



OPPORTUNITIES *for* TRANSFORMATIVE PLACEMAKING

**Columbia Gateway,
Maryland**



ANNE T. AND ROBERT M. BASS CENTER FOR
TRANSFORMATIVE PLACEMAKING

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November 2018

COLUMBIA GATEWAY, MARYLAND

As the demand for walkability and a lively public realm increases, suburban office and research parks around the country are facing increasing pressure to evolve.

To compete, developers and landowners in these areas feel they must provide more amenities, as well as spaces and programming that encourage professional and social collaboration. But they often must overcome limited finances, legacy zoning, and other policies in the process.

This case study examines how one such office park in Columbia, Md. is implementing a plan to transform itself into a lively district that meets the changing needs of tenants and their workers.



HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The 920-acre site that eventually became Columbia Gateway has been a part of the vision for the planned community of Columbia, Md. since its inception.

In the years leading up to the founding of Columbia in 1967, famed developer James Rouse bought up 14,000 acres of rural land in an area between Baltimore and Washington with the hopes of demonstrating a third way between America's struggling cities and haphazard suburban sprawl. He set out to prove that with adequate interdisciplinary planning, his version of European new towns could combine the pastoral spacious character and housing that many Americans sought in the suburbs with the employment opportunities, amenities, and mix of races and incomes found in cities. Today, while Columbia's built form may look similar to other suburban places around the country, this unincorporated town of 100,000 has largely maintained its affordability, while increasing its racial diversity over time. In 2017, the town was 56 percent white, 25 percent black, 11 percent Asian and 8 percent Latino, with a median home price of \$300,000—though the majority of households earn six-figure incomes.¹

In 1969, two years after Columbia's founding, General Electric (GE) announced it would open Appliance Park-East on the site of what is today the Columbia Gateway office park. The GE facility was the first major employer to sign on to Rouse's ambitious scheme, but the plant only ever employed a quarter of the planned 12,000-person workforce that GE promised. Two decades later they closed the facility, moving their operations offshore. Rouse quickly bought back the land and began the long process of redeveloping the industrial corporate campus into Columbia Gateway, a typical suburban office park. Today, the gradual replacement of old GE buildings with suburban offices is nearly complete—just in time for a new set of major shifts in worker preferences and economic development.

"We were the orange shag carpeting of business parks," explains Vernon Thompson, executive vice president of the Howard County Economic Development Authority (HCEDA). When it was built, Gateway served its purpose well, but nearly 30 years

At a glance:



THE SITE

920-acre,
300 companies,
12,000 employees



INDUSTRIES

Professional services,
cybersecurity, medical
devices, regenerative
medicine, insurance, and
government contracting

on, it's starting to show its age. The buildings are isolated, the ground floors blank, the roads wide, the sidewalks stunted, the access limited. Eighty-five percent of the land remains unbuilt, with 20 percent of all land taken up by surface parking lots and 60 percent by unprogrammed open space.² "If you don't know exactly where that one deli is, tucked inside that one office building, it's hard to find a cup of coffee for God's sake," says Larry Twele, CEO of the HCEDA. Today, approximately 12,000 employees work across 300 companies in a range of industries, including professional services, cybersecurity, medical devices, regenerative medicine, insurance, and government contracting. But tomorrow, will Gateway still be able to retain and cultivate this center of employment and innovation in a landscape where its firms and workers demand a more dynamic, urban environment? The answer to this question may lie in a planned transformation of the park that represents the spirit, if not the form, of Rouse's forward-looking vision for the area.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although plans began in 2015, a recent announcement brought some urgency to the redevelopment of Columbia Gateway. Tenable, Inc. is a fast-growing international cybersecurity company and a longtime tenant of Gateway. When Amit Yoran became CEO in 2016, he made it clear that he was committed to staying in Columbia, a hub of cybersecurity activity. But amid fierce competition for top talent, the company decided in late 2017 that it will move down the road to the Merriweather District, one part of a major effort to rebuild Columbia Town Center as a walkable, mixed-use downtown.³ While the Tenable move will itself be a big loss for Gateway, the Howard County Economic Development Authority also sees it as a cautionary tale, worrying that—without rapid intervention—the move might just be an omen of things to come.

In 2015, Howard county executive Allan Kittleman announced his vision for Columbia Gateway to become an “innovation district”—a dense mixed-use transit-connected area where startups, anchor institutions, and research-intensive corporations cluster together and connect through community-oriented places and programs. The vision was aimed not only at retaining existing firms and employees, but at better leveraging Columbia Gateway’s cybersecurity assets and its

strategic location between Washington, Baltimore, and the Army’s Fort Meade, home to the National Security Agency, to cultivate new business growth.⁴ However, Columbia Gateway has a long way to go to meet this ambition. A recent report, commissioned by park property owners, suggests that the fully built out district should include nearly 275,000 square feet of retail and amenities, and nearly 2 million square feet of residential to help support a new 24/7 urban lifestyle—an enormous amount of new development. Further, although 80 acres of the site are shovel-ready, the county must update the covenants and zoning ordinances—including land use designations that limit density, housing, and retail uses—before any construction can begin. This process will take years to complete.⁵

In the meantime, the HCEDA is pursuing a variety of strategies to keep up the momentum. In 2017, Howard County threw its hat into the ring for an old county office building that houses the HCEDA offices, the center Amazon’s HQ2 competition, offering up Gateway as part of the package. Winning would have provided the prospective innovation district with a major employment anchor, while likely helping to mobilize the money and decisions needed to accelerate redevelopment—though at great cost. Howard County also was among the many jurisdictions criticized for offering undisclosed—but presumably generous—tax incentives for Amazon to relocate to their city. However, for better or worse, Howard County did not make it onto Amazon’s list of top 20 contenders.

Other smaller initiatives have proven more effective. In 2016, Gateway took the first steps toward creating the Howard County Innovation Center within its borders. Located in an old county office building that holds the HCEDA offices, the center is an effort to reorganize existing resources into an anchor for the innovation district. Doing so using a public building has its perks. “If I were trying to do this in a commercial market office building, I’d be looking to fill that building with anyone who could pay to fill space,” says Twele. But “[t]he county believes in this as a strategy, and it gives me the luxury to be very selective about who we build a space with.” Soon, it will also house the Maryland Center for Entrepreneurship (HCEDA’s in-house business incubator), the Howard Tech Council,



a satellite location of the Howard Community College, and office space for graduates of the incubator program. In the long run, Twele hopes it will also include more resources for second-stage companies and programs focused on building diversity. Like many other innovation centers around the country, the ground floor will include a community area with a cafe and event space. In the absence of a dense built environment with many gathering places and community events, other would-be innovation districts have found such spaces a crucial first step in stoking the existing innovation ecosystem and making a good first impression on prospective newcomers.

Columbia Gateway has also invested in public and community spaces as a low-cost, high-impact way to begin nurturing the innovation district—before even breaking ground. In spring of 2017, the park launched a weekly food truck program, which drew 300 people to four food trucks at its inaugural event. Today, the park offers food trucks at locations around the park every day of the week. “It might [be surprising] to kick off an innovation district with food trucks,” Twele told the Business Monthly in 2017, “but this is about people getting to network, because ‘intellectual collisions’ begin to occur when people share technology and ideas.”⁶ Much like the new Innovation Center, public

space activations like these can act as a kind of density substitute, a way to bring people together even in a traditional suburban setting. Compared to peers like Research Triangle Park in North Carolina—which has kicked off its own ambitious redevelopment effort with a repurposed building called The Frontier—Gateway’s placemaking initiatives are still limited, but the food truck program provides proof of concept for what Project for Public Spaces calls a “lighter, quicker, cheaper” approach to improving public spaces through simple amenities, programs, and even light development.⁷ These iterative improvements can, in turn, help build public buy-in and organizational capacity—both necessary ingredients to addressing greater challenges.

James Rouse imagined Columbia as a “garden for the growing of people,” a place for our country to heal its past of segregation, inequality, environmental destruction, and diminishing sense of community.⁸ “The only valid purpose of any civilization, is to grow better people,” he said, “more creative, more productive, more inspiring, more loving people.” With continued redevelopment and placemaking efforts, the Columbia Gateway Innovation District has an opportunity to help realize Rouse’s dream of a more people-focused economy.



ENDNOTES

1 Amanda Colson Hurley, "Here's a suburban experiment cities can learn from," Washington Post Magazine, July 13, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/heres-a-suburban-experiment-cities-can-learn-from/2017/07/11/c737165e-4d1f-11e7-bc1b-fddb8359dee_story.html.

2 The Business Monthly, "Development Focus Shifts to Columbia Gateway," available at <http://www.bizmonthly.com/development-focus-shifts-to-columbia-gateway/> (March 17, 2017).

3 Morgan Eichensehr, "New Tenable CEO plans to continue high growth, keep company local," Baltimore Business Journal, December 16, 2016, available at <https://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2016/12/16/new-tenable-ceo-plans-to-continue-high-growth.html>.

4 Christopher Wink, "Howard County says its Gateway Innovation Center must benefit all Maryland," Technical.ly, available at <https://technical.ly/baltimore/2017/10/05/howard-county-gateway/> (October 5, 2017).

5 The Business Monthly, "Development Focus Shifts to Columbia Gateway," available at <http://www.bizmonthly.com/development-focus-shifts-to-columbia-gateway/> (March 17, 2017).

6 Ibid.

7 Project for Public Spaces, "The lighter, quicker, cheaper transformation of public spaces," available at <https://www.pps.org/article/lighter-quicker-cheaper> (accessed October 27, 2018).

8 Jimmy Stamp, "James W. Rouse's legacy of better living through design," Smithsonian Magazine, April 23, 2014, available at www.smithsonianmag.com/history/james-w-rouses-legacy-better-living-through-design-180951187/.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Project for Public Spaces (PPS) would like to thank Anne T. and Robert M. Bass for their generous support of this profile. The authors would also like to thank Mark Thompson for introducing us to the Columbia Gateway office park, and to Vernon Thompson and Larry Twele for their insight into its past, present, and future.

Thanks to Luisa Zottis for layout and design.

Photos courtesy of Preston Huett.

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