

Robert E. Oshel

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Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 4th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Members of the County Council:

I call on the County Council to reject the M-NCPPC's proposed "Thrive Montgomery 2050" plan for several reasons discussed below.

Adoption and Implementation of the Plan Would Betray the Trust of Montgomery County Residents

This plan, if implemented by the County Council, would be a betrayal of the trust of hundreds of thousands of Montgomery County homeowners who purchased their homes with the understanding that County law guaranteed that the population density of their neighborhoods would remain approximately the same. Single family homeowners have been and are the backbone of Montgomery County. Without the people who moved to Montgomery County for single family homes in a suburban environment as the county developed, the County would not be what it is today. When residents bought their homes, they bought more than just a particular building, they bought a home in a neighborhood with an acceptable or desirable population density. In my case this meant ten homes on my block with ten families and similar numbers of residents on surrounding blocks. If the "Thrive" plan is adopted, instead of having nine families in my block, there could be as many as 180 families because of the ability of speculators or developers to replace single family homes with duplexes, triplexes, quads, or even small apartment buildings of up to 20 units .

Adoption of the "Thrive" plan allowing quads as a matter of right in single family zones could result in more than twice as many housing units per acre in R-60 single family zones than are allowed in R-12.5 townhouse zones. When they bought their homes, the residents of single family neighborhoods surely did not expect that their neighborhood could become more than twice as densely populated as typical townhouse developments. Allowing this density increase would amount to "bait and switch" by the Montgomery County government.

For 93 years, since 1928, Montgomery County residents have relied on the zoning code and

trusted the Montgomery County Government to prevent over-development of their quiet residential neighborhoods. I would not have moved to Montgomery County and bought a home here if I had thought that the homes next to mine could at any time be replaced with more dense housing or even small apartment buildings, and I certainly would not further invest in improving my home, as I have done in the past, if I thought that could happen. Why invest in a home and neighborhood if the essential characteristics of the built environment can be fundamentally changed and population densities increased at any time?

Advocates for additional density make the bogus claim that it is needed for equity or racial justice. This is nonsense. My block in Silver Spring has had Black homeowners since 1968, before I moved here. The two Black families who moved to my block that year are still here. They must have found the neighborhood affordable and acceptable. As neighborhood historian I know that other Black families have also lived in the neighborhood since 1968 or earlier. It should also be noted that when Councilmember Jawando met with our Civic Association virtually to discuss his zoning proposal to increase density in single family neighborhoods near Metro stations, Black neighbors were some of the most vocal opponents of his proposal.

Adoption and Implementation of the Plan Would Reduce the Quality of Life of Montgomery County Residents

A fundamental purpose of government is to enhance the quality of life of the people. Adoption and implementation of the “Thrive” plan would lower the quality of life of residents, not enhance it. The proposed increase in population density, with accompanying increases in traffic and noise, further crowding of already crowded schools, and additional demands on already overburdened infrastructure, would fundamentally change the elements that make my neighborhood and other neighborhoods desirable.

Proponents say the increased density can come through replacement housing that looks similar to existing single family homes. There is no guarantee, however, that new buildings will be compatible with existing homes, but even if there was, that is not the point. There is no way that having twice as many, three times as many, four times as many, or even more new residents would not reduce the quality of life of everyone. More residents inevitably means more noise, more traffic, more parking issues, more trash, more flooding of our already overwhelmed storm sewers, more crowding in schools, and more burden on other infrastructure.

The “Thrive” Plan is Out of Touch With the Reality of What People Want

It is well known that the prices of single family homes has been increasing greatly since the beginning of the pandemic, while prices of more dense housing arrangements and rents have been decreasing. This makes it obvious that there is a shortage of single family homes and an abundance of more dense units in relation to what people want and are willing to spend their money on. Yet the planners of the M-NCPPC proposed to reduce the supply of single family homes -- which are in demand -- by replacing them with duplexes, triplexes, quads, and small apartment units -- which are not in demand. The pretty pictures and platitudes of the “Thrive” plan will not change how people actually want to live. Most Montgomery County residents

clearly prefer lower density single family homes to more dense arrangements. If Montgomery County is to continue to be a place where people want to live and work, the County needs to increase the affordability of single family homes, not reduce their supply. Apartment living or even duplexes and triplexes have never been the long term “American Dream,” and the “Thrive” plan cannot make it so.

The Planning Process has been Flawed

Rushing preparation and potential adoption of a plan for the next 30 years during a pandemic which has limited traditional public participation makes no sense. What is the hurry, other than to push something through while people are distracted and participation is difficult by anyone other than the lobbyists and the developer interests paying them to promote the plan? A plan for the next 30 years should not be developed and adopted during a pandemic which has had the most severe impact on the functioning of society of any event in over 100 years. There is absolutely no crucial event or deadline which demands that a 30 year plan be adopted in these circumstances. The fundamental changes proposed in this plan should not be rammed through.

“Thrive” is Hype, Not Good Planning -- The Plan Should Be Rejected

Even the plan’s name, “Thrive,” makes the plan suspect. Rather than select a descriptive name for the plan like “Wedges and Corridors,” the planners chose a name that hypes the plan. Who wouldn't want to “thrive”? But whether the plan is good for Montgomery County depends on the validity of its content, not its name. I believe that the so-called “Thrive” plan is actually a “Dive” plan that will harm the county and its residents. The County Council should reject it.

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