

Investigating the Future and Image of Leesburg, Virginia

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, the Washington metropolitan area (Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV) has experienced extraordinary levels of growth, facilitating the region's emergence as not only a center of national governance but increasingly a nationally and internationally significant location for population and economic development. Leesburg, Virginia, located approximately forty miles northwest of the downtown core, has historically avoided the sprawling suburbanization characteristic of more proximate locations such as Fairfax and Arlington, instead serving as a distinct economic center for Loudoun County. However, as the Town of Leesburg has grown in both population and landmass over the past approximately fifty years, it has also become increasingly incorporated into an outward-pushing Northern Virginia region, dramatically reducing the once-evident buffer physically and psychologically separating those two entities. The increasing interconnection between Leesburg and the Washington metro region raises questions about the futures of both, with impacts for ongoing conversations regarding urban and regional-scale growth dynamics, governance, and place-making, as well as their intersections with local economic development. This thesis seeks to understand the methods by which Leesburg navigates the challenge to retain a unique and distinctive character while acknowledging the new spatial reality of its connections to the larger region. To better understand this complex situation, we conducted semi-structured interviews with fourteen individuals having strong understanding and expertise regarding economic development, governance, and place making in Leesburg and the rest of the Northern Virginia region. The interviews suggest that Leesburg is becoming a destination for outside visitors and tourists, while also crafting a 'complete community' in which residents can live, work, and enjoy recreational activities; Leesburg increasingly serves a number of distinct purposes for growing and varying audiences. While interesting in itself for observers of the Washington metro region, the Leesburg case also presents relevant implications for the future of large-scale urban and regional growth and change, as well as the continued validity of heritage-based place images given contemporary economic and development imperatives.

# Investigating the Future and Image of Leesburg, Virginia

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The Washington, DC region (Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV) has seen both population growth and physical expansion over the past several decades, making it an increasingly important region within the United States and the world. The Town of Leesburg, Virginia is located about forty miles northwest of Washington, DC, and its distance from the downtown has historically allowed it to remain separate from the suburbanization and sprawl associated with DC's closer-in suburbs. During the past fifty years, however, Leesburg's growth and the outward push of development pressures from more eastern Northern Virginia localities have combined to limit that historical separation. Increasing interconnections between Leesburg and the rest of the DC metro region raise questions about if and how Leesburg will create, sustain, and demonstrate a unique identity moving forward, and what that identity will include. This research involved fourteen interviews with planners, policymakers, and expert observers in Leesburg and the Northern Virginia region to better understand the town's place image and economic development. The results suggest that Leesburg is increasingly becoming a destination for tourists and outside visitors, while also working to foster a community in which residents are able to live, work, and play. The Leesburg case is important because of what it says about region-wide growth, development, and governance, as well as its implications for the maintenance of historically-based place images in the modern world.

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## **Structure of Thesis**

This thesis begins with an introduction to the unique urban development situation of Leesburg, Virginia, located on the periphery of Washington, DC's Virginia suburbs. Long the commercial center of a highly rural and agricultural Loudoun County, Leesburg has experienced significant urban growth and landscape change over the past five decades. This thesis examines the implications of this change on the Town's efforts to retain its historic charm and negotiate its character while also accomplishing economic development initiatives. Following the introduction, the research questions and a short note on the qualitative methodological approach are presented. Next, a review of prior literature, with particular attention and emphasis on the qualities of exurban and peripheral locales as well as place image and its connections to inter- and intra-region urban competition, is provided. After the literature review, data collection and analysis approaches are outlined; this methodology section is followed by a discussion of results. We find that Leesburg is increasingly becoming a 'complete' community and a destination of significance for a wide audience, but also that a number of factors create uncertainty in defining Leesburg's path forward. The thesis concludes with overall implications and conclusions gleaned from the Leesburg case example, in addition to suggested directions for future research.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Problem Statement

In the spring of 2022, the Town Council of Leesburg, Virginia adopted a new town plan, entitled Legacy Leesburg Town Plan (popularly known as Legacy Leesburg). Legacy Leesburg outlines a new approach to comprehensive planning in Leesburg through the promotion of a “playbook concept” that seeks to add a degree of flexibility to the decision-making process. Put simply, the playbook concept fashions Legacy Leesburg as a ‘living document’ that can better respond to evolving conditions, in contrast to the more traditional comprehensive planning model which outlines defined goals, deliverables, and features for particular areas. One of the core messages of the Legacy Leesburg document is the need for the Town of Leesburg to transition towards a more proactive approach to planning, wherein the Town assumes “a greater role in working to achieve the vision of Legacy Leesburg rather than relying more heavily on the development community” (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022, p. 219). As explained by senior town planner Richard Klusek, “we’re ... looking for the individual merits of each and every application, and again, that shift to proactive planning where the Town really takes lead on getting amenities for its residents and perhaps working collaboratively with the development community to talk about some of the things that a particular community needs rather than just saying 10% open space” (*Council work session*, 2022, p. 17). Again, this represents a fundamental shift from the traditional reactive approach to comprehensive planning.

The playbook concept emerges from the fact that the Town of Leesburg is already considered ‘built out’, meaning that there is little space for new development. As such, Legacy Leesburg was crafted with the intention of having the Town of Leesburg become more deeply enmeshed in the development agenda writ-large. While the document outlines the necessity of

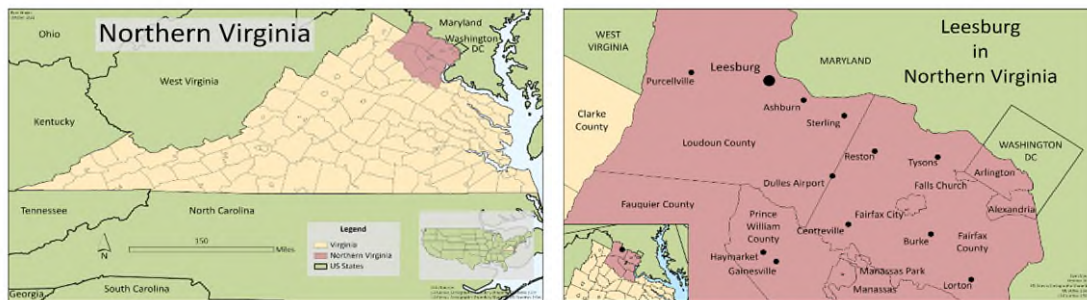
having urban development adhere to the “character of Leesburg”, it simultaneously stresses the importance of the Town of Leesburg being able to mobilize an action plan or advance a particular initiative or strategic priority in a highly opportunistic manner. The adoption of Legacy Leesburg is a signal that the Town of Leesburg has reached an important moment in its urban development history, with the task of trying to nurture urban growth without eroding local identity serving as a lingering challenge.

In many respects, Leesburg, Virginia now faces the challenge that numerous communities located on the metropolitan periphery in the United States are currently negotiating. Leesburg’s small-town feel and historical ambience have largely created prior understandings of a locality sometimes perceived as a bedroom community for other parts of the Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions. Nevertheless, modern economic imperatives and development patterns are igniting a reimagining of the role of Leesburg in a changing urban environment. This reimagining has not been an entirely seamless process, with perceived tension in the process of maintaining the town’s character--that character having emerged out of Leesburg’s historical distance from the rest of the Northern Virginia region and associated with fairly ‘independent’ development (see, for example, *A brief history*, n.d.)--while incorporating characteristics more emblematic of a modern suburban sprawl. As urban infilling increases the physical connections between Leesburg and neighboring suburban communities, town planners, administrators and other stakeholders are facing questions concerning the role of Leesburg in an evolving urban system. With the rapid expansion of the metropolitan boundaries of the Greater Washington region, Leesburg is encountering a new spatial reality. This thesis examines the ways Leesburg is responding to the pressures of urban growth and the creation of this new spatial reality.

It is possible to imagine that Leesburg could leverage its physical distance from Washington, DC and focus on a style of place-based development that celebrates its historic character and small town feel; however, such a development plan is more complex than it may initially appear. The Legacy Leesburg plan (2022, p. 8) promotes the town's Old and Historic District as a "prized asset" (p. 10) and an essential building block of the town's hard-fought-for identity; indeed, Leesburg's Historic district is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. At the same time, the plan also recognizes that the historic quarter reflects a now-bygone image of Leesburg as a county-level economic center, whereas the Town now seeks to accomplish economic development initiatives with implications for a multi-state region (*A brief history*, n.d.). Gaining access to new amenities is also an important town priority in response to the increasingly competitive nature of competition between localities. Planners and administrators recognize the challenge of this complicated mix of imperatives, especially given that in crafting a complete community and remaining competitive within the region, the town must attract various forms of sustainable economic development, including economic development that occurs outside the Old and Historic District.

Leesburg, therefore, is at a critical juncture. It can: (1) actively choose to embrace the rest of the Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions, including suburban built forms; (2) it can reject the outward spread of suburbanization, emphasizing its historic downtown at the expense of other more suburban sections; or (3) it may seek a different road, picking and choosing various strategies in response to—or anticipation of—changes both inside and outside the Town borders. Regardless of the chosen route, the actions taken by those planners, administrators, developers, and policymakers in shaping the future of the Town have implications for the broader region. This is especially true because Leesburg has been used to

mark something of north-to-south dividing line within Loudoun County—to the east are more built-up areas, whereas areas westward tend to retain a more rural agricultural character (Harney, 2010; Peskin, 2016; Cowell & Eckerd, 2020; Cowell et al., 2020). Put simply, Leesburg functions as a transition zone from the county’s eastern build-up to its western rurality and open land (see Figures 1 and 2 below for a visualization of Leesburg’s place in the county and region). Therefore, changes within Leesburg might foretell changes within the rest of Loudoun County and even counties further geographically distant from Washington, D.C.



*Figures 1a and 1b show Leesburg’s place within the larger Northern Virginia region. Leesburg is located in central Loudoun County, which itself is occupied a northwestern part of Northern Virginia. Source: author.*

Leesburg’s shifting identity is reflected in the challenge of assigning it to the major categories used by geographers and other commentators for naming urban form. For example, Alder (2009) referred to the Town as “the farthest true suburb west of Washington,” whereas Peskin and Kashiwagi (2016) noted the emergence of an ‘edge city’ corridor along Route 7 just outside Leesburg; edge cities have been thought of as distinct from traditional suburbs (Garreau, 1991). Complicating the matter, some popular news sources have referred to Leesburg and other parts of Loudoun County as ‘exurbs’, a separate if ambiguous urban form in themselves (Phillips, 2008; Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2021). The lack of a coherent definition, category, or assignment for the town is also reflected in the complicated understandings of the Northern Virginia region expressed by its residents, especially regarding the region’s borders. For

example, White (2017) found that in a survey of these residents, the most important factors in determining regional boundaries were distance from Washington, DC, location within or outside Fairfax County, latitude, and total population. Given this list of factors, the status of Leesburg as relating to the region was uncertain.

Leesburg certainly possesses a number of characteristics making it unique -- for instance, it is Virginia's largest incorporated town, adding distinct complications to its relationship with the rest of the region. Yet, the urban development pressure the town faces is not dissimilar to that faced by many communities located on the periphery of metropolitan areas. As urbanization and suburbanization continue to expand outward from this country's central cities, the very placemaking and image-generating strategies employed by Leesburg remain relevant to planners and policymakers throughout the nation. Despite claims of a back-to-the city movement (South & Crowder, 1997; Hyra, 2015), decentralization continues to impact small and outlying towns across the United States. Communities once thought to be socially and spatially insular are now having to navigate new demographic and development conditions. Perhaps even more common is the nostalgic notion, with wide-ranging consequences, that places and experiences ought to stay the way they were in the mid-twentieth century. As expressed by Leesburg Town Council member Fernando Martinez, "I would have no problem paying more property taxes if we could keep the town the way it is with no more, no more building, no more industrial, no more commercial, no more retail. If we can just stay the way we are, I'd be okay with that" (2022, personal communication). This emphasis on keeping the town 'the way it is,' or more likely, the way it was once imagined, is common within a number of spatial contexts, with wide-reaching political and social implications. The case study of Leesburg, then, offers insight into this larger trend and how it is being navigated.

Even within the metropolitan Washington region, the expansion of the urban fabric has challenged a number of communities to reconsider how they present themselves to residents, businesses, and outsiders, yet this challenge is not the same for every locality. Leesburg's particular history and investments in built form, including the presence of a genuine and authentic historic center at the heart of what is already a large community, make it fundamentally different from those communities which only emerged during and after the mid-twentieth century. For instance, even as developments in the final two decades of the twentieth century embraced 'new urbanism' as a means of accomplishing 'traditional' community styles, as exemplified by the Fairfax community of Kentlands, most of these constructions failed to accomplish the authentic walkability, heterogeneity, and small town feel they imagined (Hahn, 2022). These 'created' communities contrast sharply with the genuine and historic downtown present in Leesburg, where idyllic and desirable features emerged organically rather than being manufactured. Indeed, this organic and genuine urban fabric represents a significant competitive advantage for Leesburg in comparison to places like Ashburn or Tysons -- while they certainly existed on the landscape before the large-scale development of the later twentieth century, these places cannot claim to have maintained historic built form or character to nearly the same extent as Leesburg. Certainly, the community and its leaders understand the significance of this unique characteristic, but they appear to have struggled in understanding how to promote and maintain their heritage in a manner that appeals to wide and growing audiences and facilitates a high quality of life in the face of modern development challenges and imperatives.

An examination of Leesburg additionally provides an opportunity to consider the interrelation of regional-level governance and administration, as well as contemporary metropolitan growth dynamics, with the facilitation and maintenance of a historically-based

understanding of a given locality. Furthermore, an investigation of Leesburg can inform how the retention and maintenance of a mid-twentieth century, Main Street USA-style image of life can survive contact with twenty-first century urban sprawl, and if in fact this is even a viable objective for planners, policymakers, and residents to advocate.

## 1.2 Background: The Town of Leesburg's urban evolution

Although Leesburg, Virginia gained early attention as an economic hub in the post-Civil War era due to its strategic location near both farmland and major cities (*A brief history*, n.d.), the most significant changes to the town have occurred over the last few decades. The Northern Virginia region as a whole has undergone development, growth, and evolution since the end of World War II, with popular and scholarly attention recently focusing on the speed and scale at which Loudoun County is being transformed (Suarez-Rubio et al., 2012; Cowell & Eckerd, 2020; Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2021; Hoffer, 2020). Many observable changes have occurred both to the physical (e.g., transportation infrastructure) and social ecology (e.g., politics and demographic composition) of the town.

Regarding transportation infrastructure, an important forthcoming development is the extension of Washington's Metro Silver Line to Dulles Airport, which as of March 2021 was projected to open in early 2022 (Pascale & Williams, 2021). At the time of writing the Washington Metrorail Safety Commission (WMSC) had not yet confirmed the Silver Line operationally ready, but all evidence indicates that the extension is nearing completion. This extension is part of a long-term plan by the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) to extend service further westward, with an eventual goal of reaching at least to Ashburn (*What is Dulles Metrorail*, 2021). Beyond the increased accessibility to the rest of the region this extension promises, many officials in Virginia have viewed it as "critical to fostering

development along the Dulles Toll Road corridor,” especially because many nearly-opened Metro stations already feature nearby developments with housing, retail, and office space (Aratani, 2021). Indeed, building around and near proposed and existing Metro stations is part of a larger pattern displayed within the Northern Virginia region. The Metro Walk at Moorefield Station townhome community, for instance, seeks to take advantage of the coming transit infrastructure in its marketing, with the homebuilder emphasizing that the development “offers luxury townhomes perfectly positioned within walking distance from the future Ashburn Metro station” (*Metro Walk*, n.d.). Even before the opening of that station, the development community has crafted new housing opportunities offering both increased density and anticipated access to the larger Washington, D.C. region, fundamentally altering the built form and character of this highly suburban locale. The investment in public transit infrastructure portends both a changing sense of place and increased level of integration for Loudoun County over the foreseeable time horizon. Whether and how Leesburg reacts to and capitalizes on this infrastructure, with the understanding that the likelihood of a train station coming to Leesburg is currently perceived to be quite low, will likely impact its identity moving forward.



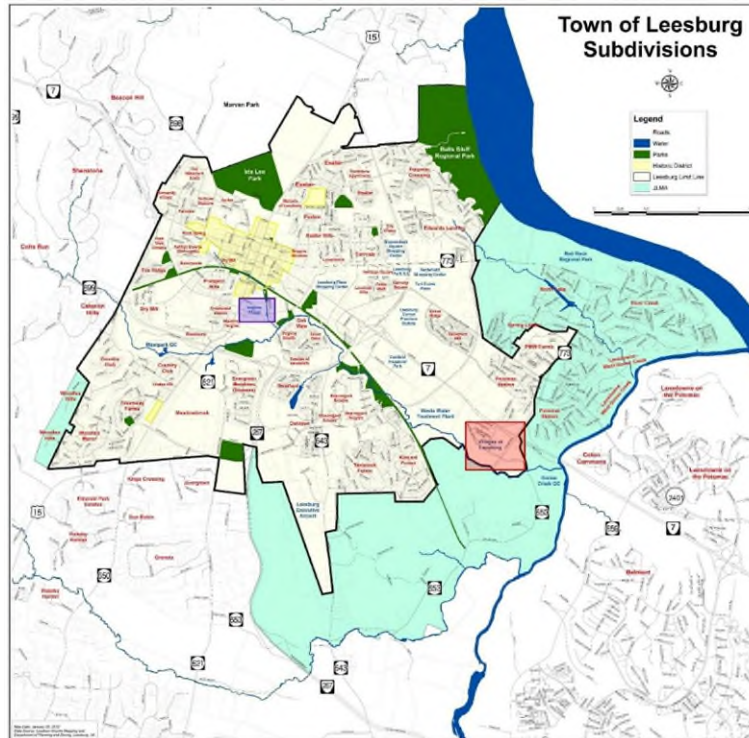


Figure 2: Leesburg has several subdivisions. The eastern gateway district includes the Village at Leesburg property, highlighted in a red box, while the Crescent Design District includes the Virginia Village property, highlighted in purple box. Source: Town of Leesburg Planning & Zoning, with modifications by the author.

Beyond transportation infrastructure, various other changes and updates to built form have occurred in the Town of Leesburg over the past several years. Town planners have identified areas such as the Crescent Design District, Edwards Ferry and Leesburg Bypass, and Eastern Gateway District as prime areas for such changes and updates, including redevelopment into areas of mixed land use (*Rewriting the Vision*, 2021). Importantly, these changes and updates rarely come without a level of consternation. Regarding the approval of the Crescent Design District, for example, then-mayor Kristen Umstaddt “disagreed [with her majority-voting colleagues] about the effects of heightened commercial and residential density, saying the result would overwhelm streets and provide unwanted competition to businesses in the historic district” (Gibson, 2013, n.p.). Umstaddt’s quotation in this case captures two important elements of the development conversation in Leesburg: first, that traffic and the continued viability of

automobile-oriented transportation remain major concerns, and second, that the Old and Historic District is often seen as an essential part of the town's urban fabric. The essential nature of the Old and Historic District was made particularly apparent when, in late 2021 the Town of Leesburg became a Tier 2 Exploring Main Street community with the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, reflecting both appreciation of and investment in the historic downtown area.

Beyond these more general initiatives, Leesburg's town council recently narrowly approved the redevelopment of Virginia Village—a decades-old strip mall style parcel—into a more modern mixed-use space including restaurants and housing (*'Reimagined' Virginia Village*, 2019; Rivers, 2021), with the most recent development proposals reflecting the ongoing need to respond to the demand for affordable housing—especially for young people (Morar, 2020; Graham, 2021). Another recent mixed-use project, The Village at Leesburg, opened approximately a decade ago with a core aim to increase the town's square footage dedicated to housing, restaurants, retail, and offices (Hager, 2010a, b, c, d; Pizana, 2010; Hager, 2012; Bateman, 2013; Sharbel, 2013). Remarkably, despite its short existence, the Village at Leesburg has already witnessed renovations and expansion in an effort to accommodate greater demand for the kinds of space it features (Bateman, 2014, 2015). These examples of alterations to built form in Leesburg are indicative of a development trend that is likely to continue.

Beyond physical changes to the town's infrastructure, Leesburg and Loudoun County are undergoing a demographic transformation which is perhaps most evident in the composition of the school aged population (Tackett, 2017). As noted by Dillon (2006, n.p.) as early as the mid-2000s, “thousands of government, technology and construction workers, many of them Hispanic, Asian and African American... are transforming a school system that was once small and

overwhelmingly white into one that is sprawling and increasingly cosmopolitan.” Quantitatively, more than eighty percent of Loudoun County school students were white in the 1980s; this number has fallen to forty-three percent within the span of about three decades (Kang, 2021). In addition to increased population diversity, Leesburg’s raw population has grown significantly in recent times. Although Leesburg’s population was the same in 1950 as in 1860, the 1970s saw major growth and development as a result of the construction of Dulles Airport (*Post-war boom*, n.d.; Harney, 2010). This construction fueled concerns about the consequences of rapid population growth as early as the 1990s, when continuing development associated with the airport led some residents and commentators to question whether Leesburg would retain its historic appeal to residents and businesses (Estrada, 1994).

Also important in a discussion of Leesburg’s demographics is the identification of “an increasing number of smaller households,” (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022, p. 52) as “demographic growth has shifted dramatically toward one- and two-person households (without children) in recent years” (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022, p. 22). This trend will be made manifest on the landscape by the fact that approximately three-quarters of housing demand is expected to come from townhomes, apartments, and other multi-family housing styles (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022). This contrasts sharply with the fact that prior housing trends in the town and region have largely centered around single-family detached houses, meaning that expected future demand is likely to exceed supply, leading to rising prices and an increased need for affordable and attainable housing that actively meets residents’ needs. Recent projects such as King Street Station, Crescent Place, and the Village at Leesburg have provided apartment- and townhome-style living opportunities, and the redeveloped Virginia Village property will do the same; demographic trends indicate that demand for such housing types will only increase over the next several years,

making their provision even more important to Leesburg's ability to create a community in which people can both live and work within the town's boundaries.

### 1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The **objective** of this research is to contribute to the development of theory about the continued role, image, and place of peri-urban, suburban, and exurban communities within larger metropolitan regions.

Three primary research questions guide this investigation:

1. Do recent urban economic decisions serve to situate Leesburg as a center/commercial hub at the junction between suburban areas to the east and rural areas to the west, OR is it destined to be a node in a regional network where growth and development tilt toward Washington, DC?
2. What do the many site-specific redevelopments to the Village at Leesburg, as well as the recently-planned renovation of Virginia Village, indicate about the place image of Leesburg moving forward?
3. How does Leesburg's place in the region affect its urban economic development?

### 1.4 Methodology

This research takes a qualitative case study approach and is informed by a series of fourteen semi-structured key informant interviews with individuals who are currently involved or have been previously involved in the governance, planning, and development of the Town of Leesburg, Loudoun, Prince William, and Fauquier Counties, and the larger Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions, as well as limited participant observation of the town. It is

additionally informed by review of relevant documents produced by the Town of Leesburg and County of Loudoun regarding transportation, land use, and comprehensive town planning (e.g., Loudoun County Transportation Plan 2010, 2022 Legacy Leesburg Town Plan), as well as articles from local, regional, and national newspapers (Loudoun Times-Mirror, Washington Post, and New York Times). Content analysis of these articles and planning documents began before the interviews were conducted and informed the development of interview questions, but also continued throughout the research effort and was instrumental in the determination of key themes and ideas.

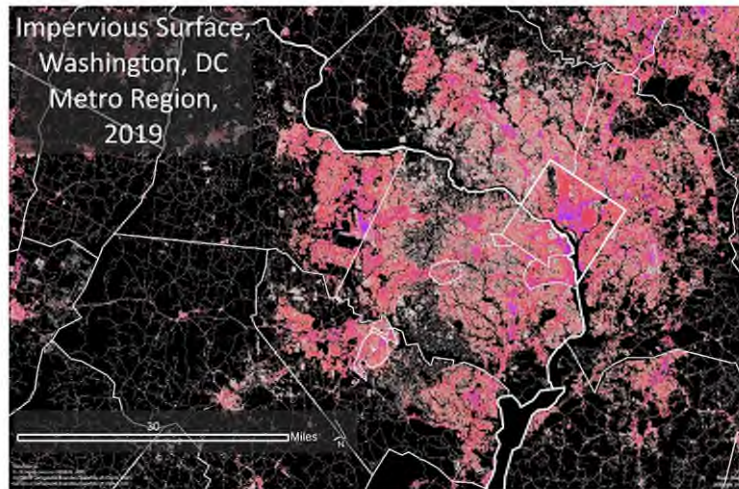
## **Chapter 2: Overview of the Suburban History of Northern Virginia and Metropolitan Washington**

### 2.1 Suburbanization in the Washington, DC Region

As noted above, some residents and observers consider the Town of Leesburg to have an unclear or unresolved relationship to the region referred to as ‘Northern Virginia,’ with the understanding that defining such a region entails significantly more than noting the northernmost localities on a map of the Commonwealth. A history of the region reinforces the idea that Northern Virginia’s current situation did not simply spontaneously emerge. Rather, the area around Washington, DC has changed significantly over the past several decades, and often with great speed. This section identifies key episodes in the region’s history and urban morphology, with the understanding that the story of suburbanization and urbanization within Northern Virginia and parts of Maryland is critical to the story of Leesburg.

Of particular significance is the fact that metropolitan Washington is a large and highly consequential entity, taking up far more space than casual observers likely anticipate. In fact, the ‘footprint’ of the region is clearly visible across two states and several counties and independent

cities. As illustrated in Figure 4, impervious surface (e.g., asphalt, concrete) in the region illustrates not only the depth and intensity of development but also shows the extent of political boundary crossing that has occurred.



*Figure 3 shows the wide range of impervious surface in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The region is large and sprawling, covering a great deal of space across numerous counties and multiple states and territories. In this figure, darker black represents limited or no impervious surface, whereas the colors represent greater imperviousness -- the deep pinks and purples are the areas with the most, and most dense, impervious surface. Source: author.*

Interestingly, suburbanization in Metropolitan Washington did not parallel the same process in other parts of the country. Rather, most of the development near Washington, DC emerged later in time and had fundamentally different character than those seen elsewhere. For instance, while the broad national trend was that suburbs meant for the elite emerged before the Civil War, most suburbanization near Washington did not begin to occur until the late 1860s and early 1870s (Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Maryland, 1999). This later development also meant that the emergence of different forms of suburbs all happened together; in suburban DC, "the development of walking, streetcar, and railroad suburbs took place simultaneously" (Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Maryland, 1999, p. B-26). Additionally, Washington, DC is home to the nation's federal government and a great deal of infrastructure and bureaucracy supporting that institution; federal workers have kept the population growing

even as other cities decline (Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Maryland, 1999; Kern, 2015; Mastran et al., 2020).

The landscape of Northern Virginia of the early twentieth century would likely be unrecognizable to many of its current occupants, as it had an almost entirely agrarian nature with only a few developing 'subdivisions' (Mastran et al., 2020). In subsequent years, as the nation entered World War I and the role, scope, and size of the federal government expanded, the federal workforce saw its numbers swell, leading to an increasing demand for local housing within the closest Virginia suburbs (Mastran et al., 2020). The post-WWII period was particularly influential in shaping Northern Virginia; beyond the general housing boom that influenced much of the rest of the nation, the Washington, DC area saw a particularly high level of decentralization led by the federal government (Wood, 1997; Montgomery and Prince George's Counties, Maryland, 1999; Mastran et al., 2020).

Beginning in the 1970s, a series of development episodes helped to shape Washington, DC into a form with which its current residents would be more familiar. One such episode involved the desegregation of schools and the implementation of school student busing contributing to widespread suburbanization, especially as white residents moved further into Virginia in reaction to the possibility of greater racial integration (*Urbanization in Virginia*, n.d.). As 'White Flight' expanded, racial segregation deepened, with a perceived separation between closer-in suburbs and the localities on the suburban fringe the result. As Spiers (2013, p. 4) notes, "the core of the Washington area declined while its hinterlands exploded" and "Washington struggled to redefine its image in the face of population loss, commercial disinvestment, poverty and crime, and a lack of transportation infrastructure to connect residents with opportunities in the suburbs." Loudoun County in particular saw significant increases in

population during the 1970s after experiencing only limited effects of the earlier growth eras (Spiers, 2013). It was during this time period when the outer suburbs became “scattered clusters of activity” and replaced “the earlier model of a commercial core anchored by the nation’s capital” (Spiers, 2013, p. 44).

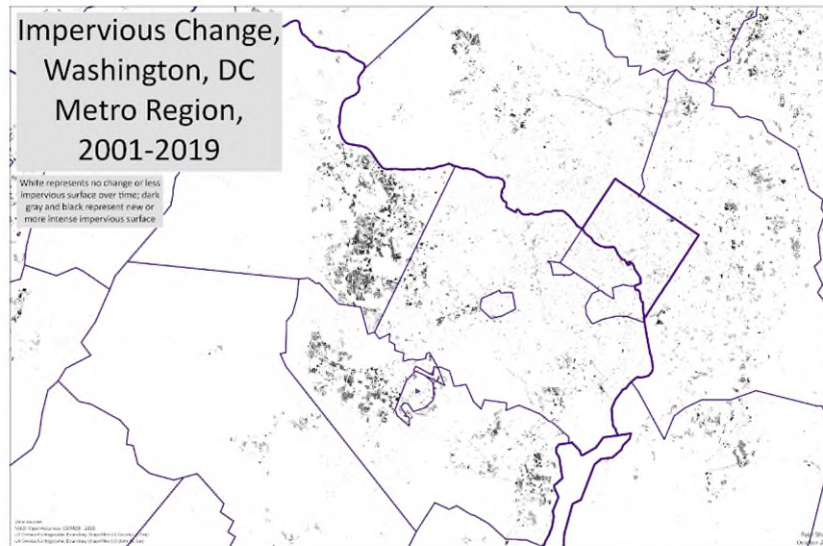
But it was only during the 1980s that suburban apartment construction first began to outpace new construction in DC, reinforcing the scale of peripheral development (Kern, 2015). However, it should be noted that this suburban apartment construction was still primarily limited to the inner-ring suburbs such as Arlington and Alexandria, with places like Leesburg remaining too spatially distant to truly be significantly impacted or impactful. Growth rates continued to increase in the 1990s, with further exurban expansion in areas as distant as central and western Loudoun County (Spiers, 2013). As identified by Suarez-Rubio et al. (2012), “exurban development increased on average 6.1% per year between 1986 and 2009 in western Maryland and north-central Virginia” (p. 366). During this time, economic activity continued to become more clustered, and those clusters of activity were increasingly distant from Washington, DC proper.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the greater Washington region region grew increasingly economically strong, with a great deal of that strength attributable to “explosive growth of the technology industry and the private sector and the shifting role of the federal government from a major employer to a primary customer in the region” (*A region divided*, 1999, p. 8). Despite this overall economic strength, though, the region was also highly divided, with Interstate 95 acting as a tangible partition. As explained by one report, “for the most part, middle- and upper-income families, substantial public and private sector investment, and economic expansion are found on the west side of this line, while lower-income families,



minorities, and little or no job growth are found on the east side of this divide” (*A region divided*, 1999, p. 2). Additionally, the economically strong western and peripheral areas of the region had become a center of growth by the late 1990s, as “between 1985 and 1995, the western counties gained jobs faster than the rest of the Washington region” (*A region divided*, 1999).

Suburbanization has certainly continued to the present day, as is easily observable through the proliferation of impervious surface in the region. Although an imperfect measure of development and urbanization, impervious surface, which includes land uses like paved roads, parking lots, buildings, and sidewalks, is considered “a characteristic land cover and indicator of urban land use” (Sexton et al., 2013). Indeed, between 1970 and 1990, ‘urbanized’ land cover increased by nearly ninety-six percent in the DC area (*A region divided*, 1999), with “urban land cover [increasing] at a rapid and accelerating pace in the region during that time period” and “growth concentrated at the expanding fringes of existing urban clusters” (Sexton et al., 2013, p. 50). Again, urban land cover is not the only measure of urbanity, but when considering a community’s reactions to changing land uses, it is a relevant proxy. Figure 5 below, showing the same region and scale as Figure 4, shows the change in impervious surface in the DC region from 2001 to 2019.



*Figure 4 shows the change in impervious surface in the Washington, DC metropolitan area between 2001 and 2019. Viewers will observe that most new impervious surface was located in peripheral locales, specifically Loudoun and Prince William Counties.*

Also important to recent suburbanization trends in metropolitan Washington is the region’s crisis of housing affordability. As one Brookings Institution report identifies, “over the past 30 years, housing construction in the region has barely kept pace with population and job growth, while housing prices have grown faster than household incomes” (Brooks et al., 2020, n.p.). Because of the region’s lack of affordable housing, according to the same report, “in 2019, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments issued a report stating that the region needs to add 320,000 more housing units between 2020 and 2030, and that at least 75% of this new housing should be affordable to low- and medium-income households” (Brooks et al., 2020, n.p.). The region’s need to construct so much new affordable housing indicates a clear lack of current attainability – although many inhabitants of the region are highly wealthy, the current housing stock does not reflect the needs of its most vulnerable residents.

With such a disconnect between supply and demand, questions regarding the spatiality of new development and redevelopment arise, especially considering that “the District of Columbia has very little undeveloped land” and “much of the existing open space in Montgomery County

and Prince George's County has been designated as agricultural reserves, and therefore is off-limits to development" (Brooks et al., 2020, n.p.). With these inner-ring suburban Maryland counties unavailable to accommodate future development and many inner-ring Virginia localities lacking undeveloped space, it seems likely that future affordable housing will be pushed further outward into peripheral Northern Virginia counties such as Loudoun or Prince William. Even though these counties may have available undeveloped space, such a push will only exacerbate the already-present development tensions and affordability issues in those locales.

## 2.2 Suburbanization in Loudoun County

Loudoun County has been integral to the DC region's continued growth. Most major changes in Loudoun County did not begin until the early 1970s, though, largely because of the significant distance between Loudoun and the central city -- for some time, transportation infrastructure was too limited to facilitate easy and timely commuting into DC or other more eastern job centers. As Spiers (2013, p. 204) notes, "before 1970, Loudoun County avoided the widespread suburbanization that took place to its east in Fairfax," to the point that "while the population of Fairfax increased tenfold between 1940 and 1970, Loudoun's population did not even double." Interestingly, the apparent trend of growth across Fairfax and Loudoun Counties involved the former growing significantly in the middle of the twentieth century, whereas the latter would approximate a similar scale of growth and change at the close of that century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Additionally, until the 1970s, population in Loudoun County was concentrated almost entirely in the Leesburg area, rather than being spread throughout geographic space (Cowell et al., 2020). During the 1970s, with an apparent eye to the rest of the region, major efforts emerged in Loudoun County to limit the pace of potential growth, with a great focus on historic preservation (Spiers, 2013). As explained in 1980 by a one-time member

of Loudoun County's Board of Supervisors, with regards to shopping center development in the county, "we saw what Lerner [developer] did to Tysons Corner, creating all the congestion there, and we didn't want Rte. 7 -- our primary commuter corridor -- turned into another Tysons" (Henrickson, qtd. in Grubisich, 1980, n.p.).

In ensuring that Loudoun County did not replicate the development patterns of its neighbor to the east, the 1970s saw residents "[beginning] to articulate support for farmland preservation as a way to promote access to local agricultural products and protect an agrarian heritage" (Spiers, 2013, p. 6). Specific preservation efforts included agricultural districts and policies of assessing land based on its (agricultural) use value, rather than value which would come from a sale to developers, incentivizing continued residence by landowners (Spiers, 2013). Later, during the 1980s, as the Washington region at large experienced significant levels of growth (Masek et al., 2000), a rural land management plan was created, both resulting from and creating tension between those rural landowners who wanted to reap the benefits of development and a coalition of environmentalists who increasingly saw the land use changes associated with suburbanization as a threat to the rural way of living (Spiers, 2013).

Even given the land management efforts, Loudoun County during the 1990s witnessed a doubling in population and an increasing number of suburbanites who advocated for further development there (Spiers, 2013). Yu (2001) explains that this growth was largely caused by the fact that "during the 1990s, ... numerous high-technology and internet-based companies formed or moved to Loudoun County," creating demand for housing and other services (p. 393). Yu (2001) also explains that the 1990s were a time of significant uncertainty for Loudoun County as a whole, as "even a cursory examination of the citizens' goals indicated contradictions" (p. 396). As more people migrated to the county, the balance of power shifted from the more rural western

section to the more suburban eastern section, as evidenced by a change in the composition of the county's Board of Supervisors – the new board oversaw the addition of significant commercial and residential space in Loudoun's eastern half (Spiers, 2013). Associated with this rapid suburbanization was the 1993 opening of the Dulles Greenway between Leesburg and Dulles International Airport, which increased the level of connectivity between the town and the eastern edge of the county (Spiers, 2013). The improvements to transportation also contributed to a pattern by which a great deal of office space was constructed along the region's major highways (Kern, 2015). The year 1993 also saw a revision of the powers of the Loudoun Board of Supervisors, by which the landowners would need to vote on any proposed changes to the zoning regulations; given that many rural landowners at this point wanted to benefit financially by selling their land, it is unsurprising that limitations on growth were not enacted (Yu, 2001).

By 1999, a Brookings Institution report highlighted the rapid westward expansion of the Washington region, noting that “Loudoun County projects needing 22 new schools in the next six years” and illustrating how Loudoun was among the “fast-growing counties where traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, and threats to overall quality of life have elected officials, business leaders, and citizens scrambling for solutions” (*A region divided*, 1999, p. 2-3). At the close of the 1990s, as a reaction to the decade's significant population and development changes, a new Board of Supervisors was elected with the idea that they would enforce “slow growth” and “rural land preservation” (Spiers, 2013, p. 233). This reactionary effort illustrates the larger trend that Loudoun County's Boards of Supervisors have been highly varying in their priorities and goals over the past few decades. While the 1990s saw Board-approved growth and development as part of a pattern by which “communities in Virginia, such as Loudoun County, neglected to seriously consider the control of sprawl until their populations skyrocketed and sprawl became

an issue,” the year 2000 witnessed the Board beginning to restrict the county’s landowners and developers, including the implementation of a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program and a reneging of the earlier decision to allow landowners to vote on zoning changes (Yu, 2001, p. 400). At the same time, the Board also sought to significantly downzone western Loudoun, more than tripling the amount of land required for a single-family home there while also increasing approved densities in the eastern portion, although at a less dramatic scale (Yu, 2001; Owens & Sarte, 2004).

As Loudoun County fully entered the new millennium, it saw the highly contentious development of a general plan with, from east to west, suburban, transition, and rural policy areas, as well as the maintenance of a “state authorized agricultural and forestal district program” as one of its most important methods of preserving rural land (Spiers, 2013, p. 248). Still, Loudoun County’s population continued to grow. Despite the introduction of ‘slow growth’ policies, Loudoun County’s population increased seventy-eight percent from 2000 to 2012, by which time it accounted for one-sixth of Virginia’s population (Suarez-Rubio et al., 2012). The growth management plan has continued to influence development patterns in the county, with continued emphasis on the central part of the county as a transition between suburban and rural land uses. Recent trends in the county’s largest town, Leesburg, continue to call into question the logic and efficacy of such a transition zone.

### 2.3 Recent Trends and Conflicts

Currently, Northern Virginia is a place of continued development and urban growth, and the scale and pace of change continue to generate consternation. This is perhaps most evident in discussions revolving around data centers. Data centers are extremely large “one-or-two-story concrete buildings occupying as many as 100 acres of land” associated with modern

digitalization and movement to cloud services (Woolridge, n.d.; Olivo, 2022). Put slightly differently, data centers are the physical manifestation of the digital economy. While there is a tendency to think of data centers as massive server farms located in remote rural areas, they are often inserted into the fabric of cities with the specific goal of reducing latency times. This land use is particularly important for the area surrounding Washington, DC, as “Northern Virginia boasts the largest data center market in the world” (Calabrese et al., 2022, p. 1). At the current moment, although “Virginia is a popular location for data centers because of its favorable tax incentives, proximity to low-cost energy, extensive fiber network, skilled workforce, and affordable land,” metropolitan Washington’s data centers face a debacle of location and situation reflective of larger development pressures and trends (Calabrese et al., 2022, p. 2).

Data centers are of particular significance for the eastern Loudoun County community of Ashburn, which during the course of a couple of decades has received the moniker ‘Data Center Alley’ (Woolridge, n.d.; *Loudoun County prepares*, 2022). Ashburn became ‘Data Center Alley’ through the deliberate choices of Loudoun County Economic Development officials in recruiting and retaining data centers, as “beginning in 2007, the Loudoun County Department of Economic Development (DED) created and implemented an aggressive data center business attraction strategy to build on established advantages and the anticipated need for digital infrastructure” (*Loudoun County data*, 2022, p. 8). This strategy has included the fact that “the county’s zoning has defined several ‘place types’ where data centers are a by-right development and eligible for fast-track approvals,” contributing to a stable and consistent environment for data center developers (*Loudoun County prepares*, 2022, n.p.). Truly, the county’s zoning is just one part of broader programs by which “careful cooperation between power utilities, local governments, and

state agencies,” as well as “reliable power at low cost” have attracted data centers (Calabrese et al., 2022, p. 3).

These programs were made possible largely because of the 1998 relocation of the Metropolitan Area Exchange-East (MAE-East) to Northern Virginia (Woolridge, n.d.). MAE-East was one of the world’s first internet peering exchanges, through which a great deal of web traffic was able to flow; once it was relocated to the Ashburn area, “a majority of the world’s internet traffic was now flowing through Data Center Alley” (Woolridge, n.d., n.p.). Thus, once that exchange point had been moved, Ashburn and its surroundings became a prime spot for data centers to colocate and collectively take advantage of the available infrastructure. Overall, deliberate data center recruitment in Ashburn and eastern Loudoun was made possible by the expansion opportunities provided by MAE-East and subsequent digital infrastructure.

Although eastern Loudoun has become well known for its data centers, because of tensions in that part of the county and restrictions on development in more western sections, developers have begun to get the sense that Loudoun County may no longer be the best place to locate future data centers. As explained by Miller (2022), data centers continue to be constructed in the county, with approximately eight million square feet of this land use under construction as of July 2022, but “cloud builders’ appetite for real estate has left a limited supply of vacant land for development, driving property prices higher, and creating tensions with area residents,” especially given that data center equipment does emit noticeable levels of noise and the purchase of property for these centers can impact affordable housing prospects by raising the price of land (n.p.). Additionally, Cowell et al. (2020) note the potential of a “saturation point for further growth” in Loudoun County more generally, citing contention regarding pro-growth transportation policies as one indicator that the county is beginning to limit growth and



development in its eastern portion. In response to the level of tension and waning amount of land available for development, county-level officials have expressed interest in “[updating] county rules on where data centers should and shouldn’t be located,” (Miller, 2022, n.p.), furthering the sense that significant parts of Loudoun County are nearing capacity with regard to that land use. In particular, Loudoun County staff have recommended that by-right privileges for data center development along the Route 7 corridor be removed, with potential areas for new development including those in the southeastern part of the county near Dulles Airport (*Loudoun County data*, 2022). Such sentiment of ‘reaching capacity’ has led these developers to consider adjoining counties as well, especially those with fairly close proximity to the cable infrastructure that already exists (Swinhoe, 2022).

The data center industry is quite consequential for land use and the economy in itself, but it may also indicate an emerging shift in the development dynamics of peripheral Northern Virginia. In contrast to the longstanding trend of many Prince William County residents opposing development, especially in the so-called Rural Crescent now serving as “one of the last remnants of Northern Virginia’s shrinking countryside” (Olivo, 2022, n.p.), the PW Digital Gateway project has recently emerged as a project that could “see Prince William overtake Loudoun as the data center hotspot of the world” (Swinhoe, 2022, n.p.). Evidence that this ‘overtaking’ may have already begun includes the fact that Prince William County already has thirty-three data centers, with several more under construction (Olivo, 2022). The motivation for continued recruitment—while rooted in the perceived economic benefits of data center construction (Stout, 2022)—may also be driven by Prince William County’s ambition to redefine its land use and economic development identity, further aligning it with the larger metro-region-

wide image of innovation, technology, and creativity, as well as the kinds of people associated with that image (see, for example, Florida, 2003).

Also important to this case is the fact that the proliferation of data centers in Prince William County is likely to disturb Manassas Battlefield as well as the graves of enslaved people from the early nineteenth century (Swinhoe, 2022). The siting of data centers and their potential to disturb historically relevant sites is only one part of “a larger debate about the changing identity of the fast-growing county that, elsewhere, is struggling with crowded schools and widening pockets of poverty” (Olivo, 2022). Certainly, development in peripheral metropolitan Washington introduces a wide variety of questions concerning the values and desires of various publics. A wide-ranging coalition of stakeholders, including the documentary filmmaker Ken Burns and other historically-minded observers, as well as residents of less dense housing community developments, many of whom came to Prince William to remove themselves from urban settings and land uses, have argued that the introduction of large numbers of data centers will fundamentally alter residents’ and visitors’ abilities to appreciate and conserve historically important sites such as Manassas Battlefield and will remove key parts of the ‘rural experience’ once associated with the county (Olivo, 2022). Other stakeholders, including residents who stand to benefit financially from selling their land to developers as well as pro-growth members of Prince William’s Board of County Supervisors, counter that the data centers will fuel economic growth and support important services (Olivo, 2022; Swinhoe, 2022).

As the data center vignette illustrates, the spatial and social dynamics of data center development in Northern Virginia are particularly informative with respect to the larger dynamics of growth in the region. Loudoun County has for some time been a center of growth, and yet its continued status as such a center may be challenged in the near future. Furthermore,

Prince William residents' acquiescence to development illuminates the possibility that residents who have long opposed change may begin capitulating to the larger trend and capitalizing on the financial and social benefits of selling and developing their land. This example focuses on Prince William County, but it is plausible that similar sequences of change might be introduced to western Loudoun County, fundamentally altering the long-significant trends within that particular locale. Overall, data center development demonstrates the inherent and continued uncertainty associated with larger development trends in Northern Virginia. While Prince William County *may* overtake Loudoun County and western Loudoun *may* shift its economic focus, there is no guarantee that either of these events will occur.

#### 2.4 Chapter Conclusion

Over the past fifty years and especially in its more peripheral locations, Northern Virginia has been subject to massive physical and population growth as well as high-level economic development. Furthermore, current development trends regarding data centers and other contentious land uses demonstrate that change in the region is both dynamic and uncertain. Although heritage is certainly important to some observers, modern development imperatives often clash with historically-based place identities, leading residents and civic leaders to decide how, if at all, they might perpetuate their historic identities while meeting the demands of the future. Therefore, the region's reimagining and remaking will likely continue to raise questions about which features are significant and worthy of maintenance, and which might be more effectively exchanged for updated uses and forms. Such questions are especially important to Loudoun County, which for decades has served as an epicenter for debates regarding growth control issues and continues to receive attention for its continued change and the internal tension associated with development. Loudoun's county seat, Leesburg, has recently become emblematic

of those debates, and is especially important given the town's significance to region-wide development patterns and growth control trends. However, Leesburg has only rarely been the subject of formal academic study, warranting further examination of its place, identity, and role moving forward.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

#### 3.1 Description of Sub-Discipline

This research is situated within urban geography, in that it considers not just the traditional central business district (CBD) but also the relationship between that CBD and surrounding suburban and rural regions. It also has relevance for and draws on urban and economic development planning. In general, urban geography has been defined as “the spatial study of the city, including urban policy; ... and provision of services and economic activity” (*Urban Geography*, n.d.). This study, then, examines the way one metropolitan locality finds its place within networks of service provision and related economic activities, with the understanding that such a metaphorical place is highly informed and shaped by the real and tangible impacts of physical space and distance.

Spatial planning builds on urban geography in the quest “to maximize the health, safety, and economic well-being of residents in ways that reflect the unique needs, desires, and culture of those who live and work within the community” through shaping the way a given community, city, or entire region functions and looks (Bowen, n.d., n.p.). Put differently, urban planners and related practitioners operate with the goal of creating and modifying urban form to achieve specific objectives related to the economic, ecological, and/or social welfare of residents. Local economic development planning, which is often associated with spatial planning more generally, seeks to sustainably and equitably raise a community's standard of living through economic

means, often involving such activities as place promotion, business recruitment, and local business assistance and development (Fitzgerald & Leigh, 2010). This research considers the effects of planning and the various roles planners have in interacting with other government officials and agencies, developers, and community groups to shape a landscape. Furthermore, it presents conclusions and complications relevant to the performance of their roles, especially as they adapt to novel and dynamic spatial realities and economic imperatives.

### 3.2 Role of the State in Planning

In considering the logic and meaning of development activity within the North American context, at least two major players must be considered: the state (broadly conceived herein to include government actors at local, state/territorial, and federal levels) and private developers. One essential role of the state in planning relates to the creation and enforcement of large-scale spatial plans, including land use plans, economic development plans, and comprehensive plans more broadly. For example, Linkous (2019, p. 1194) provided an in-depth analysis of Sarasota, Florida's Sarasota 2050 plan, noting how this local government-produced plan "signaled an official resolution to the issue of growth in Sarasota's exurbs." Based on this case, spatial planning by the state can be thought of as creating fixes and solutions for the various perceived-to-be-negative environmental, economic, and other conditions experienced within a jurisdiction. Another role of the state which is worthy of examination in exurban and peripheral zones connects to the fact that the state, in line with its comprehensive planning efforts, can promote transit, which is then linked to development and building processes (Lang et al., 2008; Phelps, 2012; McKinnon et al., 2019; Charney, 2020). Indeed, "as an increasing number of cities and suburbs are finding out, a transit line is frequently a developmental magnet with powers of attraction far beyond its daily commuting numbers" (Ehrenhalt, 2012, p. 177).

Although the state certainly plays a major role in the creation and implementation of plans and other official structures, the role of developers as they build and implement projects cannot be forgotten. The relationship between developers and the state can be somewhat symbiotic, in that developers focus on creating and benefiting from demand and population increases, whereas “state policies and expenditures with respect to land use, planning, transportation systems, and more play a critical role in structuring such production demand” (McCarthy, 2008, p. 133). In other cases, because the state can use its powers to limit the activities of developers, conflict between these entities can arise, especially when they have different visions for a space (see, for example, Linkous, 2019). Beske (2007, p. 10) explained why this dissonance in vision can emerge: “modern zoning codes... do not effectively deal with the complexities of current development.” In this sense, while developers keep up with and shape current trends in design and land use management, state-created plans and codes, which take time to create and update, might not be quite as responsive. Likewise, in their detailed examination of the differences in motivation between the state and developers, Grant and Perrott (2011, p. 177) wrote about how these groups’ logics of development, especially concerning mixed-use projects, are not always the same because they involve different long-term motivations -- developers seek to maximize profit, whereas the state tends to emphasize quality of life and wellbeing. A general sense of tension between the state and private sector development firms is often evident within the literature.

### 3.3 Domestic Migration and Movement to the Periphery Zone: Place Image, Place Marketing, and Amenity Migration

Next, it is important to consider the reasons why people and businesses move to peripheral locations, especially given the finding by Johnson & Schultz (2011) that migration, rather than natural increase, is the major reason for population growth in peripheral areas; also important is the fact that over the past few decades, America's 'urban' growth has largely occurred in "previously undeveloped areas" (Levitt & Eng, 2021, n.p.). Among the reasons for movement are specific campaigns promoting peripheral areas; some scholars write about these campaigns as targeting businesses as well as private citizens, especially considering that many such private citizens also function as business managers and therefore want to meet a variety of needs in relocating (Wilson, 2018).

Both beyond and as part of promotion campaigns, an essential factor motivating many individuals and companies to locate in peripheral zones is place image/place marketing. Place image is often conceptualized as consisting of elements such as brand, visual image, reputation, sense of place, size, educational facilities, municipal infrastructure, sporting facilities, and general identity (Glinska & Florek, 2012; Dixit et al., 2019; Clouse et al., 2020). In terms of economic development, place image is significant in that localities and regions must argue that they meet the demands and requirements of so-called footloose firms capable of locating wherever they please; therefore, creating an image that relates to the fulfillment of these needs can be helpful in attracting such firms (Wood & Tasker, 2008; Bergqvist, 2009; Dixit et al., 2019; Clouse et al., 2020). As argued by Harvey (1989), "the task of urban governance is, in short, to lure highly mobile and flexible production, financial, and consumption flows into its space" (p. 11). Furthermore, creating a specific 'place' within the larger region is a particularly

common activity for 'entrepreneurial' governments, focusing "much more closely on the political economy of place rather than of territory" (Harvey, 1989, p. 7).

An idea discussed extensively in the tourism literature, place marketing focuses on selecting one or more traits or components of a place and highlighting them while concurrently ignoring or downplaying more negative aspects; place marketing is one way of contributing to the development of a place image, especially for those people who live outside of that place (Hall & Hubbard, 1995; Oakley & Rofe, 2005; Avraham & Daugherty, 2009; Glinska & Florek, 2012; Knox & Mayer, 2013). According to some observers, "this commodification of the city is now considered a requisite strategy in local economic development to lure external investment into the city" (Hall & Hubbard, 1996, p. 161), and has also been linked to the idea of entrepreneurial local governments (Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Young & Lever, 1997; Oakley & Rofe, 2005; Read & Sanderford, 2017; Read, 2019). Similarly, some authors have specifically linked place marketing to urban redevelopment and transition; places undergoing such change may require this kind of promotion (Young & Lever, 1997; Oakley & Rofe, 2005; Read & Sanderford, 2017; Read, 2019). Specific methods town marketers can use include hosting spotlight events, focusing on new attractions, focusing on branding, associating with other locations or brands, highlighting the physical form of a place, and highlighting geographic location-based advantages (Young & Lever, 1997; Hopkins, 1998; Mazzarol & Choo, 2003; Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Wood & Tasker, 2008; Avraham & Daugherty, 2009; Bergqvist, 2009; Cleave et al., 2017). Specific case studies in the field of place marketing, promotion, and image management more broadly have focused on towns in Africa (Agyei-Mehsah, 2006), cities undergoing the de-industrial transition in Croatia (Nelson, 2013) and coastal Australia (Reiser & Crispin, 2009), rural locations (Hopkins, 1998), smaller cities and creative quarters/districts



(Evans, 2015), large metropolitan centers (Foroudi et al., 2020), and even entire nations (Wilson, 2018).

One particularly relevant thread of place marketing research highlights the ways various forms of media and promotion have been used to market the ‘heritage’ of specific towns (Hopkins, 1998; Agyei-Mensah, 2006; Reiser & Crispin, 2009; Nelson, 2013; Evans, 2015; Wilson, 2018; Foroudi et al., 2020). Wilson (2018) connected this idea to corporate heritage marketing, noting that such strategies are used to suggest that those qualities which provided an organization (or place) value and relevance in the past are still relevant today and will be in the future—in other words, heritage links the past with an entity’s current state and future as it moves forward.

An identified impact of place marketing and image management, whether based in heritage or in other promotional tools and concepts, is amenity migration, often discussed as occurring in and having consequences for people and businesses in exurban and periphery locations (Cadieux, 2001; Chipeniuk, 2004; Glorioso & Moss, 2007; Loeffler & Steinicke, 2007; McCarthy, 2008; Cadieux, 2011; Cadieux & Hurley, 2011; Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Taylor, 2011). Amenity migration is defined as “the purchasing of primary or secondary residences in rural areas valued for their aesthetic, recreational, and other consumption-oriented use values” (McCarthy, 2008, p. 130). Amenity migration is traditionally discussed primarily with regard to private individuals’ movements; still, Mazzarol and Choo (2003) made a special note that many small firms consider the locations of owner-managers’ homes in selecting sites, often locating nearby. Similarly, Wilson (2018) reminded readers that business owners are among the types of people who can engage in this kind of relocation, encouraging the further movement of people and infrastructure. Thus, amenity migration can also impact business location.

### 3.4 Characteristics of Exurbs and Exurban People & Exurbs as In-Between

An understanding of the future of peripheral spaces should be informed by a discussion of their present state. The widely cited 2006 Brookings Institution publication by Berube et al. continues to provide an effective introduction to the people of exurbia and the spaces they call home. In this piece, the authors identified exurban residents as largely white, middle-class, homeowners and commuters, and noted that at the same times as peripheral spaces were becoming more diverse, they were at publication fairly homogeneous; Mahler's (2005) description of the typical exurban resident as young, white, and middle-class is consistent with this identification.

More recent writers have also observed the trend of suburban areas becoming more racially and ethnically diverse as far-peripheral regions stay majority-white (Pfeiffer, 2012; Kang, 2021; Tavernise & Gebeloff, 2021). In accordance with this trend, Ehrenhalt (2012) argued that "we are living at a moment in which the massive outward migration of the affluent that characterized the second half of the twentieth century is coming to an end" (p. 11) and "people with the resources to live wherever they wished [have begun] choosing to live near the urban center" while long-time residents of the city centers are 'priced out' of their neighborhoods (p. 84). In the observed trend, wealthy white individuals have begun to return to the central city, leaving those with fewer resources with little choice other than to move out into the suburbs -- thus completing the 'great' demographic inversion. Should this inversion continue and grow in scale, the once majority-white exurbs could see significant demographic changes.

Regarding the built form and classification of exurbs, a noticeable theme is that they are not wholly urban, suburban, or even rural. Observing their lack of simple classification, Fishman (1990, p. 30) wrote about exurbs, edge cities, and other 'new cities' as "not urban, not

rural, not suburban, but possessing elements of all three.” Of particular significance in assigning exurbs to a given classification may be the fact that “small towns are incorporated units with distinct forms of government, whereas rural areas are under county jurisdiction” (Daniels, 1989, p. 413); the label of ‘small town’ may be most appropriate for a number of jurisdictions facing crises of identity regarding their placement along the urban spectrum. Fishman (1990) also described how these places had no one center, instead being defined by an overlapping series of household, consumption, and production networks. According to Lang and Knox (2009), exurbs are connected to central business districts primarily via highways, reflecting a car-centric orientation. While some of these fundamental characteristics can be identified, not every article or publication describes or defines exurbs or exurbia the same way, reflecting the fact that “the new city eludes all the conventional terminology of the urban planner and historian” (Fishman, 1990).

Given that exurbs do not fit neatly into any one type of urban form, it is unsurprising that conflicts among their residents regarding spatial organization and identity have emerged. For example, scholars have studied conflicts and debates between ‘city people’ and ‘rural people’ (Taylor, 2011; McKinnon et al., 2019) and between farmers and non-farmers (Smith & Sharp, 2005; Linkous, 2019). It is likely that further conflict and division will continue, especially as peripheral locations continue to grow and are increasingly inhabited by individuals and stakeholder groups with varying ideas and priorities.

Definitions and descriptions of exurbs and exurbia, as well as the fact that they are inhabited by overlapping groups of stakeholders with varying ideas about what land use and planning should look like, tend to support the idea that exurban locations are in a state of uncertainty. Even if Taylor and Hurley (2016, p. 5) wrote about “exurbia as a permanent

landscape where urbanization is actively opposed,” evidence from much of the rest of the literature suggests that, especially considering the many forces ‘at play’ on the urban periphery, the future might not look the same as the present or the past in these locations. It is partially because exurbs are often seen this way, as ‘in-between spaces,’ that an examination of their future is warranted—what are these spaces becoming and why is that the case?

### 3.5 Exurban Development – Current and Past Periphery Development and Change

Prior researchers have additionally considered the form and spatiality of development in peripheral locations, finding that the peripheral zones outside many large North American cities have recently seen changes in form and function. Among these changes are infill and densification, the introduction of mixed-use form, and office park redevelopment. These changes to built form, although often discussed somewhat separately in the literature, in practice tend to accompany each other, especially because “the imperatives driving the promotion of mixed-use and high density residential and employment land-use—‘densification’—derive from core aspects of the urban sustainability agenda” (Evans & Foord, 2007, n.p.). Simply put, rarely is office park redevelopment entirely divorced from the implementation of mixed land use because these phenomena are part of the same broad series of programs. With that in mind, the conceptual heading of ‘redevelopment’ can be applied to describe most of the transitions and transformations described in this section.

Mixed-use development, whereby “residential, commercial, civic and other clean uses” are mixed together “at a fine scale,” has been an important form of redevelopment in the recent past (Grant & Perrott, 2011, p. 188-189). An example is the case of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada’s incorporation of both housing and office space into high-rise towers (Witt & Klein, 2019), although many other architectural forms have been proposed and implemented for mixing

uses (Evans & Foord, 2007; Lang et al., 2008; Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009; Grant & Perrott, 2011; Ehrenhalt, 2012; Lung-Amam, 2021). In any case, an important idea is that mixed-use spaces, regardless of their locations, recreate a quality of the traditional city center which people, especially younger people and those no longer caring for children, seek out (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009). This is especially the case when mixed-use spaces are pedestrian-oriented and allow residents and visitors to move around without cars (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009; Grant & Perrott, 2011; Ehrenhalt, 2012; Charney, 2020).

Similarly, areas not just in the periphery but also closer to the urban core have seen changes to and reimagining of industrial and office parks, representing a highly specific kind of the suburban redevelopment discussed above (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009; Read & Sanderford, 2017; Abrams, 2019; Read, 2019; Charney, 2020). In these cases, as “younger workers have come to favor urban environments that contain a variety of services and transportation options, a shift that has reduced the popularity of cloistered office settings” has occurred, with a new focus on ‘live-work-play areas’ throughout metropolitan regions (Abrams, 2019, n.p.). This shift is aligned with the above-mentioned focus on mixed-use spaces, especially considering that today’s office park renovations focus on providing creative and knowledge workers with opportunities for employment, recreation, and residence (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009, p. 203). The major theme is that the office and industrial parks which emerged on the suburban and exurban landscapes many decades ago are no longer exclusively places for completing labor activities, instead serving the ‘workers of tomorrow’ and of today through the creation of mixed-use zones.

### 3.6 Geography of Work

Prior scholars have additionally examined the geography of work and of employment and the connections between these topics and both inter- and intra-metro competition for labor and residents. Especially relevant to this discussion is the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused observable trends in the manner in which many individuals conducted their working activities, as well as their living activities more broadly. Therefore, the geography of work may be slightly different at this moment than at any other time, with notable uncertainty regarding long-term impacts.

One prominent trend in the literature, having emerged even before the Covid-19 pandemic, is that the geography of employment is not the same as the geography of work. As explained by Shearmur et al. (2021), “an employer’s address does not provide sufficient information about where work activities are performed” (p. 2057). Rather, “the geography of work may divulge from the geography of employment when paid work is done at the premises of client organizations, during commuting, on business trips, on external meetings, at home or at other places” (Hermelin & Trygg, 2012, p. 126). Thus, this section examines both the geography of employment and the geography of work, with the understanding that the gap between the two subjects is becoming increasingly wide and increasingly consequential for localities and their economies.

Various topics in the geography of employment and work in cities and urban regions were examined before the pandemic, although it is apparent that the relationship between home and the workplace have long been significant. For instance, Haughwout (1999) examined the effect of infrastructure (e.g., roadways) in distributing employment throughout the area, with the finding that “by reducing the cost of covering distance, the network effects of highway

investments would be expected to undermine spatial advantage and density” (p. 563). Put simply, highways and advanced transportation infrastructure make commuting more feasible, allowing workers to be employed at greater distances from home. In investigating a different type of infrastructure, Hermelin & Trygg (2012) found that information and communications technologies make working outside of the office an increasingly viable option, further connecting working life and home life.

Prior scholars have also examined the significance of different types of jobs, in that various industries and working activities are often considered separately but may be inherently interconnected. The relationship between high-quality and low-quality jobs, for example, was particularly important to Kaplanis (2006), who hypothesized that “low-quality jobs, defined either as low-paid jobs or low-skill jobs, depend increasingly on the growth of employment of high-quality jobs” (p. 2). Additionally, Althoff et al. (2022) identified that “the livelihood of customer service workers depends directly on the local spending of high-skill business service workers,” further interconnecting the two groups (p. 1). Similarly, Ross (2008) postulated that regardless of the perceived differences between higher- and lower-skilled job opportunities, they increasingly share certain qualities making their practitioners vulnerable. Specifically, “though they occupy opposite ends of the labor market hierarchy, workers in retail and low-end services and the ‘creative class’ temping in high-end knowledge sectors share certain elements of precarious, or nonstandard employment” (Ross, 2008, p. 31). Of course, not every highly skilled member of the so-called ‘creative class’ engages in temporary work, but the fact that this group may share behaviors and geographies with an otherwise different class of workers presents a challenge to longstanding employment paradigms.

A great deal of recent attention has centered around the changing geographies of work and employment after the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic (Shearmur et al., 2021; Althoff et al., 2022; Bond-Smith & McCann, 2022; De Fraja et al., 2022). In March 2020, major shifts in the geography of work were noticeable, as the percentage of their time workers spend working at home more than tripled, on average, between February and June of that year (Shearmur et al., 2021). However, it must be noted that these changes were not entirely new conceptions but were instead the continuation of a larger trend. Indeed, as early as 2012, Hermelin & Trygg observed that “during an ordinary week, all respondents worked at the office and almost all did some paid work at home” (p. 130). Additionally, the shift toward working from home did not affect every individual or industry equally, as “the shift principally affects the most highly qualified workers, those working in high-order services and those based in the CBD” (Shearmur et al., 2021, p. 2067). As a whole, then, although more casual observers may see the emphasis on working outside of the office post-Covid-19 as a major change affecting all aspects of life, in reality it has only been the continuation of a pre-existing trend with varying spatial and social consequences.

Additionally, not every individual or industry has the same potential to work outside of the traditional office environment. General trends in the identification of differences in work from home potential include the idea that “the higher a city’s population density, the greater its potential for remote work” (Althoff et al., 2022, p. 4), likely because with greater density may come greater numbers of people engaged in those industries that are conducive to remote work; particularly relevant industries include information and cultural services, finance, insurance, real estate, business services, and public administration (Shearmur et al., 2021). The movement toward working remotely has also occurred at a greater magnitude for larger organizations and



for workers whose primary offices had been in the central business district (Shearmur et al., 2021).

Given that the shift toward remote working is the continuation of a pre-existing trend, it is sensible that other means of engaging with work have continued, if in a new form, to the present day. Specifically, commuting, it is argued, has become more tolerable as employees decrease the frequency with which they work in the office (Althoff, 2022; Bond-Smith & McCann, 2022), with the result that “high-skill workers gain flexibility in their residential choices” (Althoff, 2022, p. 9) and cities’ commuter-sheds could grow by as much as 300% (Bond-Smith & McCann, 2022). A lower commuting frequency may also result in a pattern whereby “people will tend to move further out within the city they live and work in because commuting is less burdensome” and “businesses will also tend to move further out because their share of commuting is less costly” (Bond-Smith & McCann, 2022, p. 15). As a whole, the changed relationship between work and home that hybrid employment provides has created impacts on employers and employees.

Beyond their relationships with employers, remote working has impacted employees’ relationships with their cities’ economies at large. Of course, if fewer people are commuting on any given day, they will also have new impacts on the economies local to their homes. In one explanation of these impacts, “when workers work remotely, morning coffees previously purchased on their commute to the office may be bought in the neighborhood where they live. Likewise, workers may switch their gym membership from one near the office to one nearer home” (De Fraja, 2022, p. 1). Of course, this also means that those businesses former commuters previously frequented may be negatively impacted. As explained by Althoff et al. (2022), “high-income business service workers dominate the economies of major US cities, and their spending

supports many local consumer service jobs. As a result, business services' high remote work potential poses a risk to consumer service workers who could lose an essential source of income if business service workers left big cities to work from elsewhere" (p. 1). Overall, prior literature suggests that, assuming remote workers live and work within the same metropolitan region, the shift to remote working has moved some level of capital from the areas where employees once worked with great frequency (e.g., the CBD) toward these workers' home areas.

### 3.7 Urban Competitiveness

Finally, urban competitiveness both within and between urban and metropolitan regions has been a subject of intense examination for prior researchers. In this case, 'urban competitiveness' refers not only to competition for employment firms, but also competition for residents. Examination of this competitiveness is particularly relevant to the Washington, D.C., region, especially given that as early as 1999, commentators observed a pattern whereby "the Washington region is divided by race, income, jobs, and opportunity, with the eastern half of the region carrying the area's burden of poverty and social distress while the western half enjoys most of the region's fruits of prosperity" (*A region divided*, 1999). Beyond this particular context, though, it is observed that "on a national and on a global scale, cities are competing with each other in ways previously unknown" (Hahn, 2022, p. 64). An understanding of why, then, such an immediately observable pattern may be visible and how the competitiveness of the region and its constituent parts, not only in metropolitan Washington but in other urban contexts, is warranted.

Of particular significance in this discussion is the fact that many firms and workers face decreasing physical ties to any specific location. This phenomenon was frequently described as early as the second half of the twentieth century with regard to 'footloose' firms and their

attraction, although Allen and Stone (1992) “[found] that the footloose concept has been used in various (sometimes contradictory) ways” (p. 302). While ‘footloose firms’ themselves appear to have faded as a research topic in the recent past, it is still essential that, especially since the mass onset of work from home policies, location is increasingly a choice rather than a mandate for both employees and their employers (Mellander & Florida, 2012; Shearmur et al., 2021; Bond-Smith & McCann, 2022). Therefore, cities and localities increasingly compete with each other to attract workers, firms, funding, and other elements of economic development (Stern & Hall, 2010; Adamo et al., 2019; Aquilino et al., 2019; Robinet, 2019).

Within the competition for economic development, some cities and locations have been more successful than others in attracting firms and/or their employees. One explanation for the difference in success levels, widely associated with the work of Richard Florida, is the creative class hypothesis. Florida (2003) specifically argued that “creative people power regional economic growth and these people prefer places that are innovative, diverse and tolerant” (p. 8). In the work that popularized this concept, “the distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to ‘create meaningful new forms’” (Florida, 2003, p. 8), with a later simplification explaining that “the creative class works with knowledge” (Mellander & Florida, 2012, p. 10).

Cities seeking to implement a ‘creative class’-based strategy for economic development, it is argued, should create the kinds of opportunities, amenities, and features that will attract that group, with the understanding that “smart, talented people, whether in the form of human capital or creative class, are attracted to open and tolerant places” and “cities with a diverse consumption of goods and services are more appealing than cities that do not” offer that diversity (Mellander & Florida, 2012, p. 17). The specifics of such a recommendation have changed over

time, with scholars increasingly that the cities that planned for the creative class really only planned for the desires of young Millennial professionals, at the expense of older members of the creative class; it may help planners to know, then, that “dense urban living (and working)” by itself “provides the necessary spatial conditions to support the functioning of the labour markets underpinning innovation-related activity” (Vinodrai, 2017, p. 29).

In the time since its popularization, the idea of the ‘creative class’ has faced criticism and speculation. Subsequent proposed modifications and criticisms have centered on the apparent elitist nature of the hypothesis and the need to consider more groups of people as true ‘creatives’ (Wilson & Keil, 2008) and the lack of widely-accepted definition, necessary conditions, or benefits of the creative class (Pavelea et al., 2021). Pavelea et al. (2021) also advised that an economic development strategy revolving around the creative class may not be the best strategy for every location, noting that “before deciding to apply a Creative Class strategy to development, Eastern European countries have to pursue more evidence-based research to examine the critical success factors for accelerating urban and regional economic development” (p. 12). Similarly, Storper and Scott (2009) reject the notion that members of the creative class are truly able to freely move through space in an entirely ‘footloose’ capacity, and that even if they could, “there can be no sustainable argument in favor of the view that gathering members of the creative class together in one place will in and of itself transform that place into a creative city” (p. 163).

Beyond creative class-inspired policies for economic development, scholars have also suggested that the creation of a brand or image for a locality can be a viable competitive strategy. This strategy has been particularly applicable to small towns, with the understanding that small-city downtowns feature “characteristics related to a strong sense of place, such as waterfronts

and older architecture,” and can therefore be used in the creation of place-based development strategies including historic preservation, the ‘Main Street’ approach, and pedestrianization (Robertson, 1999, p. 270; Van Leuven, 2022). Indeed, “saturated by a landscape of sprawl and car-oriented retail development--shopping malls, big-box stores, massive parking lots, and roadways unsuitable for pedestrians--many small towns view their historic town centers as an untapped source of competitive advantage within the larger region” (Van Leuven, 2022, p. 1-2).

In discussing place-based economic development strategies, it should still be noted that these strategies are often not entirely divorced from the creative class concept, in that beyond fueling the economy, “the presence of the creative class is also a strong differentiator for every city” (Rodrigues & Schmidt, 2021, p. 31). Additionally, as argued by Robinet (2019), the main goal of city branding is “attracting talent” (p. 1). The overall logic of implementing branding as a competitive advantage is that “a successful brand can create job opportunities in the sought-out high-skill and in-demand sectors” (Robinet, 2019, p. 3). Put simply, the creation of a strong sense of place can be particularly helpful in attracting members of the creative class.

The importance of branding for intra-region competition has been particularly examined, with Aquilino et al. (2019) finding that the brands for smaller sub-sections of a larger metropolitan region can vary significantly. Merrilees et al. (2013) would concur, having found that the strengths or intensities of local brands often varies significantly throughout space. Indeed, peripheral cities are a particularly integral part of this conversation, with the understanding that “stressed satellite cities have a small number of brand attributes with a strong brand image and a larger number of attributes with a weak brand image, in contrast to more strongly performing attributes of self-sustaining cities” (Merrilees et al., 2013, p. 41). Furthermore, heritage-based place brands, while popular among locales with proud, significant,

or distinctive local history, may not be the panaceas their supporters imagine. Rather, in many cases, “repeated attempts at heritage tourism development have not delivered the desired economic and population growth” and heritage-based brands can actually have “the perverse effect of circumscribing and limiting vision and action” (Stern & Hall, 2010, p. 211). In many cases, attaching a locality’s heritage or history irrevocably to that place’s brand may create the conditions for economic decline rather than development.

### 3.8 Literature Review Conclusion

Prior researchers have focused much work on the forms, inhabitants, and other characteristics of exurban and periphery communities. These places are increasingly home to a variety of mixed-use and transit-related development and redevelopment sites, whose presence contributes to tension between groups of residents as well as conflicts between the state and developers as these entities perform their many roles. Other relevant courses of inquiry have concerned the geographies of work and employment, as well as the factors or strategies contributing to urban competitiveness. The Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan areas have been sites of particular interest, with the Town of Leesburg, Virginia receiving fairly sustained national media attention as it has undergone transitions during the past thirty-some years. In light of such interest, this study aims to synthesize that media attention with academic conversations about the state and future of peripheral areas as urbanization continues its outward spread. The results of this study will have particular use for planners and developers seeking to better understand how and why economic development is occurring in their jurisdiction, as well as how the Town’s transformations fit into larger patterns and processes.

## Chapter. 4: Methods and Approach

### 4.1 Site Selection

The argument being made in choosing to examine Leesburg is that this locality's physical distance from Washington, DC's central business district, as well as its emphasis on local history and heritage, force the town to consider the impacts of development and expansionism in ways not seen throughout the rest of the DC region at the current moment. While Leesburg's distance from the city meant it was not an integral part of the initial stages of post-World War II suburbanization, it is now at the crossroads of a variety of development- and urbanization-related forces likely to shape its future. With that said, Leesburg is not the only locality in or near Northern Virginia seeking to actively shape its place image within a dynamic and changing region. Rather, other localities have certainly carved out distinct spaces or niches for themselves, or created well-envisioned mixed-used development projects. Ashburn, for example, has become known for its hosting of data centers (Woolridge, n.d.; Peskin, 2016), and Tysons (Corner) has worked to add density and mixed land use in the face of a declining desirability for the kind of distinctly jobs-based urban form (the 'edge city;' see Garreau, 1991) it has represented for the past thirty-some years (Phelps, 2012; Charney, 2020).

What makes Leesburg different is that the question of *what the town is*, on a fundamental level, remains a fairly malleable and uncertain idea that continues to be scrutinized and contested by multiple actors. Indeed, in being malleable, Leesburg illustrates a larger trend by which "towns on the periphery of metropolitan areas... may be able to play new roles in the regional economy" as larger regions grow to increasingly include them (Accordino & Adhikari, 2021, p. 1). This differs from those areas of the region that have become, for better or worse, more narrowly defined by their residential or commercial natures. As county-level policies enforcing

Leesburg's situation between suburban and rural landscapes combine with internal dynamics regarding the towns' future, Leesburg has the potential to fundamentally change its nature within a short time frame.

Prior researchers have focused largely on a form of development commonly referred to as 'exurban' (see, for example, Witt & Klein, 2019), but Leesburg's density, connectedness to the rest of the metropolitan region, and historic character introduce questions of whether its essence can be fully and accurately encapsulated in such a widely-used term. Leesburg seems to be 'more than' just a residentially-dominated exurb or suburb of Washington, D.C., but its exact role in the region is not immediately obvious. The town's complicated relationship with the typologies of academic urban geography makes it academically worthy of investigation, especially given recent attention to the importance of heritage-based place perception in peripheral localities throughout the world (Jansen et al., 2012). Beyond the borders of the Town of Leesburg, this work furthers a generalized understanding of the impacts of regional growth and governance dynamics within one of the nation's fastest-growing metropolitan regions. Leesburg's relationship with the rest of the region demands further investigation to understand the available 'paths forward' for historically significant peripheral localities experiencing the ongoing challenge of infill and suburbanization.

#### 4.2 Data Collection Methods

Given that this research seeks to better understand how Leesburg is negotiating urban development pressures and objectives, semi-structured interviews with fourteen individuals possessing specific and demonstrated knowledge of local and/or regional urban planning, development, and governance were conducted. Information from individuals with direct knowledge and experience relating to these ideas is an effective way of answering the research



questions noted above, especially because “the use of open-ended interview techniques allow[s] participants to speak freely and offer detailed examples to illustrate their concerns” (Sugarhood et al., 2013). As the key informants involved in the study tend to have a number of pressing demands on their time, semi-structured interviews were selected as a technique for gathering a substantial amount of specific and detailed information within a fairly short time period.

All participants, as named and described below, had strong familiarity with current trends and happenings within Leesburg, Loudoun County, and/or the larger Northern Virginia region, and they were targeted for inclusion in the study based on their professional expertise. Of the interviewees, nearly all were identified and recruited by the research team, but snowball sampling, by which respondents suggested further interviewees relevant to the research endeavor, was employed in gathering responses from two of the interviewees. Furthermore, it was especially important in recruiting participants to gain a broad and diverse perspective, including perspectives of those individuals who have been able to observe the town from afar. However, the ‘diversity’ of the respondents was limited by the fact that nearly all identified as white, and at least twelve of the fourteen identified as middle-aged white men. Such a demographic profile was not inherently targeted by the research team; rather, it appears that many of the decision-makers relevant to this research had those traits.

A further limitation of sampling results from the fact that all of the Town Council members who participated in the research endeavor tended to vote along the same lines and had voted to approve the Virginia Village redevelopment project. This limitation resulted from self-selection rather than researcher selection; all members of the Town Council were approached regarding participation in the research. This limitation was mitigated via the incorporation of

highly detailed Town Council Work Session meeting minutes, which provided the perspectives of the remaining Council Members.

Given that many worked from home during the data collection timeframe, most interviewees expressed a preference for the research conversations to occur via teleconference (i.e., Zoom). Ten interviews were thus conducted via Zoom, two were conducted in-person, one was conducted via phone, and one via email. Interviews ranged in duration, from less than thirty to more than sixty minutes. All interviews were transcribed.

Data from the semi-structured interviews were cross-referenced and supplemented with information emerging from site visits, planning documents, and reports and council minutes published by the Town of Leesburg and County of Loudoun, as well as news articles (inclusive of opinions, lifestyles, and editorial pieces) from the Loudoun Times-Mirror (local), Washington Post (regional), and New York Times (national) regarding the events and qualities of the town, county, and region. Review of these documents began before the first interview was conducted and thus informed the development of interview questions; the reviewed documents also provided context to a number of interview topics and allowed for verification of the ideas expressed by research participants. The reviewed documents, reports, and articles helped to establish and verify timelines of change as relevant to the research topic, as well as providing examples and validation of many of the broad themes discussed during the interviews.

It is important to note that Loudoun County received special attention during and immediately prior to the timeframe during which the research was conducted for a number of reasons; media articles regarding the county were instrumental in shaping the researcher's understanding of local dynamics, if not holding direct relevance to the research effort. In particular, the election of Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin in November 2021 was influential

in motivating a number of national profiles of the county and its residents. Thus, although some examined articles may not appear to have direct relevance to the topics of planning and development in Leesburg or Loudoun County, they still provide insight into the contemporary experiences of the town and county. Furthermore, as one interviewee opined, this increased media attention likely played a role in shaping outsiders' understanding of the locality and thus contributed to the development of place image.

Geospatial data were collected from the National Land Cover Database to create maps of Leesburg and its changing surroundings for the relevant time period. Specifically, data included the National Land Cover Database (NLCD) Land Cover Change Index (CONUS) from 2019, depicting change from 2001 to 2019. This product was chosen because it provides the United States' government's definition regarding where 'urban' growth and development have occurred over the past approximately twenty years. According to the Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics Consortium website, where NLCD data are found urban or 'developed' uses have a very wide range of meanings, from developed open space, with impervious surfaces accounting for less than twenty percent of the total land cover, to developed high intensity, for which impervious surfaces account for between eighty and one-hundred percent of total land cover (*National Land*, 2022). With this in mind, further data were collected from the Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics Consortium website regarding 'urban imperviousness;' specifically, the product called 'NLCD Imperviousness (CONUS) All Years' was used, with data from 2001, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2016, and 2019. This data product was used to create maps of impervious surface over time, as well as to conduct change analysis. The obtained geospatial data were supplemented in maps with shapefiles from the United States Census Bureau, specifically the Cartographic Boundary Shapefiles for US Counties and US States.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

After the qualitative interviews had been transcribed, they were uploaded to the Dedoose software platform for coding and analysis. Initial coding was deductive in nature, in that *a priori* coding was implemented to search for those themes and ideas which had been previously identified as relevant to the research topic (see, for example, Blair, 2015). Blair (2015) notes that *a priori* coding can be particularly helpful in “giv[ing] the data a voice” and ensuring that the data are effectively situated within the larger literature and discussion regarding a topic, making this approach particularly well-suited for the research endeavor (p. 19). The predetermined codes included place image, the role of Leesburg both nationally and locally, transit and transportation, blending of past and present, Leesburg between urban and rural, and historical elements/character, among others. During the data analysis process, a number of other themes and codes emerged within the data as well, leading to extensive emergent or *in vivo* coding -- emergent codes included affordable housing, quality of life, and differences between the Virginia Village and Village at Leesburg projects, among others. These emergent codes were largely based on the specific words and language of the research participants. Indeed, most interviews led to the identification of new codes which could be subsequently applied to other transcripts (Blair, 2015). Still, in the interest of efficiency, even emergent codes were identified largely due to their relationships to pre-existing codes, meaning that pure descriptive coding was not employed. During the coding process, we performed limited analytical memoing (see, for example, Saldana, 2013). This process helped to ensure reflexivity and added rigor to the analytic process, and was integral to the development and identification of larger themes.

After the initial coding stage, excerpts given the same codes were compared with one another to understand the various opinions expressed by the key informants. For instance, a

number of interviewees commented on transportation topics, but they imagined transportation and associated ideas (e.g., sub-themes such as connectivity, Metrorail, transportation infrastructure) within different contexts, presenting a number of opinions on this large and significant topic. Widely varying perspectives were common to a number of codes, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of Leesburg's current situation and how the town will move forward. The coding process also served as a means for familiarization with and immersion within the data, adding to our overall understanding of the research situation.

Basic analysis was also performed regarding the geospatial data from the Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics Consortium website, with the primary goal of creating maps as visual aids in telling the story of Leesburg and Northern Virginia. The geospatial urban imperviousness data were loaded into ArcGIS Pro. The Raster Calculator tool was used to subtract the 2001 imperviousness levels from the 2019 imperviousness levels; this provided the level of change over time. No specific analysis was performed on the NLCD Land Cover Change index dataset, as this already included the analysis of change.

#### 4.4 Key Informants

Key informants were made aware from initial contact that due to the fairly small number of people with intimate knowledge of the subjects being discussed, guarantees of anonymity or confidentiality would do little to inhibit their identification as subjects. Thus, neither anonymity nor confidentiality were offered; the participants are listed below.

Ara BAGDASARIAN has been a member of the Leesburg Town Council since 2021 and formerly spent eight years on the Leesburg Economic Development Commission

Brian CULLEN is owner and founding principal of Keane Enterprises, a private development group of particular significance for its redevelopment of the Virginia Village site

Zach CUMMINGS has been a member of the Leesburg Town Council since 2021 and serves as the council liaison to the Board of Architectural Review

Tom FLYNN is the Deputy Director of the Prince William County (VA) Department of Economic Development and former Director of Economic Development for Loudoun County

Tony HOWARD is the President and CEO of the Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce, with extensive experience in similar positions throughout the region

Richard KLUSEK has been a Senior Planner for the Town of Leesburg since 2017 and was particularly active in the development of the Legacy Leesburg plan; he previously worked as a Senior Planner with the County of Loudoun from 2011 to 2017

Don KNUTSON is President of the Knutson Companies, a homebuilder particularly active in both Leesburg and other parts of the Northern Virginia region

Robert “Bob” W. LAZARO Jr. is Executive Director of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, a regional council bringing together more than a dozen local governments from across the region; the NVRC focuses on regional coordination and professional and technical assistance for member governments

Fernando “Marty” MARTINEZ is Vice Mayor of the Town of Leesburg and has spent time on the Leesburg Town Council since 2002

Paul NEWMAN is the Market Intelligence Manager for Loudoun County Economic Development and has held various planning positions throughout the Northern Virginia region in both the public and private sectors

Doug PARSONS is the Director of the Fauquier County (VA) Department of Economic Development and former Business Development Manager for the Town of Leesburg

Sarah PRICE is a former Business Development Manager with Loudoun County Economic Development and continues to work in a development context in the Washington, DC area

Buddy RIZER is the Executive Director of Loudoun County Economic Development and the Secretary of the Go Virginia Region 7 Council

Russell SEYMOUR is the Director of Economic Development for the Town of Leesburg and had been in that position for five years at the time of the interview

#### 4.5 Positionality Statement

While qualitative analysis may seek to be ‘objective’ in observing and understanding the larger research situation, it is also imperative to note that the background, experiences, and identity of the researcher do impact not only the findings but also the entire research process. With that said, the primary investigator is a fairly young, white, main with training and education in geography and planning topics. This background allowed the primary investigator to effectively relate to and develop rapport with the research participants, especially considering that most of them had fairly similar backgrounds to him. While the primary investigator was a geographic outsider to the Northern Virginia region and this may have introduced an imbalance of power regarding the sharing and discussion of knowledge regarding the research topic, there was nothing to mark the primary investigator as an outsider. In other words, the interviewees had no reason to suspect that the primary investigator was anything but an insider to the region, and this likely facilitated the effective and helpful flow of information.

## Chapter 5: Results

The collected data suggest that Leesburg is striving to become a ‘complete’ urban-style center with particular significance for not only Loudoun County but also a large and growing sphere of influence crossing multiple states. However, its exact status and trajectory are made uncertain by both internal dynamics regarding the future of development and external factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic. From Leesburg we learn that whereas one-time small towns may not be able to remain as ‘small’ as they once were, they can still retain the qualities that residents and visitors enjoy.

### 5.1 What is Leesburg to Become?

In examining how Leesburg is likely to change over the next several years, shaping an identity for itself amid an ever-changing region in which growth and development pressures actively push outward and westward from the central business district that is Washington, DC, it may immediately appear that the defining question to be asked is whether Leesburg is going to be engulfed by the larger agglomeration of residential communities, commercial areas, and cultural specificities that define Northern Virginia. In beginning to answer the first research question (Do recent urban economic decisions serve to situate Leesburg as a center/commercial hub at the junction between suburban areas to the east and rural areas to the west, OR is it destined to be a node in a regional network where growth and development tilt toward Washington, DC?), this section contends that the relevant question is not *whether* Leesburg will be surrounded by typical suburban development, but rather what the consequences of the westward-pushing growth and development forces, in concert with Leesburg’s own outward development, will be. Leesburg’s future will be determined not just by what surrounds it, but by how it reacts to its surroundings. Given this agency, we argue that Leesburg can shape its own



destiny and identity, carving out a distinct niche that retains a genuine and authentic sense of place. Importantly, this establishment and maintenance of a genuine and distinct place image is not guaranteed -- even as town and regional officials seek to ensure that Leesburg remains a well-defined entity, its destiny remains malleable.

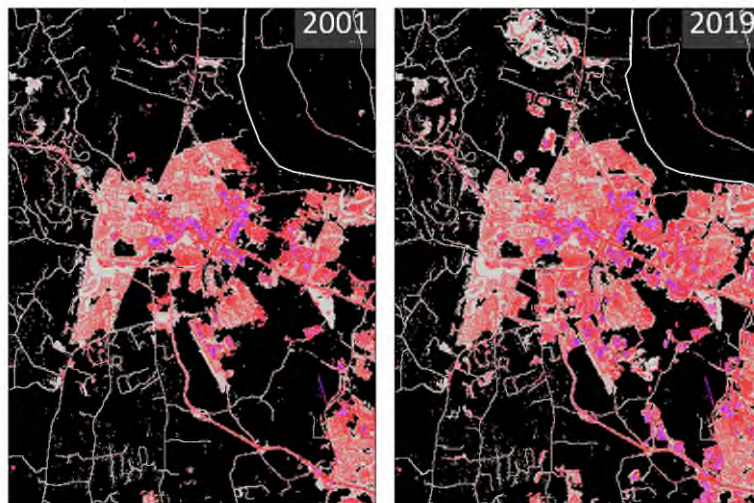
#### 5.1.1 Leesburg's Uneasy Relationship with Northern Virginia

An essential part of defining Leesburg's place within the Northern Virginia region is the assumption that Leesburg is, in fact, within Northern Virginia. White's (2017) finding that this assumption is contested by residents of the region was partially supported by the data in that a variety of perspectives regarding Leesburg's exact relationship to that region were presented. Such variety was anticipated, with *a priori* codes including 'fully part of NOVA,' 'separate from NOVA,' and 'uncertain relationship to NOVA' effectively applied to the data; codes and ideas relating to transportation infrastructure and affordable housing also helped to link Leesburg to the larger region. Regardless of the variety, overwhelmingly, key informants described Leesburg as part of NOVA; Doug Parsons (Director of the Fauquier County (VA) Department of Economic Development and former Business Development Manager for the Town of Leesburg) expresses this dominant sentiment in forcefully noting that both Leesburg and Loudoun County are 'definitely' part of Northern Virginia (2022, personal communication). Other interviewees tended to agree that Leesburg is part of NOVA, even if it occupies a spot on the very western edge of that region. As explained by Fernando "Marty" Martinez (Vice Mayor of the Town of Leesburg, with experience on the Leesburg Town Council beginning in 2002), "Do I consider it part of Northern Virginia, I think I have to. I mean, but I would say we are the edge of Northern Virginia. If you go west, it's rural Virginia" (2022, personal communication).

Yet, and in line with White's (2017) findings, the predominant sentiment was not universally adopted. Even Tony Howard (President and CEO of the Loudoun County (VA) Chamber of Commerce), who maintains that Leesburg is "frankly, unequivocally" part of NOVA, also adds that "you're gonna get a different answer from every person you talk to" (2022, personal communication). One dissenting voice came from Sarah Price (former Business Development Manager with Loudoun County Economic Development), who opines that "I think that given my experience in working in this area, I would sort of say that Leesburg is not really considered part of NOVA. Although it probably technically is, um, in the demographics but I think when people think of NOVA, I'm not sure that they think of Northern Virginia including Leesburg. Again, they should. But I don't know the answer to that. I would say that maybe they're not" (2022, personal communication). While Price considers Leesburg to be part of Northern Virginia, she understands that the long-significant distance between Leesburg and Washington, DC may continue to inhibit the development of connections between those entities. Similarly, Seymour notes that Leesburg certainly does not share the stereotypical assumptions that people associate with Northern Virginia, explaining that, "if you tell me I live in Northern Virginia and that means I get the services, I get the quality of life, I get all those other aspects, then yes I live in Northern Virginia. But if you automatically assume that Northern Virginia is nothing but congestion and all those, then no we're not" (2022, personal communication).

Built form reinforces personal perception in advancing the idea that Leesburg is increasingly connected to the rest of the Northern Virginia region. An examination of impervious surface data shows that over the past two decades, Leesburg has been increasingly part of and interconnected with the rest of the Northern Virginia region. While observers as recently as 2001 could certainly have made the case that Leesburg was its own entity with a strong buffer between

the town and the rest of Northern Virginia, over time, developments within the once-present ‘gap’ have created the sense that Leesburg is now an element of that region, if only its most western locality. Developments along the northeastern borders of the town have, over the past two decades, most obviously contributed to the sense that Leesburg is a westward extension of NOVA. Land cover data support the trend expressed by most of the key informants -- that although this may have once been a contested statement, Leesburg is now part of Northern Virginia.



*Figures 5a and 5b above, depicting impervious surface in the Leesburg area in 2001 and 2019, show not only that the Town of Leesburg has experienced infill development and outward expansion over time, but also that development to the east has effectively reached Leesburg’s door. Leesburg is increasingly physically connected to the rest of the Northern Virginia region.*

### 5.1.2 Mixed Use Developments in Leesburg

In this section, we examine the implications of the recently-planned redevelopment of Leesburg’s Virginia Village property, as well as its connections to the already-existing Village at Leesburg. Leesburg faces a number of challenges in determining which aspects of its history, character, and built form are worthy of preservation, which elements should be enhanced, and which, if any, may be more appropriately redeveloped to better align with emergent placemaking

and economic development goals. The downtown area has long been significant for the town, but other more residential or commercial areas also fulfill the imperative for Leesburg to adequately house, entertain, and provide employment for both residents and visitors. Extending or emphasizing the downtown in new areas may reinforce that area's historically relevant nature, but doing so may also disturb the spatial and image-defining balance Leesburg has found.

Even though they offer differing ideas of what exactly urbanism and development should look like there, the Village at Leesburg and Virginia Village (re)development projects provide strong evidence that Leesburg is becoming more of an urban center with great significance for Northern Virginia. The redeveloped Virginia Village will bring focus away from the suburban periphery and toward the highly significant downtown and therefore advances a place image of Leesburg that centers around that unique downtown space; in contrast, the Village at Leesburg advances a place image that is more typically suburban in its built form and location. Although the exact means through which they replicate 'urbanity' are certainly different, at their cores, both of these places strive to be mixed-use offerings that recreate the desirable walkability, density, mixed uses, and other amenities commonly associated with urban life, even if doing so means actively manufacturing these qualities rather than allowing them to emerge organically. Indeed, these projects demonstrate a larger trend by which developers "are rapidly introducing 'main street malls' and lifestyle centers, with an estimated one-third of all new shopping center properties now incorporating main streets and open-air town-like atmospheres" (Bohl, 2017, p. 63). In this case, the operative phrase is town-like -- consumers appreciate an atmosphere that is reminiscent of a traditional town or urban space, with the understanding that such an atmosphere does not necessarily need to have emerged organically over time.

When considering what, exactly Leesburg is, meaning which characteristics matter and how they inform an understanding of the location, many observers note that the downtown area has particular significance in determining Leesburg's 'place image.' When asked to choose one image that 'captures' what Leesburg is, Rich Klusek (Senior Planner for the Town of Leesburg, with particular involvement in the development of the Legacy Leesburg plan) responds that

“it’s gotta be that downtown image that I see over and over. If you’ve seen any press release about Leesburg, that downtown image. It’s King Street and Market Street, you know, that crossroads, that represents what I think most people want to associate with Leesburg. When you, if I live in Leesburg and someone says show me a picture of Leesburg, I’d have to pick that. That goes back to that character, that unique thing that people are so proud of” (2022, personal communication).

Zach Cummings (member of the Leesburg Town Council since 2021) expresses a similar sentiment, noting that “the historic downtown ... is really truly the successful tool that the town of Leesburg has had over the last two hundred years, and is what creates our success” (2022, personal communication). A number of observers mentioned that the downtown replicates urban features, echoing Klusek’s reference to “urban features in the downtown” (2022, personal communication). Specific characteristics include walkability, as referenced by Newman, Bagdasarian, Lazaro, Rizer, Klusek, and Howard, as well as the ‘human scale,’ as referenced by Klusek and Bagdasarian (2022, personal communications).



*Figure 6 shows downtown Leesburg on a Thursday evening. While the charm and historic character of the buildings are evident, it is also important that the sidewalks are empty and the little traffic present consists of automobiles.*

Even given its outsized significance and role, Leesburg’s historic downtown cannot independently sustain the town’s identity, especially given its small physical size relative to the rest of the urban footprint. While the Old and Historic District is a key generator of place image for the town, it is simply too small to house Leesburg’s tens of thousands of residents without drastic alterations to the kinds of development that are allowed within its boundaries. Additionally, the downtown’s increasing vibrancy and activity are still insufficient in positioning it as a twenty-four hour activity center. Howard describes his experience with the downtown: “Alright, I go down there and get some materials... , and I got there and I’m like -- I already knew, had an instinct that things close down early in Leesburg, so I gotta get there before six. I got down there at 5:35, they were already closed. And I looked around, I’m like except for like two restaurants, nothing is open” (2022, personal communication). Although this anecdote occurred more than a decade before the interview, Howard’s experience demonstrates that Leesburg’s downtown, like the downtowns of many other smaller urban communities, has not been immune to the effects of dispersed development on a continued vivacity and liveliness. In

fact, the Old and Historic district was once seen as something of an ‘antiques’ district, catering only to a very specific subset of shoppers: “there’s a whole lot more breweries and wineries and things like that where there used to be antique stores when I first came here in 2010, 2011” (Flynn, 2022, personal communication).

The deconcentration of activity from the historic core is particularly evident in the retail sector, as outlet stores and big box retailers have sought peripheral locations that provide more physical space. For example, the Leesburg Corner Premium Outlets opened in 1998 (*Leesburg Corner*, 2019), providing retail options that competed with those of the Old and Historic District; this competition contributed to a larger nation-wide trend by which “the image of downtown as an obsolete place... began to prevail in the minds of many individuals” (Robertson, 1999, p. 274). In recent years, Leesburg town officials have actively sought to make the downtown more relevant, with First Friday events and other attractions pulling residents and visitors to the space and showcasing entertainment options (Howard, 2022, personal communication; Martinez, 2022, personal communication; Parsons, 2022, personal communication; Seymour, 2022, personal communication). Even so, given the downtown core’s relative lack of housing density, and with different commercial interests migrating away from that area, the vibrancy of Leesburg’s urban center is threatened. Therefore, development projects outside the ‘downtown proper,’ including the Village at Leesburg and redevelopment of Virginia Village, have been initiated as a means to not only provide additional space for housing and commercial activities, but also to create and reinforce the urbanity of Leesburg. In reinforcing Leesburg’s ‘urban’ characteristics, these developments continue Leesburg’s legacy and perpetuate elements of its historic identity, without necessarily locating within the Old and Historic District.



*Figure 7 above illustrates that a number of shops in downtown Leesburg close before 5:30 pm on weekdays, limiting the extent to which working individuals can enjoy them.*

The Village at Leesburg was constructed in the early 2010s with the goal of increasing the amount of space dedicated in the town to housing, restaurants, retail, and offices (Hager, 2010a, b, c, d; Pizana, 2010; Hager, 2012; Bateman, 2013; Sharbel, 2013). The Village at Leesburg was “Leesburg’s first large mixed-use development,” and its site selection was motivated by the high median incomes in Loudoun County, the relative stability of the Washington area economy--which was especially important given the economic tumult of the late 2000s--and an underserved retail market in the town (Hosh, 2009, n.p.). The area’s development was consistent with the fact that “across Canadian and US cities, observers have noted the proliferation of maker spaces, co-working spaces, and the development of innovation districts as popular policies and tools for fostering innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship in urban environments, all while offering ‘authentic’ urban experiences” (Vinodrai, 2017, p. 30). Indeed, “the concept behind the Village at Leesburg and other mixed-use developments is to produce a sense of constant activity, with people living, working, shopping and dining in close



proximity to one another” (Hosh, 2009, n.p.). While the Village at Leesburg is often conceived as a ‘town center’ development, it is consistent with a larger trend by which “the offices, retail businesses, and service establishments that occupy main-street and town-center developments have suburban expectations for highway visibility, conventional parking lots, and facade characteristics that are different from the format of a traditional town center;” put simply, the Village at Leesburg is emblematic of a town center that has been manufactured to meet the demands of suburbia rather than emerging from any historic needs or characteristics as would be expected of a ‘town square’ or ‘town green’ (Bohl, 2017, p. 55).

Interestingly, throughout the mid-2010s, the space witnessed a number of renovations and expansions, justified by an increasing demand for the kinds of space it features (Bateman, 2014, 2015). This demand was made evident as several interviewees noted that the Village at Leesburg satisfies a need for a number of residents throughout the region. Paul Newman (Market Intelligence Manager for Loudoun County (VA) Economic Development) explains, “it’s not just keeping the Town of Leesburg stuck or constrained to just a certain type of historic businesses and restaurants,” and the center “helps the town provide people with both the more like boutique kind of businesses as well as the more necessary modern-like businesses” (2022, personal communication). The value of the Village at Leesburg is linked to its provision of business establishments and user experiences that are distinct from those found in the more historic or traditional sections of the town.



*Figure 8: While it is located within a car-dependent context, the Village at Leesburg offers mixed uses and emphasizes walkability in replicating elements of urbanity that many Leesburg residents enjoy. Source: author.*



*Figure 9: The wide sidewalks and human-scaled buildings with pedestrian-oriented information complement the Village at Leesburg's density and walkability, replicating those features as also found in the downtown area. Although parking spaces are present, the space's designers envisioned its occupants walking from place to place -- as would those visitors to the historic and pedestrian-centric downtown. Source: author.*

The Virginia Village site, situated in the Crescent Design District adjacent to Leesburg's downtown, had its origination in the late 1950s as an automobile-oriented, strip mall-style development. Since the late 2000s, the Town of Leesburg has begun to plan for this area becoming more pedestrian-oriented and mixed-use in nature. In fact, the Crescent Design District as a whole seeks to "create a new approach for development and redevelopment that presents a superior opportunity to extend the fine grain pattern of the downtown area and the original Old and Historic District, while creating a setting for a mixture of uses including a host of housing types" while presenting a transition between the downtown and more car-centric portions of Leesburg (*Chapter 11*, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, the Crescent Design District has long sought to accomplish the 'live, work, play' imperative of a complete community, with the idea that it would present "a strategy to introduce more housing options, business location alternatives, and shopping and dining to expand and complement downtown" (*Chapter 11*, 2012, p. 2). Although significant time has elapsed between the District's initial approval and the material initiation of redevelopment projects, and notwithstanding the significant physical barriers that limit the extent to which urban-style streetscapes can truly emerge in this area, the Crescent Design District continues to be viewed as a prime area in which to promote the "Live, Work, Play" concept.

Recently, Keane Enterprises (a local developer) has initiated redevelopment at the site. A key element of the Virginia Village project is that it aims to be more connected to the downtown than the more isolated Village at Leesburg. As explained by Brian Cullen (owner of Keane Enterprises, which oversees the redevelopment of Virginia Village), "you can go eat in the community that we're building, or you can walk eight minutes down to downtown Leesburg... I think it's more just how it's connected to a real authentic place that makes it very different" (2022, personal communication). Because of this perceived difference, Keane Enterprises has

actively “tried to stay away from this town center moniker. Because we don’t think we are a town center, ... we feel that we’re an extension to downtown. We’re a connection to downtown” (Cullen, 2022, personal communication). Central to the reincarnation of Virginia Village is the inclusion of more than 600 residences (townhomes, stacked townhomes, and condominiums, as well as 490 multifamily rental units) in the mixed-use package.

The increased residential density has been one of the more contentious aspects of the redevelopment scheme (Stinnette, 2022). Public opposition to the proposed densification of the district has also been directed towards the impacts on traffic patterns and significant parking demands. For instance, members of the Town Council expressed particular concern that parking for the Saturday Farmers Market would be insufficient under the redevelopment plan, reflecting continued anxiety about the town’s ability to maintain its quality of life with the development of new features (*Council work session*, 2021). Another underlying sentiment of the criticism is that the scale of the new ‘lifestyle center’ runs the risk of mimicking the build-out found in Fairfax, Manassas and other more typically suburban Northern Virginia locales. For others—including the majority of Leesburg’s Town Council who tepidly voted 4-3 to proceed with the redevelopment—the occasion to convert an old and under-utilized strip mall into an amenity-rich area with linkages to the historic downtown was precisely the type of development that Leesburg had envisioned for the Crescent District. One summation referred to the proposed Virginia Village as “a regionally-significant marquis project that will provide a blueprint for how to transform an aging and environmentally unsustainable commercial strip mall into an exciting mixed-use neighborhood” (Brauer and Painter, 2022, n.p.). And yet, the pressure to get the ‘character’ of the development correct obviously troubles many of the town’s civic officials, especially because Virginia Village represents the first large-scale and multi-acre attempt to transform the town’s

Crescent District. The Virginia Village project, as expressed by Council Member Steinberg during a council working session, has the potential to “be the benchmark or at least the indicator of where we [the Town of Leesburg] might be headed” (*Council work session*, 2022). The risk is that the project will represent a style and scale of urbanity that Leesburg is not fully committed to (see section 5.2 below for a deeper examination of how Leesburg is currently gripped with uncertainty).

In all, members of the Town Council during the Virginia Village approval process repeatedly expressed their concerns, likely consistent with those of a sizeable segment of the Leesburg resident population, that the redevelopment project will irreversibly change the course of Leesburg’s future, reflecting a deep-seated uncertainty about what exactly that future is. Even though it would provide housing and amenities, both of which are largely seen as a necessity for Leesburg’s continued viability and vibrancy, additional features of these kinds -- especially at the scale proposed in the redevelopment plans -- are inconsistent with the heritage of the town as expressed by its centerpiece Old and Historic District. Uncertainty around this kind of project may also be rooted in a skepticism expressed by the development regime toward “mixed-use projects organized in a traditional layout of streets, buildings, and public areas;” while the Virginia Village redevelopment may not be traditional in nature, reactions to it are likely rooted in well-rooted sentiments regarding this type of project (Bohl, 2017, p. 55). To make these additions, then, could represent a major change to Leesburg’s urban fabric, and one with which not all stakeholders are in agreement. Although the redevelopment plan has been approved, the approval process is representative of the larger uncertainty associated with the Town of Leesburg and its future writ large.



*Figure 10a and 10b: The Virginia Village property, anticipated to in the near future become a vibrant mixed-use center, is currently little more than a strip mall framing an expansive parking lot. The car is the center of this space. However, it is expected to become a mixed-use development where cars are primarily housed in garages and the scale is much more pedestrian in nature. Source: author (left); Brauer & Painter, 2022 (right).*

An important distinction between these two development projects is that while the Virginia Village project seeks to more closely align with the architectural style and ‘character’ of the downtown, the Village at Leesburg is more typically suburban in nature. In contrasting his company’s project from the Village at Leesburg, Cullen describes the latter as “a generic pop-up” (2022, personal communication). Ara Bagdasarian (member of the Leesburg Town Council since 2021 and former member of the Leesburg Economic Development Commission) agrees, explaining that, “there are mixed-use town centers all over America. You could be dropped in any one of them and not even know where you are. You could be in Akron, Ohio, or you could be in Philadelphia, suburban Philadelphia in a town center that looks exactly like the Village at Leesburg” (2022, personal communication). Similarly, Cullen directly compares the Village at Leesburg to the nearby suburban ‘town center’ developments One Loudoun and Brambleton (as do Knutson, Howard, and Flynn), noting that they are all typical of a fairly widespread suburban development pattern (2022, personal communication).

Such a comparison is also warranted by literature regarding the development of consumption-oriented spaces in other highly historical locales. In explaining the development of

a large outdoor shopping mall and the associated landscape of consumption at Short Pump, Virginia, Tharp (2022) observes that “this environment of chain stores and parking lots has contributed to locals’ general apathy and ignorance about the area’s actual past” (p. 90). In fact, “it [is] typical that the benchmark event in the decline of a small-city downtown [is] the opening of a regional mall” (Robertson, 1999, p. 274). While, in contrast to Short Pump, Leesburg retains its history via the preservation of its downtown space, it is important that if Leesburg seeks to retain its heritage and maintain an image based in its historical qualities and built form, the Old and Historic District cannot be eclipsed by novel developments such as the Village at Leesburg. Should the historic downtown be overshadowed by more novel developments, Leesburg would become just one part of a larger trend by which retail and recreational activities found on the outskirts of towns (e.g., malls) threaten “threaten the historic fabric” of downtown spaces throughout the nation (Accordino & Adhikari, 2021, p. 1-2). In this case, we observe that the Village at Leesburg and the historic downtown currently feature similar mixes, indicating that their joint success or downfall may be inherently connected. Furthermore, town planners and civic officials strive to maintain the Old and Historic District as a viable and persistent image, regardless of other developments. Additionally, Leesburg’s recent focus on the downtown and an accompanying Main Street-style program (Seymour, 2022, personal communication) indicates that the downtown will continue to exist as a valued amenity (Van Leuven, 2022). Taken together, we find that downtown Leesburg is not currently threatened by emergent developments and redevelopments, but its continued relevance is worthy of continued consideration.

The Village at Leesburg still contributes to the idea of Leesburg as an urban destination. Even Cullen acknowledges the Village at Leesburg “has a lot of things to it, you know, the residential and it has walkability to stores and restaurants” (2022, personal communication).

Similarly, Bagdasarian opines that even though “from a character perspective, it doesn’t have the same, you don’t have the same experiences walking in downtown Leesburg where you’ve got smaller scale buildings, the streets are closer together, you don’t have cars in the middle of the streets and the side of the road,” the Village at Leesburg is still a highly walkable and mixed-use community (2022, personal communication). Indeed, the vibrancy of the Village at Leesburg is only projected to grow, with recent announcement of five new restaurant and ‘experience’-based tenants as well as expansions to current offerings, with the expected impact of providing more space for unique offerings and experiences (*Village at Leesburg announces*, 2022). Beyond its urban characteristics, the Village at Leesburg has acted as an event destination. As explained by Russell Seymour (Director of Economic Development for the Town of Leesburg),

“we’re looking at, that is also a really great place for some hotel activity that’s gonna be occurring out there. We’ve got two hotel projects that are gonna be in that vicinity, so I think from that place and that really is a destination. If you look at what’s there and you start talking about Wegmans, you talk about the movie theater, you talk about, those are destinations. And they’ve done a really good job of having their own events ... and they have people out there all the time” (2022, personal communication).

Seymour’s meaning, then, is that the Village at Leesburg has acted as a destination in the past largely because of its commercial offerings and experiences, and that plans for the future see the continuation of that trend. The Village at Leesburg is a destination not only because it provides desired mixed-use and walkability in replication of the urban and downtown-esque features



residents and visitors enjoy, but also because it hosts offerings that are in themselves destinations.

In contrast to the Village at Leesburg's replication of a larger suburban trend, plans for the Virginia Village site indicate that Leesburg may be presenting itself as a 'distinct' center for entertainment, socialization, and economic activity with a greater focus on the downtown than is generated by the Village at Leesburg. As explained by Bagdasarian, the Village at Leesburg is "its own really self-contained community," whereas "the Virginia Village is an extension of the downtown" with "historic nods" to the downtown (2022, personal communication). Don Knutson (president of the Knutson Companies, a homebuilder particularly active in both Leesburg and other parts of the Northern Virginia region), an outside observer to that particular redevelopment process, specifically calls the project an "addition to downtown Leesburg" (2022, personal communication). Cullen echoes this sentiment, noting that the community will become a walkable "extension" of the downtown Old and Historic District, in contrast to the Village at Leesburg's situation near major highways (2022, personal communication). Cullen continues by noting that in contrast to the Village at Leesburg having aimed to satiate the needs of a particular now-past time period and its associated development urges, the redevelopment of Virginia Village aspires to accommodate the desires of a younger generation/ He observes that "there's more people in generations younger than me that would rather live in Virginia Village than live in a cul-de-sac" (Cullen, 2022, personal communication).

Additionally, the Virginia Village project contributes to the now decade-plus-long movement of the town away from suburban notions and toward those of the urban, continuing the urbanization process in which the Village at Leesburg is also included. As expressed by Cummings, "Virginia Village... and my impression is it's much more urban because it's a

tighter” development than the Village at Leesburg that also provides a deal of housing and commercial activity (2022, personal communication). Whereas the Village at Leesburg is still somewhat suburban in nature given the auto-dependent nature of its surroundings, the redeveloped Virginia Village will strongly and decisively move away from that image and further solidify the idea that Leesburg is becoming more urban.

Although Virginia Village and the Village at Leesburg certainly indicate Leesburg’s movement toward a ‘complete community,’ their relatively small sizes and commitments to retail at the expense of greater commercial space limit the extent to which they can truly move the town into that category. Planning staff acknowledge this reality: Seymour is particularly wary of the retail-heavy nature of the Village at Leesburg and Virginia Village, noting his concern about a situation whereby “people start talking about, well we’re gonna build more retail. More retail. Because I don’t see that being a good investment right now” (2022, personal communication). Retail and restaurant space may be nice amenities, but they do not lead to the creation of high-paying jobs, as Seymour implies through his observation that “we have business clients that are saying, we met with somebody yesterday that was telling us, one of the biggest problems we have is we can’t pay our hourly workers what Amazon can. Amazon’s coming in and they’re paying twice as much and we can’t find people to work here” (2022, personal communication). Should Leesburg continue to prioritize retail space as a major land use within its mixed-use developments, these projects may only reinforce the ‘live’ and ‘play’ components of the ‘live, work, play’ trifecta, ironically limiting the extent to which the town becomes ‘complete.’ To be clear, the Village at Leesburg does offer office space, and the redeveloped Virginia Village will do the same. However, the offerings appear unlikely to sufficiently transition Leesburg toward a space where residents can truly reside in close proximity to both

employment and entertainment options, even if they demonstrate the town's movement toward that ideal.

Of course, given the changing nature of work and its decreasing connection to physical workplaces, the development of commercial space is not the only way to facilitate a growing 'work' component of a 'complete community.' Rather, Leesburg could grow that component via recruitment and retention of young professionals (e.g., in line with Florida's creative class theories). Furthermore, Leesburg does already have a number of coworking spaces (Seymour, 2022, personal communication; Bagdasarian, 2022, personal communication), which could encourage movement by those individuals able to work fully remotely. However, the limited stock of affordable housing suitable for young professionals, as well as the family-centric nature of most residential sections of the town, may disincentivize in-migration from that group. Again, communities such as Virginia Village will moderate housing concerns and provide amenities suitable for remote and hybrid workers, but Leesburg in its current state does not meet its 'complete community' goals.

A final note of significance in this discussion concerns the use of the 'village' nomenclature for both of these mixed-use offerings. While not mentioned in the research conversations beyond a general acknowledgement of the similarities in naming choice for the projects, the choice to use the word 'village' can be understood as evoking a quaint, historic, and small town-based image of the setting, in contrast to the highly urbanized, dense, and commercial images more commonly associated with cities. At the same time, the use of this term evokes the modern shopping mall, in that "mall design speaks to an imagined past to encourage more shopping, lessen the stigma of consumption, and provide a sense of connection" (Tharp, 2022, p. 89). In this sense, both the Village at Leesburg and Virginia Village -- with the

understanding that Virginia Village used that name from its origination as a 1950s automobile-oriented extension of a then-small and -rural Leesburg -- situate themselves as charming and picturesque elements of the Town of Leesburg, perhaps rejecting the notion that they are manufactured and created features inherently meant to drive economic activity. The dichotomy between the urbanized, highly developed characteristics of these projects and their ‘charming’ names further demonstrates the disconnect between how Leesburg has imagined itself and what it has truly become, further contributing to the uncertainty of what the town will be moving forward.



*Figure 11: The nomenclature of ‘Village Market Boulevard’ in the Village at Leesburg may seek to reinforce the quaint, connected, and complete imagery that project seeks to recreate, even at the automobile-dependent entrance to the property.*

### 5.1.3 Complete Communities

As outlined in the Legacy Leesburg plan, part of Leesburg’s path to becoming more of an urban center revolves around establishing itself as a ‘complete community,’ in contrast with

bedroom communities where residents may live without spending much if any of their free time. Leesburg already has a large residential population and is a destination for ‘play’-based activities, meaning that it must focus more on ‘work’-oriented space to become a true ‘complete community’. The town’s specific location within the larger Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions makes that ‘completeness’ a greater possibility.

While ambiguous, the idea of the ‘complete community’ continues a trend introduced decades ago, and receiving renewed attention in recent years, of the ‘live work play’ center (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009). Indeed, mixed use ‘live work play’ centers are often noted as recreating desirable characteristics of the city center, as Leesburg has sought to do (Dunham-Jones & Williamson, 2009; Grant & Perrott, 2011; Ehrenhalt, 2012; Charney, 2020). Within the Leesburg context, as explained by Seymour, “a complete community ought to be one where you can move into to live, you can find a job that supports your ability to live in that community, and you don’t have to leave to go out to dinner, you don’t have to leave the area to go on vacation necessarily” (2022, personal communication). Leesburg, then, lacks the characteristics of the complete community in that “unfortunately a lot of the focus has been on the live and play, and they seem to leave off the work piece” (Seymour, 2022, personal communication).

Leesburg’s specific location within the region presents characteristics or advantages that are particularly helpful in generating economic development to contribute to the ‘work’ element of the ‘live work play’ trifecta. One advantage as identified by key informants is that Leesburg is located between suburban locales and those that are more rural. In this sense, residents are able to access a variety of amenities, leveraging admission to both scenic rural areas and associated features, as well as those features that are associated with more built-up regions. Prior research suggests that such access may be particularly helpful in attracting employees, given that some

“scholars argue that rather than thick labour markets and the institutions that support [their] (re)production, amenities are the key driver attracting talented individuals to particular places” (Vinodrai, 2017, p. 28); the true value of amenities can be contested, though, as explained below.

In explaining Leesburg’s particular place in the Northern Virginia region, Newman sees that, “Leesburg definitely is kind of that boundary as well as the gateway I think for more urban development and residence to the east” (2022, personal communication). Seymour adds to this idea, explaining that “you know right on the other side of the treeline is these beautiful rolling hills that you can go out, you get lost in the countryside. And that’s something that we highlight because of our location, that you don’t get in Fairfax or some of the other Northern Virginia localities” (2022, personal communication). Put simply, in contrast to other areas of the region, Leesburg has a strategic location allowing visitors and residents to access a diverse range of amenities.

Echoing Newman and Seymour, Bagdasarian expresses particular appreciation for Leesburg’s access to transportation infrastructure and other more distinctly ‘urban’ amenities in mentioning that

“I love the fact that you know I’m a fifteen minute ride to Dulles, like traveling is, used to be a pain in the butt, and now if I have to go out of town, I schedule an Uber, they’re here in five minutes, I’m dropped off right in front of the terminal, hop on my plane. I’ve actually timed it, I’ve been from my door to my gate in under thirty minutes. And that to me is just like awesome ... being close proximity to DC” (2022, personal communication).

These quotations reveal that observers see distinct value in being located in Leesburg for the associated ability to access a greater number of *types* of amenities than would be available in most locations, making Leesburg a particularly attractive place for workers to live.

Prior scholarship suggests that even if it is potentially helpful in attracting certain types of residents and businesses, access to amenities will not, in isolation, attract highly skilled and qualified individuals to work in Leesburg. As argued by Storper and Scott (2009), “While clearly the presence of appropriately skilled and talented people is essential to innovation, it strains credulity to suppose that members of the creative class move about the economic landscape as though they were principally in search of amenity-based gratification” (p. 156). Furthermore, “among the preferences in addition to those for amenities--generally construed--that play a role in individuals’ location decisions we must also count those for relevant employment and remuneration” (Storper & Scott, 2009, p. 161). Therefore, Leesburg’s emphasis on its access to amenities is an effective element of its tourism attraction approach to development, but such emphasis is unlikely to be sufficient in crafting a long-term, sustainable economic development agenda. Put simply, Leesburg needs to do more than provide amenities--or access to them--if it truly wants to become a complete community. Leesburg’s prospects are ameliorated, then, by its ability to access not only a large labor market for the employment opportunities located within its boundaries, as well as the large consumer market from which tourism, retail, and other destination-based industries can pull customers.

Another factor making Leesburg potentially attractive for businesses and other forms of economic development is that the town has a particularly large market, extending even into more western localities like Purcellville. Robert W. Lazaro, Jr. (Executive Director of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission) draws on his extensive experience in that more western locale in

explaining that “we in Purcellville had market studies that showed that, you know, you’re never going to get a clothing store to come to Purcellville because the market showed that Leesburg had took all the air out of that balloon. I mean, you can go into Leesburg and buy anything. You know we would always joke that you couldn’t buy underwear in Purcellville” (2022, personal communication). Lazaro’s humor and metaphor still convey a genuine sentiment, and he is very serious about the fact that Leesburg has historically captured a great deal of the Loudoun County market share -- businesses can locate there and have access to a geographically broad customer base.

Beyond market access, Leesburg also provides access to other necessary conditions for successful economic activity, including a highly skilled workforce; this is also related to Leesburg’s location in that it can be easily accessed by a number of types of workers. Explaining this accessibility and in support of Buddy Rizer’s (Executive Director of Loudoun County Economic Development and Secretary of the Go Virginia Region 7 Council) mentioning a “talented workforce” (2022, personal communication), Price notes that “there’s more and more people with the skillsets we were just talking about living there, but Leesburg has access to that, that workforce. They also can pull in workforce from West Virginia, especially, um, because of where they’re located. So they might have a strength in pulling a broader, diverse set of workers that maybe people wouldn’t go as far from [home]” (2022, personal communication). Price also explains that “there’s a really profound, a lot, intellectual capital in Loudoun County. They’re very knowledgeable about the tech sector, um, and so Leesburg can, can take advantage of that” (2022, personal communication), with Parsons echoing that sentiment in observing Leesburg’s highly educated workforce (2022, personal communication). In all, respondents agreed that the entire Northern Virginia region is home to highly educated individuals with immense technical



and professional skills -- indeed, “Northern Virginia has a well-developed pipeline of competent data center workers, owing to the existence of data center-specific degree programs at institutions such as Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) and George Washington University (Calabrese et al., 2022, p. 3).

Leesburg’s strategic position within the region creates a number of factors providing it a complicated relationship to various types of economic development. The town’s provision of connections between urban and suburban areas, allowing it to serve as a central hub for activities coming from a number of directions, may incentivize a number of businesses to locate within its boundaries; still, these amenities by themselves are unlikely to facilitate the creation of a full and complete community with economic and labor activity. Although key informants stressed the importance of amenities, Town economic development officials will likely need to continue going beyond these appealing features in generating the kinds of activity that will supplement living and playing in making Leesburg ‘complete.’ In this sense, the provision of the Village at Leesburg as a location with both amenities and also commercial office space, alongside the redevelopment of Virginia Village into a place including similar features, is not just a pleasant addition to the town, but an important condensing nucleus for the recruitment of firms and people -- amenities do not by themselves generate economic activity in Leesburg.

#### 5.1.4 Complete Urban Center for Whom?

Also important to Leesburg’s movement toward ‘complete’ community is the way that its location, as examined both above and below in response to Question 3, affects the economic development occurring in the town. Leesburg’s particular location, in addition to its concurrent emphases on the downtown and mixed-use centers, allows it to serve as an urban space and destination for a particularly large and growing region that now includes several states. At the

same time, many Leesburg residents spend much of their waking time outside the town's borders, whereas the workers who meet the town's retail, tourism, and hospitality demands tend to live in neighboring or distant areas. Thus, questions arise regarding for whom Leesburg acts as an urban center -- is this function an inward-facing reaction to the needs of its residents, or is it an outward-facing appeal to the day-trippers and other tourists increasingly flocking to the locale?

From the perspective of the town's economic development office, Leesburg increasingly looks outward in attracting tourists to experience the town, with the understanding that the money these tourists spend also benefits residents. Seymour explains that his office has recently hired an individual to focus on two major efforts (2022, personal communication):

“establishing a main street program for downtown, and then also focused on tourism. And the idea behind the tourism piece are the day trippers. And go back to what I said a few minutes when you're talking about when we close the streets, okay, they're coming from Maryland, they're coming from West Virginia, they're driving down from Pennsylvania. They're coming in. Great. We have them come in. That is a target for us, that's an opportunity. We want them to come back. We have a number of, really in the last year we've had a number of state conferences that have been in our area”

However, just because the office may be looking to attract outside visitors does not mean that Leesburg's residents are unable to benefit from revitalization and reinvestment. Rather, as explained by Van Leuven (2022), “a vibrant downtown offers a differentiated retail and entertainment experience for local residents and visitors. By beautifying the streetscape and hosting events, the MSP [Main Street Program] director and volunteers attempt to transform the

historic business district into a *destination* for families, tourists, and shoppers” (p. 3, emphasis original). While tourists are a clear audience for Leesburg’s economic development activity, prior scholarship makes it clear that *both* tourists and residents can benefit from that activity.

Furthermore, Leesburg’s planning staff and civic officials believe that a key element of making the downtown more attractive involves imagining it as an amenity encouraging visitors to become more permanent residents. The Legacy Leesburg plan espouses this perspective, noting that “a vibrant, walkable, highly amenitized downtown and walkable, mixed use neighborhoods are assets a community can wield in the competition to attract and retain talent, and in turn jobs and investment” (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022, p. 61). In creating the downtown space as an amenity, the Town of Leesburg seeks not only to encourage tourism, but also to provide motivation and reasoning for tourists to join the urban fabric in a more permanent manner.

Of course, Seymour also highlights his department’s efforts to attract relevant jobs to the area and inform Leesburg residents of the opportunities available within the town boundaries as essential parts of accomplishing the economic development imperative, but the downtown will remain a central and important space for Leesburg, and one that increasingly looks outward in fulfilling its mission. However, it should also be noted that, as discussed below, Leesburg currently lacks the transportation infrastructure and rail links that would facilitate easy connections for day-trippers and other visitors, highlighting the lack of clarity in Leesburg’s plans for the future.

Regardless of specific audience, the town’s explicit focus on its downtown in creating and hosting events has been particularly important in establishing Leesburg as a destination. Lazaro firmly believes in this idea, enthusiastically conveying that “it [Leesburg’s downtown] is

[a social and economic center]! ... Leesburg has done really well in renovate -- reinvigorating their downtown, it's an attractive place, it's very walkable, they do a lot of special events from the garden show to Taste of Leesburg, etcetera, that bring people into the core, you know they have a humongous family-oriented events like the Halloween parade, Fourth of July, and others" (2022, personal communication). Howard agrees, contending that "the town's doing a much better job these days of leveraging [its downtown] by having like First Friday and closing down King Street for only pedestrian traffic, and having other special events" (2022, personal communication). Both Lazaro and Howard convey that Leesburg is able to act as a social and economic center because of its downtown section -- this section of the town not only acts as a host for outsiders, but also a source through which these outsiders' understandings of the locality are generated and reinforced. Furthermore, the space has significance for residents as well, providing a space to host sanctioned and approved events -- even if the space may not be considered suitable for political activism or other protest (see, for example, Tharp, 2022), it provides desired programming.

Critically, that status as a destination applies for residents of both rural and urban locations within Northern Virginia and surrounding areas. As explained by Newman,

"there's a strong sense of place and history [in Leesburg]... that you might not get in a lot of the, the newly developed parts of Loudoun, you know that you might not find in Sterling or Chantilly or Ashburn. So I think a lot of people in eastern Loudoun, and even from other parts of Northern Virginia like Fairfax County or Prince William, a lot of people go to Leesburg because it's just such a nice place to hang out" (2022, personal communication).

In this case, Leesburg's specific characteristics -- especially its history and character -- are unique within a region that has seen rapid and homogeneous suburbanization over the last several decades. This uniqueness allows the town to function as a destination, offering experiences that are not found elsewhere. In this sense, Leesburg--with particular emphasis on areas such as the Village at Leesburg--actively competes with developments such as One Loudoun and the Dulles Town Center to attract visitors interested in those experiences which can largely be found throughout the region. In fact, Tom Flynn (Deputy Director of the Prince William County (VA) Department of Economic Development and former Director of Economic Development for Loudoun County) explains how "rather than drive all the way down to One Loudoun or further in, Leesburg has become, its downtown has become somewhat of a gathering place for that, sort of an activity area that's pretty neat" (2022, personal communication). Indeed, according to Flynn, Leesburg is particularly a "gathering place for people in western Loudoun County," especially because it offers experiences associated with more 'built-up' places that are not available in the county's western portions (2022, personal communication). Such a role is consistent with Leesburg's historical function for the region, as "small towns have traditionally functioned as retail and service centers to surrounding farmers" (Daniels, 1989, p. 414-415); of course, the specific attachment to Leesburg has changed, but the town continues to fulfill many of the same responsibilities it has throughout history. Combined, these discussions of Leesburg's characteristics and roles indicate that the town serves a variety of different audiences from varying backgrounds and perspectives.

In line with the fact that Leesburg is particularly attractive for residents of eastern locales, land use decisions have actively centered gathering spaces and economic hubs at positions

convenient for residents of those places, with Cummings noting that “Village at Leesburg is off of Route 7, it’s... at the gateway of the town” (2022, personal communication). Considering that Route 7 stretches from Leesburg to the east, connecting the town to Sterling, Great Falls, and eventually locations more proximate to Washington, like Tysons and Falls Church, it is evident that Leesburg has positioned itself as a suitable location for residents of more ‘traditional’ suburbs to complete their activities. Bagdasarian supports this idea, noting that “on a number of occasions, I’ve just overheard people saying oh yeah, we came down from Gaithersburg, we came down from Frederick because we heard about this live music scene in downtown Leesburg” (2022, personal communication).

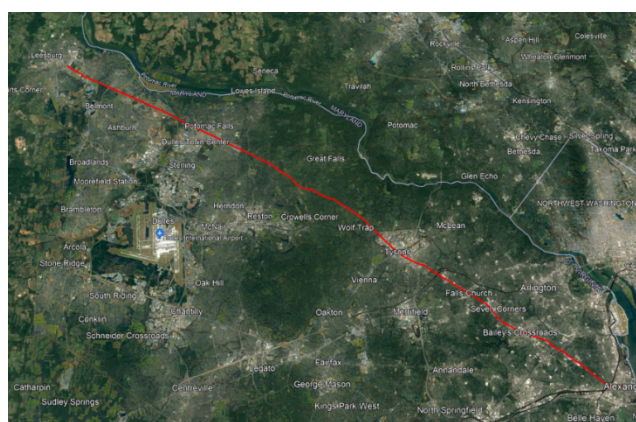


Figure 12 shows the reach of VA-7 (in red) from Leesburg, in the top left corner, through many built-up Northern Virginia localities to the eastern edge of Alexandria. Source: Google Earth, with modifications by author.

Also important to a discussion of for whom Leesburg acts as a complete urban community is an understanding of the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the town at large. As a whole, as of July 2021, approximately 68.4% of Leesburg residents indicated that their ethno-racial background was ‘white alone,’ while 17.6% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 10.1% identified as African American, and 8.7% identified as Asian alone (*QuickFacts Leesburg*, 2021). The median household income was \$116,350 and 3.6% of people were in poverty (*QuickFacts Leesburg*, 2021). The mean travel time to work was 29.0 minutes (*QuickFacts Leesburg*, 2021).

Given this description of the town, a number of conclusions can be drawn. Based on the demographic description of the key informants, it is apparent that the decision-makers in the town may not accurately represent the entire population – there may be voices missing from the planning, decision-making, and administrative processes, and these voices appear to belong to the substantial minority of residents who identify as Hispanic or Latino. Especially considering that wealthy white residents may be among those individuals most likely to travel outside of the town’s boundaries to complete their working activities, while Hispanic and/or Latino residents may be more associated with the service industries Leesburg centers within its movement toward becoming a hospitality and tourism destination, the Town’s creation of a complete community for the first group becomes problematic. Indeed, while wealthy white individuals may have the financial means to rent apartments in places like the Village at Leesburg and Virginia (studio apartments at The Metropolitan at Village at Leesburg cost nearly \$2,000 per month to rent [Floor Plans, 2022]) thereby enjoying the ‘complete communities’ created there, the same may not be true of other sub-populations.

Based on this demographic description of the town, we can conclude that while residence and employment (specifically, office-based or ‘white collar’ employment) in the Village at Leesburg may be attainable to households at or above the median household income level, the individuals who work in the shops and restaurants contributing to the ‘play’ aspect of a ‘complete’ community are left without the same options. Leesburg’s idea of a complete community currently appears to cater to the dominant majority of fairly wealthy residents in the town, but does not necessarily provide the same opportunities to other groups.

Beyond the Northern Virginia region, Leesburg is also significant for a wide range of localities spanning a number of states. As explained by Seymour,

“a lot of what we see now is they think of Leesburg as a, an event destination. We have seen more people, even when we started closing the streets more often downtown, and that’s been in the last two years. And expanding that, to go from a First Friday of the month to basically every Friday and Saturday we’re closing the downtown area. And we’re pulling people in from Maryland, from West Virginia, from Pennsylvania that are coming down for the day, and I think that Leesburg now is starting to be seen as that, hey it’s a great place to go, the destination” (2022, personal communication).

Seymour’s implication here is that as Leesburg has begun to position itself as a destination for a wide variety of events, with special focus on the downtown section and the particular amenities located there, the town has attracted attention from a wider geographic audience than it may traditionally have warranted. Whereas the town has historically been relevant as an economic center for Loudoun county and the western part of the Washington region, it now acts as a center of opportunities, entertainment, and economic activity for residents of distant locales.

Also important to a discussion of for whom economic development and place making are initiated is the understanding that many residents of Leesburg do not work in the town; additionally, many employees who work in the town do not live there. Seymour observes, “we tend to export employment,” sending highly skilled individuals to areas further east to work in technology, government contracting, real estate, data management, and a number of other ‘professional’ industries, whereas “we tend to import people to work at the businesses that are here, the restaurants, the retail centers” (2022, personal communication). Other less



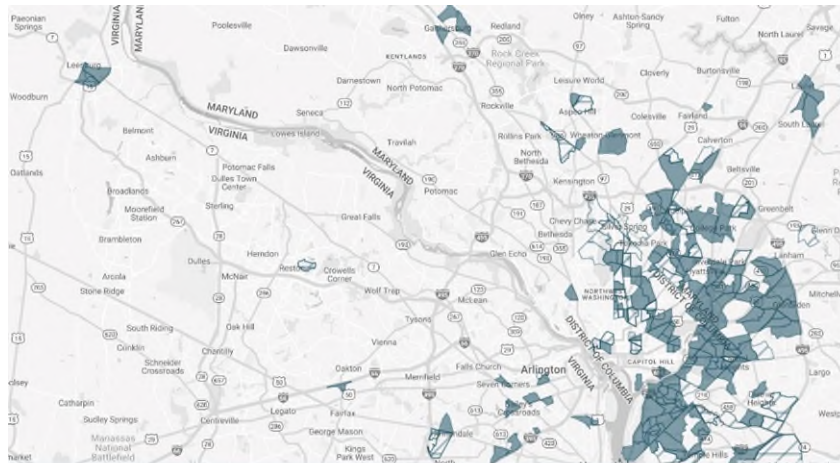
professionally-oriented opportunities in Leesburg include manufacturing; Seymour stresses that “there are businesses in Leesburg that are manufacturing-based businesses” and that many residents of Leesburg do not even know these businesses exist, much less work at them (2022, personal communication).

A small portion of Leesburg’s higher-skilled employees are still able to work close to home. For example, Cullen discusses “a company called K2M, which was bought by Strkyer [a global healthcare technology firm], and they’re one of the bigger employers in Leesburg” (2020, personal communication). Newman also provides evidence for skilled employment in Leesburg, mentioning that “we’ve seen a big uptick in technology companies that want to be located either inside the town or on the periphery of the town” (2022, personal communication). These perspectives are reinforced by official data released by the town, suggesting that K2M is among Leesburg’s private firms with the most employees, although it is joined by the retail giants Costco, Target, and Wegmans (*Major Employers*, n.d.). However, the public sector is by far Leesburg’s largest employer, represented most strongly by Loudoun County, Loudoun County Public Schools, and the Federal Aviation Administration, all of which have more employees working out of Leesburg offices than any one private firm (*Major Employers*, n.d.). While the public sector positions may be stable and provide substantial employment, their current dominance suggests that additional large private employers still have the opportunity to contribute significantly to the ‘work’ aspect of a ‘complete’ community.

An important part of these firms’ decision to locate in Leesburg is the fact that, as explained by Rizer, “a large portion of the downtown area of the Town of Leesburg is located in a HUBZone, a US Small Business Administration Historically Underutilized Business (HUB) Zone which helps small businesses gain preferential access to federal procurement opportunities”

(2022, personal communication). While not every technology company in Leesburg is located within this zone, it is a desirable place to locate, with Seymour noting that “we get calls on a regular basis for HUBZone space” (2022, personal communication). Indeed, HUBZone designation has long been particularly attractive for a number of businesses, with Parsons explaining that it was instrumental in bringing federal contractors with a variety of specific focuses to Leesburg (2022, personal communication). These federal contractors, while not as close to their customers as they might have been in Alexandria or Arlington, still retain a relative proximity, with Flynn explaining that “there certainly [are] a lot of government contractors that want to be here to have access to the decision-makers in Washington, DC” (2022, personal communication).

Additionally essential to the discussion of these areas, especially as connecting to the idea of a ‘complete community’ featuring both residential and economic or commercial activities, is the fact that businesses qualifying for the HUBZone program must have at least thirty-five percent of their employees residing within a HUBZone (*HUBZone*, n.d.). Although individuals need not reside and work within the same HUBZone, Leesburg’s dominance of the HUBZone ‘market’ for western Northern Virginia (see Figure 15 below) may motivate a close proximity between work and residence.



*Figure 13: HUBZones in the Washington, DC metropolitan area are largely concentrated in and adjacent to the nation's capital, with Leesburg (top left) hosting western Northern Virginia's main options for this kind of space. However, Town Council members have expressed concerns that rising rents may result in the loss of the town's HUBZone designation (Stinnette, 2022). Source: United States Small Business Administration HUBZone map.*

Such a requirement has interesting implications given the impact of the pandemic on where, physically, Leesburg residents live; as explained by Cummings, “we have a lot of folks who work for defense contractors, government contractors that live here, and a lot of them nowadays since Covid work from home here in Leesburg” (2022, personal communication).



*Figure 14: Stryker's Leesburg offices are located in an automobile-dependent, residential area of the town, providing easy access for a large number of residents. Source: author.*

The dynamic by which many of Leesburg's higher-paid, higher-skilled residents leave the town to perform their working activities, in contrast to the fact that residents of other locales enter Leesburg to labor within the tourism-supporting industries, raises questions regarding the intended audience of the town's image-creating activities. Residents of Leesburg who work in other localities may be able to partake in the positive benefits of revitalization and remaking without necessarily contributing to the processes by which they occur, whereas workers who reside elsewhere and perform the essential functions of the service industry are clearly contributing to Leesburg's 'making,' but may not be able to enjoy the fruits of that process. Importantly, the various groups impacting Leesburg's future (e.g., residents who work in the town, residents who work in outside localities, individuals coming to Leesburg from other locations for work) may not hold the same desires regarding what Leesburg is to be or how they fit into such a vision, and the collected data do not evidence a plan or strategy regarding how these groups' varying perspectives should be accommodated. The pandemic and recent emphasis on high-skilled employment within the town's boundaries work to balance this complex dynamic, but its continued presence does limit the extent to which Leesburg is able to become a 'complete' community in which all stakeholders are equally able to share in the benefits of place development.

Leesburg continues to become a destination of significance in terms of both leisure and employment, primarily for individuals residing in and near Loudoun County, but also increasingly for those visitors from a large and expansive geographic region crossing a number of administrative boundaries. While current working and employment patterns do limit the extent to which the town is now a 'complete' community where people live, work, and play in the same

area, recent trends and the presence of high-skilled and well-paying employment opportunities suggest that the town's 'completeness' is only growing.

#### 5.1.5 Hub or Node?

Leesburg's place in the larger Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions has changed significantly over the past several years, becoming increasingly integrated into and interconnected with activities at the larger metropolitan scale. Additionally, its image as a 'destination' and increasing focus on becoming a 'complete community' have made Leesburg more of an urban-style center in its own right, with a particularly strategic location. Throughout the interviews, key informants expressed a number of ideas regarding whether Leesburg is to be a 'hub at the junction between suburban and rural' or a 'node in a regional network where growth and development tilt toward Washington, DC.' Predetermined and emergent codes relevant to this conversation included 'elements of rural and urban,' 'growth tilting toward DC,' 'growth tilting toward Leesburg/Loudoun,' 'Leesburg as a center/hub,' 'Leesburg in between city and rural,' 'role of Leesburg,' and 'uncertain position.' Key informants had a wide variety of ideas regarding these themes, with the major finding that Leesburg is increasingly a node within the Northern Virginia region, but it is still likely to remain at the intersection of rural and urban or suburban land uses. Truly, Leesburg's status as a hub, node, or other role remains highly fluid, as a number of interests and desires continue to be negotiated in an increasingly contentious and impactful development, redevelopment, and image generation process.

Perhaps the most important part of this finding is the fluidity it represents, especially given that Leesburg's future has not yet been sealed. As of writing, Leesburg acts as a seam in bringing together both the spreading suburban homogeneity so familiar to residents and visitors of areas to its east, with the resistance to growth and change characteristic of Loudoun's western

locales. As explained by Cowell et al. (2020), residents of western Loudoun County place significant emphasis on ensuring that development in their history and heritage, whereas the eastern side of the county has over the past several years been highly accepting of commercial and residential development. Leesburg's spatial inconsistency brings together elements of both regimes, demonstrating that even as they physically meet they are not necessarily with one another. It is particularly essential that town planning staff do understand this inconsistency, with the result that Leesburg attempts to maintain its historic sense of place even as development continues; Leesburg appears to strive in limiting what it might consider 'unnecessary' growth and instead adopting a form that is only as large as required to meet imperatives. As detailed in a work session document,

“as the population continues to grow, it is imperative that Leesburg protect its authentic sense of place and small-town feel, with the understanding that ‘small-town feel’ is not dependent on the size of the population or the square mileage of the town -- it is instead a reflection of connections to neighbors and a shared investment in the success of the community” (*Legacy Leesburg Town Plan Update Joint Work Session Document*, 2020, p. 9).

In this sense, the Town argues that even though its physical form is incongruous, it can still maintain a sense of place and definition that maintains and emphasizes the small-town atmosphere generated throughout history and embodied in the heritage and fabric of the

Downtown Leesburg places significant emphasis on the local aspects of community creation and maintenance that have been important in that location for several decades. Featuring wide sidewalks, abundant yet dense parking options, and a number of locally-owned and -operated restaurants, boutiques, and cafes, the downtown section is clearly oriented toward

pedestrians looking to enjoy an experience that is based in both heritage and modern attractions. This is consistent with Van Leuven’s (2022) characterization of small-town downtowns featuring “higher building densities, higher concentrations of pre-automobile civic and commercial development, and an elevated--relative to the rest of the built environment--orientation toward pedestrians (p. 2). With curated entertainment options suitable for both local residents and visitors from outside the town and region, the downtown ensures that its constituents know they are in a special and unique place where they can feel both safe and welcome. The overall feeling created by the downtown is one of a highly local and independent locale that retains its historic form even in providing modern experiences.



*Figure 15: Downtown Leesburg features wide sidewalks and a number of boutiques and restaurants. With a historic built form but amenities consistent with the demands of today’s (local and visiting) consumers, the downtown space reflects a clean, safe, tourism-based place image dedicated to reinforcing the uniqueness and peculiarities of the larger locality. This image depicts King Street just past its intersection with Market Street. Source: author.*

Although important to the town’s identity, downtown is but one small section of the larger Leesburg. Outside of the downtown, Leesburg is largely automobile-dependent, with homogenous residential areas, wide multi-lane streets, and intersecting highways. These features

contrast directly with those of the downtown section, creating a spatially-observable disparity by which suburbia and urbanity -- including differences in scale, density, and type of development - - collide within a fairly small locality.



*Figure 16 a, b, c: These images show various locations outside of downtown Leesburg. Even when they feature density, these areas are largely homogenous and auto-dependent, lacking the vibrancy of which the downtown Old and Historic District is so characteristic. On the right is the Metropolitan at Village at Leesburg apartment complex; the nomenclature of this complex indicates consistency with an urban 'feel,' promoting the Village at Leesburg as an urban-type community and reinforcing the sentiment that Leesburg as a whole is not entirely rural or suburban in nature -- it embodies 'metropolitan' characteristics.*

*Sources: author.*

As discussed in section 4.1.2, key informants agree that Leesburg is increasingly part of Northern Virginia, itself a region in which growth and development have historically been based on connections to the central business district and its industries (*A region divided*, 1999). Additionally, Leesburg's status as a destination, especially for residents of eastern Loudoun's locales (see section 4.1.5 above), indicates that it has become a significant node within that region. Of central importance in discussing Leesburg's increasing status as part of that larger region, though, is that growth does not necessarily point to its center. As shown in Figure 5 on page 23 above, new impervious surface over the past two decades has been concentrated along the region's urban fringe, rather than at its core; this is consistent with Rizer's assertion that "Loudoun and Leesburg have grown more than DC and other areas to the east on a percentage basis," meaning that "development has been tilting away from those [latter] areas towards



Loudoun” (2022, personal communication). Leesburg, then, reflects the changing development trends of Northern Virginia by becoming a center of that larger region wherein development increasingly points westward—

Key informants also tended to assert that Leesburg is likely going to remain physically in between suburban and more rural land uses. Of central importance here is the future of areas to Leesburg’s west, which have remained far less developed than more eastern localities. Howard believes that this lack of development will probably remain consistent, especially because of top-down authority utilized by the county as a whole: “we’re going through a zoning ordinance review right now and there doesn’t seem to be, nobody is anticipating at all that they’re gonna open up much of western Loudoun to development” (2022, personal communication). Other informants concur, with Lazaro citing the lack of utilities expansion within the western portion of the county as a reason why it will remain fairly rural (2022, personal communication). Still, a level of disagreement can be observed regarding the fate of western Loudoun County, with Parsons expressing that Purcellville in particular is “growing out of its skin” (2022, personal communication). Lazaro, commenting in his capacity as a former mayor of that town, respectfully disagrees that such a trend is occurring, explaining that “during my tenure, we didn’t have a single residential upzone, and like I said, it’s been more than twenty years now that there’s been a residential upzoning” (2022, personal communication). Taken together, with additional consideration of the fact that Purcellville grew by about seventeen percent between 2010 and 2021 but remained at less than ten-thousand residents (*QuickFacts Purcellville, 2021*), the collected data indicate that Leesburg’s location will remain at the junction of rural and suburban land uses. Still, the particular character of the land uses in western Loudoun County is worthy of continued monitoring.

## 5.2 The Uncertainty Element

There is ample evidence to support the idea that the Town of Leesburg is willing to entertain a move towards a more urban, walkable model with emphasis on those features that make the Old and Historic District attractive and distinctive. Truly, the detailed and intensive process by which *Legacy Leesburg* was conducted, including resident interviews, social media outreach, a community workshop, and a design charette, among other methods, demonstrates the extent to which that document reflects a well-understood and comprehensive understanding of the town's current state and path forward (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022). As explained by Klusek, "the plan document is based on an extensive community outreach effort and this effort was perhaps one of the best community outreach efforts we've had for a planning study of this sort" (*Council work session*, 2022, p. 17). Yet, the exact future of development in Leesburg is made uncertain by a number of internal and external factors. Internal divisions regarding what the Town's future should look like, the nearly completely built-out nature of the town, and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic all present complicating factors which place in doubt what exactly Leesburg is becoming.

Before the interviews, we anticipated that key informants would discuss an 'uncertain position' for Leesburg, perhaps manifest most strongly in a rapidly changing relationship with the larger Northern Virginia and Washington metropolitan regions. However, as the research conversations progressed and the coding process proceeded, it became apparent that while Leesburg's relationship with the larger Northern Virginia region is increasingly well-defined, both internal and external factors limit the certainty with which its future can be accurately anticipated. Even as Leesburg actively seeks to create its place image and define its identity, the future is still uncertain. In this section, the reasons for that uncertainty are elaborated.

### 5.2.1 Growth and Development Dynamics in Leesburg

As Leesburg continues to change, it is apparent that observers and civic officials desire for it to remain distinct from more typically suburban localities within the rest of Northern Virginia. Asked to consider how Leesburg is similar to areas such as Ashburn, Reston, and Fairfax County more broadly, Martinez explains, “I hope we’re not... I mean, ah, I would say we’re getting there, we’re getting crowded, what we’re trying to stop is building up because we don’t have the land to build out. So we’re resisting the efforts to build up, we’re resisting the efforts to put in data centers and those kinds of things.... So I don’t want to be anything like that, and I don’t think we are yet. We’re getting there with the crowdedness, with the population, but I don’t think we’re there yet” (2022, personal communication). In this case, Martinez creates a direct contrast between his vision for Leesburg and the dominant images of those Northern Virginia communities which have become known for data centers (i.e., Ashburn) and the proliferation of multi-story towers and similar such buildings (i.e., Tysons).

Resistance to ‘building upward’ within Leesburg appears to be rooted in a desire to maintain the current character and feeling of the town. Council Member Kari Nancy embodied this desire and concern in inquiring about current building heights and the redeveloped Virginia Village’s consistency with these heights at a 2021 Town Council Work Session: “My question is, what are these? I know that property especially off Catocin tapers off a little bit. Then comparatively speaking, you might know this offhand again, how tall are Church & Market and the condos? King Street Station, I think they might be called. How tall are those two? I’m just trying to visualize what it might look like in person” (*Council work session*, 2021). While Council Member Nancy in this instance does not oppose increased building heights, she demonstrates a strong concern regarding the consistency of future development with existing

features. Cullen also observes a level of resident-led resistance to development efforts, explaining that “as more people move here and they become what I call IGMs, I got mine, they got their house and they have their shopping center and they have all the things they need, and you know, stop it -- I think that mindset in fighting the development community became the norm” (2022, personal communication). The congruency between Cullen’s and Martinez’s statements makes it clear that both prominent and influential observers, as well as rank-and-file residents, would like -- and will act -- to ensure that Leesburg remains recognizable within the rest of Northern Virginia.

Even such a widely-expressed goal as ‘distinctiveness’ inspires numerous and varied methods of achieving it -- Martinez’s argument against the idea of building up contrasts with Cummings’s comfort with adding density and more closely approximating urban growth. Cummings in particular expresses his support for those development projects actively seeking to transform Leesburg from a suburban space into an urban place, explaining that, regarding the Virginia Village project, “we’re not recreating that suburban development model. We’re looking at more of an urban model, which puts more people in one place and because it’s walkable, you’re gonna have less of a need for cars... we have to look at it in a different way, we have to take the lens of being a suburban development off and look at it through more of an urban look” (2022, personal communication). While it is apparent that the town’s civic officials agree that Leesburg should not look the same as its surroundings, less certain is what, exactly, it should look like. One reason for the lack of clarity is the fact that many observers lack fully informed understandings of what various land uses truly encompass. Seymour contextualizes this situation:

“One of the things that the consultant had when they were doing the Legacy Leesburg plan was, you see this often, they talk about industrial zoned areas. And they have, literally, the consultant brought in pictures of these smokestacks and all this. And I laughed about it, and said I haven’t seen that, certainly in Northern Virginia but I’ve not seen those, and I’ve been doing this since the mid-nineties, I haven’t seen those type of development. So what I did was we were all having a public forum at the library, so I went in and took pictures of what we have in our industrial areas. So oh here’s the Stryker office building. Here’s the EIT data instrument facility. These are, here’s REHAU. These are, sort of buildings, glass, brick, no smokestacks, and so when I was talking to people and they were coming after they were looking at those, come over and they look at this, I said, and oh this is the development we want. I said okay this is what you want? Absolutely. All of those five little businesses that we’re seeing right here, they’re in Leesburg right now. Those pictures were taken in Leesburg and oh by the way, that’s our industrial zoning. That’s part of it. What... they need to understand... is that industrial is not a bad word” (2022, personal communication).

From Seymour’s implications, it appears that, given more information about what commercial and industrial land uses look like in Leesburg, greater numbers of residents would be willing to embrace such uses and work toward a ‘complete community’ in which they can live, work, and play. Depending on the exact way such uses are presented, this support may or may not be elicited.

Even highly influential elected officials for the town do not want to see further development. Martinez opines that “personally, I would have no problem paying more property taxes if we could keep the town the way it is with no more, no more building, no more industrial, no more commercial, no more retail. If we can just stay the way we are, I’d be okay with that, but you’re gonna find a lot of residents aren’t. So we have to find a balance” (2022, personal communication). Regardless of Howard’s warning that if Leesburg stays the way it is “they risk stagnating” and “time and the market will pass them by,” leading to a “vicious downward cycle” (2022, personal communication), Martinez represents the pattern that some officials would rather not see any change at all in Leesburg. Given the opportunity to wield significant influence, these individuals would have the power to limit the extent to which Leesburg truly becomes a complete urban center.

In fact, the contentious approval process for the Virginia Village redevelopment project illustrates the great level of uncertainty regarding Leesburg’s movement toward becoming a ‘complete’ community with mixed uses. As noted above, the January 2022 approval of the Virginia Village project was only narrowly passed by council members (Stinnette, 2022). Furthermore, that vote had been postponed from December 2021 due to concerns regarding “worries of an insufficient amount of residential parking, the order in which certain phases would be completed and the density of the buildings;” even the Leesburg Planning Commission Chair spoke (as a resident) against the development as these concerns persisted into January (Stinnette, 2022, n.p.). At the same time, Bagdsarian, who voted in favor of the development, noted that certain concerns may be less consequential than envisioned, especially considering novel ways of living: “I think that you’re gonna have more people that are not gonna be commuting to and from the office every day, and so that will help alleviate you know some of

the traffic and implications with any sort of new development” (2022, personal communication). This sequence of opinions demonstrates that the uncertain nature of Leesburg’s future is a self-reinforcing cycle; observers are unsure about the impacts of development, creating uncertainty as to the viability of development projects, which in turn fosters further uncertainty regarding the impacts of any future development in the town.

One method through which a number of localities within the Northern Virginia region have ensured they are not ‘passed over’ by the market during the past several years, even if their built form is changed by the process, involves the expansion of public transportation. Indeed, the expansion of the Silver Line of the Metro, the train system operated by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), provides a strong example of the growth and continuity dynamics present in the town. The Silver Line is an extension into the western suburbs of Washington, DC, with a recent emphasis on the Dulles region and eastern Loudoun County (*What is Dulles Metrorail*, 2021); key informant interviews and media coverage of the project indicate that the Silver Line will not extend from Loudoun County’s eastern boundaries to Leesburg in the near future. As Howard points out, the economics of the extension are unfeasible: “Phase 2 didn’t meet that. So they, that’s why they broke it in half, so when people ask oh will they take it out to Leesburg, well Phase 2 from Reston to Ashburn, including Dulles Airport, didn’t meet that cost-benefit analysis, sure as heck ain’t gonna meet it out to Leesburg. There’s not gonna be enough riders ... so you don’t get federal money, you don’t build it” (2022, personal communication).

Although Leesburg is unlikely to host a Metro station anytime soon, the prospect of a station has generated extensive debate. While not disregarding Howard’s conclusion, Bagdasarian is more hopeful of a Silver Line Extension to Leesburg: “the ability to, you know,

live out in the suburban areas and then you know be able to take public transportation, you want to go to a Nats [Washington Nationals baseball team] game, or you work in the city” (2022, personal communication). Bagdasarian’s argument is that the Metro would allow residents to more actively participate in those events and activities that focus on being present within Washington, DC. For Martinez, the Silver Line represents a “two-edged sword,” in that “it offers a great opportunity for commuters” and would offer a highly consistent, if lengthy journey, but also in that it would require a great deal of parking infrastructure in the town and may result in more individuals coming to the city from surrounding areas, adding to the crowdedness (2022, personal communication). Despite his enthusiasm, Bagdasarian acknowledges the perceived concern among some residents that the addition of the Silver Line in Leesburg might add to crime in the town (2022, personal communication). The mixed reaction to the Silver Line demonstrates that future developments and connections to the metropolitan fabric might bring about positive changes in the lived experience of dwelling in Leesburg, but they might also bring about new concerns and the exacerbation of perceived issues there. Truly, a defined transport linkage between Leesburg and the rest of the metropolitan area would require a sustained commitment to the potential ‘transformative implications’ such a linkage would hold. While a significant minority would like to realize those implications, it seems that the uncertainty of Leesburg’s current development agenda makes the opportunity cost of a Metro connection too steep.

A final element of Leesburg’s growth and development dynamics concerns the town’s level of agency in proactively determining its future and implementing the required tools to do so. Of particular significance in determining the town’s level of agency is the Dillon rule, whereby “local governments have three types of powers: in layman’s terms, those granted



expressly by the state, those strongly implied by the state, and those that are essential to localities,” and “if there is any reasonable doubt whether a power has been conferred on a local government, then the power has not been conferred” (Owens & Sarte, 2004, p. 34). One potential consequence of Virginia’s adoption of the Dillon rule is that localities face “the inability ... to address growth in a more aggressive manner” (Owens & Sarte, 2004, p. 34). Martinez opines that this consequence massively impacts Leesburg’s future: “we are still restricted by what the county and the state will allow us to do,” with the implication that “if we could be a city, we could then dictate our future. Our destiny” (2022, personal communication). Cummings, however, disagrees, arguing that “if we see an issue that’s popped up because of say the Dillon rule, or it’s a power given to cities and counties but not towns ... we just need to be more aggressive at looking at how we can ... come up with a reason and get enough support behind it to make the change” (2022, personal communication). Town planning staff seem to take a middle ground, with Klusek sharing that “I think that our comprehensive plan is a tool to say what we want to be” (2022, personal communication). Such focus on comprehensive planning and associated zoning is consistent with the argument by Owens and Sarte (2004) that “localities’ desire to maintain fiscal soundness combined with state legislated restrictions on their ability to raise revenues leaves them with little recourse outside zoning restrictions” (p. 36). Put simply, Leesburg’s approach of emphasizing planning and zoning in determining what its future will be, rather than evaluating or implementing more innovative approaches to growth management and image creation, is effectively the only viable and acceptable means of shaping its future. Such a limited avenue raises concerns, then, when combined with the ‘noncommittal’ nature of Legacy Leesburg, which provides guidance for development without necessarily

outlining clear administrative priorities for the town's change and development. These questions create further uncertainty regarding what, exactly, Leesburg is to be.

### 5.2.2 On Being Built-Out

Another factor contributing to uncertainty regarding Leesburg's path toward becoming a complete urban community is that the town lacks greenfield development space, limiting opportunities for new commercial development. As explained by Cummings, "we're a 97, 98% built out town. We cannot, we cannot use all of our land to build something that in, you know, a year is not, is vacant. We need to fill up our offices and we do, we're at almost near capacity for office space in the town right now" (2022, personal communication). Official statistics support Cummings's sentiment, with *Legacy Leesburg* explaining that "only approximately 1,600 acres of greenfield land remain in the study area" (*Legacy Leesburg*, 2022, p. 65). Seymour echoes the idea that office space in the town is at capacity, explaining that "with the Village at Leesburg, their office space out there that they have is full... you've got some very large companies out there and you've got some service-based office use out there" (2022, personal communication). While commercially-oriented space is desirable in Leesburg, it is also perhaps too scarce to fulfill the needs of potential consumers.

Other observers argued that office space is not the only realm in which demand exceeds supply in Leesburg. Martinez in particular notes that (2022, personal communication) "our town is a great little town, keeps growing, you know I think we're reaching our capacity for everything. And so you know, we're now at the point where we'd love you to come and visit and spend your money, but go home." This quotation encompasses the idea that powerful and influential elected municipal officials in Leesburg see that the town is becoming more 'full' and desire not to see any further change.

In truth, certain types of change commonly found throughout the rest of the Northern Virginia region may not be possible in Leesburg because of this ‘built out’ characteristic. Cummings describes the situation: “we don’t have the ability like the county does or other, some other cities and towns to just say oh you want to put a 7,000 square foot office for your company to come here? Great, we’ll build it right here in this field. Well we don’t have that field, you know. So we have to be a little bit more creative to look at how we can continue to grow and bring folks to Leesburg” (2022, personal communication). The specific example in this quotation is related to office buildings, but it could just as easily refer to housing developments or any other type of land use, meaning that true greenfield development is unlikely to significantly impact Leesburg’s future.

Of particular significance is the fact that much of Leesburg contains highly suburban features that many residents enjoy. As explained by Klusek, “most of it from a land consumption perspective is suburban,” meaning that if “you go a mile outside of the downtown and you’re looking at great suburban neighborhoods, and so it’s a little bit of both. It’s one of the things that I personally really like about it. I mean, I live in Leesburg. I live in a suburban area. And I love Costco. I love going to Costco, I could go to Costco, I could go to Target, I could go to Dick’s Sporting Goods, everything is right there” (2022, personal communication). This quotation is particularly important in not only conveying that much of the development in Leesburg is highly suburban in nature, but also that residents enjoy the features and amenities provided to them by those suburban sections. Unless residents of these suburban sections begin to see new uses for these areas, they will likely remain fairly suburban, limiting the comprehensive level of change for the wider community.



*Figure 17 above shows Leesburg's Costco shopping center, located in a highly suburban section of the town that even planners who advocate for more urban features enjoy. Source: author*

While being 'built out' does not mean that Leesburg cannot become a complete urban center, such a characteristic not only seems to create limits on the extent to which change occurs in the town, if it happens at all, but also limits the kind of change that can occur. This perception of being 'at capacity' is likely a main reason why, as explained by Seymour "there's starting to be more of a focus on redevelopment, because you want to protect what little green area you have left" (2022, personal communication). Similarly, Klusek maintains that the redevelopment of "Virginia Village represents that growing up that I was talking to you about" (2022, personal communication). The sentiment here is that Leesburg is at a point in its history where it has grown significantly over time, and it may therefore need to approach development in a new manner -- questions regarding the exact manner of that approach lead to uncertainty regarding Leesburg's future.

Based on the conversations with the key informants, as well as the fact that the redevelopment approval process for Virginia Village was extremely contentious and only

occurred in earnest nearly a full decade after the approval of the Crescent Design District, we contend that in fact the redeveloped Virginia Village will not be replicated ad nauseum throughout the rest of that district. Given the fact that much of the ‘contention’ regarding the redevelopment of Virginia Village centered on the concerns of Town Council members and other prominent observers that the entire Crescent District would become a mass of mixed-use buildings with heights, land use intensities, and populations not otherwise seen throughout the Old and Historic District or the parcels immediately surrounding it, such an outcome is highly unlikely. While the redevelopment plans for Virginia Village themselves may be supported, their widespread replication is inconsistent with the visions of Leesburg held by a number of its most influential civic leaders. Leesburg’s high level of focus on and appreciation of its historic downtown and the small-town image it emblemizes force the town to look beyond the Village at Leesburg and Virginia Village for long-term meanings of the phrase ‘complete community.’

### 5.2.3 The Ultimate Accelerator: The Covid-19 Pandemic

A final factor noted by key informants as introducing uncertainty into Leesburg’s development future is the Covid-19 pandemic. In effect, the pandemic accelerated a number of already-existing trends, amplifying their impacts and creating the sense that longstanding processes may disappear. At the same time, it also modified the influence of long-awaited changes for the town and region. Overall, as explained by Seymour, given the imagined task of inquiring about the future of any locality, “if they’re being honest I think everybody will tell you there’s a lot of uncertainty. We don’t know. Covid forced people to look at things very differently” (2022, personal communication). Klusek concurs, explaining that, “I think that every community across the country is probably still trying to figure out what the post-pandemic world looks like” (2022, personal communication). The primary finding is that the pandemic’s

acceleration of an already-existing trend in which employees work from home or on a hybrid schedule has contributed to a greater focus on planning for and providing amenities and even entire communities more intentionally designed for the new reality of working in this country. This focus, in adherence to the new reality of work, supports the notion that Leesburg is defining itself as an urban center within Northern Virginia, even though future pandemic impacts may alter the way planning is conducted and life lived in Leesburg.

One of the most important impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic is an increasing focus on remote and hybrid work throughout the entire DC region; as explained by Cullen, in considering particularly the Town of Leesburg, “we think people are gonna commute less, we think that they will be on property more” (2022, personal communication). While the magnitude to which workers have been able to engage in their workday activities outside of the traditional office space has been staggering, it is also essential to note that the increased ability to do so is itself only the acceleration of a pre-existing trend. Price agrees, explaining, “there’s a big shift that’s been coming but the pandemic sort of accelerated it, which is about this notion of working at your work place location and at home... the pandemic I think accelerated some trends that were already happening” (2022, personal communication). Prior scholars also support the notion that working from home as a result of Covid-19 is the acceleration of a pre-existing trend, with Shearmur et al. (2021) explaining that “since the mid-1990s, there has been a steady, but not overwhelming, move toward working from home and from non-specified locations” (p. 2061). Because this is the acceleration of an already observable trend, rather than a totally new idea that emerged unforeseen out of the global health crisis, a number of observers see it as likely to remain important for years and even decades to come.

Spaces and places conducive to hybrid working or working from home are certainly in line with the Town of Leesburg's focus on defining itself as a complete urban center where individuals are able to engage in live, work, and play activities all within a fairly close proximity. Indeed, Accordino and Adhikari (2021) explained that commuting out of peripheral small towns into the central city would indicate 'bedroom communities,' whereas telecommuting could show that towns were becoming centers in their own right. Within the Leesburg context, as explained by Klusek, "if the office is moving to the house, maybe that means we are a little bit more of a complete community now, where people are actually staying put" (2022, personal communication). Bagdasarian also explains the implications of working from home and hybrid work schedules, describing the rising number of residents "living and working, that cheesy thing, live work play, but more people are living and working and playing and living their life in Leesburg, versus going to Arlington or Reston or DC to work. I think that is something that has been, that was accelerated through the pandemic" (2022, personal communication).

Beyond an increased focus on downtown infill developments that are themselves walkable, human scale, and mixed use, master-planned developments such as Virginia Village allow people to center their lives around the home rather than the workplace. As Cullen observes, "[companies] like the context of downtown Leesburg, they like the idea that they can walk to go get a cup of coffee, that kind of thing. So I think that's really how the pattern seems to be emerging... You used to get up in the morning, get your clothes on, get in the car and drive for an hour and fifteen minutes. You don't do that. Now you get up, maybe you walk the dog. And you work for a little while and then you'd like to walk over and get a coffee a little ways away and go back. So the whole proximity to services is a big deal, and I think it's easier to have a non-office-centric lifestyle when you have other things going on around you" (2022, personal

communication). In this quotation, Cullen observes his company's Virginia Village redevelopment project as actively accommodating new manners of living made popular because of the pandemic's acceleration of the working from home trend. In other words, the pandemic has caused a quickening of the rate at which the town of Leesburg has seen the proliferation of mixed-use, walkable developments accommodating lifestyles which more actively focus on remaining near the home in completing one's day.

On the other hand, the pandemic did not accelerate every trend within Leesburg or Northern Virginia, and its continued impacts mean that not every pre-pandemic trend or movement has fully returned. Metro ridership provides a strong example of such a pre-pandemic trend; although he refers to the pandemic as "a blip," and notes that traffic in the region has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, Lazaro is careful to note that Metro ridership had only returned to just over half of its pre-pandemic levels as of September 2022 (2022, personal communication). This decline in ridership likely connects to the work-from-home hybrid employment trends which have accelerated the Town of Leesburg's demand for mixed-use developments and a number of amenities adding to a strong and defined place image, yet it also has implications for the level of connectivity regarding the larger metro DC region and the potential effects of the Metro's westward expansion. If fewer people are riding the Metro than long-term projections and planning had indicated, there may be less incentive for a station to open in Leesburg. Howard in particular notes the emergent uncertainty in that "the world changed, and so the question now becomes, is [the Metro's westward expansion] still the same great opportunity that we thought it would be ten, fifteen, twenty years ago" (2022, personal communication). While Howard's answer to the question is yes, other observers may feel that the answer is still too uncertain to make defined investments or plans in such expansion.



## Chapter 6: Implications and Thesis Conclusions

### 6.1 Implications

Although it provides an interesting case study, Leesburg is not the only peripheral community experiencing conflict between rapid growth and an important historical character. Rather, recent academic scholarship argues that Leesburg's situation is far from isolated. Indeed, given that "this century's planning challenge is one of retrofitting suburbia" (Day et al., 2022, p. 565), even as "suburbs are sprawling" throughout many portions of the country, it is apparent that a number of rural and peripheral suburban communities will need to reimagine their built forms and characteristics (Levitt & Eng, 2021, n.p.). Therefore, while Leesburg may be the best example within its region of a locality actively reshaping its image in response to outside development pressures, it is emblematic of a larger situation and process likely to be impacting communities and their leaders for some time. From the Leesburg case, observers can draw the larger conclusion that as growth and development at the regional scale have begun to take novel forms, prompting the reimagining of once-strong local identities, new challenges for region-level governance are emerging.

Northern Virginia's most outlying localities have increasingly acted over the past several years as centers for population and economic growth. As these localities continue to develop and change to meet modern economic imperatives and house the growing region's booming population, they illustrate the larger trend that American cities increasingly demonstrate their growth by pushing outward, rather than intensifying land uses within already-developed spaces. Although "for the rural communities in Loudoun County, Virginia, sprawl would have seemed unimaginable" as recently as the 1980s, Loudoun over the past four decades has witnessed a massive proliferation of impervious surface and urbanized uses, fundamentally altering the

purpose of much of its once highly agricultural land (Yu, 2001). During this time period, once-distant Leesburg and eastern Loudoun County have become increasingly integral to the Northern Virginia region, becoming centers of growth in an entity once highly centered around Washington, DC. The trend by which once-distant locales are increasingly relevant as developed parts of urban regions has persisted to the present day, with Levitt and Eng (2021) writing that between 2001 and 2019, suburbanization “add[ed] more than 14,000 square miles of new development across the contiguous United States” (n.p.). Put simply, while they were once the defining and most essential parts of their respective regions, central cities in the United States are being eclipsed as the centers of development within our metropolitan areas.

As peripheral areas take on new roles for their regions, some once-distant locales find themselves needing to reimagine and redefine their central characteristics in response to the modern requirements of economic development. In undergoing this process, a major lesson Leesburg has for other localities is that even as development pressures exert their influence, a town or city being ‘absorbed’ by a larger region still maintains a level of capacity to control its own future. Observers of the dynamics in Leesburg see that the town is clearly moving in a direction that is distinct from those of its direct neighbors and those suburbs that are more proximate to Washington, DC. The decision to pursue ‘complete community’ aspirations is the result of deliberate choices regarding the character and roles of built form and the locality more broadly. Leesburg could certainly have become a purely residential bedroom community. However, by actively embracing the historic downtown and its associated aesthetic and spatial characteristics, Leesburg seeks to assert a distinctive and recognizable image for itself as an urban and urban-inspired destination, and also a community where individuals are increasingly able to live, work, and play within a fairly small geographic area.

Moreover, other towns can learn from Leesburg that creating a ‘special’ identity that appeals to both residents and visitors, does not have to rely on the fabrication of an entirely new urban fabric. Rather, Leesburg has made the decision to reinvest in and extend its downtown, making what Cummings calls “the successful tool that the town of Leesburg has had over the last two hundred years” central to, but not the only element of, its identity and definition (2022, personal communication). Whereas places like Ashburn have ‘put themselves on the map’ by adding completely new and once-unimaginable features like data centers, Leesburg is pursuing a different vision.

While Leesburg certainly has lessons for other towns, to suggest that it acts as a complete and fully developed ‘blueprint’ or model for other localities would be incorrect. Rather, the uncertainty of the future in Leesburg—resulting from both internal and external forces, pressures, and systems—means that a clear model has yet to truly emerge. Furthermore, Leesburg’s focus on its heritage and history, as most clearly embodied in its Old and Historic District, as well as Virginia’s adherence to the Dillon Rule and the larger dynamic of county-incorporated town relations at the state level, mean that the number of cases to which the story of Leesburg could truly apply is small. While the American west has in recent decades emerged as a space where exurbs and sprawl interact in unique and interesting ways with the central city (see, for example, Berube et al., 2006), the exurbs in that region do not carry the same weight of history and heritage as found in Leesburg, limiting the generalizability of the case to other scenarios. Such limited generalizability does not limit the learnings and conclusions that come from the Leesburg case, but it does limit the extent to which larger theories and conceptions of urban geography and scholarship can be derived from it.

Finally, Leesburg illustrates the challenges of localized growth within the task of regional-level governance. As urban regions grow in physical size and are increasingly defined not by central cities but by peripheral sub-centers, the development of a region-wide plan and image becomes highly complex. Additionally, for the Washington region in particular, “because the Commonwealth of Virginia provides limited guidance to localities concerning growth, these questions [regarding housing, roads, sewers, schools, etc.] often must be addressed by local officials” (Owens & Sarte, 2004, p. 33). Without a region-wide strategy for growth and development, change has the potential to become chaotic and uncontrolled. The significance of region-wide planning entities, such as the Northern Virginia Regional Commission, then, cannot be understated; entities such as the NOVA Regional Commission will likely need increased funding and resources as they seek to coordinate the efforts of their member localities.

In all, we learn from Leesburg that external pressures are not the only important factor in shaping a location’s image and role. While external factors can certainly influence and mold the manner in which a given town or locality interacts with its surroundings, Leesburg champions the idea that those outside factors do not necessarily determine the locality’s identity. Again, what matters is not whether Leesburg is influenced and affected by the larger region that is Northern Virginia -- Leesburg is certainly impacted by its place within that region. Rather, what matters is how Leesburg reacts to that outside influence, including through the addition of urban-type features and developments that allow it to both retain and develop a unique and distinctive place within the region. As explained by Cummings, “we’re the special part of Northern Virginia that makes Northern Virginia, Northern Virginia. That’s what Leesburg is. We’re not the cement jungle of Arlington... we are a special little enclave of history and community, tucked away in the western corner of Loudoun County” (2022, personal communication). Leesburg’s experience

supports the idea that being enveloped by a larger entity does not take away the power of a locality to engage in the process of becoming something ‘special.’

## 6.2 Future Research Directions

Given that Loudoun is not the only community in the nation experiencing the intersection of suburbanization and outward urban development with historic characteristics and features, nor is it even the only locality within the broader Washington Metropolitan region experiencing this intersection, future research can focus on comparing the implications of change between various sites. Nearby Prince William County has quite recently worked toward developing its own version of Loudoun’s ‘Data Center Alley,’ with potential implications for sites of national historical significance, and an examination of the differences and similarities in Leesburg’s trajectory to that of Prince William would further illuminate the extent to which either one of those localities is truly all that unique in its plight, as well as enlighten observers regarding the efficacy of anti- and pro-growth strategies within the DC region. Furthermore, comparative case studies may be more effective in contributing to the development of widely-applicable theory and the understanding of larger trends in a way that single case studies are not (Yin, 2013). Additionally, Leesburg is not alone in transforming a peripheral area into an urban-esque hub for surrounding communities (Day et al., 2022). Examinations regarding how Leesburg’s motivations for such differ from those of other former ‘edge cities’ or ‘exurbs’ would be particularly useful in understanding the motivations of planners throughout the country, with particular significance for developers looking to operate in those localities.

Future work can also focus more directly on the lived experiences of residents in Leesburg and similar localities. This research aimed to capture the understandings of key informant planners, policymakers, and developers, with the understanding that these experts

would be most able to speak to the high-level trends in the town and region as well as the sentiments of residents and business owners. However, no explicit effort was made to capture the opinions of these latter groups of people. Further examination into residents' and business owners' understandings of and opinions regarding major trends, whether through surveys, a comprehensive review of commentary provided at public meetings and work sessions, or another method, would cast light upon the true desires of the populace with regard to Leesburg's direction.

Future investigations may also more explicitly consider how trends regarding individuals' places and means of work (e.g., hybrid or remote employment schemes) interplay with placemaking and identity. Prior literature makes clear, and number of key informants expressed the sentiment, that for Leesburg as well as for other localities within the United States, changing norms and behaviors regarding the workplace have led to concerns that traditional means of economic development planning and implementation are no longer adequate, or should at least be modified to fit the new reality. As the working world changes and post-pandemic policies become more firmly entrenched in society, an understanding of what, specifically, that new reality is, will be of particular significance and aid to local policymakers and planners.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions and Prompts

- What is your name? What is your position/title and where do you work?
- What does your job/position entail? What is your main work objective and how do you accomplish it on a day-to-day basis?
- Do you consider Leesburg to be part of what people refer to as NOVA? Why or why not?  
What about the DC metro region?
  - Do you get the sense that residents, business owners, planners, and elected officials in Leesburg desire to be associated with NOVA? Why or why not?

- What elements make Leesburg similar to nearby towns? What shared characteristics might make it fit into a larger geographic region?
- Tell me about some of the changes you've seen in Leesburg during your time there.
- When people think of Leesburg, what do you think comes to the front of mind?
- Can you comment on the reasoning behind the recent redevelopment efforts at Virginia Village?
  - What factors are motivating that redevelopment effort? Which groups are opposing it?
  - What makes it different from or similar to the Village at Leesburg? Are they catered to different markets/different businesses looking to inhabit/different geographic outreach? Would you say they have similar goals?
- Can you comment on some of the reasoning and motivations that went into the development of the Village at Leesburg?
- Looking at attracting businesses and economic development to the Town, what might be encouraging businesses to locate here?
- Which groups or organizations do you observe most impacting Leesburg's future growth and development? How do they interact with one another?
- Which industry clusters do you see most impacting the economic development of Leesburg over the next ten to twenty years? Why those clusters?
- How has the pandemic influenced recent urban development decisions?