



Perkins&Will



Focus Group Meet Up Summary

Date: 10.24.2022 Authored by: Sycamore Consulting

The Kensington Planning Team hosted a series of Focus Group Meet Ups to hear unique perspectives about the future of Kensington station. The purpose was to hear from specific groups who may use Kensington Station now and in the future. The feedback will help ensure that the master plan reflects a wide variety of wants, needs, and desires. Specific groups targeted included Adults 55+, Rental Community Residents, and City of Avondale Estates Residents. Meet Ups were held in person and virtually according to the following schedule:

Adults 55+

Thursday, October 6th & Thursday, October 13th @ 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Location: DeKalb Public Library, Covington Highway Branch
3500 Covington Hwy, Decatur, GA 30032

Rental Community Residents

Thursday, October 6th @ 6:00 PM – 7:00 PM

Location: Virtual Meeting

City of Avondale Estates Residents

Thursday, October 6th @ 7:00 PM – 8:00 PM

Location: Virtual Meeting

At each Focus Group Meet Up, participants were presented with an introduction to the master planning process, MARTA's goals and policies surrounding Transit Oriented Development (TOD), and three high-level street and land-use framework plan alternatives that were concurrently available for comment online. Questions promoting general discussion were posed on topics including current user experience at the station; station access (by train, bus, car, bike and/or foot); current land use; and hopes, preferences, ideas, and concerns for future development of the site. This document provides a high-level summary of the common themes heard across all Focus Groups and individual summaries of input received at each Focus Group Meet Up.

Focus Group Meet Up: Common Themes

Common Themes: Wishes, Preferences, Ideas, and Concerns

- **Safety:** Participants expressed wishes for safety improvements for those using the station as well as those trying to access the station area from surrounding areas.

Safety was discussed in terms of surrounding roadways and the importance of safe roadway crossings as well as the physical (natural and built) environment of the station area itself.

- **Affordable Housing:** All groups expressed concern with the rising cost of living and the limited options for affordable housing – particularly housing for seniors and those on fixed or low income. People do like the opportunity of increased access to services that MARTA can provide.
- **Community Assets/Green Space:** Participants expressed desire for more walkable community-oriented spaces. Preferences and ideas included parks, sports facilities (including support for StationSoccer), event venues.
- **Traffic:** Concern with impacts to automobile traffic were expressed – particularly regarding existing traffic patterns and how any new development might add to or otherwise affect traffic congestion.

INDIVIDUAL FOCUS GROUP MEET UP SUMMARIES

Focus Group Meet Up Details

Meeting Date:	10.6.2022	Target Population:	Adults 55+
Meeting Location:	DeKalb Public Library Covington Highway Branch 3500 Covington Hwy, Decatur, GA 30032		

Discussion

What is missing within walking distance of your home?

- Pharmacy, especially now that they closed Rite Aid
- Grocery Store (Kroger) – something that is easy to walk to; right now, you have to drive or take the bus to grocery stores. Doesn't need to be big, just somewhere to get the essentials
- Urgent Care
- Safe, walking trail (2 miles is a good distance)
- Activities, interactive greenspace for all ages – there is a lot of green space in the area, but all of it is fenced and has signs that say “no trespassing”

Wishes, Preferences and Ideas

- Prefer to walk not drive (20-30 min) everywhere
- Like the senior housing near LaVista and 285 (good parking example)
- For non-regular riders, they would use the station more if retail, food and beverage and other services located here
- Public amenities (recreational activities/resources, swimming pools, gyms)
 - o We may have resources in the community already, but people don't know about them, and they are underutilized.
 - o Golf
 - o Bike trails
 - o Dog park
 - o Senior exercise facility (there's a new one being built on Redan Road)

- Resources to teach and take classes
- Most all would live here if possible and visit if there was something to do
- Want to live in a senior apartment that doesn't require having a car (they are expensive and can break down)

Concerns

- Unless you have a car, this is a food desert.
- People don't necessarily want to catch the bus – they'd rather ride the train and walk.
- Enough greenspace for future residents
- Traffic impact of new development and road diet combined
- School capacity for children due to construction of new housing developments
- Using the bathrooms at Kensington – not sure if they are open
- Need to figure out the reasons that people don't ride MARTA in order to determine how to adjust that
 - MARTA doesn't take you everywhere you need to go (like other large urban cities)
 - Ridership safety – the community needs to know what safety precautions are put in place to change public perception; patrolling officers and lighting
 - One attendee noted that more officers are around recently. Usually, one on foot and one in a car.
 - Some are afraid to ride the train
 - It might take a while for public perception of this transit station to change for this to become a destination
 - Panhandling has gotten worse
- Housing units to parking ratio at the new development
- Concentration of drug rehab centers near the station
- Avondale Police are notorious for targeting and stopping Black drivers on Covington Highway especially, and it will take a long time to turn this around.
- Accessible paths for wheelchair users – specifically crossing Kensington Road
- Pet friendly housing options
- Evacuation concerns out of Atlanta when natural disasters strike

Focus Group Meet Up Details

Meeting Date:	10.13.2022	Target Population:	Adults 55+
Meeting Location:	DeKalb Public Library Covington Highway Branch 3500 Covington Hwy, Decatur, GA 30032		

Discussion

- Many attendees ride MARTA and use Kensington Station
- Some live in senior housing in the general area, others live in Lithonia
- One attendee is blind and a frequent MARTA rider, and came to express the need for housing and a community that allows for greater independence for people with disabilities
- One attendee doesn't feel safe enough to take Kensington and will to East Lake and park if taking the train to Downtown Atlanta

- One attendee used to have a 3-hour commute one-way: walk to the bus stop, take two buses, and take two trains
- Many have lived in Atlanta for a while and have seen the changes over time (like Edgewood / Kirkwood, Avondale, etc. and remember when Avondale was the end of the line station)

What are some issues with Kensington station?

- Safety concerns – no visible MARTA police at the station, teenagers hang out and they can get rowdy
- There is no town square, no businesses, no housing. It was built with cars in mind, and it makes it look out of place. You don't see people, so it doesn't always feel safe.
- Lighting and video recording are needed
- Concerns with adjacency to the jail
- Decatur has all the same potential issues (teenagers, homelessness, proximity to the jail, etc.), but it feels safe because everything else is there (plaza and town square, restaurants, businesses, government buildings, housing)

What would you like to see here?

- Restaurants and coffee shops (lots of people love coffee!) – Memorial Drive has restaurants, but they are too far away from the station to walk to.
- Housing
- Parks and green space
- Recreational spaces for kids and the youth to keep them engaged
- Affordable housing – not just one level of income – that also accommodates those with disabilities and seniors
- If MARTA does this plan, the problems will be fixed because more people will be around
- This area needs everything for everyone (like a hospital or medical center, and everything else we've mentioned)
- Bank (some banks are disinvesting in the area; maybe they could be partners in the redevelopment because they are federally required to spend money in the communities where they have branches)
- Grocery store
- Need jobs on and near MARTA – restaurants and businesses provide jobs – and it will allow employees to take transit to work, rather than drive, or have a long transit ride and walk
- Community services – medical spaces, recreation center (need something for kids to do to keep them out of trouble), educational activities, amphitheater (closest one is Lithonia)
 - o Amphitheater could be good for community events and concerts
 - o Jazz concerts for people to go relax
- Need to think about the streets around the station that make it an island that is hard to develop on. Need to work with GDOT – they've done it before. Why not here?
- Connect to the bike path in Avondale that goes to Stone Mountain

Reasons Development is Coming Here (separate conversation started through discussion)

- People here have taken care of things and invested in their homes and have been here for a while. That's why there is now attention here.
- There is a lot of development on Covington Highway, which will bring more people, and they need places to go (restaurants, retail, etc.).
- One of the most underutilized areas, especially with the DeKalb County facility and the parking lot at the station

- What are the plans for the DeKalb County facility?
- Green spaces should be added to that area
- DeKalb should be working with MARTA to make this whole area more walkable with green spaces and better streets

Housing and Density – does the idea of more than 600 units concern you?

- 600 units doesn't sound like a lot. Redevelopment is happening everywhere – people are moving here and they need somewhere to live.
- Downtown Atlanta feels better than it used to because people are living there – helps with more eyes on the street
- People may not want large buildings and design matters. Make it special.
 - Avondale Estates was modeled after European villages
 - Maybe do the same thing here – the name “Kensington” came from a place in the UK
 - Give it a smaller village look and feel
- Need affordable housing
- This area isn't part of Avondale Estates, so redevelopment probably won't affect them with traffic all that much because the road through the city has always been a thoroughfare
- Homeownership
 - Would be good to have some ownership units so that people can earn generational wealth
 - Investors and out of state property owners are buying up lots of homes, flipping them, renting them, then selling them for much more
 - The investors have made it hard to afford to live in the area, especially with increases in property taxes
 - MARTA should make a program for homeownership (gave the example of land trust models)
- Parking should be moved out farther from here and this should be a neighborhood station about people. It's time for the station to “grow up.”
- There are plenty of strip malls with a bunch of parking spots that could be used for MARTA, and shuttles could take riders to the stations.
- MARTA Reach was mentioned – loved the program and it should be expanded
- Housing for seniors and those with disabilities should be affordable
- Some seniors want to downsize because managing a house becomes too much to handle

Focus Group Meet Up Details

Meeting Date:	10.6.2022	Target Population:	Rental Community Residents
Meeting Location:	Virtual		

Discussion

How do you feel about housing options?

- There is a good amount of housing, but pricing is the difficult part.
- There is a struggle to find quality housing under \$1,000.

- Streets are not pedestrian friendly, especially Covington Hwy and Memorial Drive

What do you think is missing at the station?

- Walkability and walkable distances to greenspace
- Grocery Stores
- Amenities that are accessible to pedestrians

How do you move?

- Primarily by car
- Walk for recreation but would walk for errands if those amenities were available. Doesn't use MARTA as frequently since the pandemic.

Are you interested in housing on this site?

- No, not if it's developed like other larger developments taking place. A lot of the newer developments don't include enough private outdoor space and they feel bulky, as if people are being crammed.
- Prefer duplex style residential
- Would prefer housing that increases interaction with community – something that doesn't feel available in larger apartment buildings.

Would you come to Kensington if new retail amenities were here?

- No, since the pandemic in person shopping isn't as big of a draw. Prefers to shop at specific niche places where they know the owners.
- Existing public spaces and grocery store options are adequate
- Doesn't like the Edgewood retail (Best Buy, Target), and it shouldn't be used as an example or precedent.

Would you come to Kensington if new food and beverage amenities were here?

- Yes, I like restaurants that are convenient.

What open space amenities would bring you here?

- Hiking trails, a lot of people from the community currently use the Towers High School track for walking

Plan Framework Comments:

- Concerned about bringing big box retail here because of the traffic that will come in addition to the traffic from larger adjacent development projects
- Concerned about new development gentrifying this area and ensuring affordability for long-time residents (especially seniors)
- Concerned about whether parking would be removed from the station
- Preference for mid-size housing rather than large scale apartments

Focus Group Meet Up Details

Meeting Date:	10.6.2022	Target Population:	Avondale Estates Residents
Meeting Location:	Virtual		

Discussion

General Comments & Concerns

- There is currently no safe crossing at Covington, Mountain, and Kensington. This intersection hasn't worked for years.
- Concerns over the amount of residential and potential traffic impact. Covington already has a lot of traffic in the mornings.
- General support for improvements to the property.
- Want to see trees preserved and maintained. Emphasis on the importance of greenspace and supporting wildlife/natural habitats.
- Quality affordable housing is very rare around the station area.
- Don't know if retail would be a draw. Don't like the idea of Edgewood Retail district.
- Food is a plus. Want more food options. Supportive of Covington Highway food options.
- Concern about impacts to Avondale's golf cart community of 100+

How often do you use the station? And for what purpose?

- Commuting for work to Lenox – this has changed since the pandemic; now uses it less
- For travel to the airport and events at Mercedes Benz or State Farm Arena, and for dining at Decatur. Will usually Uber back from Decatur if it's later in the evening.
- For commuting to work in Buckhead, occasionally to Decatur and rarely the West Side
- For commuting to job at Georgia Tech.
- Not used very often since the pandemic
- For some, not within walking distance, concerns over reliability, and only rarely used

What would make your experience using Kensington Station better?

- Ability to bike to the station and bike parking, EV charging capabilities for commuters.
- Improved electronic signage (recently has been done, which is good), better and accessible public restrooms
- Better lighting, especially for early mornings and late evenings when the sun is down
- Restaurants and ability to bike to them
- Cafes (i.e., North Ave Station)
- Restaurants and other retail to make better use of the parking lots
- For people to feel safe using this public amenity
- Last-mile connectivity to get to and from the station. The MARTA Reach program was well-liked in the community.

How do you see redevelopment impacting Avondale Estates?

- Envision the site creating its own little city, envision people living there might use the Memorial corridor more.
- It feels a little separate from Avondale - the redevelopment at the Avondale Station is attractive – but when you exit it's in "no man's land" and on a busy street, doesn't want Kensington to feel this way. Depends on how the space between Avondale Estates and the station redevelops.

- It would be great for it be cohesive between Avondale, but fears it might feel like its own little island
- Concern about development fronting both sides of the road so that Kensington Station does not feel like an island; would be cool to do brewery tours between all the stations with all the new breweries popping up; should have things for all ages
- Commentor sees pros and cons, hopes that people will promote the new retail but fears increase in traffic, particularly on residential streets in nearby neighborhoods.
- Commenter sees this as an extension of Avondale, would like to see this complement existing businesses in Avondale and not duplicate
- Commenter likes that a mix of housing price points will bring diversity to the area
- Commenter: "Avondale residents are in a unique position halfway between Avondale Station and Kensington Station so there will likely be some people from Avondale who start walking here because it is closer. There are existing plans that are going to make this place more connected and safer for walking, excited to see this whole corridor develop as a much more connected and pedestrian friendly place, concerned about the competition with retail, would like to see some owner-occupied housing at the station because it helps provide some stability that might bring longer term residents leading neighborhood groups at the station. Covington Highway Study by the City of Avondale Estates for the road diet will make the city better connected to the station (currently underway)"
- Curious about how bus routes will be integrated – commenter says that the environment for bus ridership should feel comfortable, clean, and inviting

What is one single improvement that would improve your life in this area?

- Traffic management with better pedestrian facilities
- More comfortable pedestrian experience
- Retail and businesses that entice people to walk
- General placemaking – creating destinations people want to visit
- Greenspace and sustainable landscaping – incorporating native plant species and maintaining/enriching existing tree cover, natural habitats and ecosystems, shade trees and canopy trees