

WHEATON PLACEMAKING INITIATIVE

Montgomery Planning



Prepared by Montgomery Planning
Placemaking Toolkit
for Wheaton Urban District
December 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	1
Placemaking Is Already Happening in Wheaton	3
Placemaking Strategies for the Future	5
Summary of Best Practices for Impactful Placemaking	19
Appendix	33



INTRODUCTION

Purpose of This Guide

As steward of Downtown Wheaton's public realm, the Wheaton Urban District serves as both placemakers, and placekeeper, playing a vital role in shaping and sustaining a vibrant, inclusive, and safe downtown. This guide is designed to support the Urban District by offering a range of placemaking strategies and best practices tailored to Downtown Wheaton. It provides both short- and long-term ideas that can help activate public spaces, strengthen community identity, and enhance the overall experience of Downtown Wheaton.

This guide is intended to inspire creative approaches to placemaking—sparking ideas, encouraging a variety of strategies, and building on the momentum created by the Wheels in Wheaton event that was held May 31 and June 1, 2025. The strategies within this guide will further the recommendations of the Wheaton Central Business District and Vicinity Sector Plan, the Wheaton Downtown Study, and Montgomery Planning's Strategic Placemaking Plan. Rather than serving as a comprehensive or prescriptive manual, this guide offers a flexible framework to support community placemaking efforts that reflects Wheaton's character and aspirations.

What Is Placemaking?

There are many definitions and forms of placemaking. **Montgomery Planning** defines placemaking as the act of improving a common space to make it welcoming and attractive, to better serve the needs of the people who use it. Placemaking is about supporting and enhancing physical, cultural, and social identities that interact to define a place.

Placemaking efforts can vary—they can be temporary improvements (such as events, pop-ups, or intermittent landscaping) or permanent changes (parks, plazas, urban design changes).

It's all about making a place feel welcoming. Events and pop-ups help to show the world the potential that a place has, and longer-term improvements help to improve quality of life. Both are important to have and work together to create welcoming and inviting spaces.



Why Placemaking in Wheaton?

The look and feel of a downtown area shape how people experience it. When people see visible improvements like landscaping, seating, or storefront upgrades, it shows that the community is investing in its future. These kinds of changes are easy to notice, relatively affordable, and can make a big impact without needing major construction projects.

Placemaking in the short-term provides an opportunity to showcase new ideas and fast-track public space improvements. It's a way to test various possibilities that can lead to long-term change.

Placemaking gives communities the opportunity to come together and use their public spaces to their best purpose.



PLACEMAKING IS ALREADY HAPPENING IN WHEATON

In Wheaton, placemaking is already happening! Annual events like Taste of Wheaton, outdoor dining, yarn bombs, and murals are just a few examples. The Wheaton Urban District and other local organizations all play a role in continuing these efforts, expanding them, and trying new ideas. This guide expands on what is already happening in Wheaton.



EXISTING PLACEMAKING EXAMPLES

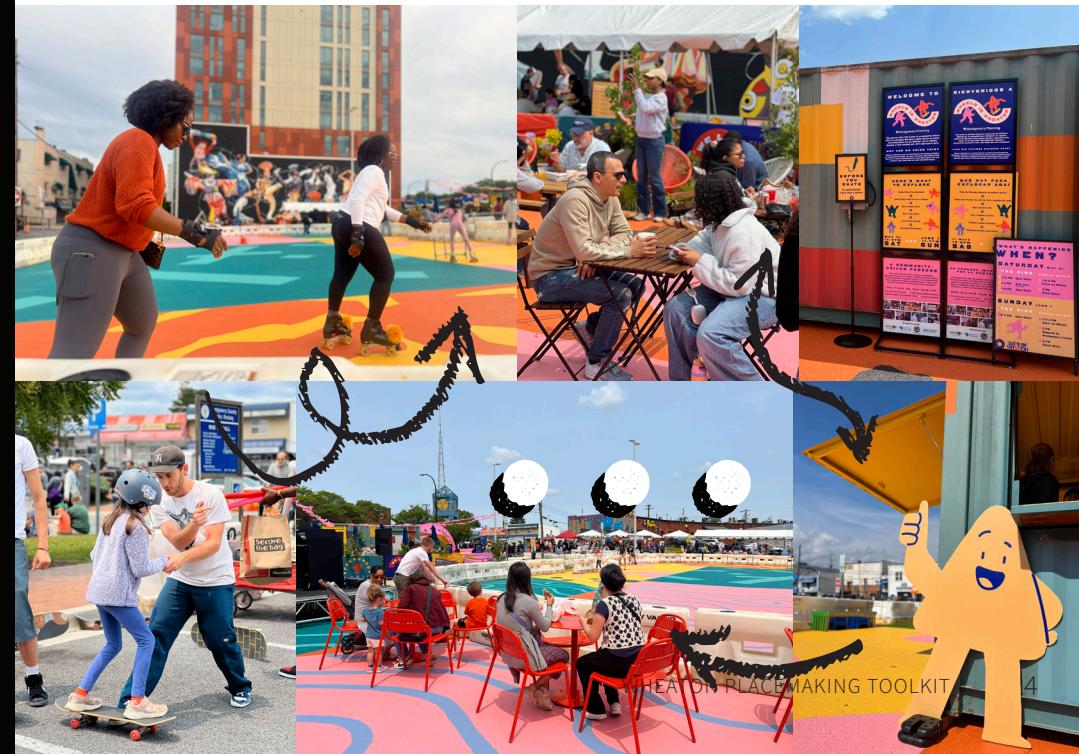


WHEELS IN WHEATON SUCCESS STORY



Wheels in Wheaton was a standout placemaking event that brought new energy and visibility to Downtown Wheaton on May 31 and June 1, 2025. Spearheaded by Montgomery Planning, the Wheaton Urban District, and a professional placemaking consultant, the event featured a large-scale mural, an outdoor roller-skating rink, a beer garden, and various activities for all ages led by local organizations. Timed to coincide with Taste of Wheaton, the event benefited from strong partnerships with MCDOT, Montgomery Parks, and local organizations and businesses. **It was a fun and fresh concept that drew new audiences to Downtown Wheaton, showcasing the power of creative public space design.**

This collaborative effort sparked renewed interest and momentum around placemaking in Wheaton, reinforcing the value of cross-sector partnerships and community-driven programming.





PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

This section offers a flexible toolkit of placemaking strategies that can be initiated, coordinated, or supported by the Wheaton Urban District. These ideas can be used independently or in combination to enhance Downtown Wheaton's public spaces and community experience. While it is not exhaustive, this collection of strategies is designed to illustrate a broad range of creative and strategic options that show what's possible, with room for further exploration.

See page 22 for maps of potential test locations for various placemaking strategies listed within this section.



PLANS AND STRATEGIC GOALS

Establish a cohesive placemaking vision to guide future efforts and ensure strategic, coordinated implementation.



Develop a Place-based Brand

Partner with a consultant who is experienced in place activation and branding to create a cohesive brand that reflects Wheaton's identity. The created brand can be applied across events, signage, furniture, digital platforms, and more.

Example: Wheels in Wheaton's cohesive event brand represented the Wheaton Triangle and helped to build excitement and create a recognizable feature for the event. The usage of the Wheels in Wheaton brand throughout the event made it fun, memorable, and engaging for visitors.

Create a Strategic Plan

Develop a multi-year roadmap for placemaking in Downtown Wheaton. This plan could include short- and long-term goals, a timeline of future projects, placemaking location assessments, design strategies, programming strategies, and/or implementation strategies for planned projects.

Consider partnering with a consultant who is experienced in place-based revitalization and activation.

Example: This image shows place-based branding for the [City of High Point](#).



Leverage Existing Planning Documents

Use the Wheaton Downtown Study and the Wheaton Streetscape Standards as foundational tools. These documents offer site-specific strategies to enhance public space, improve connectivity, and support development.

Tip: See Chapter 6 of the [Wheaton Streetscape Standards](#) for placemaking-specific recommendations.

Dedicated Activation and Design Team

Consider partnering with (or forming your own) dedicated team to lead and implement design and activation efforts.

Tip: Working with the same team over time can help plan and implement a cohesive and strategic effort. Montgomery Planning can be a resource to aid in these efforts—for example, by assisting in a placemaking vision or providing examples of organizations/consultants that could be a good fit.



Example: [This Catonsville Arts Master Plan](#) is a specific strategic plan for the Catonsville Arts and Entertainment District.

CONNECTIVITY AND SAFETY

Make it easier, safer, and more engaging for people to navigate and explore Downtown Wheaton by foot, bike, and transit.



Asphalt Art: Painted Crosswalks and Curb Extensions

Advocate for and identify opportunities to paint crosswalks and curb extensions to enhance visibility, shorten crossing distances, and increase pedestrian comfort, all while adding art to public space.

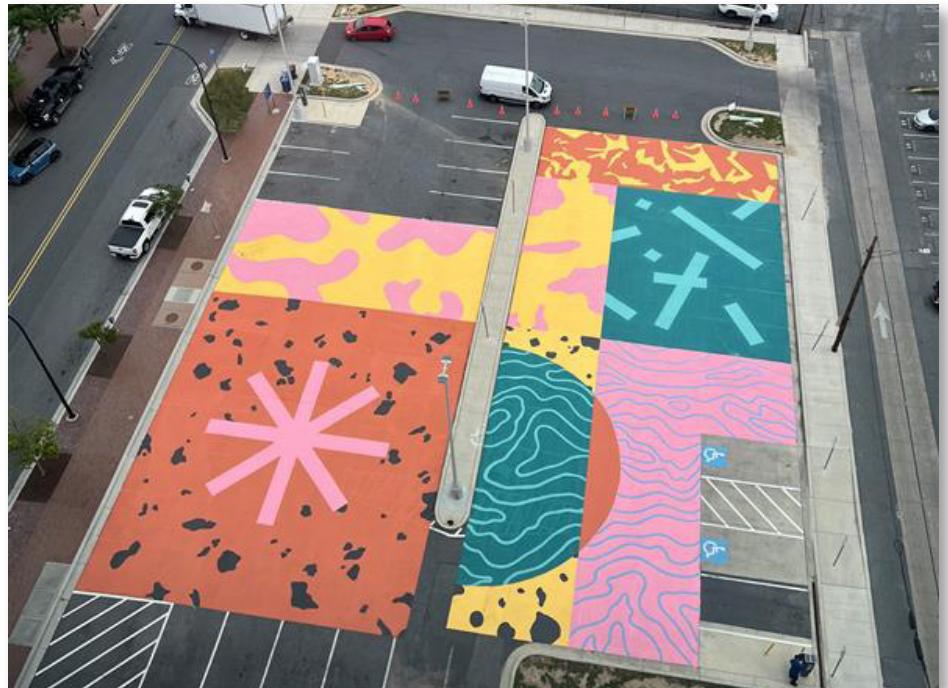
Utilize asphalt art to implement pilot bike lanes. Partnerships with MCDOT, Montgomery Planning, or local cycling groups could be useful to advance the implementation of both temporary and long-term bike lanes. Montgomery Planning's [Approved Bicycle Network](#) can be used to identify locations where bike lanes have already been proposed.

Tip: Montgomery Planning's [Vision Zero Toolkit](#) can be a useful resource—see page 32 for guidance on painted curb extensions.



Example: The City of Rockville's Beall Avenue Asphalt Art Project utilized awarded funds from the Bloomberg Philanthropies Grant to integrate pavement artwork on the street to calm traffic, enhance pedestrian visibility, and make safer bike lanes.

Additional guidance on connectivity improvements can be found in the Appendix, on page 33.



Example: The surface mural in Parking Lot 13 was a successful implementation of asphalt art. This could be recreated in other parking lots throughout the Urban District.

Curb extension painting in Washington DC.



Wayfinding

Effective wayfinding can help people navigate, discover key locations, feel more comfortable exploring, and reinforce a place's identity.

Physical signage: use a mix of signage types throughout Downtown Wheaton to include walking distances to different districts, highlight landmarks and/or transportation locations, and incorporate Wheaton's branding. Signage can also be produced to specify different districts to help support their identities and help visitors orient themselves when exploring.

Digital wayfinding: a digital map, similar to what already exists on the Wheaton Urban District webpage, could be enhanced to serve as a central tool for navigation and engagement. The map can be embedded as a QR code on physical signage, brochures, promotional materials, and promoted on social media and newsletters.



Example: Create a digital and interactive map like this one from the [City of Rockford](#), Michigan to highlight key destinations and routes. Align Wheaton's place branding with the map to enhance visual identity.

Consider building on physical wayfinding strategies by creating an interactive experience.

Examples

- Themed trails – like an art walk or history trail.
- Scavenger hunts where participants can follow clues to discover landmarks or public art.
- Digital badges – visitors can earn rewards for visiting multiple locations, attending events, or completing trails.



Example: [Wayfinding signage](#) in the Town of Estes Park Colorado.



Example: Creative and exploratory [wayfinding strategies](#) in Waco, Texas.

Other Connectivity Enhancements

Install bike racks or corrals near parks, retail areas, and transit to support short-term bike parking, encourage multi-modal trips, and encourage visitors who already bike to stop and stay in Wheaton. This could be an opportunity to partner with local artists to incorporate art into the bike parking area.

Partner with local cycling groups like Washington Area Bicyclist Association to host rides, classes, or meetups. These events can attract new visitors, support local businesses, and highlight Wheaton's bikeability.

Artwork at transit stops can be a creative way to make a transit stop feel more unique, memorable, and safe. Consider partnering with WMATA at the bus loop or Metro entrance to pilot this idea.



Example: A “Bike Party” is a lively, organized group bike ride that can encourage cycling, exploration, and community. These events are open to all ages and skill levels, make cycling feel more comfortable, and can even create a moving spectacle that is an opportunity for people watching. The bike party route could weave through Urban District streets with pitstops at other placemaking installations. Recently, the Rockville Bike Advisory Committee organized a [Halloween-themed bike party](#) through Rockville, and other cities like [Baltimore](#) and [Washington D.C.](#) host various themed bike party rides throughout the year.



Example: This [street mural and bike rack](#) was installed in a repurposed parking space in San Francisco, California.



Example: These [creative bus shelters](#) are in Portland, Oregon.



ENHANCING PUBLIC SPACE

Use creative design approaches to increase comfort, safety, and visual appeal.



Greening

Continue planting street trees, using large planters, and add other greening in existing areas to soften the streetscape.

Seek opportunities to expand greening beyond traditional street trees and landscaping throughout the Urban District.

Example: Encourage businesses to place planters, flowers, or outdoor décor in front of their storefronts. Hosting seasonal contests, like a flower display or holiday-themed decor competition, can enhance the streetscape while building community and potentially attracting visitors to explore the area.

Example: [“Holidays on Harford”](#) is a festive season-long event that encourages visitors to explore the town of Harford.

Creative Lighting

Install string lights over sidewalks and outdoor seating areas not only to add ambiance, but to improve visibility and comfort for pedestrians. In the winter, add holiday lights to trees, building roofs, and storefronts to add ambiance, festivity, and additional lighting.

The Wheaton Urban District could offer to purchase or install string lights or holiday lights for interested business and property owners. Proactive outreach to potential participants can explain the benefits, share examples, and build support for the initiative.

- Collaborate with local artists to create light installations that double as public art and functional lighting, for example, embedding LED lights into murals, creating freestanding sculptures that incorporate light, or using digital projection on a building at night.

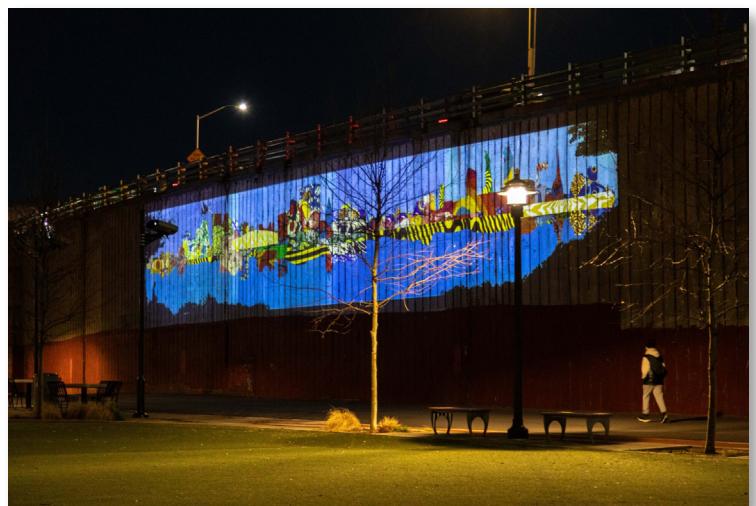
Artwork

In addition to supporting the variety of installations that already exist in Wheaton, consider exploring additional locations that could host a variety of different art installations, such as murals, sculptures, or interactive artwork.

Example: Consider partnering with property owners to temporarily transform vacant storefronts into art galleries.



Example: These [lights hanging over sidewalks in Baltimore, Maryland](#), are attached to homes on one end and trees on the other.



ACTIVATIONS

Activate underused spaces to demonstrate the potential of public spaces.



Temporary Pop-ups

Temporary activations can demonstrate how underused spaces, including existing public space, or simply a parking spot, can better serve the community. These low-cost, flexible pop-ups bring energy to public spaces, encouraging people to gather, connect, and experience their environment in new ways. They can be one-time or recurring events, held in small spaces for short durations.

Pop-ups can be casual and adaptable:

- Transform a space by setting out picnic tables and yard games and inviting food trucks or carts for a specific day and time. Add umbrellas, decorations, or other items to add visual interest and comfort. Encourage usage of the space by including programming—a concert, kids skateboarding or bicycling lessons, a craft activity, etc.
- These types of pop-up activations could be done in Parking Lot 13 on the muraled area, or in existing spaces like Marian Fryer Town Plaza.



- Example: In Montgomery Mall, a designated space is sectioned off, decorated, and available for various groups to use by reserving the space. This space can host various activities like board games, book clubs, fitness classes, police meet and greets, and more. This concept could be adapted for either indoor or outdoor use and fosters engagement, connection, and community involvement. This could occur inside a vacant storefront, outside at a park, in a parking lot, or in a constructed parklet.

Pop-ups can also be more formalized and structured:

- Constructed parklets, often in on-street parking spaces, can function as outdoor seating for restaurants, communal spaces for gathering, parks, and more. They can be complete with seating, greenery, and other built elements to be both functional and comfortable. These spaces can be used for day-to-day use and can benefit from active programming to encourage usage.



Example: This is a [pop-up garden and gathering space](#) in Philadelphia, PA.



Example: Parklets can vary in size and scope; [see more examples](#) from South Carolina.

Structured Events

Introducing new and different events, alongside existing annual events, can reach new audiences and keep things fresh. Events can highlight local makers and businesses while attracting both Wheaton residents and visitors from surrounding communities.

Examples:

- An artisan/craft festival featuring makers through demos, workshops, or retail could support Wheaton's Arts and Entertainment District and local makers.
- A large, monthly farmers market could serve the region and help Wheaton feel like a destination.
- A bike party, as described earlier, is a fun event that energizes people.

Incorporating programmed activities into new and existing events can attract diverse audiences to the area. Partnerships with third party organizations and businesses can spark fresh ideas.

Example: Partnering with GOATS on Wheels to provide free skateboarding lessons for children at Wheels in Wheaton brought in new audiences, brought people together, and gave families a fun new activity to try.



ACTIVATION TIPS

Start small

A smaller space can be activated with fewer resources and is a good choice for quick testing and iteration. Pairing with an existing event can boost visibility and build on proven success.

Build a balanced experience

Use “placemaking triangulation” by including places to sit, things to see and do, and things to eat and drink. Include lighting, shade, and greenery to make the space welcoming and impactful.

Get ideas

[AARP's Pop-Up Toolkit](#) can be a helpful resource to get ideas and see how previous events were carried out.

- During a pop-up demonstration project in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, an umbrella canopy turned a shabby alleyway into a destination. See page 26 of the AARP Guide to learn about “alley activation” pop-up demonstrations. Photos courtesy of Team Better Block.



Be creative

Intentionally activate both temporary and permanent public spaces through creative programming to highlight the possibilities of the public space and invite community use. Collaborate with local organizations and businesses to bring fun ideas to life.

Examples:

- Reconnect with GOATS on Wheels to host skateboarding lessons for kids.
- Partner with a bakery to host a cookie or cake decorating class outdoors.
- Create a pop-up café by partnering with a coffee shop to set up a morning coffee cart near the M-NCPPC building. This could also take the shape of a hot chocolate stand in the winter months.
- Collaborate with local environmental or gardening groups to organize or host a plant swap event.
- Partner with a local school or library to create a children’s reading nook or storytelling zone with cozy seating, a coffee cart, and snacks.
- Host skill-sharing workshops like a bike repair meet-up or a criterium race led by a cyclist group, craft tutorials led by a local artist group, book swaps led by local book clubs, etc.
- Intentionally and regularly collaborate with specific types of businesses, like breweries or ice cream shops, to eventually attract a permanent establishment.

SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPACTFUL PLACEMAKING



Define the Goal of the Project

Establishing a clear goal is helpful to guide decision-making and ensure that placemaking efforts are intentional and cohesive. A well-defined goal helps align activations, installations, and programming, making it easier for the public to understand the purpose and benefits of the initiative.

Example: Goals could include creating a safer pedestrian environment, creating more spaces to gather, bringing in more visitors, etc.

Focus on Key Areas to Make an Impact

Concentrating efforts in one or two locations allows the public to clearly see the transformation and impact of placemaking. This focused approach can help to build momentum and set a strong foundation of future expansion.

Multiple, visible placemaking efforts help people understand the role of public spaces in daily life. They also provide tangible evidence that these spaces are worth investing in—socially, culturally, and economically.

Use Storytelling and Promotions

Effective promotion builds momentum, encourages participation, and strengthens community support.

Connecting each activation to a larger story helps to build support for the overall initiative.

Example: Explain why the pop-up is happening, who it serves, and what visitors can do there. Sharing this context through both promotional materials and on-site signage can help people understand the purpose and value of the space.

Partner with Experts

As mentioned earlier, working with an experienced placemaking consultant can help to create and implement strategic placemaking throughout the downtown. They often can provide innovative designs, create helpful messaging, work directly with various community groups, and successfully implement various efforts.

Commit to Long-term Engagement

Placemaking is most impactful when efforts are sustained and repeated. This ongoing presence keeps spaces fresh, relevant, and responsive to community needs, while reinforcing their role as community hubs.

Consistent use can demonstrate to external stakeholders, like the County, elected officials, and/or prospective businesses and developers, that these public spaces are active, valued, and central to community life.

Program Spaces Intentionally

Programming brings energy and purpose to public spaces. It can encourage people to visit, linger, and return. In Wheaton, programming could be done in both newly created spaces and existing ones like Marian Fryer Town Plaza or Wheaton Veterans Park.

Collaborating with local organizations and businesses is a useful tool to offer effective programming, foster new and existing community connections, and test new ideas.

Collaborate with Local and Regional Partners

Work with local government (M-NCPPC, the County), community organizations, and businesses to help design, create, program, and/or support a new or existing space.



EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL LOCATIONS FOR VARIOUS PLACEMAKING STRATEGIES

These maps identify potential sites for implementing placemaking strategies listed in the guide. While the map covers the entire Urban District, priority areas are primarily concentrated within the Central Business District and other high-traffic areas.

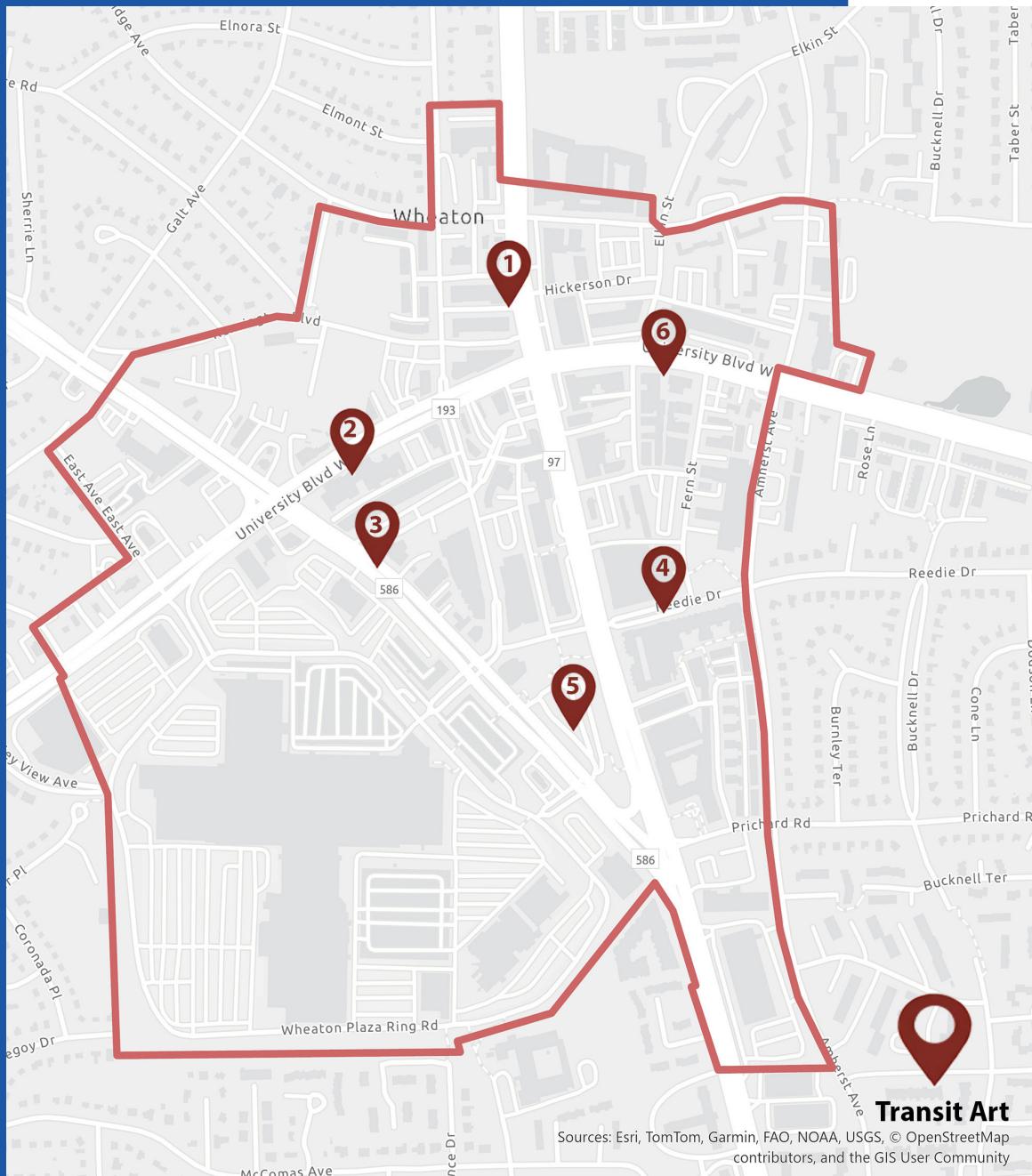
These locations were selected as examples that may benefit from beautification and safety improvements and/or have favorable existing conditions that support implementation.

The examples are flexible and meant to help guide decision-making, but are not prescriptive. What gets implemented and where will depend on the goals of the project, available resources, and necessary permissions.

PLACEMAKING MAPPED



TRANSIT ART



Here are some suggested locations for artwork at bus stops, Metro entrances, parking lots, and/or bike corrals.

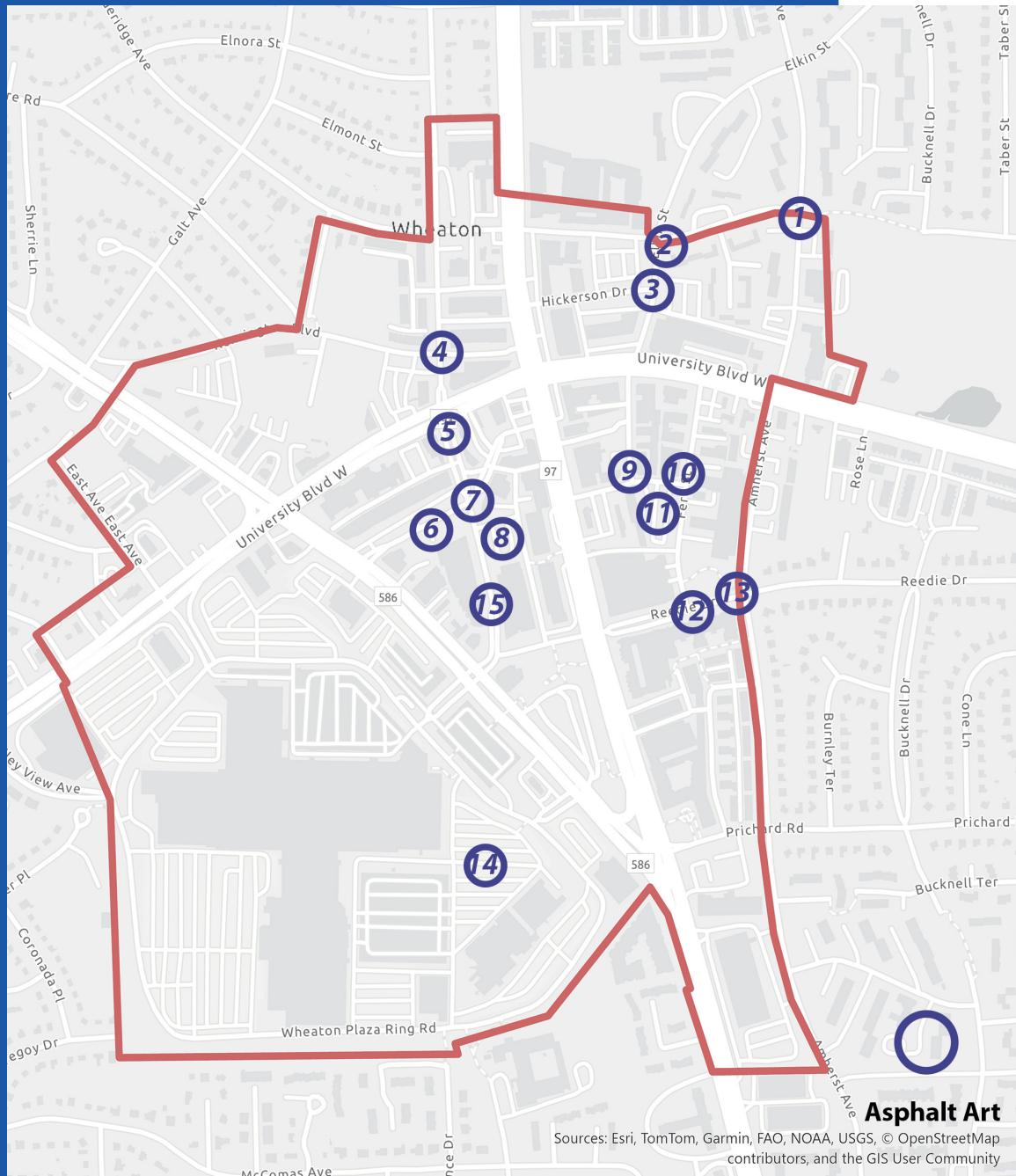
Potential Locations

#	Address
1	Georgia Avenue south (between Blueridge Avenue and Kensington Boulevard)
2	University Boulevard (between Veirs Mill and Georgia)
3	Veirs Mill Road at Ennalls Avenue
4	Reedie Drive at Fern Street
5	WMATA bus loop and Metro entrances
6	University Boulevard (between Elkin Street and Fern Street)



ASPHALT ART

Here are some suggested locations for various forms of asphalt art, including painted curb extensions, crosswalks, ground murals, temporary road diets and bike lanes.



Painted Crosswalks or Curb Extensions Potential Locations

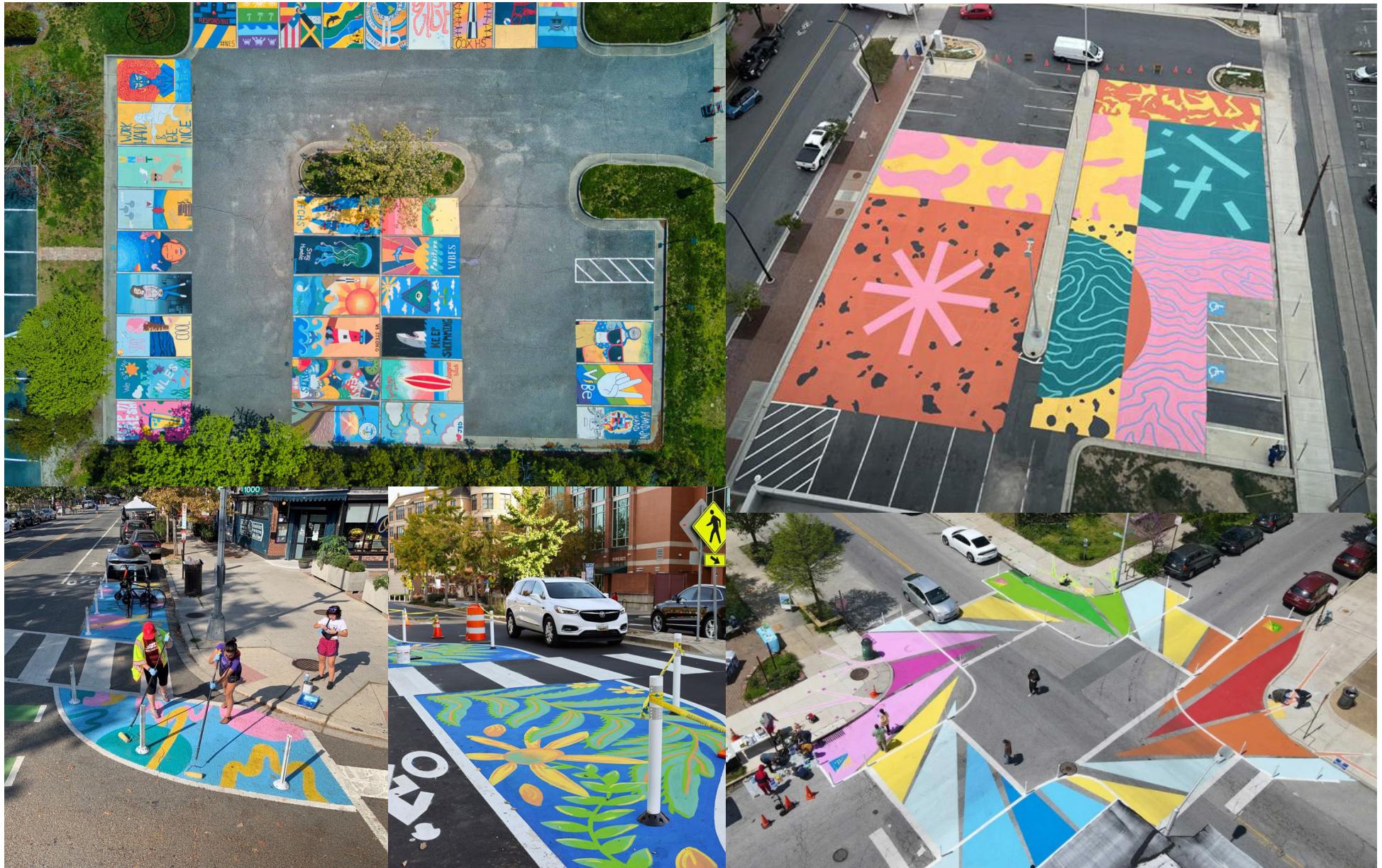
#	Address
1	Blueridge Avenue and Amherst Avenue
2	Elkin Street and Blueridge Avenue
3	Elkin Street and Hickerson Drive
4	Grandview Avenue and Kensington Boulevard
7	Grandview Avenue and Ennalls Avenue
9	Elkin Street and Price Avenue
10	Fern Street and Price Avenue
12	Fern Street and Reedie Drive
13	Reedie Drive and Amherst Avenue

Ground Mural Potential Locations

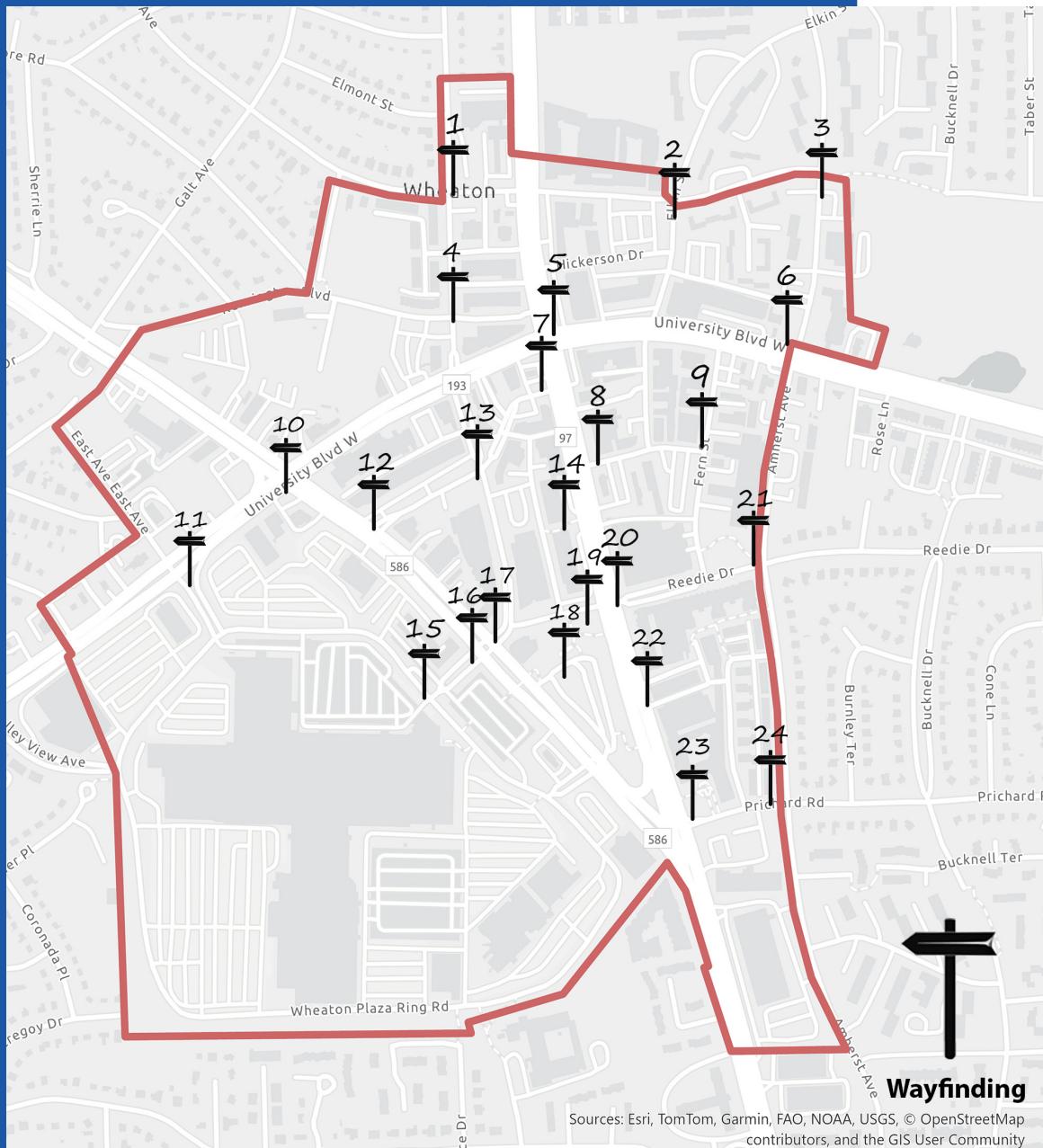
#	Address
5	County Parking Lot 33
6	County Parking Lot 34
8	County Parking Lot 13
11	County Parking Lot 17
14	Westfield Wheaton Parking Lots

Road Diets, Temporary Bike Lanes, or Other Painted Activations Potential Locations

#	Address
15	Grandview Avenue



WAYFINDING



Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community

Here are some suggested locations for signage at high traffic areas and entry points into the Wheaton Urban District. Transit stops, Metro entrances, and other stationary locations are examples of priority locations.

Potential Locations

#	Address	#	Address
1	Blueridge Avenue and Grandview Avenue	13	Grandview Avenue and Ennals Avenue
2	Blueridge Avenue and Elkin Street	14	Georgia Avenue at the Staircase down to Triangle Lane
3	Blueridge Avenue and Amherst Avenue	15	Wheaton Plaza Ring Road at Parking Lot Entrance
4	Grandview Avenue and Kensington Boulevard	16	Wheaton Plaza Ring Road at Veirs Mill Avenue
5	University Boulevard and Georgia Avenue	17	Veirs Mill Road and Grandview Avenue
6	University Boulevard and Amherst Avenue	18	WMATA Bus Loop
7	Georgia Avenue and Ennals Avenue	19	Metro Entrance
8	Georgia Avenue and Price Avenue	20	Reedie Drive and Georgia Avenue
9	Price Avenue and Fern Street	21	Reedie Drive and Amherst Avenue
10	University Boulevard and Veirs Mill Road	22	Georgia Avenue Metro Parking
11	University Boulevard and Wheaton Plaza Ring Road Entrance	23	Georgia Avenue and Prichard Road
12	Veirs Mill Road and Ennals Avenue	24	Prichard Road and Amherst Avenue



ENHANCING PUBLIC SPACE

Here are some suggested locations for aesthetic improvements such as overhead string lighting above sidewalks, seasonal decorations on trees or buildings, and/or other landscaping improvements.

Potential Locations

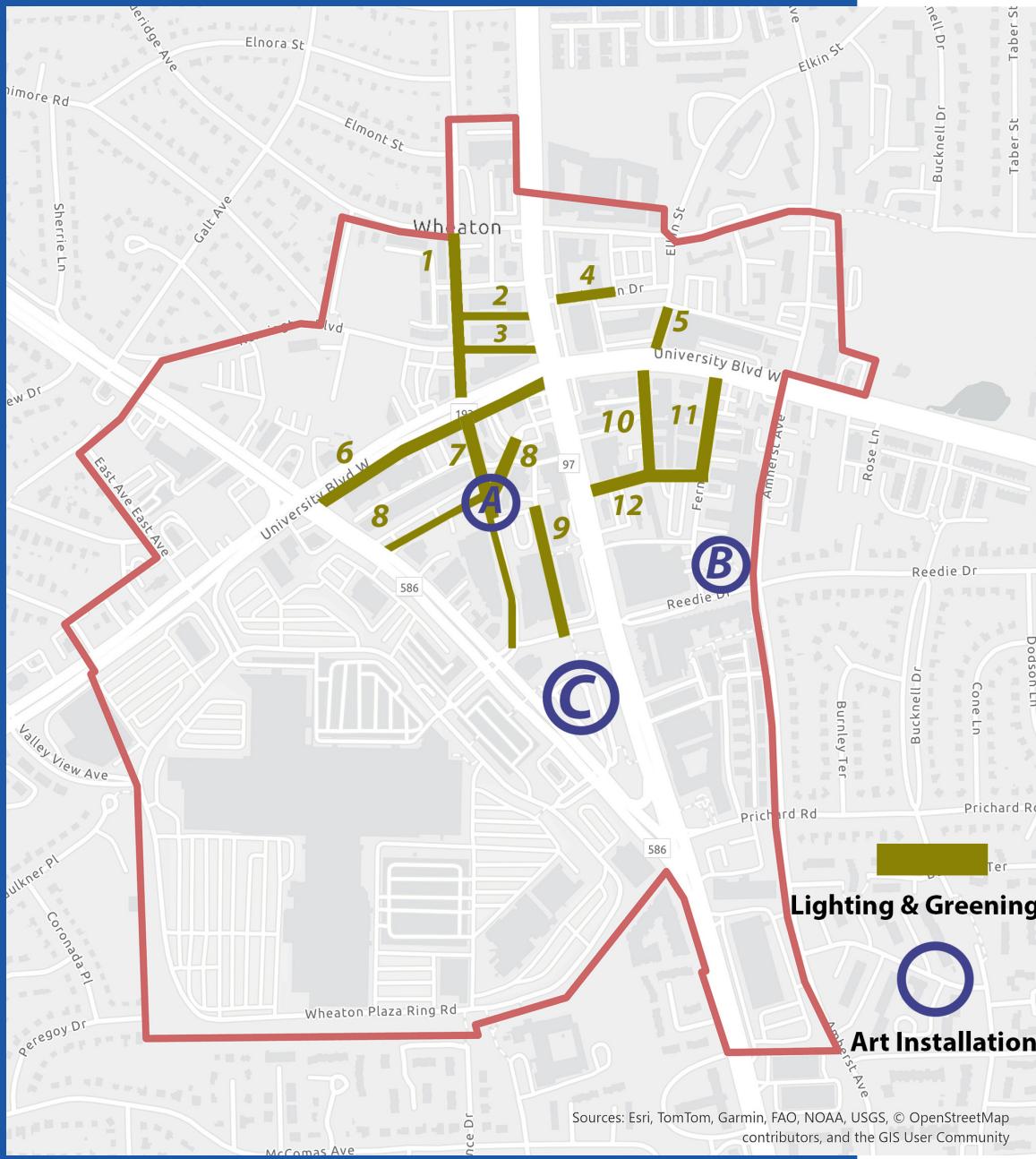
#	Address
1	Grandview Avenue between Blueridge Avenue and University Boulevard
2	Georgia Crossing North Shopping Center, at Grandview Avenue and Georgia Avenue
3	Kensington Boulevard between Grandview Avenue and Georgia Avenue
4	Hickerson Drive
5	Elkin Street between University Boulevard and Hickerson Drive
6	University Boulevard West between Veirs Mill Road and Georgia Avenue
7	Grandview Avenue between University Boulevard and Reddie Drive
8	Ennalls Avenue
9	Triangle Lane
10	Elkin Street Between Price Avenue and University Boulevard
11	Fern Street, 13000 block
12	Price Avenue, 2300 and 2400 block

Lighting & Greening

Art Installation

Art Installation Potential Locations

#	Address
A	Grandview Avenue and Ennalls Avenue intersection (at the clock tower)
B	Wheaton Veterans Urban Park
C	WMATA Bus Loop and Metro Entrance



Sources: Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS User Community



ACTIVATIONS



Here are some suggested locations for small activations and large events in Wheaton.

Small Activations Potential Locations

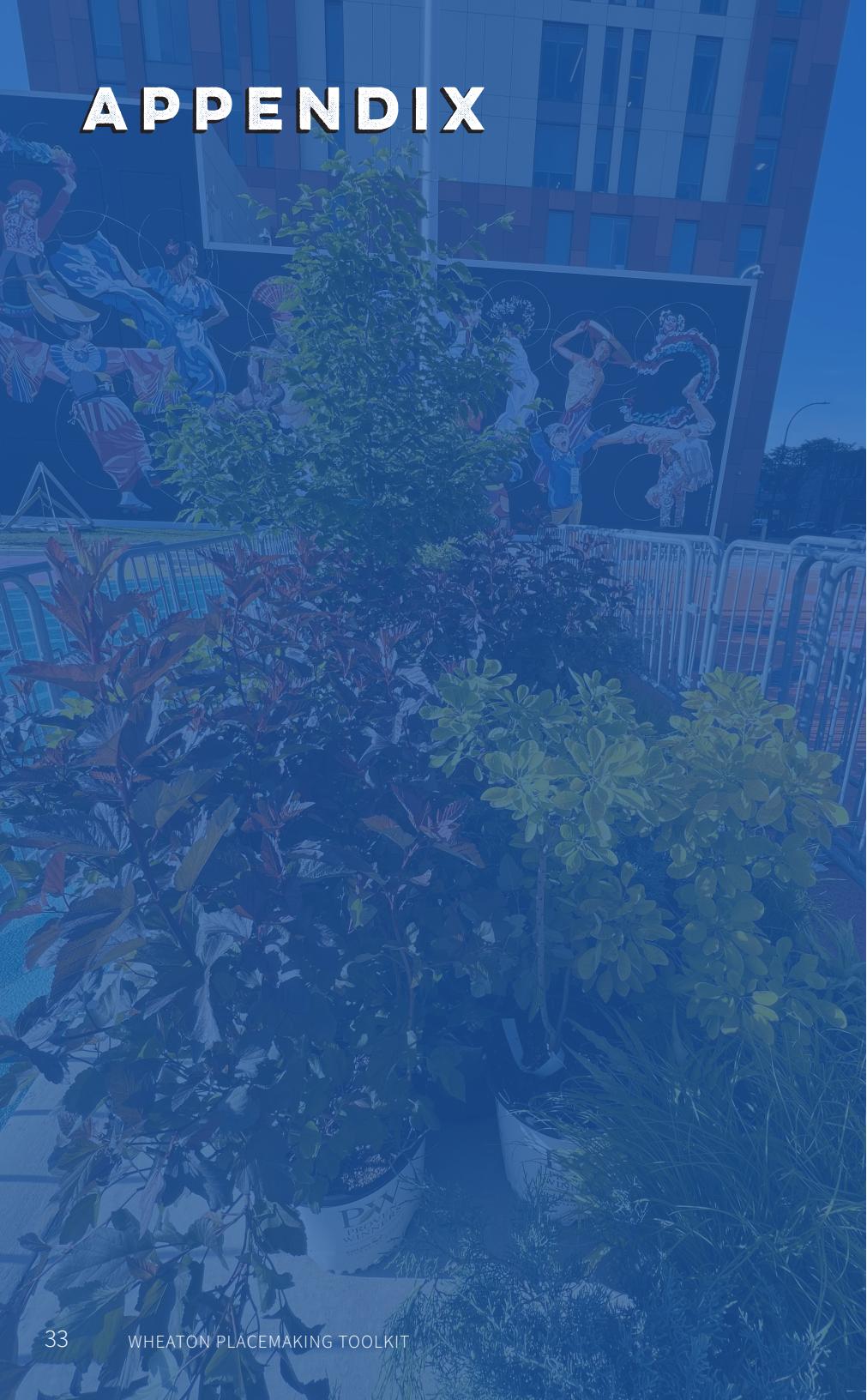
#	Address
1	Elkin Street between Price Avenue and University Boulevard
2	Price Avenue between Georgia Avenue and Fern Street
3	Wheaton Veterans Urban Park
4	Grandview Avenue between Reedie Drive and Ennals Avenue
5	Triangle Lane
6	Marian Fryer Town Plaza

Large Events Potential Location

#	Address
A	Parking Lot 13
B	Marian Fryer Town Plaza
C	Westfield Wheaton Mall Parking Lot



APPENDIX



- ▶ Vermont's Better Places Toolkit: [Find examples of placemaking, descriptions of the process, additional placemaking resources, and additional tips for successful placemaking.](#)
- ▶ AARP Pop-Up Toolkit: [Find examples of pop-ups, why to do them, and how to do them.](#)
- ▶ Project for Public Spaces is an organization focused on placemaking, [Their article "What Makes a Successful Place?"](#) describes what makes places great and suggests guidelines for placemaking and improving public spaces.
- ▶ Neighborhood Design Center is a local organization and leader in placemaking design. [Find examples of case studies and placemaking they have done throughout Maryland.](#)
- ▶ Washington DC – [Ground Mural Best Practices Guide.](#)
- ▶ Tactical Urbanism Guide: [Use this to learn more about iterative placemaking projects and tactical urbanism projects. This also includes specifics about materials that can be purchased to make these projects happen.](#)
- ▶ Additional guidance on connectivity enhancements is available in a [connectivity focused Placemaking Toolkit](#), developed by Kimley-Horn as part of our consultant team for Wheels in Wheaton. Recommendations in this document were informed by Wheels in Wheaton and offer practical strategies that can be implemented during events and activations.

RESOURCES AND EXAMPLES



Placemaking Toolkit

for Wheaton Urban District

WHEATON PLACEMAKING INITIATIVE

 Montgomery Planning