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Drop the money here: Officials say growth in Silver Spring is 'smart'

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Paint a bull's eye on the corner of Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue, or maybe a dollar sign. With the arrival of the state's "Smart Growth" legislation recently passed by the General Assembly, it is possible more state dollars will be heading Silver Spring's way.

Smart Growth is designed to reduce urban sprawl by directing state funds to projects in areas with existing infrastructure -- roads, transportation, utilities -- and away from less-developed areas.

At a press conference in downtown Silver Spring Wednesday, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan outlined a host of potential areas where the state can direct its funds: the oft-discussed central business district, Montgomery College expansion and revitalization programs for other business areas.

The state has already designated Silver Spring as an enterprise zone, in which businesses can receive tax abatements and other incentives for relocating or expanding, and the county has previously announced several businesses will be taking advantage of the program.

But Duncan and others hope to attract even more private business interest to the area.

"It's cheerleading, sure, but it's also showing people that things are happening in Silver Spring," Duncan said in a telephone interview.

Potomac Electric Power Co. seems to have signed on to that belief. At Wednesday's press conference, Pepco donated \$15,000 to fund an initial study for the National Main Street Program, a program designed to pump up declining business areas with special events, façade improvements and economic development programs.

The Main Street program will first look at the Fenton Street Village area, a collection of smaller businesses and shops located just off the main streets of Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue.

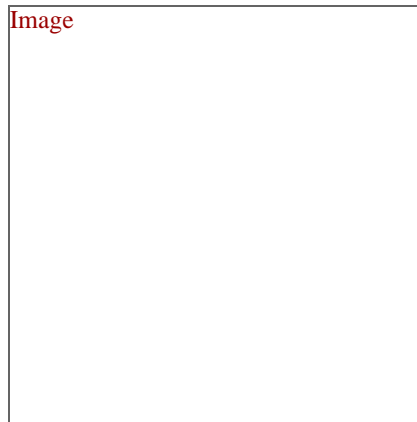
The program was introduced to the county by members of Citizens of Sensible Development, a citizens' group.

Pepco's commitment to Silver Spring began months earlier, when it upgraded its systems to allow for increased capacity in preparation for the American Dream, according to Steve Arabia, a Pepco spokesman.

Even when the Dream failed, "we figured something else was coming," Arabia said.

In addition to the Main Street program, there are other projects on the county's wish list that would be appropriate for state money:

*The Silver Spring transit center, a transportation hub near the existing Metro station that will consolidate access to Metro, MARC commuter trains and Ride-On buses. The two-phase project, to be completed in 1998, will cost about \$20 million, although that figure could go higher with more amenities, and funds will come from state and federal coffers.



*The 14-acre site at the corner of Colesville and Georgia, which was to be the location of the American Dream mall. That project is no longer likely to be one large project, but rather have a "town center" approach.

*The county would also like to see more housing in the downtown district.

*The county also announced the existence of the Fenton Street 50/50 Program, in which the county would essentially match funds for renovating or improving the exteriors of buildings. At least one property owner has said he is interested in the program to improve his building on Sligo Avenue. Other property owners have been reluctant, however, saying the program's June 30 deadline is too soon and there is only \$100,000 available.

Duncan has said he expects to name new developers and outline the projects in a few weeks. Hazel Peterson of Fairfax, Va., and Triangle Equi-ties of New York City are rumored to be the finalists.

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