

Smart growth vision and policies for Montgomery County's future



5 principles for a smart growth future

Montgomery County today boasts a record of success, but also faces new challenges and opportunities. Among the nation's wealthiest jurisdictions, Montgomery is home to a strong school system, well-paying jobs and technology clusters, remarkable diversity, growing urban centers, an expansive park system, and our nationally-heralded Agricultural Reserve.

Yet our county also faces challenges that we as a community and our elected leaders must address head-on: traffic, housing affordability, school crowding, and large vacancies in commercial office parks, which increase the burden on the residential tax base.

Montgomery County has long been an innovator when it comes to forward-thinking, progressive policy solutions. Among those innovative policy solutions are its inclusionary zoning program, parks and conservation, and transit initiatives.

With the county projected to grow by 230,000 residents over the next 25 years, progressive and innovative smart growth policies are a must-have for the county to handle that growth, generate the tax revenues necessary to maintain high-quality services, and thrive as a sustainable, equitable, and economically-competitive community.

We encourage Montgomery County elected officials and candidates to embrace five core smart growth principles:

1. **Increase the investment in transit-oriented development and support a full build-out of our county's Metro- and transit-accessible areas for a strong and competitive economy**
2. **Expand the county's housing supply to make sure there is housing that is affordable for all levels of the workforce**
3. **Invest in expanded transit options like bus rapid transit, the Purple Line, WMATA's bus Priority Corridor Network, and other strategies that lower vehicle miles travelled**
4. **Invest in bicycle and pedestrian transportation to complement our transit network and improve neighborhood access**
5. **Protect, preserve, and expand the county's parks, Agricultural Reserve, streams, and drinking water.**



PRINCIPLE 1

Increase Montgomery County's investment in transit-oriented development and support the full buildout of Metro- and transit-accessible areas for a strong and competitive economy.

The young, mobile workforce can live anywhere but increasingly show preference for vibrant and walkable urban neighborhoods with modern transit, ample recreational opportunities, and good schools. Companies are following suit -- locating in vibrant, transit-friendly places. Montgomery County should capitalize on this opportunity to link our urban centers with new transit, bicycle, pedestrian, and housing investments to draw new people and new companies and support a strong and competitive county economy for decades to come.

Demand is for transit-accessible workplaces

- A [2015 report](#) for the county found that Montgomery's most successful office clusters are in walkable, transit-accessible locations.
- [86% of new office development](#) in the Washington DC region is taking place within one-quarter mile of a Metro station, and region-wide, \$235 billion of property value sits within one-half mile of Metro.

- The under-construction Purple Line is projected to increase property values in Montgomery and Prince George's County [by \\$11 billion](#).
- The relocation of Montgomery County's largest private employer, Marriott, to Bethesda Metro station to attract and retain the next generation of employees, adds an exclamation point to the importance of facilitating transit-oriented development.

Transit-oriented development generates more tax revenue

Compact urban development generates more tax base per acre¹ than other types of development. Nearby Arlington County, Virginia generates [nearly 50% of its property tax](#) from its Metro station-adjacent development, helping to fund schools and other services countywide. The District of Columbia has attracted an enormous amount of new investment thanks to its urban fabric, its commitment to building close to Metro, and investment in transportation options including the DC Circulator, protected bike lanes, and Capital Bikeshare. Transit-oriented development in DC has generated big increases in tax revenues, allowing the city to modernize schools, replace aging infrastructure, and invest in affordable housing.

¹ See Joe Minocozzi, *The Smart Math of Mixed Use Development*, Planetizen, Jan 23, 2012, <https://www.planetizen.com/node/53922>; and Alanna Mckeeman, *Land Use, Municipal Revenue Impacts, and Land Consumption: A Study of Property Tax Revenue per Acre in Fairfax County, Virginia, 2012*, <http://www.baconsrebellion.com/archive/pdfs/2013/02/McKeeman.pdf>

Build-out of the first phase of Montgomery County's bus rapid transit (BRT) network along Veirs Mill Road, Route 29, and Rockville Pike (MD355) is expected to bring in [\\$871 million in net fiscal revenue](#) to the county. That's about four times the amount of the recent county tax increase, and enough funding to construct several new elementary or high schools.

Transit-oriented development generates the tax revenues the county needs to continue to provide excellent schools, a high level of services,² and to grow our economy. We need to continue investment in TOD and look toward a full build-out of Metro- and transit-accessible areas.

PRINCIPLE 2

Expand the county's housing supply to make sure there is housing that is affordable for all levels of the workforce.

Access to housing that is affordable for many levels of the workforce is critical to Montgomery County's ability to attract and retain residents. Linking affordable housing with jobs and transit can also be a key factor in helping people out of poverty, and reducing traffic and greenhouse gases.

We need affordable housing near transit and jobs

Housing should be located near transit -- rail or frequent bus -- wherever possible, because the cost of long auto commutes can quickly drive up the combined costs of housing and transportation. When located near transit

² We elected not to include a discussion and recommendation about school funding and policies in this paper since we are not the experts in the field. We are convinced however that transit-oriented development and the supportive policies we discuss here will strengthen the tax base and provide the funding the county needs to maintain its excellent schools.

in a walkable, mixed-use environment, new housing will generate fewer car trips and vehicle miles traveled per capita. Lack of affordable housing close to jobs means longer and more expensive commutes, adding to traffic on the roads. For those who cannot afford a car and lack nearby access to transit, lack of affordable, accessible housing can foreclose many job opportunities. For companies, it can mean positions left unfilled.

Housing close to transit is great for all ages

Transit-oriented housing is particularly attractive to young professionals, and increasingly to downsizing empty nesters. Young millennials want to be in walkable locations near transit that provide a short commute to work. Empty nesters want the option to ditch their cars and walking to entertainment, the grocery store, or the pharmacy. Both age groups can enjoy the freedom and community that urban locations provide without the every-day need for a car.

Opposing new housing will make it worse

Unfortunately, we have seen a great deal of pushback to more homes near transit. Yet, opposing housing near transit will only make our traffic worse, limit needed housing supply, and reduce the number of affordable units. Recent [research](#) in California has found that new market rate housing paired with a strong commitment in producing subsidized units is the most effective strategy to mitigate displacement. In a county where median gross rent climbed from \$914 in 2000 to \$1,656 in 2015, we have to create policies that help people live here.

Invest in expanded transit options like bus rapid transit, the Purple Line, WMATA's bus Priority Corridor Network, and other strategies that lower vehicle miles travelled and give county residents options.

Transit is critical to creating the mixed-use urban centers that are in demand by today's companies and employees, moving the growing number of county resident without increasing traffic, providing affordable access to jobs, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Build it and they will ride

We know that when we provide transit options and housing close to transit, residents will drive less. From 2002-2014, the county's population increased by 100,000 people but at the same time, driving in the county [actually decreased](#). During that time Montgomery, built new housing near Metro stations and many of those new residents chose a car-free lifestyle. One out of every six residents in the Takoma Park-Silver Spring area are carless, a rate [second in the region](#) only to DC.

More transit, less gridlock

Transit is essential for moving people, especially during peak commuting hours. Without it, our region would be truly gridlocked:

- The Purple Line is projected to daily take 17,000 cars off the road by 2040, and will offer a faster trip between Downtown Bethesda and Downtown Silver

Spring than by car or bus -- just nine minutes.

- WMATA has [estimated](#) that without regional transit, the region would have to add another 1000 lane miles of highway to handle the trips.
- We also know that 8-car Metro trains can handle 35,000 trips per hour – critical to taking vehicle trips off the roads.

A more equitable county

Access to transportation has emerged as the [single greatest indicator](#) of a person's odds of escaping poverty, making transportation and access to transit a civil rights issue. Poverty has been increasing in the county, and in areas like Burtonsville, households are [spending](#) 60% of their income on rent and transportation. They need access to affordable, efficient transit.

Transit and TOD are better for the environment

Transportation is now the [single greatest contributor](#) to greenhouse gas emissions in the US, reflecting progress in the energy sector and the continuing impact of our dependence on driving. Transit and transit-oriented development (plus green buildings) are important investments that Montgomery County can make to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

We need continued commitment

In 2013, the Montgomery County Council voted unanimously, with the support of the County Executive, to adopt an 81-mile bus rapid transit (BRT) network. Moreover, the county's steadfast support of the Purple Line has now made this light rail investment a reality! These are critical transit network additions to the county's existing Metrorail, Metrobus, and RideOn service. Plans are now advancing for the Route 29 BRT, interim express service on Route 355, and a BRT study,

as well as enhanced bus service along Veirs Mill Road.

These are all important commitments to a transit-oriented future, but we have to stay on track. We should make sure all these projects come to fruition and that we continue to look toward the future for more transit improvements.

PRINCIPLE 4
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Invest in bicycle and pedestrian facilities to complement our transit network and improve neighborhood access

We should not underestimate the health, transportation, and competitiveness benefits of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure for Montgomery County. The market demand we've seen for urban, transit-oriented places includes demand for places where it's safe and convenient to walk and bicycle to work, the store, schools, libraries, coffee shops, bars, and restaurants.

Demand is strong and growing for walk and bike-friendly places

- In White Flint, local residents are part of a campaign, called Pike District Pedestrians, for safer streets – “complete streets” with bicycle lanes, narrow travel lanes, good sidewalks, and safer crossings.
- In other parts of the county, including recent cases in Clarksburg, parents and advocates fight for “Safe Routes to School” so that their children can safely walk or bicycle, enhancing health and independence.
- Trails like the Capital Crescent Trail and rural roads, like those in the Agricultural Reserve, are a draw for recreational cycling. Many cyclists talk about shifting from bicycling in Loudoun County to bicycling in

the Agricultural Reserve since the more protected landscape has meant less traffic and better protected scenery.

There are health benefits to walk and bike-friendly places, too

Too few people get enough exercise each day, which contributes to our nation's obesity epidemic with many associated medical issues including heart disease and diabetes. Walking or bicycling for some or all trips each day is a way to work exercise into every day – without having to go to the gym.

Walking and bicycling costs less

A single vehicle lane can transport 2,000 people per hour in cars, but the same lane could move [14,000 people on bicycles](#) – as has been seen in major European cities, while also reducing the cost and space consumed by parking. WMATA studies [show](#) that 60% of Metro riders arrive by walking, and that the [most cost effective way](#) to provide access to Metro and increase ridership is through improving bicycle and pedestrian facilities within one-half mile of the stations, not by spending [\\$18,751 or more per space](#) on structured parking – particularly when 22% of Metro-provided parking in Montgomery already [goes unused](#).

Protect, preserve, and expand the county's parks, Agricultural Reserve, streams, and drinking water

At its core, smart growth is making responsible, forward-looking choices about where and how we grow. As much as that means walkable urban places, it also means preserving natural spaces in and around our bustling region. That is especially true in Montgomery County.

Montgomery County's 90,000-acre Agricultural Reserve and its public parks, including expansive stream valley parks, are its crown jewels. The Agricultural Reserve provides a range of benefits to the county. The reserve allows local farmers to continue to produce fresh, local fruit, vegetables, and cheese; raise livestock; and to supply the region's restaurants and farmers markets. It offers a scenic landscape for day tours, bicycling, hiking, horseback riding, and relaxation for our hardworking residents.

The Reserve safeguards the Piedmont Sole Source Aquifer, a natural underground reservoir that helps recharge streams and the Potomac ensuring we have a year-round drinking water supply. The Reserve helps to protect Seneca Reservoir, a backup emergency supply for when the Potomac flows are low, and protect the Potomac – which hosts water intakes that supply water to millions of people in our region.

Similarly, Montgomery County's stream valley parks provide a critical protective buffer to protect the water quality of our streams from urban and suburban runoff. These parks reduce sediment and pollutants flowing into the streams, and protect drinking water, while also helping to save native species from tiny invertebrates to [native brown trout](#), which depend on clean water.

Montgomery County provides residents an expansive park system ranging from the urban parks like Elm Street Park in Bethesda and Jessup Blair in Silver Spring, to Wheaton Regional Park in Wheaton. Parks are essential to quality of life and attracting and retaining residents – providing for active recreation and passive contemplation. Today, the county has [28.8 acres](#) of park for every resident.³

What doesn't make our smart growth priorities list? The controversial upper Potomac Bridge (Outer Beltway) and other major highway proposals like M-83

A new upper Potomac River bridge crossing runs contrary to all that Montgomery County has worked for in making the county among the most sustainable, equitable, and competitive in the country. Such a crossing would slice through the Agricultural Reserve, damaging farms, forests, parks, streams, and water supplies; divide neighborhoods; and bring noise and air pollution to homes and schools.

It would create pressure to develop in the Agricultural Reserve where the conservation protections are not complete, adding traffic and other infrastructure costs to the county. The principle of induced demand means a new crossing wouldn't relieve traffic at the American Legion Bridge, but instead bring new traffic, while diverting scarce resources from fixing the American Legion Bridge, and investing in Metro and other transit and local streets.

Similarly, the long proposed Midcounty Highway Extended, or M-83, if built would divide neighborhoods, harm wetlands, slice through parks and places of quiet retreat,

³ Calculated based on 36,000 acres of parkland in the county and 1,040,000 residents. See <http://www.montgomeryparks.org/montgomery-parks-and-montgomery-county-recreation-department-begin-2017-parks-recreation-and-open-space-pros-plan/>

while bringing more traffic. Better here would be bus rapid transit along 355, better local street connections, and not overdeveloping areas upcounty in places remote from jobs and transit.

The choice is ours

Montgomery County could choose the old approach used by so many suburban jurisdictions around the US of trying to build its way out of congestion while not worrying about the location of development or how auto-dependent it might be. Or it could choose a more sustainable path. It could keep with its record of forward-thinking policies that created the Agricultural Reserve, mixed-income housing, great parks, and walkable, transit-oriented development.

The sustainable path laid out in the discussion in this paper and in the policy recommendations below, will make the county more competitive, more affordable and accessible, more equitable, and more sustainable, leading the way in reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. We hope that this is the path our next elected officials will take.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended smart growth policies and priorities

Principle 1: Increase Montgomery County's investment in transit-oriented development and full build-out of Metro- and transit-accessible areas to support a strong and competitive economy.

1. Focus mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable development at Metro Stations, Purple Line stations, and in commercial corridors, particularly those with Bus Rapid Transit.
2. Ensure good design, active ground floors, public plazas, parks, and trail connections to other communities.
3. Expand green building requirements and incentives, with particular attention to the win-win of green buildings in walkable, transit-accessible locations.
4. Complete mixed-use town centers for suburban communities like Clarksburg.
5. Ensure good stormwater management tailored to urban centers – using low-impact green techniques where available space, as well as cisterns, and other means to store and slowly release stormwater.

Principle 2: Expand the county's housing supply to make sure there is housing affordable for all levels of the workforce

1. Use housing trust funds to buy and preserve existing market rate affordable housing, converting it to long-term committed affordable housing, and increasing the Housing Initiative Fund to \$75 million per year.
2. Ensure strong affordable housing standards, reaching beyond the current requirement of 12.5 percent for moderately priced dwelling units to 15 percent, and more with density bonuses.

3. Use incentives to preserve affordability of market rate affordable housing remaining in private hands.
 4. Prioritize affordable family housing near transit and ensure that transit-oriented communities with access to high frequency rail and bus transit include 15% percent affordable housing and evaluate increasing to 17.5% with density bonus. Target rents to 65% area median income.
 5. Accelerate the transformation of commercial corridors into mixed-use, mixed-income communities with medium density multi-family housing to expand housing supply and affordability.
 6. Convert older office buildings for which there is no longer a market, but have good transit service and the right floor-plate design, to mixed-income housing.
 7. Make housing a priority for public land redevelopment (not including parkland) near frequent transit service, setting aside 30% of new housing as affordable for residents who earn 65% of area median income or less, and setting aside a substantial share for 30% AMI and below. This requirement will be offset through discounted sale of the land and/or sufficient increases in height and floor area ratio (FAR).
- planned for Montrose Parkway East to transit, bike improvements.
 4. Partner with the State of Maryland to ensure Metro receives the dedicated funding it needs for full restoration to a world class system – closing the estimated \$6.2 billion capital funding gap and the \$1.3 billion operating gap over the next ten years.
 5. Address the bottleneck at the American Legion Bridge, including bus in dedicate HOV or HOT lanes in the near term, and a future Purple Line connection (Light rail or Metrorail) between the Red and Silver Lines.
 6. Expand MARC service to all-day, bi-directional, seven days per week service.
 7. In addition to MARC, make bus and HOV improvements to I-270 to most efficiently move people between Frederick and Montgomery counties.
 8. Invest in RideOn bus optimization program to ensure that RideOn is running as frequently and reliably as possible.
 9. Reduce vehicle miles travelled (VMT) per capita through travel demand management, fostering new housing growth near transit and enhancing existing transit services.

Principle 3: Invest in expanded transit options like bus rapid transit, the Purple Line, Priority Corridor Network, and other strategies that lower vehicle miles travelled

1. Build the countywide bus network – a combination of the 82-mile BRT network and priority corridor investments – with dedicated lanes, off-board fare collection, transit signal priority queue jumps and other enhancements for frequent, reliable bus service.
 2. Complete the Purple Line!
 3. Fund the \$4.6 million necessary to implement express bus service on Veirs Mill Rd, divert the \$140 million
10. Adopt VMT caps and travel demand management requirements in place of auto level-of-service standards in the Subdivision Staging Policy. Full adoption of Unified Mobility Plans in all “red zones” by 2020.
 11. End parking minimums and introduce parking maximums in “red areas” and phase out through new transportation demand management (TDM) requirements in the growth plan.
 12. Support county-wide ‘parking cash out bill’ that equalizes the transit and parking benefits.

Principle 4: Invest in bicycle and pedestrian investments to complement our transit network and improve neighborhood access

1. Ensure new suburban neighborhoods are connected to each other by local streets, or as a fall-back, by pedestrian and bicycle trails.
2. Build connected local street networks in all transit-oriented centers, suburban town centers, transforming commercial strip corridors, and office parks evolving to mixed-use.
3. Ensure all streets are “complete streets,” with protected bike lanes (preferred in order to maximize bicycling), good sidewalks, narrower vehicle lanes, safe crossings, and where appropriate, dedicated bus lanes.
4. Build safe routes to schools, to stores, and to transit from neighborhoods.
5. Prioritize bicycle and pedestrian connections to Metro, Purple Line, and BRT stations over costly parking.
6. Expand bikeshare and ensure membership is accessible and affordable for lower income residents.
7. Construct off road paved bike trails where feasible and protective of the environment -- these are excellent for recreational and family cycling in addition to serving weekday commuters.
8. Enforce road safety laws including those restricting distracted driving.

Principle 5: Protect, preserve, and expand the county’s parks, Agricultural Reserve, streams, and drinking water

1. Protect the Agricultural Reserve including seeking additional donations of permanent conservation easements or purchasing permanent easements, to ensure retention and preservation of agricultural and forest uses, along with watershed protection.
 - a. Protecting the Piedmont Sole Source Aquifer will be essential for ensuring adequate water supply during future droughts which could be more severe than in the past.
 - b. Do not build the upper Potomac Bridge and connecting highway(s) which will cut across farms and forests, open the Agricultural Reserve to development pressures, and harm water quality and water supplies.
2. Review stream conditions and expand stream buffers, adjust zoning, and reduce stormwater runoff to strengthen stream protection and protect water quality.
3. Survey parkland available per capita and within walking distance of every resident. Add parks to ensure everyone has one nearby and to meet the demand of a growing population.

