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Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Ave, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Support)

Testimony for June 17, 2021

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Thank you, Council President Hucker and councilmembers, for the opportunity to comment on the county's new general plan, Thrive Montgomery 2050. Please accept this testimony 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 Planning Board's draft of Thrive 2050, although we urge you to further strengthen certain areas, as detailed below. Thrive creates a vital blueprint 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.

Thrive 2050 provides a framework for Montgomery County's planning to respond to the times and use growth as a tool to meet our collective goals and improve everyone's quality of life. This is an opportunity to jumpstart our economy; to allow more people to decrease their carbon footprints by expanding housing opportunities in our many walkable, amenity-rich neighborhoods; to respond to changing demographics by making it easier for older people to age-in-place and households to downsize; and to undo our entrenched racial and economic segregation.

The fingerprints of the original *On Wedges & Corridors* plan can be seen in every land use, transportation, and housing decision in Montgomery County since 1969, for better or worse. For example, the fact that US-29 was not included as a growth corridor and no east-west corridors were selected as growth corridors exacerbated our stark east-west divide.

Similarly, the decisions you will make in this document will have generational implications for how we live, work, and play. The world in 2050 will be very different no matter what — the question is whether we allow our communities to evolve in order to preserve what we value the most: diversity, sustainability, affordability, prosperity, equity, and social mobility.

We present the following recommendations for your consideration:

General Comments

- **Prioritize eliminating racial and economic segregation**

Montgomery County is incredibly diverse, but its communities are largely segregated by race and income. We are excited by the existing language in support of breaking down invisible walls between different areas of the county, but this could be an even more explicit goal that is prioritized throughout the document.

- **Integrate with the county's Climate Action Plan**

The county's draft Climate Action Plan, although it does not discuss land use, identifies the climate impacts that put Montgomery County at the highest risk, including extreme heat, drought, extreme precipitation, and high winds. Thrive's land use policies are critical to addressing climate change, and in addition Thrive should further emphasize the importance of:

- Tree canopy expansion and other heat reduction tactics;
- Community networks to check on the elderly and other vulnerable residents during heat waves and other extreme weather events;
- Stormwater management and flood protection;
- Improving and expanding public transit options; and
- Additional climate resilience in the county's buildings, transportation system, utilities, agricultural land, parks, wetlands, and trees.

1- Introduction

- **Explain why we're anticipating growth**

Most of this plan is predicated on the fact that Montgomery County is projected to add approximately 200,000 people over the next 30 years. When hearing this, many residents ask why we have to accommodate such growth and cannot simply keep the population as-is. Thrive must have a stronger explanation as to why this growth is anticipated and why growth in walkable, transit-oriented communities is an opportunity to jumpstart the county's economy and reduce regional greenhouse gas emissions.

2 - Compact Growth

- **Focus primarily on centers, as well as corridors**

We are excited by the new attention given to corridor-focused growth, especially previously disinvested corridors. However, the primary emphasis should continue to be

on activity centers. Strong urban centers with clustered destinations are what make urban geometry work. To this end, we recommend the following line edits:

- Page 32: “Promote and prioritize public investments in infrastructure in activity centers and along growth corridors...”
- Page 32: “Establish high-quality transit infrastructure in activity centers and along growth corridors...”
- Page 32: “Leverage federal, state and local incentive programs, publicly owned land and land investment opportunities for ~~corridor~~ infill development.”
- Page 39: “Amount of infill development/redevelopment in activity centers and along major corridors”
- Page 39: “Proportion of new population, employment and housing within a mile (or half-mile) of activity centers and priority corridors”
- Page 39: “Public and private investment in infrastructure, services, and amenities in activity centers and along corridors...”

- **Refine the growth diagram**

Images are powerful, so we are glad to see Thrive’s land use vision mapped. Generally, we believe the approach used by the Planning Board is sufficient, with some minor revisions:

- The growth corridors should be listed in the map’s key.
- Change the name of the lightest blue area from “Corridor-Focused Growth” to “Infill Growth.”
- We are concerned about listing VIVA White Oak / FDA as a large activity center, given the absence of high-capacity transit access. All other large activity centers are supported by a Metrorail station.
- We were surprised not to see Takoma Park listed as an activity center. Given Takoma Park’s high quality transit infrastructure and central location next to Washington, DC, Takoma Park should be listed as a large activity center.
- Similarly, Long Branch, Takoma-Langlely Crossroads, Lyttonsville, and the Connecticut Avenue Purple Line station area should all be listed as medium activity centers, given their proximity to jobs, transit, and amenities.

- **Explain large, medium, smaller activity centers and villages and neighborhood centers.**

Certain areas of the county are identified as either large, medium, smaller activity centers or villages and neighborhood centers without any explanation as to what these different development scales are intended to be. Broad examples, including pictures, of these categorizations will be critical for future master planning.

- **Strengthen the Agricultural Reserve for the 21st century**

The Agricultural Reserve can and should be a source of local food; a place for sustainable recreation; and a means to protect forests, natural areas, and watersheds. The reserve should continue to serve our environmental interests, while benefiting the landowners and community members at-large. Thrive should provide a more clear vision for how to accomplish this.

3 - Complete Communities

- **Defining complete communities**

A complete community is defined broadly in this draft as having a mix of housing, retail, amenities, and services. While this is true in the broadest sense, we believe it would be useful for future planning to further describe uses that are especially important, such as a diversity of housing price points, grocery stores, health care, and green space. No community should be considered “complete” if it is unattainable for those with low or moderate incomes to live there.

4 - Design, Arts, and Culture

No comments.

5 - Transportation and Communication Networks

- **Mention parking minimums**

Eliminating parking minimums in downtowns, town centers, rail and BRT corridors and adjacent communities is mentioned on page 10 of the draft actions document, but should also be mentioned on page 80 of the draft plan. We recommend: “Manage parking efficiently by charging market rates and reducing the supply of public and private parking, including by eliminating parking minimums for new development projects.”

- **Prioritize frequent, reliable transit in capital budgets, as well as local street connections**

The draft states on page 84 that the addition of local street connections should be a top priority in both capital budgets and development review. If this priority is going to be explicitly mentioned, then funding frequent, reliable transit service in both the capital and operating budget should be mentioned as well. We must also ensure that new local street connections are complete streets and don’t further entrench our reliance on private vehicles.

- **Plan for electric cars**

There is no discussion of the role of electric vehicles in either the draft plan or draft actions plan. Although shifting to electric vehicles will not change land use or the need to reduce and shorten vehicle trips, we must transition to EVs to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, which will require infrastructure upgrades and investments, like charging infrastructure for multi-family housing, that should be incorporated into Thrive.

- **Refine measures of success:**

We recommend adding the following metrics: jobs accessible by transit (up), amenities accessible by transit (up), average commute times (down), average transit commute time (down), average transit trip time (down), and difference between average car commute/trip time and average transit commute/trip time (down).

6 - Affordable and Attainable Housing

- **Create a stronger vision for economically and racially diverse neighborhoods**

While this chapter does discuss this goal, we believe it needs to be more of a priority. If economically and racially diverse neighborhoods were a primary goal, the subsequent policies would more deeply discuss targeting higher income areas with more housing, including subsidized housing. Furthermore, Thrive 2050 should recommit the county to subsidized housing being mixed income. This was not always the case in the affordable housing industry and exacerbated segregation.

- **Amplify the need for housing those with the lowest incomes**

The chapter is called “Affordable & Attainable Housing: More of Everything,” but spends most of the text explaining the need for more market rate housing and diverse housing types. While this is correct and we are grateful for this focus, we would like to see the chapter go into more detail about the housing needs of those who the market is very likely to still leave cost burdened. To serve those of the lowest incomes, the county will need to beef up its existing affordable housing programs and think more boldly and creatively about new programs.

- **Don’t leave out tenant rights**

Earlier drafts of Thrive 2050 had strong language declaring that housing is a human right — that language has since been deleted. We urge you to add it back in, and the ensuing importance of strong tenant rights and protections. The county must ensure that all households have safe, healthy housing that meets their needs and are not left behind by land use changes that result in higher property values and increased rents.

- **Think carefully about incentives**

We support public incentives for desirable, transit-oriented development and subsidized, income-restricted housing. However, financial incentives, especially for market-rate development, should be carefully considered. Thus, we recommend the following edit on page 99: “Provide ~~financial incentives such as Payment in Lieu of Taxes~~ to boost housing production for market rate and affordable housing, especially near transit and in Complete Communities.” Non-financial incentives can include adjustments in the development approval process.

7 - Parks and Recreation

- **Consider the natural environment beyond parks**

The original working draft included a “Healthy and Sustainable Environment” chapter that discussed parks, but also a range of other environmental topics. In the final Planning Board draft, those issues were integrated into some of the other chapters, but others were left out or not given due attention. We believe this current draft chapter could be adapted to re-incorporate some of those important ideas. The county needs a vision for the natural environment outside of parks that will be preserved through the application of urbanism, as detailed in the compact growth chapter.

Thinking beyond parks would also allow for the inclusion of stronger climate resilience, mitigation, and adaptation policies, such as related to renewable energy siting, stormwater management, heat mitigation, energy efficient buildings, and forest protection, as well as providing a 21st century vision for the Agricultural Reserve.

8 - Conclusion

- **Commit to evaluating the plan’s progress regularly**

We cannot wait thirty years to determine whether or not the county is successful in Thrive’s goals. Each chapter has identified metrics to measure progress, and those should be used to provide a regular report to the county’s leaders and decision makers. The working draft recommended an evaluation every five years to track progress in achieving the plan’s goals and envisioned outcomes, and the final draft of Thrive should do the same.

Actions & List of Resources

We support a supplemental Actions & List of Resources document that has more specificity than would be appropriate for the general plan itself. We would like to see the document expanded to list actions for departments outside of the authority of the Planning and Parks Departments. Please consider the following suggestions to strengthen this document:

- G-10: “Review county lighting standards to improve energy efficiency and minimize light pollution.”
 - This action should note the importance of county light standards in reducing traffic injuries and fatalities on our roadways. Over 65 percent of pedestrian fatalities between 2015 and 2019 happened at night. The county’s Vision Zero goals need to be balanced with its goal to minimize light pollution.
- C-4: “Update the County Growth and Infrastructure Policy to encourage co-location and adjacency of public facilities, including schools, to achieve the policies of Thrive Montgomery 2050.”
 - To achieve the policies of Thrive, more will need to be updated in the Growth and Infrastructure Policy. The impact taxes, transportation tests, and other policies incorporated in the adequate public facilities ordinance all influence whether or not the county develops in alignment with the general plan.
- T-16: “Form a subregional transportation or transit authority, such as the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority, that would include Montgomery County and Prince George’s County, among others.”
 - We are concerned by this action because it has resulted in less public input, political “logrolling” resulting in wasteful spending, overspending on roads and underspending on TOD supportive investments. We believe this should be a subject not included in the plan.
- T-21: “Eliminate motor vehicle parking minimums for new development projects in downtowns, town centers, rail and BRT corridors and adjacent communities to encourage travel by walking, bicycling, and transit.”
 - Parking minimums are an outdated policy that should be eliminated countywide. The absence of parking minimums does not mean that parking will not get built — only that developers will use the market to decide how much parking is needed rather than government regulations. We would encourage the county to consider parking maximums in downtowns.
- H-1: “Expand housing options in detached residential areas near high-capacity transit by modifying the zoning code to allow duplexes, triplexes, and quadruplexes, residential types by-right and with smaller lot areas.”
 - While evolving single family neighborhoods near transit, jobs, and amenities is critical, we must also continue to build large-scale, higher density developments in activity centers themselves.
- **What’s left out?**

There are no action items on protecting small businesses, building the planning bus rapid transit network, streamlining market-rate development, decarbonizing buildings,

or making it easier to add neighborhood retail into residential areas. These ideas are largely missing from the draft plan as well.