

November 18, 2020

Montgomery County Planning Board  
2425 Reedie Dr, 14th Floor  
Wheaton, MD 20902

**Item 7 - Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Support)**

**Testimony for November 19, 2020**

**Jane Lyons, Maryland Advocacy Manager**

Thank you, Chair Anderson and Planning Commissioners. My name is Jane Lyons and I'm testifying on behalf of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, the leading organization advocating for walkable, inclusive, transit-oriented communities as the most sustainable and equitable way for the DC region to grow and provide opportunities for all.

We strongly support the draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050, although we believe it can be made even better. Generally, Thrive creates a vision for a county that is more affordable, walkable, prosperous, resilient, and racially and economically integrated, and recognizes that the best way to achieve that vision is through embracing the principles of inclusive smart growth, urbanism, and equitable transit-oriented development.

We would like to highlight the following five points as our major recommendations for the draft:

**1. Rethink single family zoning, not just around transit:** We need to allow and encourage a range of housing types in neighborhoods near transit. However, we should not limit zoning reform to these areas. This has the potential to spark opposition to new transit, if single family homeowners know that new transit goes hand in hand with zoning reform. This also has the potential to leave out areas of the county that are predominantly white and high income — the kinds of places that are still exclusive today due to racist policies of the past, which will not be undone without intentional planning otherwise. While our priority for growth should be near high-capacity transit, we must include other measures to diversify housing options in other neighborhoods while also extending transit.

From the beginning, Euclidean zoning laws have perpetuated racial and economic segregation by separating housing of different types and thus different price points. This was further exacerbated by redlining and other racist lending practices, as well as restrictive covenants, but exclusively allowing single-family homes in certain neighborhoods still keeps communities exclusive today. Where you live affects your job prospects, education, health outcomes, access to healthy food, and so much more — it shouldn't. At the same time, we know from examples around our region that neighborhoods with a great diversity of housing types, and with a diversity of people and activity, are today some of the most in demand and successful today.

**2. Provide a map to guide future growth:** A map similar to the map from the 1993 general plan refinement will help residents and decision makers understand where growth should be directed, identifying the centers and web of corridors discussed in Thrive. We also urge you to bring MARC stations into the discussion about where to focus growth.

**3. Reduce redundancies:** This is a document that reads as if it were written by committee, and it was. This includes redundancies in arguments that could be improved by reorganization and inconsistencies in writing's voice. Tightening up language will also open up space to include more data visualizations that support the arguments made. Additionally, many goals and policies are almost repeated word-for-word in different chapters. Because so many of the policies and actions are interconnected, we suggest moving these to their own appendix that is not constrained by the plan's chapters.

**4. Emphasize racial justice:** We commend including the section about the history of redlining and other discriminatory housing practices. However, we believe the plan can better tell the story of segregation, identifying both past mistakes and successes so that we can better identify solutions for the future. Therefore, we also believe the goal of integration could be woven into the plan's vision and goals more.

**5. Create implementation metrics now:** We should not wait until two years have passed after the completion of Thrive to establish metrics for measuring the plan's success. Our itemized comments below offer recommendations for high-level metrics.

Further, we recommend the following itemized changes:

### **1. Preface**

- a. We urge you to remove the phrase "stable residential neighborhoods." This language goes against one of the main arguments of the plan — that neighborhoods near transit need to evolve to include a range of housing types. By qualifying certain neighborhoods as "residential," this implies that urban hubs are not residential areas.
- b. We urge you to change "we need to accommodate the projected new population growth of 200,000 people over the next 30 years" to "we need to welcome at least 200,000 people over the next 30 years." Montgomery needs to welcome as many new residents as possible near transit and jobs in order to jumpstart the economy and meet climate goals. Montgomery is uniquely positioned to help meet state and regional climate goals given its existing transit infrastructure, job centers, and proximity to DC. Given our values of diversity and inclusion, Montgomery is also well positioned to be a national leader in sustainable growth that is equitable, breaking down traditional barriers to racial and economic integration.

### **2. Introduction:** No comments

### **3. Planning Context**

- a. Page 13, Trend 1. It should be explained why the first identified trend (adding 200,000 residents over the next 25-30 years) is happening, as well as make the argument for why it is good for our economy and climate goals that this trend is happening in Montgomery County.
- b. Page 23, Trend 12. It would be helpful to identify which climate change impacts Montgomery County is projected to be the most at-risk for.
- c. Additional planning contexts and challenges should include: 1) Montgomery County's racial and economic segregation and 2) Montgomery County's greenhouse gas emissions by sector, and how both of these trends have changed over time.

### **4. A Plan to Thrive**

- a. Page 32. "The goal is to create Complete Communities that are diverse and can provide most essential services within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or drive." We urge you to remove driving from this definition of 15-minute living. The vast majority of county residents already live a 15-minute drive from their daily needs, rendering the Complete Communities a meaningless argument for embracing a more compact, mixed use, sustainable built environment. Moreover, the worldwide concept of the 15-minute neighborhood is specifically focused on walking and biking.
- b. Page 32-34. In general, the concept of Complete Communities needs more work. There is no standard definition and no explanation of how 15-minute living will be different in urban, suburban, and rural communities. There are certain critical amenities that are not mentioned, such as healthy food. We also believe it should be explicitly stated that no community is "complete" unless it is racially and economically diverse. There should be no enclaves of whiteness, wealth, or poverty in Montgomery County.
- c. Page 37. "This additional density will require change in existing single-family neighborhoods through the introduction of 'missing middle' housing, such as duplexes, triplexes, townhouses, live-work units and small multi-family structures in areas where a moderate degree of intensification is appropriate." In addition to small multi-family structures, this section should also identify mid-rise multi-family structures as desirable along major transit corridors and high-capacity transit centers.
- d. Page 43, Racial Justice and Equity. This section should make the case that racial and economic integration is the best way to promote social mobility, achieve equitable outcomes, and shared prosperity.
- e. Page 45, Affordable. We urge you to change "housing closer to workplaces" to "housing closer to job centers, amenities, and other destinations."
- f. Page 46, Safe. This section should establish the vision that safety is enjoyed more equally by all; whereas currently, safety is experienced unequally by people of color, women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and people with non-conforming gender identities or expressions.

- g. Page 46, Inclusive. “Residents have a say in how their neighborhoods look and feel.” While this is true, residents having the loudest voice in how their neighborhoods look and feel is what led to segregation and our housing shortage. Thrive needs to grapple with how to take residents’ concerns into consideration while also ensuring broader public involvement and pursuing the greater public good.
- h. Page 46, Resilient. “Our actions reduce greenhouse gas emissions and air and water pollution.” We suggest this be changed to read: “Our action eliminated greenhouse gas emissions and minimized air and water pollution.”
- i. Page 46, Competitive. “We embrace the cultural, racial/ethnic, and linguistic diversity of our community as a competitive advantage, particularly in attracting employers recruiting staff who want to live and work in a diverse community.” While diversity is certainly a strength, it should not be the primary edge to our economic competitiveness.
- j. Page 47. “We will need to make tradeoffs that may not be easy.” We urge you not to use language posing change as requiring tradeoffs. It is possible to make changes that grow the pie and result in a higher quality of life for all.

**5. Plan Elements:** No comments

**6. Complete Communities**

- a. Page 53, Policy 1.1.1. “Every resident should have the opportunity to live, work, play, exercise, shop, learn, and make up of public amenities and services within a 15-minute walk or bike ride.” This is contrary to the statement made about Complete Communities on page 32, which included driving. We prefer this definition.
- b. Page 54, Policy 1.1.3. In addition to walking and bicycling, buses should also be considered the highest priority modes of transportation.
- c. Page 54, Policy 1.1.5. Additional actions are required to ensure the co-location of essential services.

**7. Connectedness**

- a. We encourage you to include goals, policies, and actions to actively pursue creating more public spaces, especially public meeting and event spaces. Additionally, we urge you to include actions for creating shared identity through signage, wayfinding, and other public communications, including to reflect the diversity of languages spoken in Montgomery County.

**8. Diverse Economies**

- a. This chapter needs more about protecting and encouraging small businesses, as well as allowing and supporting neighborhood retail.
- b. Page 65. “...increasing traffic congestion negatively affect economic activity.” We urge you to change this to “...high travel times negatively affect economic activity.” Traffic congestion does not necessarily correspond with high travel times, given destinations are located in relatively close proximity. In fact, traffic congestion in

walkable urban places is actually a reflection of a successful, vibrant urban economy.

- c. Page 66, Diversity. “Montgomery County already has several competitive industries such as biotechnology and the federal government, but it must cultivate new ones to ensure that its portfolio remains competitive.” We disagree with this approach to economic development. The county’s energy is better spent cultivating existing major industries and closely related industries, rather than trying to cultivate new industries. The positive spillover effect of having several large successful industries will result in a more diversified economy.
- d. Page 66-67, Connectedness. This section should make the argument that urbanism and a high-quality transportation system results in improved “connectedness” or agglomeration economies.

#### **9. Safe and Efficient Travel**

- a. This chapter still does not mention demand management policies, promoting pilot projects, or the importance of frequent transit — all of which are critical to achieve the outlined vision.
- b. Page 74. “We simply cannot be equitable, address climate change, and support a strong economy by building more roads.” We suggest replacing “roads” with “highways.” Building new roads should be permissible in cases where they improve connectivity of street grids.
- c. Page 76, Action 4.1.4.a. “Provide dedicated transit lanes as part of the replacements of the American Legion Bridge.” In accordance with the County Council’s most recent position, this action should also include engineering the new American Legion Bridge to be able to accommodate heavy rail.

#### **10. Affordability and Attainability**

- a. This chapter would generally benefit from stronger “both/and” messaging around market rate and subsidized housing, rather than “either/or.” Subsidized housing is incredibly important in order to make sure Montgomery’s neighborhoods are affordable for households of all incomes, including the lowest income households. Montgomery County cannot just keep doing what it has been doing — considering housing a right means that we need to think more boldly and go beyond existing programs.
- b. Page 83-84, Issues and Challenges. Montgomery needs to start thinking about housing supply and demand in submarkets rather than as Montgomery as a whole. An oversupply of moderately priced housing in Damascus doesn’t solve housing demand in Silver Spring.
- c. Page 84-85, Vision. We urge you to more explicitly include racial and economic integration.
- d. Page 85-86, Build More Housing, of More Types, in More Ways. “In order to build more housing, community-led support for and championing of new housing development is critical.” Community support is important for all issues addressed in Thrive. What should be highlighted is how many community members use the

current planning process to block new housing or zoning changes. How can the county lead a paradigm shift on this?

- e. Page 86, Policy 5.1.1. “Encourage the production of a broad variety of housing types to achieve attainable price ranges.” The actions associated with this policy should not only address breaking down zoning barriers, but also other land use regulations that make middle housing types difficult to build.
- f. Page 86, Action 5.1.1.a. We urge you to include “small apartment buildings,” in addition to “duplexes, triplexes, and quadruplexes.”
- g. Page 89, Goal 5.3. “Continue to promote the policy of mixed-income housing development through the implementation of county policies, programs, regulations, and other tools and incentives.” This goal’s associated policies and actions are too reliant on the moderately priced dwelling unit (MPDU) program. Montgomery County needs a strategic, targeted approach to intentionally create mixed-income neighborhoods, of which the MPDU program should only be one part.
- h. Page 90, Goal 5.5. “Minimize displacement of people, especially among low-income residents, people of color, people with disabilities and older adults.” This goal should include rent stabilization and just cause eviction in the associated policies and actions.
- i. Page 93, Goal 5.6. “Expand housing access through elimination of fair housing barriers and enforcement of fair housing laws to protect residents from discrimination.” This goal should include a right to legal counsel for people facing eviction in the associated policies and actions.

## **11. Healthy and Sustainable Environment**

- a. We would like to see more integration with the county’s upcoming Climate Action and Resilience Plan; more about creating capacity in the electric grid and green buildings; strategies to attack food deserts; siting renewable energy with parking lots, and commercial and industrial rooftops preferred; and planting more street trees to build the urban canopy.
- b. Page 101, Goal 6.4. “Provide all residents with safe, convenient access to affordable, healthy food.” Creating mixed-income communities should be considered a key strategy for eliminating food deserts and providing access to healthy foods.

## **12. Diverse and Adaptable Growth**

- a. This chapter, placed toward the end of the plan, doesn’t add much that hasn’t already been said. We believe it would be most beneficial for this section to focus on the policies that support diverse and adaptable growth — including the county’s tax regime, review/permitting processes, and adequate public facilities ordinance — in addition to the Agricultural Reserve. Moreover, most of this chapter is focused on the Agricultural Reserve without making a strong argument about how it should be used in the future. How can the Agriculture Reserve best help us meet our environmental, health, land use, economic, and food production goals, and balance those interests?

### **13. Culture and Design**

- a. Page 117, Policy 8.2.1. “Make design excellence a priority, even when cost saving measures are considered.” We strongly disagree with this prioritization of values. Affordability and sustainability should be prioritized before subjective design considerations.
- b. Page 123, Action 8.5.6.c. “Amend the Zoning Ordinance to make public art a prerequisite of receiving incentive density within the Commercial/Residential and Employment Zones.” Density, given its core importance in achieving the county’s vision of future growth, should not be held as a bargaining chip for public art.

### **14. Implementation**

- a. Page 126-128, Tools to Implement the General Plan. The county’s adequate public facilities ordinance, the Growth and Infrastructure Policy, should be listed here.
- b. Page 129-130, Performance Measures. “The Plan recommends developing baseline performance measures as a Montgomery Planning work program item within two years of Plan adoption.” We strongly disagree with this. What gets measured gets done, and Montgomery County cannot wait for two years to get started on Thrive’s implementation. Therefore, we encourage you to create baseline performance measures in the next draft of Thrive. In our testimony on the draft vision, goals, policies, and actions, we recommended emphasizing the following when selecting metrics:
  - i. life outcomes of residents — the Montgomery of 2050 should not be a place where income, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or zip code are determinative of health, wealth, or educational outcomes;
  - ii. vehicle miles traveled and average residential distance from high-frequency transit;
  - iii. greenhouse gas and carbon emissions, by sector; and
  - iv. integration — whether our neighborhoods and communities include residents of different incomes, races, ethnicities, ages, etc.

Thank you for your consideration.