used to determine potential uses. Potential disadvantages are high costs for code upgrades, potential zoning mismatches, and outdated facilities that might not be redevelopable.

Recommendations for these properties focus on expanding current processes and grants to give better incentives for redevelopment. Examples include simplifying the use and occupancy permitting process for adaptive reuse. Any new tenant or owner must secure a Use & Occupancy (U&O) permit from the Department of Permitting, Inspections, and Enforcement to legally occupy a formerly vacant building. This involves inspections to ensure the space meets safety codes for the intended use. Expanding this process to include adaptive reuse may create more potential for redevelopment. Additionally, updating zoning codes to facilitate mixed-use and residential conversions would be beneficial, as would leveraging existing municipal incentives, such as Seat Pleasant's SPICE program. It's also important to ensure that municipal and county standards align to minimize redevelopment complexity. Overall, redevelopment for unused properties provides opportunities for various outcomes, especially if potential barriers that could prevent this are addressed throughout the process.

Abandoned properties or buildings are those that formerly housed a specific use or facility but have since become obsolete, been vacated and often left in disrepair. Examples in Prince George's County include shuttered public buildings (e.g. a closed school or library), defunct industrial sites or warehouses, and former hospitals. These sites are more challenging than "clean slate" vacant land or maintained idle buildings, as they often have deteriorating structures, environmental contamination, and title and code issues that complicate redevelopment. However, these properties have a high potential for immediate impact should they be updated and redeveloped, as they are often strategically located to fulfill a specific purpose.

Recommendations for redevelopment include establishing clear pathways and guidelines for adaptive reuse concerning historic preservation, particularly emphasizing cultural and community significance. Given the potential history of an abandoned property, community

outreach is essential, and fostering partnerships with local nonprofits, cultural institutions, and community organizations would start this. Integrating placemaking initiatives could also provide valuable support, incorporating local history, art, and overall community identity into redevelopment projects. Implementing phased redevelopment plans allows for incremental revitalization, which minimizes financial risks and could enhance community acceptance and involvement. Finally, securing targeted financial incentives and grant programs is vital for mitigating environmental remediation costs and building stabilization as the property is updated and redeveloped.

These recommendations comprehensively address the three property types. By providing structured guidance, the guidebook aims to improve interagency and stakeholder coordination and offers practical pathways that help clients and local actors move projects forward with greater confidence, reducing the risk of decision paralysis.

## **Conclusion**

Prince George's County is on the cusp of achieving unprecedented growth with projects underway along the Blue Line Corridor. Redeveloping vacant and underutilized properties is essential to continue this growth trend and for creating sustainable, equitable growth in Prince George's County.

The recommended *Vacant to Vibrant: A Stakeholder Guidebook* empowers municipalities, developers, and community organizations to transform liabilities into assets by offering a flexible, typology-based framework and actionable guidance. Adaptive reuse can be a powerful tool to revitalize the Blue Line Corridor and similar regions countywide via coordinated interagency collaboration, thoughtful community engagement, and a commitment to inclusive development.

In the future, efforts and research should focus on piloting this framework in target areas, strengthening affordability protections, and expanding technical support for small-scale developers and community-based organizations. Alongside strategic investment and collective commitment, adaptive reuse can foster long-term resilience, economic mobility, and sustainable

growth throughout Prince George's County.

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