

**Testimony to the Montgomery County Council
Thrive Montgomery 2050
June 29, 2021**

The League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC) continues to support the work that has gone into the Thrive Montgomery 2050 document and the revisions since the first call for public testimony.

We have again reviewed each proposal through the lens of economic health, community equity and environmental resilience because we believe this is essential to growing a healthy Montgomery County; these elements of the Thrive 2050 plan clearly align with League positions.

The county must continue to make changes in housing, transportation, development patterns, preservation of open spaces and our environment in order to thrive. This testimony again contains comments on five Thrive 2050 topics: transportation, land use, housing, the environment and agriculture.

We also continue to believe the Plan would benefit from having an evaluation process, albeit brief, in the main document rather than in a separate document. The public needs to know on a regular basis how the county is tracking progress toward its goals and what the timetable is for evaluation.

Transportation:

Prioritizing transit will have a major effect on equity, the environment, population growth, health and our economy. The county is making strides, but **LWVMC encourages a more coordinated effort across all transit modes to produce a greater impact.**

The current budget, which includes more free transit, is a good example of how Thrive 2050 can have a significant effect on transportation.

Retrofitting an existing environment is difficult, and while working with our diverse population poses many challenges, transit will be key to resolving many issues in the coming years.

- Our streets and highways currently lack good design, appropriate speed limits and pedestrian and bike accommodation; there is clear need for improvement.
- The Maryland Legislature just passed a law allowing for lower speed limits, and Thrive 2050 should urge continued coordination between the county's plans and MCDOT to improve safety for residents.

LWVMC Testimony: Thrive Montgomery 2050, cont.

- The county must update old methods of measuring vehicle speed and congestion, create new criteria for sidewalks and bike paths, prioritize capital improvement projects for building of infrastructure and improve cooperation with state entities.

Land Use:

The key themes of this document -- such as urbanism, active lifestyles, social connection, housing, transforming major roads into boulevards, regional solutions to problems, diversity as our strength, etc. -- could have come directly from League positions!

- LWVMC recognizes that many of these topics are controversial and that agreement is not always possible – e.g., whether there should be solar power in the agricultural reserve; where businesses should be located; how we should expand public services and where; how county policies will affect schools, jobs and community services; and how much we should invest in climate change and the environment.

The county should incorporate changes into the General Plan that promote a vision for where the county wants to go.

- Proposals that come before the county should meet the high standards that the General Plan sets. Enforcing these standards will not be easy. Vocal aspirations must become concrete plans. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of enforcement to enact positive changes.

Housing:

Montgomery County continues to need more housing, **especially units for very low-income families (30% of median income and below), larger units for larger families, and the so-called “missing middle” attainable housing designed for low- and middle-income households** (“missing middle” includes garden apartments, multiplexes of various types and other low-rise, smaller, more affordable units, including cottage courtyard units.) We urge the Plan to support appropriate densities to achieve the maximum attainable housing along the corridors designated for growth.

- Even if our population grows at a rate of only one percent, the county will need to house a minimum of 200,000 more people by 2045, and the demographics of households will have changed as well as the numbers, necessitating changes in the units to serve them.
- We need to accommodate much larger numbers of single-person households as well as greater numbers of very large households. We have a decreasing number of middle-income residents, at least in part because we do not have sufficient appropriate housing to accommodate them.

LWVMC Testimony: Thrive Montgomery 2050, cont.

- We support the creation of a new optional method of development to encourage consolidation and development of duplexes, cottage courts, townhouses and small multiplexes and apartments that are near transit, along our growth corridors and close to the county's centers of activity. A fifteen-minute walking distance to frequent destinations is a worthy goal.

Corridors are a great location for some of this much-needed housing. They are often safer as well because communities of these units tend to offer residents access to major arteries from side streets that are safer than the driveways of existing homes that feed directly onto major roads.

We must also preserve existing low-income and affordable housing or replace it without a net loss – and preferably with a net gain. Thrive 2050 offers options for achieving these goals, some new and some building on existing tools, and we hope many of them, such as residential reuse of excess office space, will be implemented.

Environment:

The League agrees with the county that climate change is the most important environmental factor facing us between now and 2050 and that 100% clean energy is a correlating goal that should help decrease the level of greenhouse gases.

We also appreciate recognition of the need to change from “wedges and corridors” to a complete community concept that includes compact development, and we should focus on other factors as well -- such as encouraging healthier living (with reduced reliance on cars), protecting wildlife, limiting light pollution, encouraging local food production via the agricultural reserve and better managing forest conservation.

Agriculture:

We strongly support continued preservation of the agricultural reserve to exclude commercial activity not directly related to agriculture. In addition to its importance for local food production, the reserve provides diverse jobs, water quality, solar arrays and other environmental benefits that must be conserved.

From: Co-Presidents Diane Hibino and Kathy McGuire