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Middle Class and Priced Out of Montgomery

When a family earning \$100,000 a year can't afford to live in Montgomery County, something is wrong.

In the White Oak area of Silver Spring, I recently drove past a development of new, three-bedroom townhouses. Three months ago, when these townhouses first went on the market, the asking price was a whopping \$480,000; now it is \$560,000.

A few families are lucky enough to be eligible for one of the project's "affordable" units, which have a price tied to the salary of a starting teacher. Everyone else, though, is out of luck, including families that may earn just a little more than \$55,000, the eligibility cutoff for the county's affordable units.

Montgomery's teachers, police officers, firefighters and bus drivers, along with thousands of private-sector employees, need to have a realistic chance to live in the county where they work. Otherwise, they will be forced to live elsewhere.

The median price of a new, single-family detached home in Montgomery County is now more than \$500,000; the median price for an older home is close to \$400,000. The Montgomery County Council needs to roll up its collective sleeves and work on this problem.

In the coming months the council plans to tackle revisions to its moderately priced dwelling unit program, which requires builders to include affordable units along with their market-rate offerings. But the council also must expand its efforts to support housing for middle-class families. Its plan should:

- Use county-owned land. The cost of land in Montgomery is a huge factor in housing prices. That's why the county has identified 10 county-owned proper-

ties where it may be possible to work with private and nonprofit builders to develop new housing costing less than \$300,000.

- Maximize affordable units in high-rise, down-county areas and around Metro stations by allowing modest flexibility in height and open-space restrictions. Smart-growth areas should not be only for luxury condos and apartments.

- Make it easier for homeowners to rent small apartments in their homes, such as in-law suites, while balancing community concerns about parking and schools. This not only would provide housing for working people, it would in many cases give older residents the additional income they need to afford to stay in their own homes.

- Hold the federal government to its financial commitment. The federal government has changed the Housing Choice Voucher Program, giving the county even less money to help families keep a roof over their heads.

- Bolster rental assistance for working families. The county's waiting list for a helping hand has tripled since January. The county needs to do more.

Absent a can-do agenda on affordable housing, Montgomery County soon will be hanging out signs that read "No Middle- and Lower-Income People Need Apply." We can't afford to let that happen.

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