

SPRINGHILL LAKE APARTMENTS
9230 Edmonston Road
Greenbelt
Prince George's County
Maryland

HABS MD-1216
MD-1216

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MD-1216

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SPRINGHILL LAKE APARTMENTS

HABS No. MD-1216

- Location:** 9230 Edmonston Road, Greenbelt, Prince George's County, Maryland. The Springhill Lake development is an approximately 157-acre complex on the western side of Greenbelt in Prince George's County.¹ It includes all of the area bounded by Edmonston Road on the east, Cherrywood Lane on the northwest, and Breezewood Drive on the south.
- Time Period:** 1962 to 1970. The first section was built in 1962 and subsequent sections were added until 1970. The Springhill Lake development consists of ten sections.
- Developer:** Community Builders, Inc., Washington, D.C.
- Designers:** Cohen Haft and Associates, Washington, D.C. (buildings and site plan); T. D. Donovan and Associates, Silver Spring, Maryland (planting plan)
- Present Owner:** The Springhill Lake neighborhood is mainly a large garden apartment complex owned by Apartment Investment Management Company (AIMCO), a real estate investment trust (REIT) based in Denver, Colorado. Prince George's County School Board owns a parcel and elementary school within Springhill Lake. Commercial Realty Company owns and manages a low-rise office building in one of the sections.
- Present Use:** There are a variety of uses within the Springhill Lake development, generally maintaining the original development plans and services from the community's inception. Springhill Lake Apartments serve as rental housing. The Springhill Lake Retail Center includes a small convenience store and a training center for a regional food retailer. The Prince George's County School Board operates the Springhill Lake Elementary School on Springhill Drive, serving kindergarten through sixth grades. The Springhill Lake Commercial Center is currently leased by the General Services Administration of the federal government.
- Significance:** The community of Greenbelt, Maryland, was created through a landmark federal planning initiative in the 1930s. Old Greenbelt exhibited a thoughtful integration of transportation, housing, services, green space, and residents. As Greenbelt expanded beyond the original New Deal-era planned town in the post war period, the community tried to maintain an emphasis on planning and progressive ideals, with mixed success.

¹ John B. Willmann, "City Living Goes to Suburbia," *Washington Post* (7 October 1961): B1.

While the original section of Greenbelt established a precedent in housing form and planning, the federal government could not maintain its tight control over the community. In 1952, the federal government sold its property to a veterans cooperative and individual buyers. The cooperative—subsequently known as Greenbelt Homes, Inc. (GHI)—later sold most of the vacant land in Greenbelt to private developers, paving the way for major growth and conflict between residents and those developers during the 1960s.

The Springhill Lake development originated in this era of intense growth and signaled a transition between the planned, even isolated, Old Greenbelt and the coming private development that would irreversibly change the city's character. Designed by distinguished Washington, DC, architects Cohen Haft and Associates, the garden apartment complex was constructed in phases over the course of 7 years. Springhill Lake was comprised of nearly 2900 housing units on approximately 157 acres west of Old Greenbelt and was reputed to be the largest garden apartment development on the East Coast at the time of its construction. With low-rise apartment buildings and townhouses integrated into a verdant landscape, the Springhill Lake complex signified the inclusion of mid-century modernist structures into suburban settings while acknowledging the form that predominated in the first two phases of Greenbelt's development. In addition, Springhill Lake was made economically feasible by the federal government's construction of the Capital Beltway (Interstate 495) to facilitate traffic around the growing capital area.

Springhill Lake's developers, Community Builders, Inc., partially emulated Old Greenbelt's site plan of clustered, low-rise dwellings and communal space, and also planned social and retail services for their residents in order to build community spirit. The Springhill Lake Community Center, also designed by Cohen Haft and Associates, provided opportunities for games, dancing, music and instruction on various forms of recreation. The development also included area for an elementary school, later built by Prince George's County, and a retail shopping center. In this way, Springhill Lake was a sensitive addition to the city of Greenbelt that greatly expanded the population of one of the most significant planned communities of the twentieth century.

Historian LaDale Curtis Winling, Summer 2005

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Fellow, produced the historical report. James Rosenthal, HABS photographer, produced large-format black and white photographs.

I. Introduction

Springhill Lake is a large garden apartment development with integrated community services on the northeastern side of the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. It is part of the City of Greenbelt in Prince George's County, Maryland, a community originally developed as a federal planned community from 1935 to 1938. Greenbelt was intended to combat urban poverty and provide work relief during the Depression as part of the Department of Agriculture's Resettlement Administration green town program. This concept was spearheaded by economist and RA director Ruxford Tugwell and represents one of the Roosevelt Administration's boldest New Deal initiatives. Defense housing expanded the original Greenbelt development during the war years. Today this large suburban community includes more typical post-war retail, office, and residential development surrounding the intact planned core of Old Greenbelt. Part of a transitional period in the development of Greenbelt, Springhill Lake is the product of a combination of development pressures from the growth of the national capital region, post-war forms of suburbanization, and community involvement in planning issues.

The southwest edge of Greenbelt lies approximately five miles from the northeast border of the District of Columbia. As the activities of the nation's capital began moving into suburban Virginia and Maryland in the middle of the twentieth century, residential and commercial developments moved closer to the suburban enclave. The federal government heavily influenced this process by building the Capital Beltway around the District in the 1960s, which both facilitated the movement of residents and workers around the capital city and promoted additional development near and beyond the Beltway.

After the federal government's sale of Greenbelt in 1952, the city faced the same state and local regulations and hierarchy of authorities as other Maryland cities. Thus, Prince George's County became the planning and zoning authority for Greenbelt. City residents, city government, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), and the county commission then began a multilateral debate on the future development of Greenbelt. This community negotiation lasted for more than twenty years and shaped the post-war expansion of Greenbelt as private developers built residential neighborhoods, shopping centers, and office parks on formerly open space within the City of Greenbelt. Residents fought to maintain the planned principles of their community and participated in vigorous debates with the MNCPPC and the Prince George's County Commission.

Anticipating growth beyond the District of Columbia borders, Edward Perkins, a suburban Maryland developer, purchased a large tract of undeveloped land west of the original federal Resettlement Administration (RA) section of Greenbelt. Perkins sought to change the industrial zoning of the property in the 1957 Prince George's County plan to multi-family residential. While the process was contentious, the county approved the change in early 1959; planning and design commenced for a 300-acre, 5000-unit garden apartment complex.² Perkins worked with a syndicate of partners including Community Builders, Inc. to build Springhill Lake. Community

² "County Board Rezones Lots At Greenbelt," *Washington Post and Times Herald* (19 February 1959): 28.

Builders was a Washington-area firm formed in 1956 to collaborate on large-scale suburban developments.³

A noted DC-area architectural firm, Cohen Haft AIA & Associates, and a local landscape architecture firm, T. D. Donovan and Associates, collaborated on the design of the Springhill Lake development. The master plan, devised by Cohen Haft, included ten relatively dense residential sections with integrated commercial, retail, educational, and recreational features. The units were exclusively rental apartments or townhouses, catering to the emerging market desires of young families. Where veterans returning from World War II sought small detached suburban houses with government financial aid, this next generation of young professional families in the Washington region sought rental housing while they saved for a down payment on their own houses.⁴

The apartment buildings of Springhill Lake were two and three stories joined in offset pairs and trios, with design details characteristic of commercial mid-century modernism. The buildings all had low-pitched, asphalt shingle roofs, and brick veneer walls interrupted by vertical bays of metal sash windows and wood panel spandrels. All buildings included extensive glazing and balconies typically made of prefabricated concrete. The buildings were arranged in several patterns – linear, L-shaped, “Z”-shaped, and C-shaped -- throughout the development. Buildings often were placed to address a curving Springhill Lake road on one side, and an interior courtyard on the other. Parking lots were kept from between the buildings; rather, they were segregated at the perimeter of each section to maximize the interior green space. Springhill Lake had only one cul-de-sac, Springhill Terrace, and was bounded by three roads, Cherrywood Lane, Breezewood Drive, and Edmonston Road.

Though the plan and architectural design earned local and regional praise, the perimeter street layout and the community’s relationship to the rest of Greenbelt created tension in the community. Springhill Lake residents felt a sense of isolation from the larger city; to address this problem many early residents became active in Greenbelt politics. The size of the enormous development helped elect a council member – who subsequently became mayor – because the voting rate was so high. This representation in city government led to several public works projects facilitating community interaction, recreation and transportation connectivity to improve the quality of life. The Springhill Lake social director, based in the Community Center, also served to promote community activity and neighborliness in the development.

However, since its opening as a self-styled “affordable luxury” community for young and middle-aged families, Springhill Lake has seen a shift in the profile of its tenants.⁵ University of Maryland-College Park students now make up an estimated one-third of Springhill Lake residents. Their transience presents a challenge to maintaining community character and to asserting political power in the city. In addition, changes of ownership and the deferment of regular maintenance and upgrades have taken their toll upon the buildings.

³ John B. Willmann, “4 Builders Carry the Ball,” *Washington Post* (24 June 1961): B14.

⁴ Brenda Cooley, Resident. Interview by author. 6 July 2005. Greenbelt, MD.

⁵ “Springhill Lake Chataqua,” Classified Ad. *Washington Post and Times Herald* (16 March 1963): C6.

In 2003, the real estate investment trust (REIT) AIMCO, the latest owner of the Springhill Lake apartment complex, hired New Urbanist design firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company to make a transit-oriented redesign of Springhill Lake. The firm proposed a plan that would see the total demolition of the Springhill Lake community through a multi-phase redevelopment.

II. Planning – Transportation and Zoning

The city of Greenbelt was one of three green towns planned and built by the federal Resettlement Administration (RA) in the 1930s. Established as a means of providing the urban poor with a more affordable and healthful environment, the green town program was administered by the RA's Suburban Resettlement Division. The original town, completed in 1938, was hailed as a significant planning achievement and predicted to be the future of urbanism. The original section of Greenbelt and its 1941 expansion by the federal government featured row houses and apartments arranged in verdant settings, with pedestrian paths connecting residences with retail and commercial buildings. In addition to the unique suburban plan of the city, the federal government promoted cooperative enterprise as a means of promoting community and affordability. In 1937 the Resettlement Administration became the Farm Security Administration, which continued the ownership and oversight of Greenbelt. Greenbelt was later transferred to the Federal Public Housing Authority and then the Public Housing Administration.⁶

In anticipation of World War II, the federal government developed 1000 new units of row housing for defense workers on federally-owned land directly adjacent to Greenbelt. These houses were developed into another neighborhood unit of superblocks with curving, picturesque streets centered around a later elementary school. After the conclusion of the war, Congress introduced federal legislation requiring the Public Housing Administration to sell off its holdings in the green towns. Public Law 65 passed both houses of Congress in 1949 and was signed by President Truman. Members of the Greenbelt community banded together to establish a cooperative in order to purchase much of the community. The Greenbelt Veterans Housing Corporation (GVHC) purchased the Greenbelt property on December 30, 1952.⁷

This change of ownership profoundly influenced the future of Greenbelt, both in its physical form and its social character. The city, which had been governed by federal planning authorities and managed by a federal employee, was suddenly subject to state and local authorities. Greenbelt residents responded to the new government structure by looking to their origins as a guide for future expansion. The GVHC hired Hale Walker, the town planner who had worked for the Resettlement Administration on the design of the original Greenbelt development, to design a plan for city expansion. Ironically, the community widely recognized by scholars for its bold plan no longer had authority over its own development.⁸

The body that did hold authority over planning and zoning in Greenbelt was Prince George's County. Because of a 1927 Maryland state law, cities did not control building or land use within

⁶ Knepper, 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

their borders. The Prince George's County Commission had the final authority on these matters, though the activity of planning and researching land use in much of Prince George's County and neighboring Montgomery County was delegated to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and staff. Because of this hierarchy, planning decisions were less immediately responsive to the needs and desires of the community – a tension that would repeatedly lead to conflicts between the city and county.

By the 1950s, a federal planning movement broadened the concept of the capital into a regional city that, because of emerging transportation choices, had a profound impact on Greenbelt. In 1951, planners and legislators reinvigorated the concept of a "circumferential highway" first considered during the war.⁹ Encircling the District of Columbia and distributing federal jobs outside the national capital, the planned highway was an effort to reduce congestion in the national capital as well as to redevelop blight within the District. From an original White House request to move jobs from the District's crowded northwest quadrant, the idea was taken up by the U.S. Senate, who asked for a plan to facilitate travel by federal workers dispersed throughout Maryland, Virginia, and the District.¹⁰ By the end of 1952, a rough plan was in place for the proposed highway and talk had turned to land acquisition. The initial plan routed the circumferential highway through Greenbelt to offer automobility to employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture research station in Beltsville.¹¹ NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center was established on the east side of Greenbelt in 1959, bringing another major federal facility to the area.

Gaining a continuous right-of-way around the capital proved difficult because of the already substantial suburban growth in the Washington region.¹² Several alterations to the planned route occurred during subsequent negotiations because the expressway's construction involved so many jurisdictions and funding sources.¹³ The project was eventually rolled into President Eisenhower's Interstate Highway system and funded through federal transportation revenues. In addition, surrounding counties cooperated by making local road improvements that would anticipate the importance and capacity of what came to be known as the Capital Beltway.¹⁴

In 1956, the MNCPPC undertook a revision of the regional plan that governed land use within its jurisdiction. The proposed zoning maps included significant upzoning to accommodate the anticipated growth of the national capital, and the new population that the proposed Capital Beltway would bring to Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. Greenbelt residents opposed this effort to bring density and new development to their community, claiming that the character of Greenbelt would be lost. Despite the opposition to the 1956 plan, the county implemented it in 1957 with minor alterations. The zoning plan included several industrial zones

⁹ Betty McDevitt, "Express Highway System Plans Revealed for Md.-Capital Area," *Washington Post* (21 November 1944): 1.

¹⁰ "Senators Ask Plan for D.C. Belt Highway," *Washington Post* (8 March 1951): 2.

¹¹ Matt McDade, "\$328 Million Roads Plan Is Proposed In D.C. Area," *Washington Post* (14 December 1952): M1.

¹² Editorial. "Modernizing Highways," *Washington Post* (21 December 1952): B4.

¹³ Wes Barthelme, "Proposed Prince George's Relocation Would Put Belt Road Closer to D.C.," *Washington Post* (19 November 1954): 29.

¹⁴ "Belt Road For Silver Spring Gets Council Nod," *Washington Post* (5 September 1956): 25.

to the west of the original Greenbelt developments and anticipated routing of the Capital Beltway between the new and old developments.

Edward Perkins, a “well-known Prince Georges County builder,” originally purchased the 311-acre tract that became Springhill Lake.¹⁵ Architect Jack Cohen recalled that Perkins considered continuing his previous work developing single family residences, but was convinced by his lawyer that a zoning change to multi-family residential would be easier to achieve.¹⁶ The proposed apartment development met with some community opposition from those who feared the size of the complex would alter the character of Greenbelt. The initial scope of the project, 4000 units, could yield more than 12,000 new residents for Greenbelt, more than doubling its population.¹⁷ Without a measured integration of new residents into the community, many Greenbelt citizens feared that new residents would overwhelm the city.¹⁸

The consensus emerged that Greenbelt would have to take a strong position in advocating for sensitive expansion.¹⁹ Differing opinions on how to achieve this goal generated a contentious debate over the zoning change from industrial to high-density residential. Dozens of residents protested the size of the new development, while the Greenbelt City Council supported the rezoning. The Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission then voted against the plan for thousands of new rental units in Greenbelt, wanting to maintain the industrial zone.²⁰ However, the County Commission, which had final authority over the proposed project, went against the MNCPPC recommendation and approved the project on February 18, 1959.²¹

Perkins formed an ownership syndicate with three other local developers called Greenbelt Associates. The syndicate was led by Perkins, apartment building and shopping center developer Isadore Gudelsky, whose projects included Wheaton Plaza, real estate firm president T. N. Lerner, and Albert H. Small, a principal partner in Community Builders, Inc.²² Community Builders was charged with the development and construction of Springhill Lake. The building firm’s other officers were Herman Greenberg, Ralph Ochsman, and Myron Fungler. Community Builders was formed in 1956 when the foursome teamed up for the Holiday Park project in the Wheaton area. Greenberg specialized in land acquisition and promotion; Small was a trained engineer who handled planning and design; Fungler oversaw the finances; and Ochsman was in charge of construction. Prior to Springhill Lake the firm planned and developed the complex of 370 Colonial Revival houses at Sleepy Hollow Woods near Annandale, Virginia and another

¹⁵ Joseph B. Byrnes. “Huge Rental Project Set for Greenbelt,” *Washington Evening Star* (7 October 1961): B1.

¹⁶ Jack Cohen, Principal Architect, Cohen Haft AIA & Associates. Interview by author. 8 June 2005. Washington, D.C..

¹⁷ “Greenbelt Gets Plan to Double Its Housing,” *Washington Evening Star* (10 February 1959): A17. Some articles list the proposed size as 5000 units but early project approvals specified 4000.

¹⁸ “24 Air Opposing Views in County Zoning Fight,” *Washington Evening Star* (10 February 1959): A17.

¹⁹ “An Election Platform,” *Greenbelt News Review* (14 May 1959).

²⁰ “Planners Oppose Greenbelt Projects,” *Washington Post* (8 February 1962): B5.

²¹ “Planning Board Denies Rezoning Bid,” *Washington Post* (14 February 1959): D1; “County Board Rezones Lots at Greenbelt,” *Washington Post* (19 February 1959): 28. The complex was victim to arson on two separate occasions during the course of construction. Bart Barnes, “Arson Is Suspected In Second Fire at Greenbelt Project,” *Washington Post* (24 April 1965): B2.

²² Byrnes. “Huge Rental Project Set for Greenbelt,” B1.

large complex of “colonial” houses at Tilden Woods in Maryland. Community Builders also constructed a number of apartment buildings in Virginia, Maryland, and the District, as well as the Silver Spring Medical Building near Wheaton.²³

III. Planning - Design

The garden apartment housing type dates to the 1910s, when developers and architects were seeking to provide a more healthful and aesthetically appealing form of urban rental housing. Characterized by larger setbacks and a lower built proportion of the lot, the new forms allowed greater access to light and ventilation throughout the apartment buildings. In addition, early garden apartments assembled multiple lots and even whole blocks to provide communal open space. Often, the apartments were arranged around a central courtyard designed by landscape architects.²⁴

Many early garden apartment complexes, including the original Greenbelt development, are derivations of Ebenezer Howard’s conception of the Garden City. Howard, a British stenographer, published *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898, reissued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Howard’s vision was for a decentralized, planned city with services and employment distributed throughout the developed area. This new urban/suburban form would feature an agricultural belt at the perimeter to pre-empt too much growth or the city’s being swallowed up by other urban growth.²⁵ Several efforts were made in the 1920s to develop garden communities adjacent to existing urban areas. Architects and planners Henry Wright and Clarence Stein worked together on two such efforts, Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, New York, and Radburn in Fairlawn, New Jersey. Stein became a consultant to the Resettlement Administration and helped guide the Suburban Resettlement Division’s planning efforts for the green towns, including Greenbelt.²⁶ Springhill Lake’s apartments were heir to this tradition stemming from Ebenezer Howard’s garden cities ideal, the town planning of Raymond Unwin in Great Britain, and continuing through Stein and Wright’s design work.

Prince George’s County experienced a wave of multi-family housing construction between 1934 and 1955 with approximately 86 new garden apartments, garden-apartment complexes and low-rise apartment buildings. The majority of this development occurred in the post-war years in response to “the need for low-cost housing, the creation of new transportation routes, and the relocation of government agencies.”²⁷ During 1955 to 1960, Montgomery County, Maryland experienced an apartment building boom while no new projects were reported for Prince George’s County. However, in 1959 Prince George’s County had 20,000 apartment units, still

²³ Willmann, “4 Builders Carry the Ball,” B1, B14.

²⁴ Daniel Karatzas, *Jackson Heights A Garden in the City: The History of America’s First Garden and Cooperative Apartment Community* (Jackson Heights, N.Y.: Jackson Heights Beautification Group, 1990), 31.

²⁵ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

²⁶ Clarence Stein, *Toward New Towns for America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1957), 120.

²⁷ Patti Kuhn, Laura Trieschmann, and Megan Rispoli, “Apartment Buildings and Garden Apartment Complexes in Prince George’s County, Maryland: 1934-55,” [Draft] National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, section E, 2, 2005, Prince George’s County Historic Preservation Office.

8,000 more than Montgomery County's 12,000. Springhill Lake's community amenities were perhaps an attempt to help the large complex compete in still robust rental market.²⁸

Community Builders, Inc., selected a known Washington architectural firm for this development, Cohen Haft AIA & Associates. The firm had worked with Community Builders on several previous projects.²⁹ Architect Jack Cohen earned a bachelors degree in architectural engineering from Catholic University. Leonard Haft also studied architecture at Catholic University, earning his bachelors degree. The Cohen Haft firm had been recognized for several different types of residential architecture before their work on Springhill Lake. Their work for Community Builders at Sleepy Hollow Woods in Virginia earned a "Quality Model House Award" from *House and Home* magazine in 1960.³⁰ Another award for Sleepy Hollow Woods from *McCall's Magazine* recognized the "medium priced" ramblers, split levels and bilevels as examples of the "best houses being built and offered for sale today."³¹ Community Builders again hired Cohen and Haft for Tilden Woods, a suburban development of detached single family residences in North Bethesda, This early 1960s project won honors from *American Builder* magazine, *McCalls*, the American Institute of Architects, and *House & Home* magazine, among others.³²

In 1962 Cohen and Haft designed a 350-unit garden apartment complex, Pinewood Garden Apartments, in Norfolk, Virginia for Community Builders.³³ The firm had designed several other garden apartment complexes in Maryland, though none as large as Springhill Lake. In 1961-62 they built Wheaton House Garden Apartments on Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring, Maryland with a park-like setting and contemporary buildings.³⁴ Their designs for single family houses were largely popular variations on the Colonial, while their multi-family structures used a more contemporary architectural vocabulary. The firm used more bold Modernist forms for individual buildings such as their work for Paint Branch Unitarian Church, opened in Adelphi, Maryland during 1961.

Community Builders began to develop an identity for the complex around the concept of a new, man-made lake near the center of the development. This body of water, Springhill Lake, gave the complex its name. The firm devised Springhill Lake in such a way as to imitate many of the traits of old Greenbelt. Cohen and Haft served as land planners for the complex.³⁵ The master plan called for an elementary school to be built by the Prince George's County school board, a modest retail and shopping center, office towers, pedestrian paths linking buildings, playgrounds and roads, two swimming pools, a par-3 golf course, and a recreation center intended as the social focus of the community. At the 1967 groundbreaking for the golf course, Perkins touted the "total marketing approach. . . built around tenant involvement through

²⁸ Kuhn et al, section E, 46-47.

²⁹ Notable examples include Wheaton House in Silver Spring, MD, and Tilden Woods in Bethesda, MD.

³⁰ "Early '60 Awards to Area Builders," *Washington Post* (30 January 1960): B1.

³¹ "Two Area Builders Cited for Outstanding Homes," *Washington Post* (11 October 1958): B4.

³² *Cohen Haft AIA & Associates*. Promotional Brochure. 1960.

³³ "D.C. Firm to Build Apartments in Norfolk," *Washington Post* (9 June 1962): D5.

³⁴ Isabelle Gournay and Mary Sies, "Context Essay - Modern Movement in Maryland [Draft]," University of Maryland, College Park, c. 2003, 58.

³⁵ Springhill Lake Site Plan, (24 March 1965). City of Greenbelt Planning and Economic Development.

recreation and social programs.”³⁶ In addition, the firm planned for the growth of verdant vegetation and maintenance of mature trees interspersed throughout the site.

The development also held economic ramifications for the city of Greenbelt. Residents of Greenbelt had long paid a higher tax rate to accommodate a high rate of city services.³⁷ The construction of a significant number of new units within the city would increase tax revenue and enable the city to reduce the per capita tax burden on all residents.³⁸ Indeed, once regional interests came to terms with the inevitability of new development, some voices came to espouse density in Greenbelt and throughout the county.³⁹ The July 6, 1962 groundbreaking for Springhill Lake was a much heralded event. State, county, and local officials including Greenbelt Mayor Francis X. White, State House Speaker Perry Wilkinson, and Greenbelt City Manager Charles McDonald, attended the ceremony, watching as State Controller Louis Goldstein dug a shovel into the ground to commence the excavation.⁴⁰

IV. Architecture

Springhill Lake residential buildings were designed to coordinate with each other and produce an overall, consistent feel. The architectural character of the structures was a relatively conservative mid-century modernism, with the simple geometric forms, visual connection between interior and exterior, and modern materials in common use for 1960s multi-family architecture. Though development was built in several stages, buildings throughout Springhill Lake were recognizably consistent in materials, forms, and siting. Both townhouses and low-rise apartment buildings were constructed of load-bearing block with brick veneer of three different earth tones – brown, sienna, and cream. All masonry courses were arranged in running bond. Each low-rise apartment building had a low pitched roof with asphalt shingles. Three colors of shingle were employed, each corresponding to a matching color of brick. Windows were horizontal sliders with aluminum frames.

The large complex mediated between affordable standardization and attractive consumer choice by employing a few exterior forms with a large variety of interior layouts. Of the 371 residential buildings in Springhill Lake, 251 were low-rise apartment buildings and 120 were townhouses. The two- or three-story buildings were arranged in attached clusters throughout the apartment complex. Springhill Lake’s residential structures were attached end to end, but staggered in order to offer some contour to the façade. The groups of apartment buildings or town houses were arranged in several patterns – linear, L-shaped, “Z”-shaped, and C-shaped -- throughout the development. Long building rows were avoided in order to facilitate water drainage. In every case throughout the Springhill Lake development, parking lots were placed at the perimeter of the building clusters to create a courtyard atmosphere, wherein several buildings looked out upon a common area of grass, trees, or small children’s playgrounds. The varied siting of the

³⁶ “Apartment Will Have Par-3 Golf,” *Washington Post* (15 April 1967): D4.

³⁷ “An Election Platform,” *Greenbelt News Review* (14 May 1959).

³⁸ “Apartments Seen Paying High Share of Taxes,” *Washington Evening Star* (5 December 1963): B4.

³⁹ “More Apartment Units Urged For Greenbelt,” *Washington Evening Star* (2 May 1964).

⁴⁰ “Ceremonies Mark Start of Apartment Project,” *Washington Post and Times Herald* (7 July 1962): A2.

buildings and the gently rolling topography helped relieve the possible monotony of a large complex of very similar buildings. Large boulders and decorative split rail fences are placed throughout the site for visual interest; the boulders are likely original and the fences more recent additions or replacements.

The apartment buildings typically were three-stories high with two parallel wings joined by a central stairway enclosed by a window wall or large windows with wood spandrels. The extensive use of metal-sash windows transferred light to the interior and makes the central area visually permeable. The treatment and detailing of this central stairway – “plain” or “contoured” – was the chief distinction between the two variations on the Springhill Lake apartment building. The plain façade was more commonly used, with a continuous flat roof line and a nearly flush wall surface between the wings and central entrance stairway. The most distinctive breaks to this continuity were the balconies on the second- and third-floors. The contoured façade buildings had a deeper recess at the central entrance, emphasized by a lower roof height over the central stairway. As a result, the wings were visually separated from the central entrance and stairway. Some apartment buildings featured a wide eave extending in a dramatic point to shelter the upper balcony (see photo HABS No. MD-1216-6).

The town houses were grouped into three clusters in the Springhill Lake complex. Two were close to the two community pools – one in section 1 on the northeast edge of the development; another in section 6 in the middle of the complex. A third townhouse cluster in section 4 was almost immediately across Springhill Lane from the section 6 cluster and close to the retail center. Like the apartment buildings, they featured alternating bays of brick veneer and painted wood paneling with metal sash window openings. Interest was added to the expanses of brick on the townhouses by filling selected brick bays with regular rows of projecting headers. These bays included pairs of rectangular vents formed by the omission of the stretcher bricks between the decorative headers between the first and second story and sometimes also at basement level. Walls of decorative perforated concrete block approximately four feet high partially enclose or screen the ground level concrete patio for each unit.

There are 28 different floor plans offered within the 2899 units of Springhill Lake. The floor plans range from small 663-square foot, one-bedroom apartments to four-bedroom apartments up to 1,507 square feet in size. The architects at Cohen Haft had suggested that a variety of unit types be available so that, once a young family moved in to the complex, they could continue to live in Springhill Lake as their family grew by moving to larger apartments or townhouses.⁴¹ Upon the opening of the first units in 1963, monthly rent started at \$115 for a one-bedroom apartment.⁴² When the redevelopment plan of Springhill Lake was announced in 2004, the starting rent for a 1-bedroom apartment was \$759 a month.⁴³

⁴¹ David Holtz. Cohen Haft AIA & Associates. Interview by author. 22 July 2005. Potomac, MD. Holtz was an architect and land planner at Cohen Haft.

⁴² Carl Freeman, “Springhill Lake Grows Fast in Five Year Span,” *Washington Post* (24 June 1967): E4. \$115 in 1963 equivalent to \$730 in 2005. Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator. <http://www.bls.gov>. Accessed 29 June 2005. This represented roughly 11 percent of the Prince George’s County annual median family income.

⁴³ Springhill Lake Promotional brochure, 2004. <http://www.ajmco.com>. Accessed 13 May 2005. This represents roughly 16 percent of the median family annual income in Prince George’s County.

The community buildings were more daring in modernist form, but still indicative of commercial trends during the period. The Springhill Lake retail center, the Fountain Lodge, and the Springhill Lake Elementary School were designed by Cohen Haft. The retail center was comprised of two flat roof brick buildings - a two-story office/retail building and a large single-story retail building (originally a supermarket). The two buildings were arranged in a rough "L" shape around a small green space. The main façade of the office building facing the yard had a two-story portico forming covered walkways along the length of the building at each level. This portico extended from the roofline and was supported by two-story rectangular brick piers. An exterior metal staircase also hung on brick piers projected from the portico and also provided vertical circulation. Behind the portico a ribbon of metal sash clerestory windows illuminated the first floor offices and nearly full-length metal sash windows illuminated the second. The other three elevations of the office building are plain brick walls arranged in running bond, with two-story vertical slit recesses, now painted blue but perhaps originally glazed. The retail building also had three simple, flat, brick facades with vertical slit recesses while the main façade facing the yard was characterized by a large glass section – about a quarter of the façade – allowing visitors to see inside from the exterior.

The Fountain Lodge, originally serving as the development's community center, overlooked the man-made Springhill Lake and one of the complex's community pools. The original design featured a soaring "bat-wing" cantilevered roof reaching from interior masonry piers out to Springhill Lake at the rear of the building and toward Springhill Drive at the front. The building was built into the hillside on the Springhill Drive side. From the lakeside, the plain volumes of the ground floor and the transparency of the second floor window walls emphasized the location of the major spaces on this elevated level. A cantilevered terrace across the lakeside elevation also emphasized this functional arrangement. Four box-like rooms decorated with vertical metal siding, two each on the front and rear, extended from the main community space of the upper floor to overhang the ground floor. The front elevation of the building was nearly a mirror of the upper floor of the building's rear elevation except that it allowed direct pedestrian access from the street via a raised walkway supported by low, v-shaped concrete piers over a shallow pool. This dramatic modernist design has been compromised by a new flat roof, thick false cornices around the main block and four attached rooms, and the addition of thick concrete piers to both the street and lake sides. The pool and raised walkway to the street have been removed and replaced by a planting bed and side entrance. The original form is still discernible, but considerably altered and compromised by these vaguely classicizing changes. The structure is now the leasing center and office for the complex.

The two pool bathhouses also feature modernist forms and remain largely unaltered. Aquatic Center No. 1, located adjacent to the lake and Fountain Lodge, exhibited a more dramatic design. Thin vertical beams supported a flat roof with a raised center section. An open clerestory, filled only with wire mesh, made the roof appear to hover over the walls below. The window-less walls featured alternating recessed and projecting bays of vertically ribbed and smooth metal siding, now painted white or peach. The structure sits on a low brick foundation. Aquatic Center No. 2, close to the retail center, was a more subdued design. This three-part, flat-roof structure had a cream brick center pavilion with wide eaves at the front and rear. This main

section was flanked on either side by a window-less wing sheathed in vertically ribbed metal siding.

Additional community amenities were realized after the development of most of the residential units. A commercial office building designed by Cohen Haft was built on the east edge of the development. A city-run recreation center was the last significant addition to Springhill Lake in 1975, located near the Springhill Drive entrance to the complex. The initial plan also included a section of proposed high-rise apartment buildings that were never built. Instead, mid-rise apartments filled out section 9 at the southern end of the development on the corner of Edmonston Road and Breezewood Drive. Additional plans for another section of Springhill Lake were abandoned and developed as high-rise office buildings, known as Capital Office Park, after the construction of the Capital Beltway split the parcel off from the rest of Springhill Lake. These changes may explain the reduced number of units from the initial scheme.

IV. Landscape Architecture

Much of the allure of a garden apartment complex lies in its naturalistic setting. Mature trees offering shade and repose, verdant courtyards offering areas for children's play and pedestrian paths – all of these could enhance the attractiveness of a development. For T.D. Donovan and Associates, garden apartments were a staple of the landscape architecture business. The Silver Spring, Maryland, firm had developed a strong reputation as a full-service landscape architecture firm – doing conceptual site-planning, grade planning, and planting schemes – for individual homeowners, builders, and real estate development companies. Thurman Donovan, the firm's principal and a University of Maryland graduate, had previously collaborated with Cohen Haft on garden apartment project such as Wheaton House in Silver Spring, built 1961.⁴⁴ At Springhill Lake the site planning had been done by Cohen Haft as part of the architecture firm's contract with Community Builders. Southern Engineering, a firm owned by developer Albert Small, had developed engineering plans including drainage and sewers. Here the Donovan firm's responsibility was limited to developing a scheme for plantings throughout the phases of Springhill Lake, an ongoing effort lasting nearly a decade.⁴⁵

Donovan and Associates had a good deal of experience working with garden apartment complexes, as that form had become the preferred product for the expanding rental market in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. Garden apartments owed much of their popularity to the combination of their affordability and the suburban setting that they offered. Though the proliferation of garden apartments brought T.D. Donovan a great deal of business, these projects also offered the firm an ongoing design challenge. Economical design work was required to provide affordable housing for residents at a profit to the developers. Donovan's landscape architects could rarely inspire delight in the client or promote ecological sensitivity in the

⁴⁴ Richard Feola. T.D. Donovan & Associates. Interview by author. 23 June 2005. Gaithersburg, MD. Feola was an employee of T.D. Donovan & Associates and later became a principal in what is now Donovan, Feola, Balderson, & Associates, Inc.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

community, but repeatedly had to demonstrate that they could design comfortable and functional landscaping on a modest budget. Springhill Lake was no different.

Because of these budget constraints and the predominance of young families among the development's residents, the Donovan landscape architects emphasized the use of durable trees and shrubs to shade and set the scene in Springhill Lake. Soft wooded trees were omitted, as was the rhododendron; branches of the former would break in heavy wind while children could trample the latter. In addition, the firm anticipated that there would be no future budget to provide replacement plantings necessitated by wear and tear, accidents, or inclement weather. Given these constraints, the project required more than a little creativity to provide a landscape that was neither monotonous, repetitive, nor vulnerable to the elements.

For landscape architects, the nation's climate is divided into ten different zones that roughly separate the types of plants and trees that can survive there, known as "hardiness zones." These zones, delineated by the United States Department of Agriculture, are defined by gradations of low temperatures in the winter. The Washington, DC, area is located at the transition between two climate zones representing regions of minimum winter temperature. Zone 6b, representing winter lows of 0 to -5 degrees Fahrenheit, runs from southwest to northeast in a band roughly 150 miles wide, including Montgomery County and much of the District of Columbia. Zone 7a, including Prince George's County, runs parallel to Zone 6b, but is wider and warmer, representing winter lows of 0 to 5 degrees F. As a result, Donovan altered the palette for Springhill Lake further, excluding several trees and plants unsuitable for Zone 7a, like azaleas and rhododendrons, though they were popular landscaping shrubs in the region.⁴⁶

Thurman Donovan, the firm's principal and chief designer, advocated the arrangement of greenery using native species or native varieties where possible. In so doing, the Donovan landscape architects turned to a palette of trees and vegetation shaped by their previous experience designing for garden apartments. Crabapples (*Malus*), maple varieties (*Aceraceae*), pin oaks (*Quercus palustris*), and white pines (*Pinus strobes*) all figured prominently into the planting plan for Springhill Lake. Each was inexpensive and native to the region, meaning that they were suited to the climate as well as the soil. For shrubs and more human-scaled plantings, Donovan turned to glossy abelia (*Abelia grandiflora*), ileagnes, and varying hollies (*Ilex*) and crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia*) to add contour, variety, color, and fullness to the landscaping.

In addition to the plantings surrounding the apartment buildings, Community Builders charged the Donovan firm with designing the 9-hole, par-3 golf course for the development. The course was promoted early on as one of the many assets that gave Springhill Lake the quality of affordable luxury. Advertised in the *Washington Post* and *Evening Star*, the modest golf course was an attractive amenity for the complex, giving it a "country club" feeling. The course opened in June 1967 and encountered problems immediately. Excess water collected on the golf course due to the extensive excavation involved in Springhill Lake, the addition of impermeable surfaces – building roofs, asphalt roads, and even turf grass – creating water runoff, and the natural topography of the area. In order to eliminate the pools of water that formed and remained

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

during and after periods of rain, the builders added fill to the lower contours of the course. While this evened out the standing pools, the underlying drainage issue remained. The turf, trees, and shrubs of the course deteriorated with the unremitting moisture, and had to be replaced or removed.⁴⁷

The golf course proved to be too expensive to maintain due to the drainage issues and was eventually abandoned in favor of development of more units and roads. Community Realty – Springhill Lake’s property managers – deeded the course to the City of Greenbelt, freeing the management company from the burden of maintenance and operation. However, they retained the development rights to part of the course, which they later exercised in order to build another section of apartment units. Not having a complete golf course, the city devoted much of the remaining deeded land to an overpass crossing the Capital Beltway.⁴⁸ The golf course clubhouse is still extant near the community center.

VI. The Community

The groundbreaking for Springhill Lake was an auspicious occasion, covered in the Greenbelt and Washington newspapers. With city, state, and county officials in attendance, participants promoted the ambitious size of the development and the vision for the future of both Greenbelt and suburban Washington, DC. However, as each new phase was built and opened, problems emerged in the original planning and in the larger politics of how Springhill Lake residents related to pre-war Greenbelt. The physical separation of Springhill Lake from the rest of Greenbelt by the Capital Beltway was mirrored in political separation. After a few years of municipal inattentiveness, Springhill Lake residents organized in the 1970s to elect several city council members from the Springhill Lake community. In addition, issues like traffic and automobile inaccessibility motivated “Springhill Lakers” to get involved in the larger politics of Greenbelt.

The initial plan for Springhill Lake attempted to exploit the opening of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway in 1962 and the Capital Beltway (Interstate 495) in 1964. Improvements to roads such as Greenbelt Road (State Route 193), also facilitated traffic movement in this part of suburban Maryland. However despite alleviating problems of traffic congestion and offering economic development to the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, this road construction also caused problems within Greenbelt. The Springhill Lake complex was completely severed from New Deal-era Greenbelt by the Capital Beltway. There was one road that crossed the Beltway in Greenbelt after the opening of I-495, and residents had a difficult time getting across that bridge to go to old Greenbelt for work, entertainment, or shopping. In addition, traffic out of Springhill Lake into surrounding communities was difficult. Anticipating the Beltway that would run along the eastern edge of the community, Cohen Haft’s road plan only offered two exits from the residential development, each on its western edge.⁴⁹ Of the two roads, Gentry Drive (now Cherrywood Lane) was anticipated to have lower traffic and had not been constructed to

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jim Giese. Video - Springhill Lake Chataqua. 2001. Greenbelt Museum.

⁴⁹ Because of excavation for the development of Beltway Plaza, immediately south of Springhill Lake, grading was not sufficient for another exit from Breezewood Drive. Holtz, interview.

withstand the substantial traffic generated by the thousands Springhill Lake residents. It soon deteriorated beyond use. Traffic on Edmonston Road became terribly congested and a politically sensitive point in Greenbelt.

In addition, the city had not created any new polling sites for voting during local and national elections, provoking the ire of Springhill Lake residents. In a special registration, over 500 voters from the complex joined the voter rolls, validating citizen concerns that Springhill Lake held untapped political resources.⁵⁰ The city reluctantly created a new polling site on the city's west side, facilitating the political participation of Springhill Lake residents.

The combination of transportation issues, inequitable distribution of local resources, and the seeming marginalization of Springhill Lake energized the electorate to vote Joel Katz, a resident of the development, onto the council in 1969.⁵¹ Gil Weidenfeld, a Springhill Lake resident and law student at George Washington University, ran for city council in the 1971 election. He also made Springhill Lake issues a high priority, including the amelioration of traffic problems and the construction of a city-operated recreation center. Weidenfeld was elected and two years later became Mayor of Greenbelt, holding the longest mayoral tenure in the city's history.

Despite the difficulties of integrating Springhill Lake into the larger Greenbelt community, Community Realty made significant efforts to establish a sense of community within the development. The social director at Springhill Lake planned and coordinated activities that attracted many members of the community. Fountain Lodge, overlooking the man-made Springhill Lake, was located on one of the two main roads through the area, Springhill Drive. In addition to communal green space for informal recreation, swimming pools were located near two clusters of townhouses and two sets of tennis courts were located in sections 5 and 7 (the northwest and central areas of the development). The retail shopping center and the elementary school provided community gathering points within the plan of Springhill Lake.

Though the complex was initially intended as housing for young families, the growth of the University of Maryland led to an increase of the proportion of college students who rented at Springhill Lake.⁵² Many of these transient residents have become less engaged in community affairs. While many Springhill Lake residents remained active in Greenbelt civic life, the community as a whole became less cohesive and engaged. In 1985, Ted Lerner, a part owner of Springhill Lake, bought out his partners and his company began managing the complex. Lerner sold the development to AIMCO, the nation's largest owner of apartment units, in 1998.⁵³

VII. Alterations

Alterations to Springhill Lake have been limited. The Fountain Lodge has been given a vaguely classical facelift, but its Modernist form is still somewhat discernable. The most notable

⁵⁰ Video - Springhill Lake Chataqua. 2001. Greenbelt Museum; Mary Lou Williamson, ed., *Greenbelt: History of a New Town* (Virginia Beach: Donning Co., 1997), 196.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Knepper, 222.

⁵³ Cohen, interview.

modification to the landscape was the redevelopment of the par-3 golf course into a later section of apartment buildings. The street layout has remained unaltered since the inception of the development, and changes to the buildings have been minimal, including several interior renovations. Maintenance of landscaping has also been limited, resulting in a loss of plantings around buildings and sometimes giving them a bare aspect. All residential buildings still function in their original use. Springhill Lake Elementary, which opened in 1966, saw classroom additions in 1970, 1974, and 1998. The Springhill Lake Community Center, located on the west edge of the community, was completed in 1975.⁵⁴ The retail shopping center retains its original form.

VIII. Redevelopment

Subsequent to AIMCO's purchase of the Springhill Lake development in 1998, the company began pursuing a redevelopment plan for the complex. In 2003, AIMCO engaged the Maryland office of New Urbanist planning and architecture firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ), based in Miami, Florida. In August 2003, DPZ presented a conceptual design for redevelopment of Springhill Lake. The chief feature of this redesign and redevelopment is the reorientation of the complex to the nearby Metro station. The Metro is the Washington, DC, area's mass transit system, run by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, featuring a network of fixed-rail and bus lines. In 1993, after years of negotiation, planning, design and construction, the Greenbelt Metro Station opened approximately one-third of a mile northwest of Springhill Lake, completing the system's green line. However, because of existing roads, traffic patterns, and parking necessities, the station platform is nearly a mile from the nearest entrance to Springhill Lake. The new plan will include a pedestrian pathway more directly linking Springhill Lake to the Metro.

The 2003 DPZ plan also features markedly increased density. From approximately 2800 units, the plan calls for an increase to nearly 5000. Subsequent negotiation between AIMCO, DPZ, and the city of Greenbelt resulted in an even more robust plan of up to 5800 units. Consistent with New Urbanist practice of incorporating neo-traditional design, the DPZ plan calls for emulation of the residential forms of Old Greenbelt and the early-twentieth-century high-rise apartment buildings of Connecticut Avenue in Washington, DC.⁵⁵ Where the planning and construction of the Capital Beltway in the 1960s opened a market for the Springhill Lake development, the 1990s expansion of the Metro green line and the growth of the federal capital region have made higher density more economically feasible. Upon approval, development would proceed in phases stretching over approximately 10 years.

⁵⁴ Williamson, 223.

⁵⁵ "Springhill Lake." Project summary, 2003. <http://www.dpz.com>. Accessed 18 July 2005.

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Cohen, Jack. Principal Architect, Cohen Haft AIA and Associates. Interview by author. 8 June 2005. Washington, D.C..

Cohen was the founder and a principal of Cohen Haft AIA and Associates, which planned and designed Springhill Lake.

Cooley, Brenda. Resident. Interview by author. 6 July 2005. Greenbelt, MD.

Cooley was a resident of Springhill Lake for four years early in its history. She then moved into a private, Greenbelt single-family residential subdivision with her family.

Feola, Richard. Landscape Architect, T.D. Donovan and Associates. Interview by author. 23 June 2005. Gaithersburg, MD.

Feola was an employee at T.D. Donovan and Associates beginning in 1965 and worked on the planting scheme for several sections of Springhill Lake. He later became a partner in the firm.

Holtz, David. Cohen Haft. Interview by author. 23 July 2005. Potomac, MD.

Holtz was a partner in the Cohen Haft firm and was responsible for much of the land planning of the development.

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Notes on Sources

Greenbelt Museum. Greenbelt, MD.

The city-run Greenbelt Museum has, in addition to a restored Greenbelt row house, staff that researches and interprets the history of the city. Though maintaining an artifact or document collection is not a high priority for them, the staff are familiar with a wide range of Greenbelt-related sources.

Tugwell Room. Prince George's County Memorial Library. Greenbelt, MD.

This is the most extensive collection of materials available on the history of the city. Including archives of the city's newspaper, the *News Review*, (ne *Cooperator*); maps and photos of Greenbelt; clippings files from regional newspapers; and library of planning books and periodicals, the Tugwell room is a rich resource for future research.

National Archives II. College Park, MD.

Archives II houses the federal government's files on the Resettlement Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the Federal Works Agency, and the Federal Public Housing Administration, all of which were involved in the creation, expansion, or administration of Greenbelt until its sale in 1952. Any primary research on Old Greenbelt should feature NARA sources.

Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Upper Marlboro, MD.

The planning body for Prince George's County, the MNCPPC, does not actively maintain historical materials. Some recent planning materials are available through the public information service and the documents library. Some older material may be available in difficult to access formats like magnetic storage tapes.

Prince George's County Historical Society. Marietta, MD.

Home to a modest collection, this historical society has a few sources on Greenbelt and may help fill in gaps from the larger repositories, including older city and regional plans.

Washingtoniana Collection. Martin Luther King Memorial Library. Washington, DC.

This collection, focusing on the history of the District of Columbia, notably includes microfilm of the Washington *Evening Star*, and some clippings files on Greenbelt.

Library of Congress. Washington, DC.

Most published sources are available here, making it a promising resource of planning, architecture, and history articles and books.

Marylandia Collection / University of Maryland Libraries. University of Maryland. College Park, MD.

The University of Maryland Libraries are, like the Library of Congress, good sources for published books and periodicals. Their special collections devoted to

the state, the Marylandia Collection, on the College Park campus, has a modest amount of materials on Greenbelt, though little on development relevant to Springhill Lake.