



Essex Design Guidelines

JUNE 2021



Adopted by the Baltimore County Council on September 7, 2021. Resolution 127-21

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Introduction

The Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, a committee of the Chesapeake Gateway Chamber of Commerce, has been working for 4 years to revitalize the heart of Essex, Eastern Boulevard. Over the years they have formed a strong partnership with the leadership of Baltimore County and the State of Maryland. Thus far, the Task Force has received over \$800k in Community Legacy funds to pursue commercial revitalization and streetscape improvements. They have managed a variety of beautification efforts on Eastern Boulevard including the installation of large planters, banners that line the street, permanent benches, light posts, as well as facilitating a number of community cleanups. Some major Task Force milestones are as follows:

- 2018 – Sustainable Community Area designation by the State, Commercial Revitalization Action Grant (CRAG) award for planters, Police Athletic League project
- 2019 - Community Legacy Grant for banners and landscaping, CRAG award for planters, Sustainable Community Boundary enlarged
- 2020 – Community Legacy Grant for façade improvements, Maryland Operational Assistance Grant for administration support, CRAG award for continuation of planting efforts
- 2021 – Community Legacy Grant and CRAG for design of a new gateway sculpture, establishing a new Essex farmer’s market, continuation of streetscape efforts and ongoing landscaping

This past year, the Task Force initiated an effort to create design guidelines to encourage businesses to make improvements that complement one another, eliminate visual clutter along the Boulevard, foster a sense of identity and place making, and assist the Task Force with the administration of their façade improvement grant program. The guidelines acknowledge the evolving environment of Essex and envision a vibrant mix of commercial activities and architectural character.

Process and Participants

In the fall of 2020, an Advisory Committee was developed to inform the process of creating design guidelines. The group held 4 virtual meetings led by the Baltimore County Department of Planning over the period of November 2020 through May 2021. Input was gathered by recapping original guidelines developed in the 1980s, examining the existing built environment, determining an appropriate boundary for review, researching guidelines of other similar commercial environments and focusing on the waterfront identity and history of the area. The core values included in these guidelines are pedestrian engagement, economic vitality, sustainability, design quality and authenticity.

The Advisory Committee was comprised of the following individuals and organizations:

- Deirdre Aiken – Project Manager, Essex Landmark Art Workgroup
- Doug Anderson, Office of Baltimore County Councilman Crandell – District 7
- Thomas Craig – Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, Baltimore County Police Department - Essex Precinct
- Matt D’Amico – Baltimore County Design Review Panel, Design Collective
- John Gontrum – Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, WTP Law
- Robin Grammer – Resident and State Delegate, District 6

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- Laurie Hay, Jessie Hillman, Emery Huang, Marta Kulchytska, Mark Landolina, Amy Mantay – Baltimore County Department of Planning
 - Rick Johnson – Baltimore County Department of Economic and Workforce Development
 - Sharon Kihn – Chesapeake Gateway Chamber of Commerce
 - Sandy Marenberg – Blue Ocean (Aviation Station)
 - Kevin McDonough – Rockaway Beach Improvement Association
 - Dr. Frank Neighoff – Chesapeake Bay Community Association
 - Cliff O’Connell - Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, Cliff’s Hi-Tech Autobody Shop, Cliff’s Direct Effect
 - Doris Franz Poling – Office of Baltimore County Councilwoman Cathy Bevins – District 6
 - Donna Rolnick – Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, WPM Real Estate Management
 - Gabrielle Slocum – Baltimore County Executive’s Office of Community Engagement
 - Andy Wasmer – Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, J&H Tires
 - Sam Weaver – Eastern Baltimore County Task Force, Weaver Marine Services

Commercial Revitalization District

These design guidelines pertain to an area of Essex that is designated as a Commercial Revitalization District. Commercial Revitalization Districts are the "front doors" to the County’s desired established communities and are eligible for a variety of beneficial programs. These programs include:

- 1) Architect-On-Call, which offers up to 10 free hours of architect design services to improve building facades;
- 2) Building Improvement Loan Program, which provides up to \$30,000 in interest-free loans for exterior improvements;
- 3) Commercial Revitalization Tax Credit, which provides tax credits for improved commercial properties;
- 4) Commercial Revitalization Action Grant, which awards business associations up to \$10,000 for projects that benefits the District.

Design Review Panel

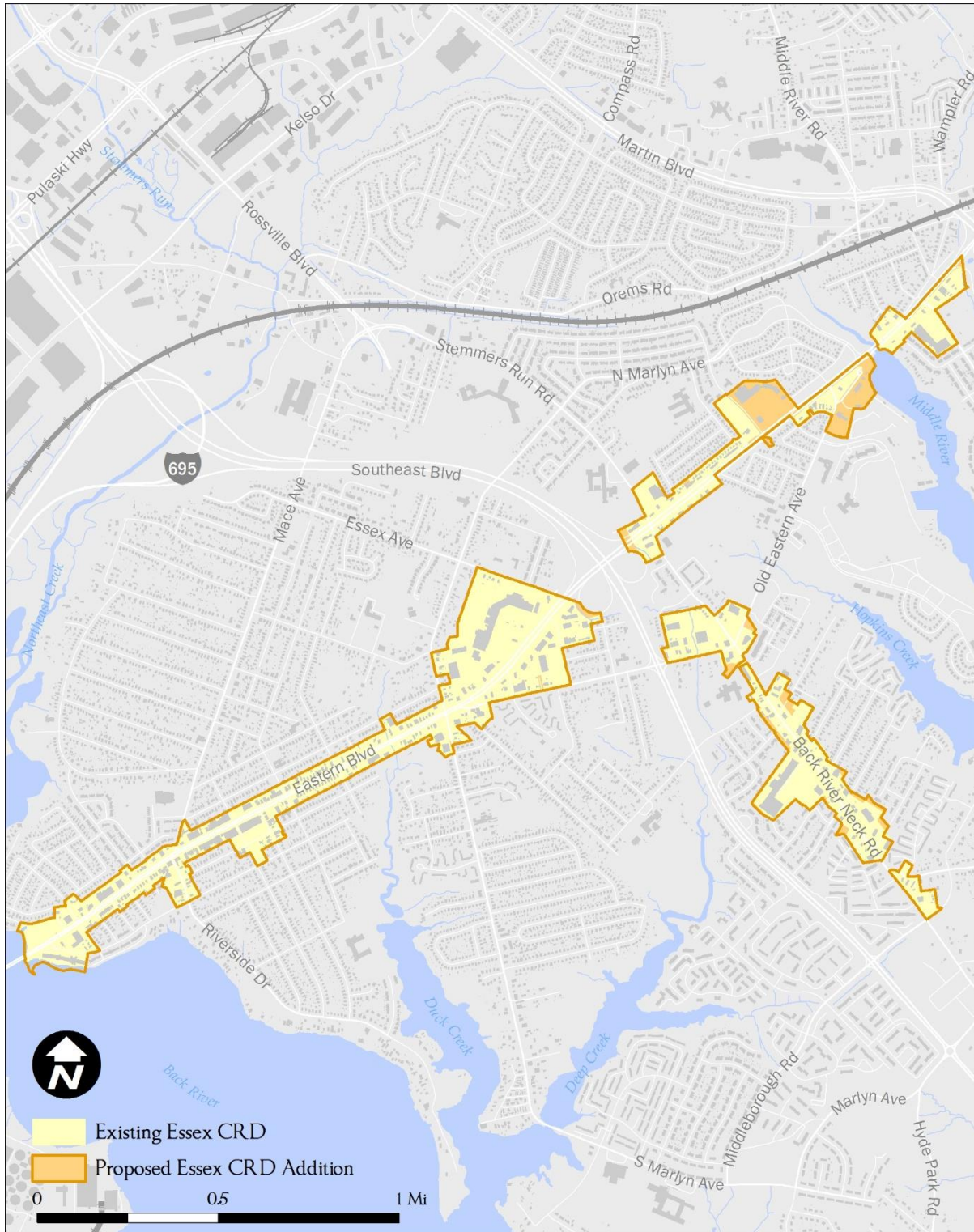
The design guidelines are intended to inform the Design Review Panel, which is comprised of appointed architects, engineers and planners. The Panel reviews projects within designated Design Review Panel areas and seeks to achieve high quality and well-functioning environments. When examining projects in the Essex review area, the panel asks the following questions:

- How does the project relate in scale, height, massing and design with the surrounding context?
- How is the public realm defined and connected with street and sidewalk patterns?
- Is the landscape and site design appropriate for the surrounding context and proposed uses?
- Does the design improve the existing character of Essex?
- Does the project take an innovative approach to design, materials, sustainability and public art?

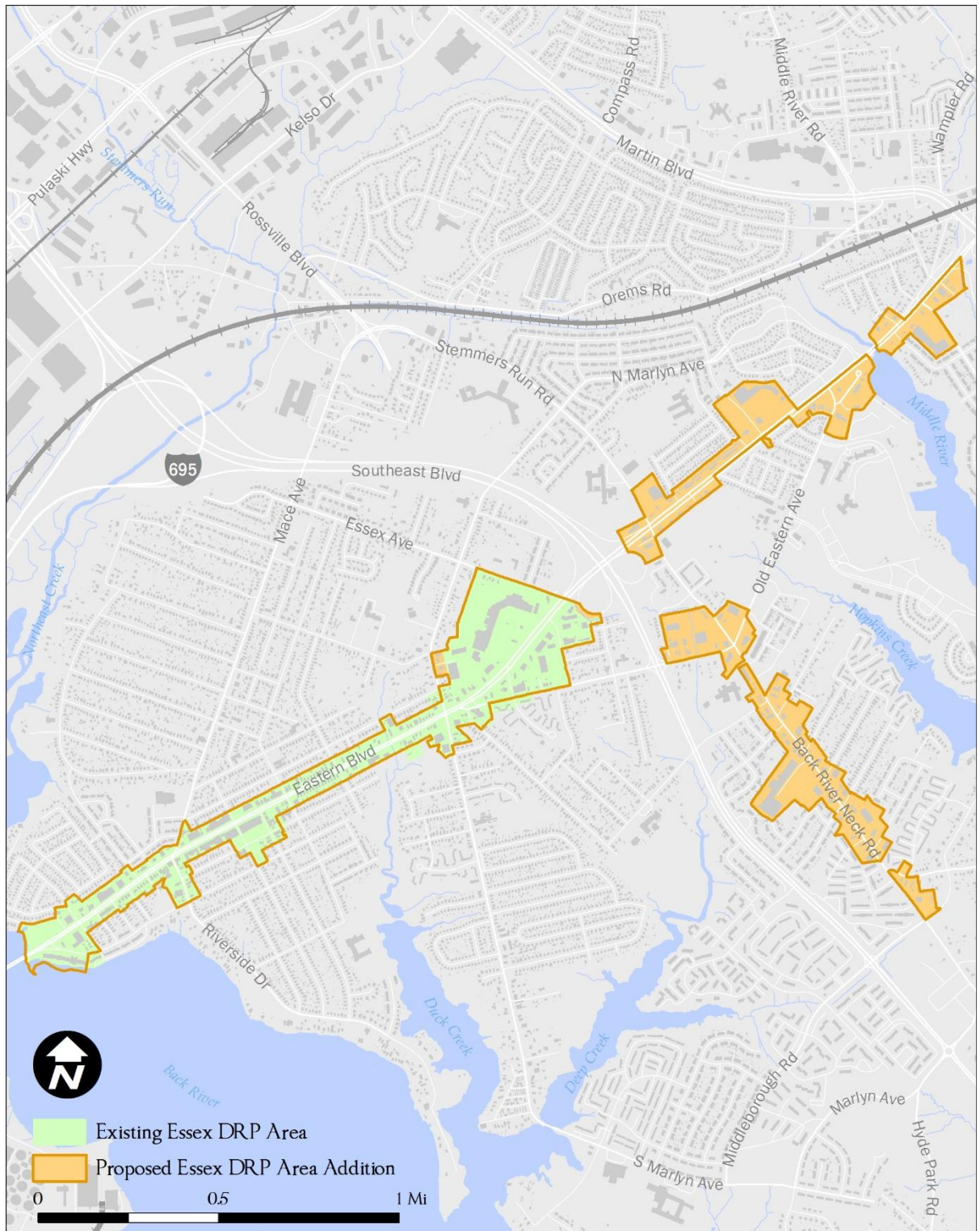
Explanation of Geographic Boundaries

There was a consensus among the Advisory Committee that the boundary for the Commercial Revitalization District and the Design Review Panel area be extended and coincide with one another. The boundary alignment means that the design review process for future development is balanced by the incentives for commercial growth. The maps on the following pages address the boundaries of the existing CRD and DRP areas, as well as the expansions proposed by the Advisory Committee. Expanding the designated areas will require County Council legislative action.

Map – Existing and Proposed Commercial Revitalization District



Map – Existing and Proposed Design Review Panel Area



Downtown

For the purposes of these guidelines, “Downtown” refers to the section of Eastern Boulevard that starts at Back River Bridge to the west and ends at the 600 block. The following Downtown guidelines are intended for the more established commercial corridor, while the Conversion and New Construction sections of this document pertain more to the areas further east and south.

Facades

Storefront façades of new or substantially redeveloped buildings should be varied, reflective of the diversity and personality of individual tenants, and of the few historic buildings that still exist.

- Buildings should provide open and inviting facades.
- Entrances should be oriented to the street.
- Ground level space should be developed to provide visual interest to pedestrians.
- Ground floor openings should relate or align with second floor openings.
- Storefronts should contain transparent glazing that reveals the activities of the establishment.
- Building facades should generally align with one another at the point where they meet the ground to create a continuous façade.
- If roll-down grates are deemed necessary, they should be constructed on the interior of the storefront ceiling to conceal them during the day.



Image credit: Montgomery County Public Libraries

Signage

Signs provide a vital service, informing the shopper and expressing the character and tone of the shop and the area.

- Signage for new construction, or in large multi-tenant centers should be coordinated to create a consistent style of building identification.
 - Signs should be proportional, graphically interesting, creative and appropriate to the area.
 - Signs should not be designed to maximize square footage, but instead to enhance their graphic impact to the pedestrian and driver.
 - Signs should be installed so that they are adaptable and repairable as sign needs change.
 - Sign character that is expressive of the individual owner and overall community identity is encouraged.
 - Tenant signage should be integrated within the architectural features of the façade and complement the building's architecture.
 - Signs should be lit to encourage continuous activity within the district and provide security.
 - Signs should be made of durable, high quality materials and well maintained.
 - Signs and associated hardware that are no longer in service should be removed in a timely manner.
- Temporary banner signs are discouraged.



Image credit: Rena's Salon in Essex



Image credit: Woody's Pub Grub in Essex

Lighting

Illumination that complements the character of the Downtown, provides aesthetic appeal and safety, and promotes comfortable pedestrian activity is critical to the success of downtown Essex.

- All lighting fixtures should be designed and installed in scale and context with the architecture of the building.
- Accent lighting of building entries or features is encouraged.
- Light sources on private development should complement lighting within the public realm of the district.
- Lighting as a nighttime amenity should be considered.
- Accent lighting of trees and artwork should be considered for the public realm.



Image credit: Hammerworks

Awnings

Awnings add visual interest to the pedestrian environment and can enhance the storefront design and attractiveness. They reinforce building patterns and rhythms, and create shade and comfort on the sidewalk.

- Awnings should be constructed of canvas or fire resistant acrylic materials.
- Awnings should be permanent and fixed in place.
- Awnings that are on multiple storefronts buildings should be located in the storefront bay and be consistent in character, scale and location.
- Awnings that are used for signage should locate the signage on the valence.
- Awnings should be maintained to appear clean and intact at all times.



Image credit: ConnectPay

Infill

Infill describes redevelopment in a vacant lot or underutilized building. Infill development is encouraged, but should maintain compatibility with the surrounding commercial environment.

- Infill building should maintain the same setback for new buildings as existing adjacent buildings.
- Placement of new buildings, block and street patterns, and/or mid-block connections should align with, and connect to, existing and proposed streets and circulation patterns.
- The primary entrance to the building should be from the primary street.



Image credit: Aaron Leitz

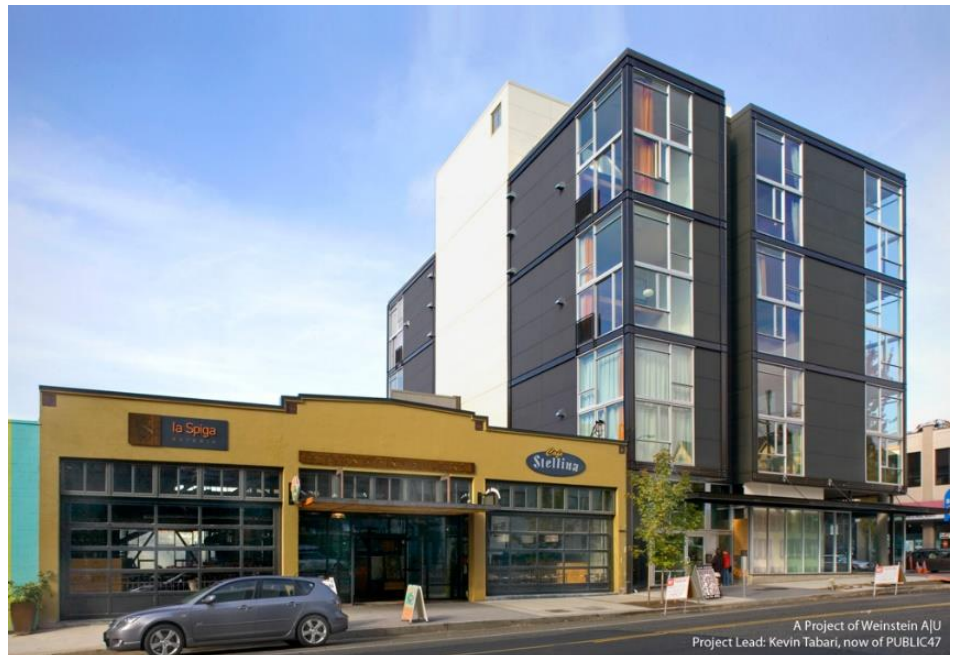


Image credit: Weinstein A+U

Conversions

The volume of traffic and change in zoning throughout the years on Eastern Blvd. has led to many structures originally built as residences to be converted to commercial property. Where this has occurred, the following guidelines should apply.

- Front yard landscaping is encouraged, and additional paving should be avoided.
- Front porches are an attractive and functional part of the building and should be maintained where practical.
- Window frames and finish should be compatible with the colors and textures of the building.
- Avoid conflicts in style by putting large commercial windows in residentially scaled buildings.
- Retain or install window boxes to add interest.
- Upper story windows should be considered and treated attractively and not boarded.
- Signage should be small scale to fit with the image of the building.
- Entrances should be made ADA accessible in a way that is well integrated into the building, when possible.
- Temporary signage such as flag signs should be avoided.



Image credit: Goldstar Title Co. in Essex

New Construction

General Principles

- Newly constructed sites should be developed for high quality mixed use comprised of commercial, residential, office and entertainment uses.
- Building facades should be visually active and scaled through the interaction of architectural detail, materials, texture and color.
- Each use with exterior, street oriented exposure should have an individual public entry from the street.
- Buildings should be inviting places that interact with the life of the street.
- Buildings should line the sidewalk and frame the public realm.
- Variation in building scaling and detail should relate to the scale and function of pedestrian activity uses along the street.
- Design of new development that is directly contiguous to single family residential communities should respect the scale, form and development pattern of the existing community.
- Building corners should be given special treatment. This may include signature entries, special roof shapes and taller, iconic architectural elements.
- New buildings should be contextual in scale and style to the surrounding structures, where practical.



Image credit: Guerilla.com

Materials

Buildings should be constructed of durable, sustainable and low maintenance materials that sustain the test of time.

- Brick, stone, metal, wood, and cementitious siding are the preferred building materials.
- All facades of a building should be treated equally in terms of materials, color and design details. The building should have a finished appearance on all sides.
- The use of replacement materials that imitate or falsely replicate natural applications should be avoided.
- Reinforce the district's character by using natural materials which, by their nature, improve in appearance and character as they age.
- The use of highly reflective wall materials that will generate glare and heat, especially at the sidewalk level, should be avoided.
- Building materials should be appropriate to the urban context.



Image credit: Heritage Society of Essex and Middle River

Parking Lots and Parking Structures

Parking can be an essential element of a successful retail district, but it should be designed in a way that is considerate of aesthetics, pedestrian safety and the environment.

- The design of parking structures should be architecturally integrated with the design and structure of the building they serve.
- Facades on parking structures should be activated with ground floor uses and/or pedestrian amenities.
- Surface parking lots should have shade trees planted throughout the lot and be screened by architectural and landscape treatments.
- Proposed landscaping, walls or fences should be used to screen the view of parked cars and to soften the landscape.
- Surface parking areas should reflect the character of the district.
- Parking structures and lots shall be adequately signed for easy identification.
- Crosswalks from parking areas to businesses should be well marked and adequate.
- Establishments are encouraged to share parking when feasible so that parking requirements do not deter future commercial development.
- Surface parking lots should incorporate canopy trees to the greatest extent possible.



Image credit: City of San Mateo

Scale

- New buildings should be contextual in scale and style to the surrounding structures, where practical.
- The location of buildings should define and contain the street or parking area space in order to concentrate and reinforce pedestrian activity.
- Architectural massing and site design should be carefully considered to ensure an effective transition between the commercial areas and the contiguous residential community.
- Building corners should be given special treatment. This may include signature entries, special roof shapes and/or iconic architectural element.



Image credit: Guerilla.com

Gateways and Area Identification

In Essex, there are two gateway gardens along Eastern Boulevard, both of which are maintained by the Eastern Baltimore County Task Force. The western gateway is located near Virginia Avenue, just after drivers pass over the Back River Bridge into Essex. The eastern gateway is located at the other end of the commercial district by Old Eastern and Homberg avenues. The western gateway contains a cube sculpture, and the eastern gateway has a sign surrounded by a dock sculpture.

After several community meetings and surveys and a final vote by a work group consisting of all major stakeholders, the Eastern Baltimore County Task Force began the process of retiring the red cube in the western gateway garden and relocating pieces for display in the Heritage Society of Essex and Middle River museum. Funding is being sought for a replacement sculpture which makes a more Essex centric statement. (See mock-up below.) The eastern gateway garden contains a welcome sign and dock, which recently were fixed and painted. Any redesign to these two areas will be in keeping with the following:

- The gateway sculpture should reinforce the maritime character of the area.
- It should be lit internally so it is visible both during and day and at night.
- The location of the gateway sculpture should not be impeded by any light, traffic pole, or tree.
- The area around the gateway should be developed as a green space, planted with species that are easy to maintain.
- The sculpture should be placed high enough that vandalism can be avoided.



Image credit: Sharon Kihn

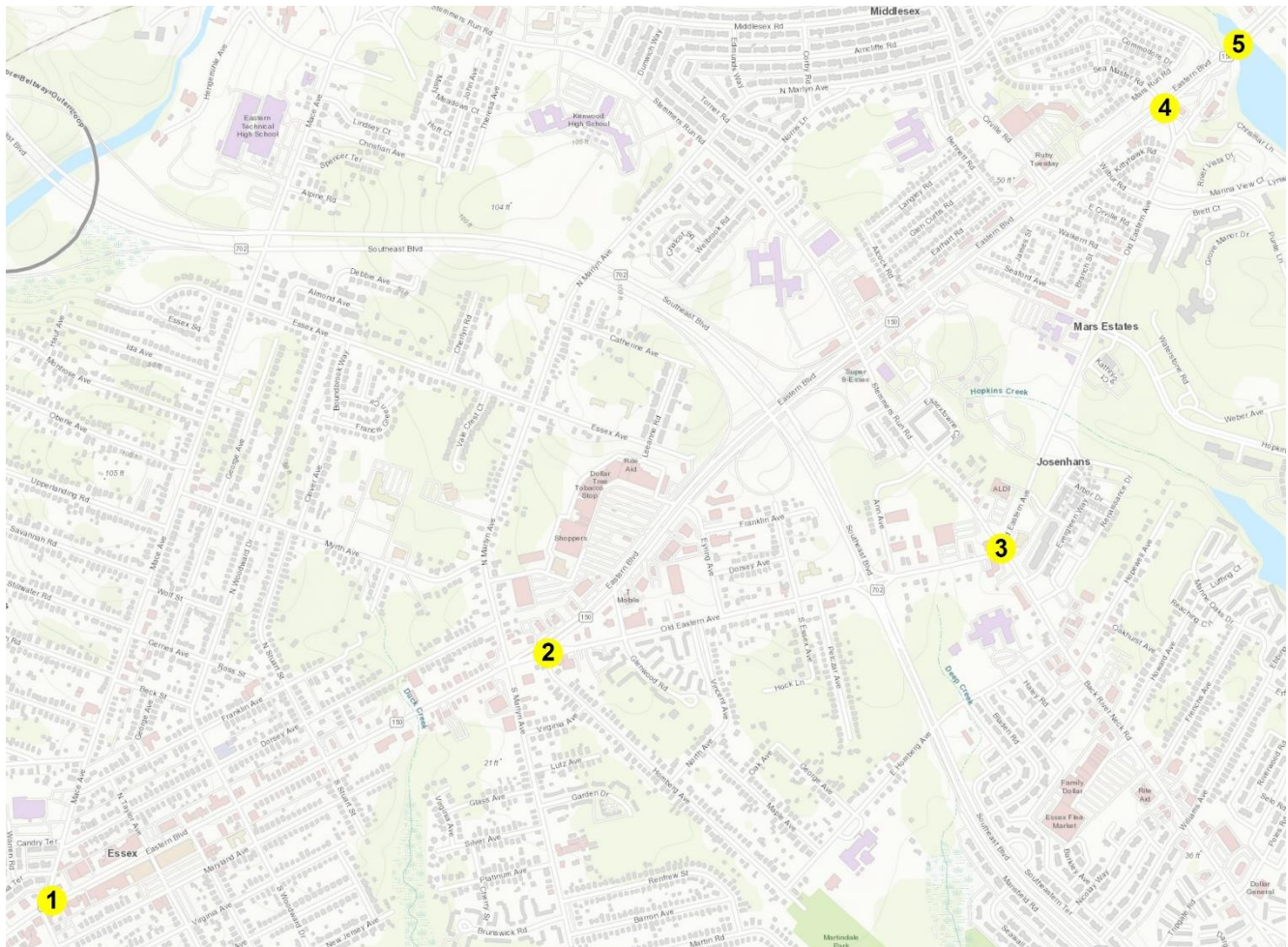


Image credit: Deirdre Aikin

Treatment of Special Places on the Corridor

The Eastern Boulevard corridor extends 3 miles from its western gateway to eastern gateway. The area would benefit from marking the following nodes with streetscape art that displays a continuous theme and weaves the area together.

- 1) Eastern Blvd and Mace Ave
- 2) Homberg Ave and Old Eastern Ave
- 3) Old Eastern Ave and Lower Back River Neck Road
- 4) Eastern Blvd and Old Eastern Ave
- 5) Eastern Blvd and Middle River Bridge



Reinforcement of the Maritime Theme

The Essex commercial area is known for, and benefits from its close proximity to the waterfronts of Middle River, Back River and the Chesapeake Bay. One of the first efforts undertaken by the Task Force was the design and installation of waterfront-themed banners. The following efforts should be taken to address and strengthen that theme:

- Murals and artwork should incorporate aspects of the waterfront.
- Planting and greening efforts should be those that naturally grow along the waterfront, and thrive in a waterfront environment.
- Community signage design should pay homage to the waterfront.
- Design of streetscape furniture including planters, benches, transformer boxes, etc. should incorporate a maritime theme.
- Painted alleys should consider a waterfront theme if possible.
- A nautical public art contest that highlights local talent is encouraged.



Image credit: The Laneway Project

Environmental Sustainability

Sustainable site design achieves a balance between development priorities and environmental best practices, enhancing the desirability of the area.

- Developments should be designed with green standards in mind. Adherence to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standard is preferred.
- Incorporate canopy street trees wherever feasible. Trees make the commercial environment more accommodating for pedestrians by improving aesthetics and reducing urban heat. Preservation of existing trees and planting of new trees is strongly encouraged.
- The pits for new trees should include root barriers to protect utilities and be at least 5' wide by 10' long. 6' by 12' is preferred.
- Street trees should be of a native, resilient variety. Preferred examples include American Elm, American Linden, Honey Locust, and Hackberry. Alternate species could be appropriate in certain locations. Species should be planted in contiguous groupings of 3-5 trees whenever possible.
- The minimum caliper size of new trees shall be 2 and ½ inches for canopy trees and 2 inches for understory trees.
- Stormwater Management shall be incorporated into all development projects to reduce runoff, improve water quality, and increase groundwater recharge.
- Incorporate stormwater management landscaping like bioretentions and native perennials wherever feasible, such as between the sidewalk and the street, or within street bumpouts.
- The use of green roofs, cool roofs and solar panels should be considered for both aesthetic and environmental benefits.



Image credit: Keep Eureka Beautiful



Image credit: Jersey Water Works

Streetscape

The streetscape describes the features of the public right-of-way. The streetscape should promote walkability as well as a variety of other modes of transportation.

- Locate well-marked crosswalks in all areas where increased pedestrian access is warranted, in coordination with Baltimore County Department of Public Works – Transportation.
- Develop protected bicycle lanes to reduce reliance on vehicular use and slow traffic. Bicycle lanes should be protected with spacing from traffic, curbs, bollards, landscaping or flex flags.
- Incorporate bumpouts or curb extensions to narrow the street at intersections where increased pedestrian safety is warranted.
- Install and group street furniture such as benches, trash cans and bicycle racks, especially on wide sidewalks and around bus shelters.
- Street furniture should be made of high quality materials that convey a sense of permanence and security.
- Creative design for street furniture is encouraged.
- Provide lighting, such as tree lights, that create an active evening environment and foster a sense of safety on the sidewalk.



Image credit: Baltimore Magazine



Image credit: Guerilla.com