

I am Alison Gillespie, and I live in the Forest Glen neighborhood of Silver Spring. Thanks for allowing me the chance to speak tonight.

As many of you know, I am a huge Parks volunteer and advocate often on behalf of parks here in Montgomery County. I spend most of my free time riding my bike and hiking on the county's trails. For more than a decade I have volunteered with one of the county's nature centers, helping to encourage and nurture wildlife, and served with many environmental organizations, too. It is my love of parks that has prompted me to focus my comments tonight on environmental topics in Thrive 2050.

This plan does a great job of addressing and embracing our urban identity. In the past, it seemed that much of our municipal planning sought to avoid or ameliorate urbanization. Saying Montgomery County was urban was a saying something taboo. It made people wince in remorse.

But this plan is exciting because it embraces the many ways that we can improve life for everyone who lives here if we are honest about the fact that we are a county that largely lives in city spaces. Thrive seeks to stop sprawl and unchecked encroachment into our precious natural areas such as farms and forests by supporting better housing policy and being inclusive of multifamily options. Anything that goes beyond "single family homes only" mentality will be a great benefit to all who live here. We need more places for people to live. And we need to undue a racist past that encouraged hate and segregation through redlining. I also want us to redouble our efforts to make this a fully transit-oriented community, and I see that supported in the pages of the Thrive report.

But we cannot just create boxes for people to live in, we must create livable communities. A key part of the Thrive Parks' plan is the emphasis on providing people with really great places to enjoy the outdoors close to wherever they live – and that means supporting great parks in urban centers as well as supporting the agricultural reserve and our amazing huge forested parks like Little Bennett. By providing green space within fifteen minutes of every citizen we can reduce the car trips people might take to go for a hike or play soccer, for instance. We can improve the health of our neighbors because they will have space for respite and for healthy exercise close to home.

Also, if people have lovely, safe, clean, green places outdoors to go relax anytime they that crave nature, they are less likely to want to buy a house in a new development far from the city where they work, meaning we can reduce traffic and the need for highway expansion. These and other great guiding concepts for parkland are well outlined in Thrive.

I regret, however, that this final draft from Planning does not include a chapter outlining a county commitment to protecting and enhancing the environment. I will say it outright: I thought that our county executive's recent climate plan was poorly written and missed the mark in many ways, and it by no means met the urgent need to address the very real problem of our most important global crisis, either.

I feel that the Executive's climate document is a piece of political theater that will not last, will not have real impact. Most likely it will be shelved and, in a year or two be completely forgotten. But Thrive is poised to have a huge, lasting impact on our management of our community, thus, my request to include an environmental chapter. It seems to me that even if the chapter just gathers up the scattered impacts already in the report and frames them and emphasizes them, that is important. Climate impacts will be big in the coming years, directly affecting both our economic well-being and human health in our

neighborhoods. There is also an equity piece to this, as the poorer neighborhoods of our county are likely to be hit hardest and we need to address the need for things like tree canopy and stormwater management for the sake of these neighbors who are already feeling the struggle in so many ways.

This is our chance to think big and own it. What we do in our planning for this populous county we call home can help or harm the planet. That is why a chapter on the environment is important to me. We have to realize that our impacts will be felt for generations. Planning has a huge role to play in protecting, enhancing, and appreciating the ecosystem around us through our environmental relationships, in urban areas, rural areas, suburban areas, public space and private space.

Urban ecologists have told us for several decades that we can do a lot of good in our urban spaces if we plant more trees, reduce stormwater impacts and increase green spaces -- not just for their aesthetic rewards but because they provide real ecosystem services. Urban forests and suburban tree canopies have an incredible innate ability to cool down cities and absorb pollutants. They also can create important niches for our native wildlife, which is essential to a healthy, balanced, and resilient ecosystem.

I think we need to have a bit more focus in the Thrive plan on protecting environmental assets throughout the entire community -- not just in large regional parks or small urban squares but in every suburban development and along every schoolyard, and street. Even our highways and arterial roads could be made more climate friendly. We also need to recommit to better agricultural practices and perhaps address what the Agricultural Reserve means in a changing climate. A chapter that specifically addresses topics such as these would really galvanize that commitment. The environment seems to fall between the cracks in this plan. Sprinkling it throughout does not seem adequate given the scope of the problems we will face in coming years.

Finally, I have one random thought that I urge you to consider: Do away with parking minimums. They are gutting us on multiple fronts: encouraging unhealthy lifestyles, killing vibrant local economies, killing new transit-oriented development, and shackling us to cars, and providing literal roadblocks to pedestrians and bikes in the form of outdated parallel and surface parking. Kill parking minimums. Cars should not be king in this county -- or anywhere on the planet -- anymore. Streets are for people. Kill parking minimums. It literally might be the most important thing we can all do to make a brighter future for all.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Alison Gillespie