

Silver Spring, MD
July 5, 2021

TO: Montgomery County Council
SUBJECT: Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan

The walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented “15 minute living” advocated for in the Thrive Montgomery 2050 plan where racial and social equity, economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability are all paramount makes eminent sense and has my full support. What follows are some of the specific reasons for my positive view of the Thrive Montgomery plan.

First, my family and I experienced a walkable and transit-oriented lifestyle when we lived in a townhouse in southwest London, England, for a time during my 35-year career with a major multinational corporation. We didn’t own or need a car then because we could walk or take transit to wherever we wanted to go. Our two sons took the “Underground” (subway) to school, and when station closures occurred, they caught a bus or two. I took a train to my job west of London, we walked to stores and the library, and on weekends and vacation, mass transit allowed our family to explore and enjoy the city, the country and even a lot of Western Europe too.

We loved that way of living so much that when we decided to move to this area years later to take care of elderly parents and subsequently retire, a primary requirement was that we find a house where we could easily walk to stores, restaurants, the library, doctors’ offices and Metrorail. We bought a home in Silver Spring within walking distance of the central business district and have enjoyed living here for 16 years now. We are very much looking forward to completion of the Purple Line, more Bus Rapid Transit lines, the Capital Crescent Trail, more protected bike lanes, and ideally expansion of Metrorail and MARC too so we will be able to drive even less than we do now.

Second, Thrive Montgomery is fact-based and aspirational but reasonable too. It promotes sustainability and creating more diverse, mixed-income communities. While many residents want to keep life as it is now with its systemic inequity, change is inevitable, so it makes sense to move in a positive direction with smart growth that includes planning for people – not cars. With the shortage of open, buildable land and affordable housing in the county now, Thrive would encourage a reasonable mix of housing in areas near transit. In areas now zoned for single family homes, revised zoning should allow duplexes and triplexes by-right as long as the housing conforms to current height, massing and set-back limitations, and the look of the housing blends in among existing single family homes. Townhouses and apartment houses along main roads near Metro and Purple Line stops also make sense.

Third, Thrive recognizes that the projected increase in people moving to our county in the future, together with already heavy traffic congestion on many of our roads, means far more transit is needed. More transit also would help enable the safe, walkable and bikeable communities that are needed and many of us seek. Zero-emission transit (and not expanded highways) would lessen greenhouse gas and other harmful air pollution, be more equitable by serving people at all economic levels (especially those without cars), and lessen the sprawl that expanded highways encourage. The best way for our streets to handle increased walking, biking and transit safely is to have lower speed limits and “complete streets”, with buses traveling on dedicated lanes to make them faster and more reliable so they will attract more riders.

As I see it, the current Thrive plan has two substantive shortcomings.

1) It needs to add back in the chapter on environmental protection and ensure the protections mirror the county’s Climate Action Plan and will be implemented. The plan needs to require more energy efficiency in current as well as new buildings, and require greater use of renewable energy including solar on government, school, commercial and residential building roof tops, parking lots and garages, as well as on farmland including the Ag Reserve. It is both reasonable and necessary for the Ag Reserve to accommodate commercial solar farms that comply with appropriate restrictions and requirements considered by the County Council last fall.

2) Thrive needs to protect Ten Mile Creek and the clean water it provides, and to require no net-loss of trees in the county. Ideally, two trees should be planted for every tree lost – as near where the trees are lost as practical. Existing forest must be preserved, especially contiguous forested areas, with incentives provided to property owners to maintain current forest land. Trees mitigate local flooding, reduce air and water pollution, sequester carbon, cool neighborhoods, and beautify our streets, homes and communities. The county’s current very weak forest conservation laws are totally unacceptable and must be strengthened.

In summary, I think the Thrive Montgomery 2050 draft plan is fact-based and appropriately aspirational but reasonable too, and would bring about the smart growth our county needs if the shortcoming I mentioned are addressed. I am pleased to live in a county that recognizes change is inevitable and is planning the steps needed to move us forward in a positive, sustainable and equitable manner.

Brian Ditzler