



Bloomingtondale Village Square Initiative

An Overview



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President

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BVS OVERVIEW

The **Bloomingdale Village Square (BVS) Initiative** was established in 2015 as an activity of the Bloomingdale Civic Association (BCA). To date, primary funding of BVS has been provided through two grants to BCA on behalf of BVS by HumanitiesDC (an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities). Other funding sources are the DC Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 5E and BCA. In addition, Bloomingdale residents have provided voluntary services to BVS that are conservatively valued at \$350,000.

The BVS Initiative seeks to bring to life two major recommendations of the DC Office of Planning's *Mid-City East Small Area Plan* – namely, to strengthen community identity, and to create a stronger sense of place. By doing so, we seek to honor the past, embrace the future, and promote the intentional development of a stable, inclusive, multiracial/multicultural neighborhood. BVS' 2015 research and planning activities suggest attainment of these goals will require no less than a 10-year effort involving a variety of public-private partnerships.

How does BVS intend to pursue these goals?

In pursuit of these goals, BVS takes as its starting point the notion that the unique character of a neighborhood is determined overtime by both the types of social relationships among its inhabitants and their interactions with physical/built environments, including buildings, architecture, roads, public and private open space, and boundaries (e.g., roads, rivers, topography, etc.). For inhabitants, physical/built environments may be of historical, social and psychological significance -- especially when they serve(d) as markers of differences in status, access or unwelcomeness, services, and amenities. However, newer residents may be unaware of such significance and interact differently with the physical/built environment than do long-term residents. Thus, neighborhood character is shaped by factors that are both internal and external to its residents, and historical and contemporaneous.



This perspective suggests the strengthening of community identity requires explication and continuous dissemination of:

- (a) the history of a neighborhood's significant social and architectural/land use events, and their impacts — historically and contemporaneously;
- (b) use of neighborhood branding and physical/ built environment enhancements that will both acknowledge the neighborhood's heritage and untold stories, while seeking to ameliorate any neighborhood divisiveness and lack of cohesion resulting from the neighborhood's physical/built environment and residents' differing perceptions of, and interactions with that environment and its changing land uses.

Likewise, the building of a stronger sense of place requires:

- (a) identifying how a neighborhood's past and present social environments have served to promote multiple and/or conflicting senses of 'place';
- (b) identifying and promoting modifications of a neighborhood's existing social environments to foster an increased sense of welcomeness, inclusion and stability for all;
- (c) promoting greater connectedness among neighbors and abutting neighborhoods; and
- (d) increasing public representations of neighborhood pride -- including greater resident civic engagement with other diverse residents.

What specifically has BVS done?

1 Guided by the DC *Mid-City East Small Area Plan* and BVS' view of neighborhood character, BVS' initial 2015 phase involved the following three major efforts (all available at www.bloominglecivicassociation.org/villagecenter): videotaping of **22 oral history interviews** of diverse Bloomingdale residents (re: age, gender, sexual orientation/preference, race and ethnicity, length of residency, etc.), and a **35-minute companion presentation video** of selections from some of these interviews.

2 Wrote and published a 44-page *Bloomingdale History Timeline, 1800 -2015* (updated in 2020) that juxtaposes major social & institutional events and architectural & land use events.

3 Developed a 32-slide PowerPoint *BVS Design Plan and Recommendations Report* (revised and printed in 2020) that recommends short-term public space landscape and design enhancements in the 1st Street and Rhode Island Avenue commercial area, and other mid-term and long-term enhancements throughout Bloomingdale. The Report also has **provided guidance for the neighborhood's beautification, public art, and public space architecture efforts.**



4 Wrote and published **two public information brochures** (*Project Overview* and *Architecture & Design Issues* - both updated in 2020), and conducted 6 community forums.

5 Guided by its *Recommendations Report*, BVS in 2019 **secured a pro bono contract with ZGF Architects, LLP for preliminary engineering, design, and renderings of a proposed park** decked-over the North Capitol Street underpass for 3 or 4 blocks; solicited both support and deck-over steering committee membership of other nearby neighborhood civic associations; supported our **Councilman McDuffie's inclusion of \$40 million for the deck-over in his Ward 5 budget recommendations**; initiated **planning of a related advocacy campaign**.

6 In 2019, BVS also **received a second grant from the HumanitiesDC to update and re-print BVS' 2015 publications**, and to **develop curricula, Teacher Guide, student materials and create the *Taking Village History to Our Youth Project***. This project seeks, through use of collaborative learning of neighborhood history, social science knowledge and research skills, to enable youth in grades 6-12 to exhibit civic leadership and a seldom heard well-informed youth voice on issues of neighborhood change and related impacts on diverse youth.



LESSONS LEARNED

Building a Culture of Civic Engagement

The key to success of the BVS Initiative is civic engagement — the exceptional willingness of Bloomingdale residents, in service of neighborhood enhancement, to voluntarily share their time, knowledge and skills, and to collaborate with persons they may not have previously known. BVS has promoted and nurtured this growing culture of civic engagement through broad dissemination of its Vision statement and other BVS products; frequent communications on neighborhood listservs/blogs and in community newspapers; repeated public and personal requests for resident assistance; frequent presentations at neighborhood meetings; tapping of personal networks; and modeling of inclusion.

The Significance of Intentionality

Bloomingdale, awarded national Historic District designation in 2018, is a neighborhood of approximately 30 blocks of primarily Victorian and Federal rowhouses located in DC's NW quadrant. Bloomingdale was established in 1892 as one of DC's earliest suburbs for middle- and upper-class Whites. Some of Bloomingdale's speculative developers placed racial

covenants (banning ownership, tenancy, etc. by Blacks for up to 50 years) on deeds as a marketing strategy. This and subsequent Bloomingdale land use issues involved intentionality in service of specific outcomes. Examples include the expanded use of racial housing covenants through use of 'covenants by petition'; lawsuits (and sometimes eviction) against Black homeowners with covenants on their homes (1920s - 1940s); prolonged delays in the building of neighborhood public schools and parks for Blacks (1890s – 1970s). Redlining and disinvestment (1950s – 1980s) opened the door (in 1980s and 1990s) for boarded-up housing and street drug dealing. In the late 1980s, due to increased federal enforcement against redlining and other racially biased real estate practices, gentrification slowly came to Bloomingdale and exploded in the 2000s along with increasing indicators of racial disparities. In 2010, 63% of Bloomingdale residents were Black and 30% were White; by 2016, 44% were Black and 42.4% were White. Undoubtedly, Bloomingdale is well-acquainted with change. BVS hopes that this time, the residents of Bloomingdale will take the lead in defining its future and character through use of principles of inclusion (not exclusion) – and that will require clarity of desired outcomes and intentionality.

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Production of this OVERVIEW of the BVS Initiative was funded by the Humanities Vision Partnership Grant Program, which is supported by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and administered by HumanitiesDC – an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

