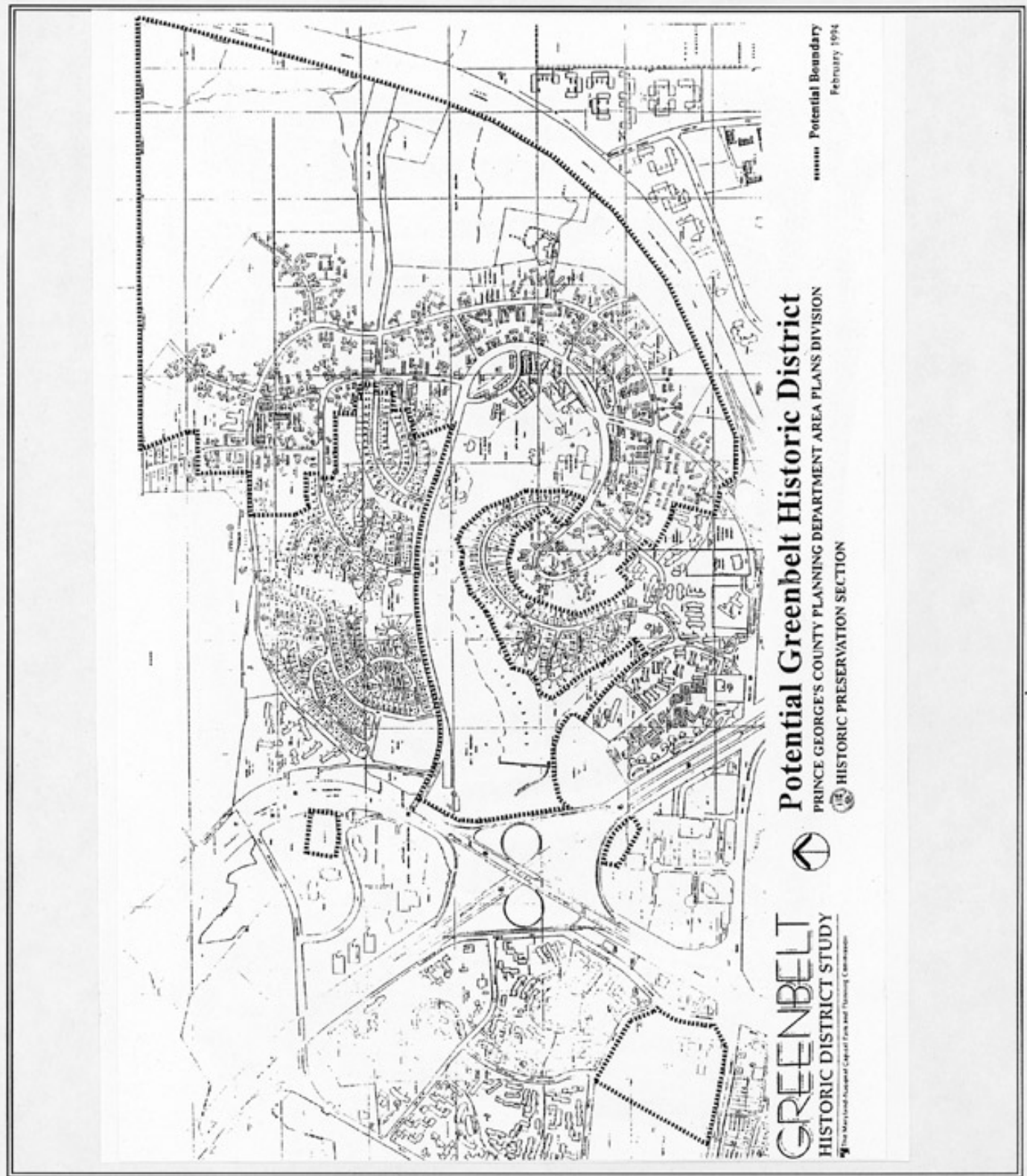


C.1.3 Modern Period (1930-1960)

The pivotal event in the expansion of the American suburb was the creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) as part of the National Housing Act of 1934. The FHA offered Federal mortgage insurance to builders and developers and long-term, low-interest loans to potential home-buyers. However, the FHA would only finance houses in suburbs that met approved standards, first published in 1935. According to the FHA, subdivisions should be designed to follow the topography of the area and have a hierarchical system of residential and collector streets. The standards included regulations for the width of streets and intersections, the placement of trees, the size of blocks and lots, and sometimes even the style of architecture. These standards were redefined in 1936 and presented as suggestions. The suggestions discouraged designs that would facilitate through traffic and showed a marked preference for cul-de-sacs and deep setbacks. Roads were to have a minimum right-of-way of 50 feet with a paved width of twenty-four feet. In 1938, the FHA began offering design reviews to developers of new subdivisions. The guidelines were revised again in 1941 to include curbs and a minimum paved width of 26 feet (Southworth and Ben-Joseph 1997, 82-84).

By 1941, 32 states had designated local planning commissions as the agencies responsible for defining and enforcing official regulations for new subdivisions. The local planning commissions generally adapted the FHA guidelines. Concerned about the cost of meeting the guidelines, the Urban Land Institute (ULI), the National Association of Real Estate, and the National Association of Home Builders began promoting the interests of builders and developers. Although they supported most of the FHA guidelines, in 1947 the ULI published their own standards which emphasized reducing the cost of infrastructure. These standards made 26 feet the maximum necessary paved street width, reduced the width of sidewalks, advocated narrower intersections and only recommended the planting of trees along the street in certain situations. The ULI revised the standards again in 1974 and 1990, suggesting narrower street corridors and simplified infrastructure (Figure 15). They did so with strong support from the National Association of Home Builders. However, in the eyes of local planning boards, which made the decisions on what would be approved, "the threat of substandard street layouts along with the rise in vehicular ownership promoted a continuation of conservative designs for subdivisions" (Southworth and Ben-Joseph 1997, 88-91).



GREENBELT
 HISTORIC DISTRICT STUDY
The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission

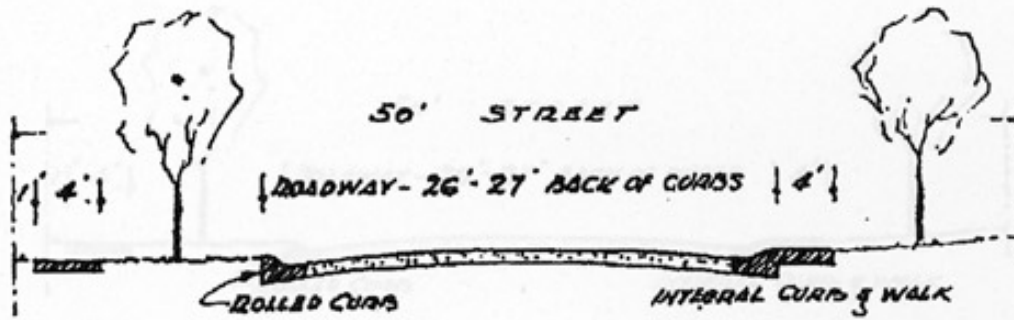
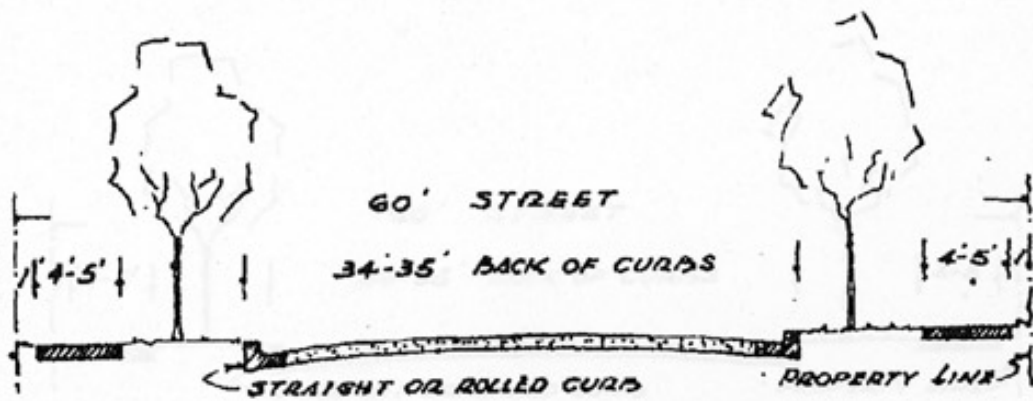
Potential Greenbelt Historic District
 PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT AREA PLANS DIVISION
 HISTORIC PRESERVATION SECTION

..... Potential Boundary
 February 1994

**I-495/I-95 Capital Beltway Corridor
 Transportation Study**
 Montgomery and Prince George's Counties
 Suburbanization Historic Context
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Figure 14: Greenbelt, Maryland Plan

Source: Maryland-National Capital Park
 and Planning Commission.
Greenbelt Historic District Study, page 91



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Figure 15: ULI Standards Illustration

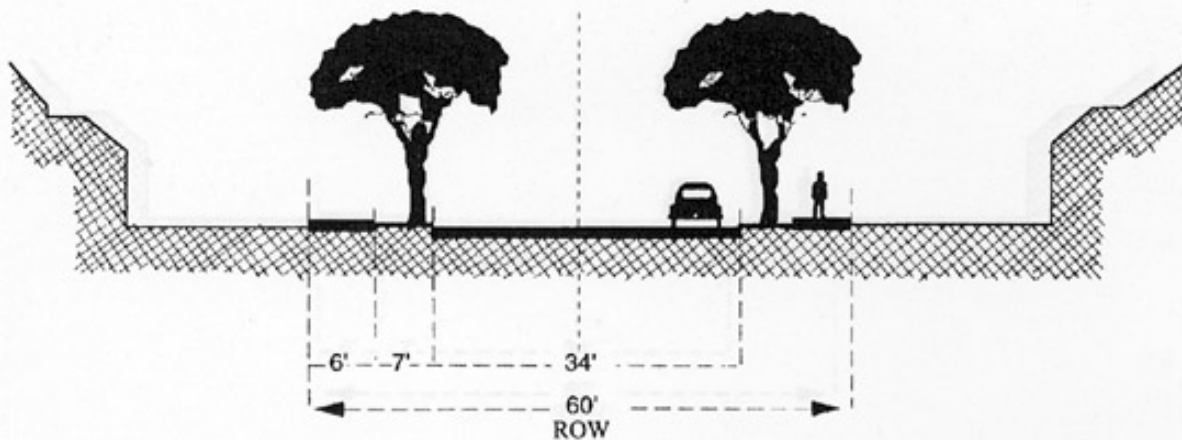
Source: Southworth, Michael, and Eran Ben-Joseph.
Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities, page 91

Local planning boards received support for the curvilinear subdivision and its cul-de-sacs from the Institute of Traffic Engineers (ITE), created in 1930. The ITE published in 1961 its proposed standards for street design based on studies of traffic accident rates in areas with various street patterns (Figure 16). Finding that accidents occurred most often on gridded streets with four-way intersections, and least often on curvilinear streets with cul-de-sacs, they recommended subdivisions with limited access and discontinuous streets ending in cul-de-sacs and T-intersections. The standards were revised in 1965 with increased widths for sidewalks and roads and increased radii for intersections and cul-de-sacs. They were republished in 1984 and 1990 with few changes. The Institute of Traffic Engineers' guidelines have become the standard for subdivision design in the United States (Southworth and Ben-Joseph 1997, 92-96).

Discontent with the suburban lifestyle among working class, elderly, and other populations led to some experimentation with multifamily housing, cluster housing and other alternatives to the detached, single-family home in the 1960s and 1970s. Generally though, the automobile suburb, with its cul-de-sacs and detached houses, was held as the ideal by most people (Wright 1981, 258-261).

The automobile suburb, or "freeway suburb," that flourished after the 1950s was often located several miles from the city center, requiring long commutes for those residents who worked downtown. Over time, freeway suburbs were designed with an increasing number of cul-de-sacs and fewer interconnected streets (Figure 8) (Southworth and Ben-Joseph 1997, 2). Lots were wider than they were deep, and houses were placed with their longest side parallel to the street. Sidewalks became increasingly rare in freeway suburbs, as residents generally drove rather than walked to other locations. Some developments included schools, recreation facilities, or other community areas, however, most were purely residential. During the 1950s, commercial and other services began moving to suburban areas along freeways. These shopping and office centers were designed to accommodate the automobile.

For additional information on street design and its influences, refer to Michael Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph's *Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities*. To further study social aspects of subdivisions, see Gwendolyn Wright's, *Building the Dream*.



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Figure 16: ITE Standards Illustration

Source: Southworth, Michael, and Eran Ben-Joseph.
Streets and the Shaping of Towns and Cities, page 93