

North Laurel Assessment

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Introduction

North Laurel is a small neighborhood situated in Howard County between Baltimore and Washington, DC. The area is home to a racially diverse population that includes mainly African American, White, Asian, and Latino/Hispanic individuals. Out of an estimated population of 21,437, the most current data indicate that 36% of the population is White, 37% is Black or African American, 15% is Asian, 7% is Hispanic, 5% is two or more races, and 0.2% is American Indian. Economically, the North Laurel area is stable and largely comprised of families of moderate or high income; most residents are highly educated and financially stable. With a poverty level under 6% of the population, residents of the community are able to provide well for themselves. The median household income for the area is \$96,601, fairly close to the \$110,133 average for all of Howard County. Laurel City, in contrast, has a median household income of \$68,230 (United States Census Bureau).

We noted some confusion about the population and demographics of North Laurel because of an inconsistency in the defined boundary of the area. Due to an error in the census information for the boundaries of North Laurel, the 2010 census reported the population in North Laurel at 4,474. The error was later corrected in an Errata document published by the U.S. Census Bureau, but readers will find some inconsistencies in data when searching websites or other documents about the community (Notes and Errata).

Methodology

To complete an assessment of this neighborhood, we utilized a number of study methods. As a first step, we drove and walked around the neighborhood, familiarizing ourselves with the streets, buildings, and other important community landmarks. We also did a literature review of data available from the internet, interviewed community stakeholders as possible, and spent time in the community talking to residents in a variety of locations around the area. Identifying strengths is an important value within the social work profession, so it's worthwhile to note that we completed the assessment process with this in mind. Although we certainly also looked for topics of community concern in order to identify areas of possible growth for North Laurel, we did this with particular attention to the positive experiences of community members and the identified strengths of their community.

Real Estate/Housing

North Laurel is home to a robust housing market, and can boast a variety of housing styles, including single family homes, townhomes, condominiums, and garden style apartments. While many are drawn to this area because of high performing schools, low unemployment, and proximity to both Baltimore and the DC Metro area, available housing is also an important component to North Laurel's popularity. North Laurel is a popular place to live, and can in fact be found on *MONEY* magazine's list of the top fifty places to live in 2015 (Best Places to Live 2015: North Laurel, Maryland). Realtors stress that this is a stable, safe place to raise children, a reality that makes it a prime location for your family (personal communication, Long and Foster Open House, December 6, 2015). In addition to all these strengths, the high quality of the available housing stock in this area is an important asset for members of the community.

A study of the housing market reveals a healthy cycle of home sales. Although in-depth assessment of real estate data for the North Laurel region is complicated by the fact that much of the existing data spans a distance beyond the boundaries of North Laurel, we have gathered data that we believe to be relevant, with assistance from the Howard County Association of Realtors. We find that homes sold in this area in September 2015 were on the market for an average of 44 days, representing an 8% decrease from the prior year. Additionally, there were 157 newly listed homes for sale in September 2015, an 11% increase from the prior year. A total of 129 units were sold in that same month (North Laurel, MD Real Estate and Homes for Sale). The median home sale price \$304,129 (City-data.com). While high home prices can be an indicator of economic prosperity within a neighborhood, it can also indicate that housing in this area may be out of reach for households living with low or moderate incomes.

The Canterbury Riding housing development merits specific attention because of its centrality and strategic importance to the North Laurel community. Canterbury Riding is a set of condominiums lining both sides of All Saints Road, one of the main roads within the neighborhood. Much of the North Laurel housing is relatively new and needs little except for regular upkeep; however, some residences along All Saints Drive and within the Canterbury Riding district could benefit from being updated and repaired, and a small percentage of these homes have code enforcement issues such as uncontained trash. The development contains homes that are older and less expensive than surrounding homes; most homes in this development are rented for between \$1400-1800 or sold for between \$149,000 and \$164,000 (Trulia.com). The homes appear to be in relatively good condition, and the communities seem to be vibrant and healthy.

While some homes within these areas may be in need of minimal upkeep or repairs in order to achieve the high level of maintenance that is expected within this community, it's important to note that the homes in the Canterbury Riding district represent the affordable housing of North Laurel. These homes are not as modern or large as some of the newer housing stock, yet this remains a nice, quiet and safe neighborhood that many families enjoy being a part of. The Canterbury Riding homes serve an important need within the community, keeping a portion the community affordable for people with a variety of income levels.

Schools

The area school system is consistently noted as a strength of the North Laurel community, and is a major draw for families who choose to move to this area. In interviews that we completed, residents often stated that the success of the area's schools is important for them, and for many was an important motivation for choosing to reside in this district (personal communication, December 7, 2015). There are both public, private and charter schools in this area. Centrally located in the community is Forest Ridge Elementary school. For the purposes of this assessment, we chose to examine this school closely.

Forest Ridge Elementary is a large, modern, well supported educational facility that currently serves about 720 students. Consistent with North Laurel's ethnically diverse population, the ethnicities of the students here are fairly representative of the general community, with students that are about 23% Asian, 32% African American, 12% Hispanic, and 25% White. Families of diverse economic statuses and cultural backgrounds are represented within this facility as well. Currently, about a quarter (26%) of students are part of the free or reduced lunch program, and 11% of students limited English proficient students. The school enjoys active and meaningful community participation, with 330 active PTA members and educational partnerships with several local area businesses. As of 2013, it has been certified as a Maryland Green School (Howard County Public School System).

One area of concern for community members is falling scores on standardized tests. Forest Ridge Elementary has seen MSA math scores decrease significantly in the last few years, although reading scores have stayed relatively even. In 2014 for Math, 26% of the students were "advanced," 52% were "proficient," and 22% were "basic." For English, 40% scored advanced, 52% scored proficient and 8% scored at the basic level (Howard County Public School System)

In the eyes of many community members, Forest Ridge and other schools in the area are functioning at a very high level (Great! Schools). For most, the schools are meeting the needs of the students and their families. However, it is clear not only from the recent drop in test scores but also from

the words of local residents that some students are falling behind. According to residents who have had personal experience working with some of the failing students, a lack of support and guidance can cause some children within these schools to fail to demonstrate their full potential for success (Forest Ridge Elementary School). As a community that highly values the education that children receive during their childhood years, finding ways to provide the personal support that children need to be successful in school can help improve the experiences that these children have as they complete their education.

Crime/Public Safety

North Laurel is a relatively low crime area, and the majority of crimes that do occur are non-violent thefts and burglaries. With that said, because safety and security is highly valued within this community, it's important to pay attention to the experiences of community members regarding this topic. We suggest that assessing crime data in this area provides part of the picture, but that understanding the community's feelings on this topic is equally important for addressing issues of crime, safety, and security.

The city posts weekly online updates of crimes committed in the area; however, these reports do not separate data by exact location. In order to gain a better understanding of crime in this area, as well as the community sentiment on this subject, we attended a Civic Association Meeting hosted by the Southern Howard County Civic Association. Our findings from speaking to residents suggest that residents are concerned about the following topics:

- **Burglaries:** The concern is particularly salient during the holiday season on Old Scaggsville Road; some community members noted that they get burglarized every year around holiday season. According to the police officer present at the meeting, at least five local businesses have been burglarized, including Kake Korner and 7-11. The officer present at this community meeting stated that there was no increase in these crimes over the past few years.
- **Prostitution.** Residents stated that prostitution is an issue of concern, and cited the Turf Motel as a venue where prostitutes walk and meet many of the truck drivers that are headed to existing nearby businesses.
- **Traffic and Safety:** Residents stated that truck drivers sometimes drive the vehicles down streets they are supposed to be banned from, creating concern about the safety of these streets. Residents in other interviews as well also cited concern about traffic safety and high speed drivers in the area (personal communication, December 7, 2015).

While North Laurel residents and business owners seem concerned about violent crimes in the area, the crime rate in North Laurel is relatively low. According to the Washington Post from 2014, Howard County police report no occurrences of violent crime within the Whiskey Bottom area, and only 273 instances of robbery, breaking and entering, and motor vehicle theft throughout the year (Glaros). From attending the meeting and speaking with community members, there appears to be a disconnect between residents' perceptions of crime in the area and the crimes that are actually occurring (personal communication, Howard County Civic Association Meeting, October 6, 2015).

Commercial/Retail

There is little commercial or retail development within North Laurel, making this an area of possible growth and improvement for residents. The retail development that does exist is located on All Saints Road in the 20723 zip code. This retail development includes the following list of shops: North Laurel Animal Hospital, Access Dental Care, All Saints Liquor, Tae Kwon Do Before and After School, Subway, Pizza Presto, Dollar Plus (Latino, African, and Indian Food), Mandarin House Restaurant, Urban Market, Vision Par Nails and Tanning. The only major franchise in this development is Subway; however, there is also a Weis Market located about a block away at 9270 All Saints Road.

While the lack of retail options could be seen as a weakness of this community, a few positive factors are worth noting. Because North Laurel is a geographically small, close knit community, there is a short travel time to reach these businesses. Some employees view this retail development as positive because these businesses have been stable in the area for over fifteen years. Being located within a primarily residential area can make residents more likely to use the available retail services because of the lack of other close options (personal communication, December 7, 2015). Moreover, there are several large vacant retail areas within the development that could be the home to new businesses, and which may prove helpful in drawing attention to this retail area.

This area has the potential to become a community gathering place, if these businesses can be challenged to foster a greater level of community involvement. Residents express a desire for a retail area they can call their own, noting that the drive to the nearest shopping centers in Anne Arundel County and Prince George's County is not only a long distance to travel, but is also not what they envision for their own community (personal communication, Howard County Civic Association Meeting, October 6, 2015). Favoring local enterprises and encouraging businesses to hire staff from within the community could help turn this small retail area from a lackluster development into a source of community identity and pride.

Community Gathering Places: Recreation and Social Opportunities

On the door of an empty storefront within the retail development on All Saints Road is a sign informing the community that the Howard County Police Community Office has moved to the North Laurel Community Center. This move evidences a shift in the available gathering places for the North Laurel community, demonstrating that the community center is becoming an increasingly important community space.

The North Laurel Community Center is a primary asset for this area, providing opportunities for children, adults, and senior citizens to play, exercise, and meet for a variety of purposes. The building features facilities for exercising and playing sports, commercial cooking, educational gatherings, senior activities, skating, and early childhood play (North Laurel Community Center). A walk through this center reveals youth enjoying time together at the free skatepark, small children playing at a playground under their parents' supervision, seniors engaging in athletic activities, and religious groups meeting to socialize and work together. Residents of North Laurel are vocal about their appreciation of this invaluable community resource, citing its value for providing fun, safe spaces to spend time together (personal communication, December 7, 2015). Because of the lack of retail options in the area, this center is the primary social gathering place within the community, and indeed draws people from outside the community to come to North Laurel.

Reflections and Recommendations

We are impressed with the high level of satisfaction that we discovered among community residents in this area. People like living in North Laurel. Many residents, when asked what they might change about their community, simply didn't have a response, a reality that speaks extremely highly of North Laurel. With that said, here we provide a number of suggestions for building on existing strengths to continue to improve the North Laurel community:

Consider expanding free and low-cost activities for children before and after school. Because education and family are so highly valued in this area, a key factor in maintaining healthy communities and attracting residents is investing in activities for children that are accessible to families at a variety of income levels. The North Laurel Community Center provides a great meeting point for these kinds of activities, especially because staff and residents who use this space are already engaging in community-building actions. We recommend building on the community's strengths to increase affordable programming for children at the Community Center in the afterschool hours.

Listen to community concerns about safety, traffic, and crime. While crime is a relatively minimal concern, and violent crime in the area is almost nonexistent, neighborhood safety is clearly an area of community interest. Community members need to know their concerns are taken seriously. We commend steps taken to hear the voices of residents on these topics. The presence of police officers at the community center encourages healthy involvement with law enforcement officials, and the existence of Civic Association meetings that are open to the public allows residents to voice their concerns and their ideas for improvements. We recommend continuing to provide these valuable resources.

View the community's affordable housing as an asset. As we detailed above, while the community's least expensive housing stock poses slightly increased challenges for keeping the area well-maintained and modern looking, these areas are very important in allowing North Laurel to remain a vibrant, diverse community. We recommend investing in the provision of low-cost maintenance opportunities that assist residents in keeping their housing beautiful and healthy. This housing is a community strength, not a weakness, and investing in the health and wellness of affordable areas will encourage continued community growth.

Take steps to increase community investment in the retail district. Currently, the retail area is small, minimally attractive, and not a source of much community pride. Finding ways to help change this could encourage greater economic growth for the area, providing an opportunity for the community to have their retail needs met from inside their own neighborhood instead of having to travel to larger business districts outside of the area. We recommend inviting community members into the process of redeveloping this area by soliciting the opinions of residents about changes they'd like to see here. Rather than developing for the sake of development, encouraging this kind of community involvement will help ensure that residents are excited about utilizing the resources present in this area. We also recommend creating policies to incentivize hiring local staff at retail venues.

Brand and define North Laurel in ways that highlight its strengths. North Laurel is a very attractive community for several reasons: it is considered to have some of the best schools in the area, and is located between D.C. and Baltimore, making it desirable for commuters. However, upon entering the boundaries of the community, outsiders may not realize that they have entered North Laurel, and may fail to recognize the distinction between North Laurel and the greater Laurel area. With so much to offer, North Laurel can benefit from defining its strengths, resources, and identity to the surrounding community.

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