

Report on Enhancing Identity of the Village of Friendship Heights

Village of Friendship Heights Community Advisory Committee

August 10, 2022



Our Village

The Village of Friendship Heights is a culturally diverse, quiet, high-rise community situated off Wisconsin Avenue between the DC border and Bethesda. Established in 1914, the Village has a Village Center, which was dedicated in 1986 and overlooks Hubert Humphrey Park. This neighborhood park and gathering place hosts many social events and is in regular use by residents. Additionally, the Village has two other parks,

eight high-rise apartment buildings, an assisted living residence and five office buildings that contain an array of professional healthcare services and medical specialties.

Best known as a desirable and diverse community of approximately 5,000 residents, the Village is next to a Metro station and a short ride to our Nation’s Capital. That makes all the cultural, governmental and scientific institutions in the area easily accessible. Other area resources include several high-quality public and private schools and two major hospitals. In or nearby the Village are delis, restaurants, grocery stores, pharmacies and a post office.

Though statistically a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC), the Village is a welcoming home for all age groups. For those choosing an active lifestyle, every residential building has a gym and a pool. Cyclists and walkers will find several trails nearby.

The Village Center offers a range of activities including classes, social events and shows. All happenings and events are published in the monthly Village Newsletter. A Village shuttle bus connects the apartment buildings, the Village Center, the grocery stores, and the Metro stop.

Background

As part of its 2021 / 2022 activity, the Community Advisory Committee considered the issue of “Identity” as it related to the Village of Friendship Heights. There are several reasons to undertake this initiative.

1. Establish a “Sense of Place”

- Recently there have been focus groups and surveys intended to illicit information about what residents are looking for in the Village and the surrounding community. The goal of these initiatives is to develop “place.”
- The Village should be proactive in developing its identity so that it is not adversely imposed by surrounding development.

2. Marketing and Communication

- For Village promotion, helping to drive real estate values, and consequently tax ratables, and to pull the community together as a place to live, raise a family, and age in place.
- Associated with this is acceptance of rules outlining building requirements based on height, setback from curb lines, architectural guidelines such as

window and door styling, and the like. While this may work in communities that are tourist destinations, for a community like the Village of Friendship Heights this is difficult due to the prominence of its high-rise buildings. That said, the Village does have a Sector Plan that has guided its development and has resulted in the physical community that it is.

- It needs to be recognized that the Village is not starting from scratch in its “Identity” search. It already has the reputation of being a well-educated, quiet community with access to the amenities of Wisconsin Ave. and easy METRO access. It serves as a medical center, with three medical buildings. Relatively close are a variety of restaurants and retail stores.

The Committee is not recommending that the Village attempt to become another Bethesda or Pike and Rose. Similar locations too close to one another would cannibalize each other increasing the likelihood of business churn. Unlike Bethesda, for example, the Village must prosper in its relationship to its proximity to NW DC and the broader “Heights” as it is becoming known.

The Village Council has discussed the retail situation at various times but is not able to influence such development. It has been suggested that losing locations such as the Panera Bread were unfortunate because it was a place where one could go, have a coffee and snack and meet with friends. While true, the reality is that the businesses must generate profit and foot traffic to remain in place – this was not happening. The determination of appropriate retail is a business proposition that requires investment, marketing and long-term demographic trend research – along with a fair amount of risk. As a result, the Committee is not making recommendations on retail, and suggests that this is not the prevue of government either. These decisions should be left to businesses which will have financial skin in the game.

What the Committee has focused on are things that can be done to increase awareness of being in the Village of Friendship Heights. The Village community is different from Bethesda, Somerset, and the DC Friendship Heights. In fact, during recent Business Alliance focus groups and surveys, as well as a meeting with the CAC, when the “Heights” was discussed, we questioned what that meant, outlining the differences between the Village and surrounding areas. This caused us to limit our scope to things that were easily achievable and that leveraged advantages already existing in the community.

The Community Advisory Committee looks forward to discussing this initiative further and working with the Village Council to emphasize the special nature and needs of the Village of Friendship Heights.

What is Identity?

The “identity” of a city, town, or village is connected to having a “sense of place.” “Place” is not only physical but extends to attributes that help describe it. For example, a place is known as a food destination, shopping district, arts center, etc. These all help to describe the “place”.

The Village of Friendship Heights has a recognizable Village Center and Humphrey Park which serves as the center of the community. These are augmented by Willoughby Park and Page Park. These help as “place” identifiers, but is it recognizable as being a village unto itself?

There are characteristics that are distinctive to the Village, but less apparent such as walkability, being a quiet restful community amidst the hustle and bustle of Metro DC, easy access to Bethesda and DC, and the changing and expanding amenities along Wisconsin Ave. Many residents have a more nuanced association to the Village having lived in it for decades where they developed deep ties and friendships. Others have moved to the Village when downsizing from a private home. This begins to indicate that there are identifying characteristics making the Village an attractive location. The challenge is to exploit that and have it become more prevalent to create a broader sense of community, place, and identity.

How to create Identity

Physical: This is as simple as letting people know where they are. Signs and markers are important, but so too is branding and marketing. With a diverse and well-educated population, cultural activities sponsored by the Village Center, and organizations such as FHNN to connect and serve seniors, and new ones on the way such as the City Line Arts Center on N Park Ave, along with several parks, creating an identity should be easy, but needs to be communicated.

First, if one were a first-time visitor and did not talk to anyone, would you know you were in the Village of Friendship Heights? The obvious answer is no.

There are no visible markers, signs, or other materials to let one know that they are in a special community. Nearby communities such as Drummond, Somerset, and Chevy Chase West let people know where they are.



This is especially important in 2022 as Montgomery County and DC begin to plan a revitalization of “The Heights”, which is said to be “at the crossroads of Bethesda and DC.” Signage welcoming people to the Village, in addition to modestly bolder signage on the Village sponsored shuttle bus, are important to letting people know where they are and to begin to provide a sense of physical place.

Emotional: Emotional connection extends beyond political considerations which can often be divisive and work against creating a community and bringing people together. Place identity is often tied to a common purpose such as sense of well-being, safety, and other attributes.

The village already has infrastructure in place to help begin its marketing. It has a logo and a website for communication of information. It has three large medical buildings that residents value for the convenience they offer. Its apartment buildings have pools, lounge areas and community rooms. It has a shuttle bus to move residents up and down the hill and elsewhere. It has a newsletter highlighting key events and happenings, and has a communication board on the corner of Hills Plaza and S Park Ave. It does not have a motto or statement of what it wants to be – or one that is easily found.

In attending numerous Village Council meetings and other forums, several key phrases keep coming up that begin to help define the village. Residents remark on its prime

location, easy access to amenities (noted earlier), walkability, quiet nature, parks, and relative safety. The Village is in an enviable position as it does not need to sell or create these attributes – they are recognized and exist...these need to be taken advantage of to enhance community awareness. As an example:

- *The Village of Friendship Heights is an easily accessible and quiet community where young and old can live, rest, play, and engage in peace and safety.*

Taking Advantage of Our Assets

- **Take advantage and enhance walkability** by completing the test of lighted pedestrian safety signs and speed bumps to reinforce this important and frequently cited aspect of Village life.
- **Emphasize the Village Center and Humphrey Park as the “center of town”.**
- **Improve signage for the parks in the Village.**
 - Incorporate signage like those at county parks stating maintained by the Village of Friendship Heights. Signage does not need to be big and intrusive, but should be of a consistent style, theme, and communicate respect for the parks and all who use them.
 - As an example, while Page Park is an inviting space, soon to be enhanced with the approved Greensweep project, you would be hard pressed to know its name given the placement and mundane identifying marker, much less the reason for the name.



- **Enhance signage** to welcome as well as inform that individuals are in the Village of Friendship Heights. While there are space limitations, there is room for improvement in the area assigned to the Village bulletin board at the corner of Humphrey Park (S. Park & Hills Plaza).
 - Rather than have a bulletin board that is difficult to read, have a **landmark sign** welcoming people to the Village. The committee did a review of such signs in the area and on-line. We are cognizant that there is a risk of too much signage in a small area that would lead to the Village having a cluttered look. The Committee suggests something like below in either wood or stone to replace the current bulletin board.



- Additionally, the Committee recommends **replacing the bulletin board** with a digital sign that could be placed in the left (as facing) window of the Village Center. This would serve several purposes. First it would make updating easier and more current. Second, it would potentially draw more residents to the Village Center and encourage them to enter.
- **Enhance signage of the Village Shuttle** via more vibrant and bold colors – currently the white on white is lost when in motion and hard to read. Consider blue or green, both components of the Village logo, as an alternate.
 - As the broader “Heights” comes to fruition, the current TAP and Alliance plan has it extending from the SAKS to the Rodman’s on Wisconsin Ave. Is it possible to expand the range of the shuttle bus to include the whole of the

Wisconsin Ave. strip, almost like a Circulator, or, at least periodically. This would also expand the available locations of our older residents to shop.

- **Seniors are the largest – and most stable – cohort** in Friendship Heights and offer a wealth of experience gained over their careers. Various services should be provided to them so that, if they choose, they can age in their own apartment homes and continue to be a vibrant part of the community.
 - While they are in generally good health, the programs and activities of the Village Center – and of FHNN – serve them well.
 - When they become less mobile and develop other limitations, the services provided by FHNN become important. Also, the shuttle bus should stop at the medical buildings to meet their needs.
 - When their health further deteriorates, they need trained home care, geriatric care managers and house call doctors. SmithLife has recently introduced a pilot program offering limited hour care (e.g., two hours per day). The Village should encourage similar services to be provided on an affordable basis, particularly in the early years of their use.
- **Children are important** to a community, and when children get together their parents tend to meet other parents.
 - Many children’s events occur at daytime hours when parents are working. While evenings are difficult due to dinner and homework, having kids’ events on weekends could be beneficial.
 - On weekends, consider expanding the shuttle bus to drop off at Willard Park. As the most proximate play area, parents of small children are required to walk up and down the hill to Willard with strollers and other necessities.
- **Use the weekly Farmer’s Market** to continue to promote Village sponsored events beyond the website and newsletter. Consider adding an entertainment component to the Farmers Market, especially in the nice weather to invite more people in. Local Markets in Bethesda and Silver Spring have clown, street performers, and local musicians. This would potentially draw more families but also offer a means for socialization beyond buying produce and moving along.
- The developing **Business Alliance** has started to sponsor events and is beginning to proactively advertise them well in advance of event dates. Coordinate to grow the voice and identity of the Village in the area as well as to influence activities of interest to Village residents.

We do not expect that all suggestions will be implemented, nor are all likely to be immediately successful. The effort to enhance “Identity” is not a short-term effort. It will require communication, time, and consideration. To modify and gain insight into what is working, a survey and or interview after an event or periodically to gain feedback is important.