

**Testimony/Letter to the Montgomery County Council
From Woodside Park Residents, Silver Spring MD
On Thrive Montgomery 2050 Draft Plan**

June 28, 2021 (4 pages)

The 82 signers of this letter are residents, homeowners, and neighbors of Woodside Park, a nearly 100-year-old Silver Spring community. We are deeply concerned about how elements of the draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan (TM2050) undermine the wellbeing of our community. We want a voice in how our neighborhood and the county will be shaped in the future under the Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan and other master plans.

We stand with the Neighborhood Coalition of municipalities and communities countywide that are sharing with you legitimate concerns and recommendation on the draft plan.

This has been a terrible year to be in the County that once prided itself on civic engagement. We are used to in-person gatherings, listening to neighbors at in-person workshops, access to planning offices and to research documents. Instead of hitting the “pause” button to address the worst public health crisis in a century, the Planning Board – and now the County Council --have been assiduous in moving the Thrive Montgomery 2050 General Plan ahead to completion. It is a process that’s totally anomalous to normal community dialogue and input.

Woodside Park has been split into three parts for future planning and development. These changes were arranged arbitrarily by the Planning Board between 2017 and June 2020, with little to no public notice given to Woodside Park’s civic organization or to the households that are now affected.

During scoping deliberations by Planning Board members in 2017, a major portion of the west side of Woodside Park (between Georgia Avenue and Woodland Drive) was “moved” into the Montgomery Hills/Forest Glen Master Plan, and is now referred to as “Woodside.”

In June 2020, Woodside Park residents opposed the annexation of parts of the east side of our community into Silver Spring’s Downtown. The Planning Board ignored our testimony with virtually no discussion, and approved a 35% boundary increase in the size of Downtown Silver Spring, with no rationale. Real estate law firms are now offering their services to property owners and developers to achieve “the highest and best use” of the land our homes sit on.

Thrive Montgomery 2050, as an aspirational blueprint, seems almost wholly focused on population growth and the need for housing close to transit. Under the draft plan, the County will be reshaped to address projected population growth--and housing needs-- by eliminating all single family zoning for more dense development; new, denser development along selected major corridors, including two that border our neighborhood, Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road; a new, not-yet-defined “vocabulary” of building types to achieve equitable housing for all; and the creation of 32 “complete communities” that make it possible to shop and live within a 15 minute walk.

Several of plan's elements deeply undermine the character, natural assets and future stability of Woodside Park, with extreme levels of density.

Some crucial underpinnings of TM2050 have been eliminated or ignored. The much-needed chapter on economic development was removed from the draft. Neighborhood compatibility—a longtime component of County master plans and zoning— has been redefined as “vague” and to be eliminated. Climate change as a critical aspect of the County's sustainability gets short shrift in this draft.

The policies recommended in TM2050 will destroy the character of Woodside Park—and the future of every home in the neighborhood by adding extreme density to the perimeter and the interior.

Reasonable people agree – as we do-- that affordable/or attainable housing would allow singles, empty nesters and first-time buyers to have housing that is appropriate to their needs and incomes. The question is: Where to situate and build substantial new housing, with equitable opportunities at various (and even subsidized) price points?

- **The original Silver Spring Downtown core** has 16 million square feet of development capacity remaining of the original 40 million square feet: it's a canvas waiting for vision and bold action, with room for potentially 15,000 new residential units, including adaptive reuse of vacant and underutilized office buildings.
- **Fenton Village** --from Fenton Street to Georgia, through all the side streets-- is a large district ready for a residential renaissance: infill housing of varied sizes and prices to create a 24/7 vibe, with energy and safety by having people on the streets 18 hours a day.
- **The Silver Spring Downtown Parking District** has garages that total 502,000+ square feet of surface area (ground level); additional surface parking lots yield 95,165 square feet more. Many are ageing and underutilized. That's 12.6 acres of land in prime locations – close to public transit in Silver Spring-- that can be master planned as mixed residential areas, with low-rise apartments, bungalows, quads and townhouses of varied sizes and price points.
- **Percontee's White Oak development area** of 300 acres along Route 29 is a blank canvas that can be masterplanned for a vibrant, inclusive and sustainable New Town, with varied housing and amenities; the BRT Flash Bus available can take commuters to the Purple Line and Metro's Ft. Totten Station.

None of these options will Balkanize future residents into undesirable locations—it places them in the midst of amenities and public transit. These locations should be the county's first choice for equitable and affordable housing.

We have three further recommendations:

- **Mandate the use of the traditional master and sector planning processes** to specify zoning changes that will achieve both public buy-in and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach now proposed in the draft TM2050 plan.
- **Neighborhood compatibility standards** referred to in the Neighborhood Coalition letter must be reinstated in the final TM2050 plan. These would be created for each community and frame what

happens in terms of density, maximum height, setbacks, side and rear lines, materials and styles keeping with the character of our neighborhood.

- **Aggregation of land or properties: Quantifiable and enforceable process and limits** need to be set for developers and all aggregators (lawyer front men, real estate companies and landowners) on how they acquire and aggregate land or property in Woodside Park (and elsewhere).

Housing is NOT home ownership. Are you serious about solving inequity ? Look to the [Philadelphia Accelerator Fund](#) -- public-private partnership designed to provide flexible funds to minority developers facing [systemic barriers](#) to traditional bank financing—with a goal of \$100 million by the end of 2021.

We are asking the County Council to make a responsible decision: return the draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 plan to the Planning Board for rethinking and major revisions. **Honest civic engagement means giving a voice – and more choice —to the County’s residents and taxpayers.**

Signed by: (82 homeowners and residents of Woodside Park, Silver Spring)

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