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**THRIVE MONTGOMERY 2050**

**A Strategic Framework for the Montgomery County General Plan Update**

**June 29, 2021**

**PUBLIC HEARING – Planning Board**

The Gaithersburg-Germantown Chamber of Commerce fully supports the proposed strategic outcomes for Thrive Montgomery 2050 of economic competitiveness, racial and social equity, and environmental sustainability. In general, we support the vision of compact growth and complete communities. We see a great benefit to having robust, dynamic, work-live-play communities with a balance of jobs, housing, and recreational opportunities. We fully accept that Montgomery County has a significant housing shortage and agree with the need for increased types and price points for additional housing.

The 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan had a profound effect on the growth of both Gaithersburg and Germantown, as did the creation of the Agricultural Reserve. Those planning decisions created the Upcounty as a great place to live and raise a family. The 1964 General Plan and subsequent area Master Plans envisioned a strong commercial corridor along with a balance of residential and retail land use. While the residential and retail components have come to fruition, the balance of commercial enterprise is still lacking.

Given the new direction of the Thrive 2050 General Plan to focus on urban areas with ready access to transit, the question remains as to how the suburban communities in the upper areas of Montgomery County will “thrive”. In reading through the draft plan, I can see the communities of Silver Spring, Bethesda, and Rockville all represented and can envision how they will evolve into 15-minute living communities. I can even see it in Germantown Town Center and pockets of Gaithersburg. But I do not see the rest of the Upcounty represented. The draft plan does an excellent job of laying out the vision for an urban context, however the vision and details of the plan need to be extended for both suburban and rural communities.

From a transportation perspective, the plan emphasizes the importance of walking, biking and transit, and reduced reliance on cars. That is an important environmental goal and if it were proposed in the 1964 plan we could have planned the Upcounty differently. But it wasn't. The residential neighborhoods in the Upcounty are geographically different than those Downcounty. The area was built assuming reliance on the automobile. Many might say that the design and development of the Upcounty was a mistake, but a significant number of Montgomery County residents live here and need our county leaders to understand the geographic differences in the Upcounty.

Recently I went to 3 prominent neighborhoods in Germantown to assess driving times vs. transit times. In all cases, the difference is staggering. Your response might be double-down on transit. That simply does not take geography into consideration. We already have a comprehensive system of buses in Germantown, the issue is that only a small percentage of people live within walking distance to the buses. For instance, in my neighborhood, we have two different buses that go directly through the

community. I can walk to the stops for both buses within four minutes. However, because of the winding, cul-de-sac streets, other neighbors in the same community may have a 25 minute walk to the same bus. No amount of retro-fitting will solve that issue. As for walkable 15-minute living, a vast majority of the population in the Upcounty can't walk anywhere within 15 minutes. On page 79, the Plan recognizes the difference between a street grid and cul-de-sac, but doesn't provide any insight on how to make transit work in the predominate suburban street design.

Neighborhood	Closest grocery store	Rockville Town Center	Bethesda Row	Silver Spring Civic Center
Cloppers Mill	3 minute drive 18 minute transit 22 minute walk	22 min drive 1 hour / 9 minute transit	31 min drive 1 hour / 42 minute transit	31 min drive 1 hour / 46 minute transit
Milestone	4 minute drive 17 minute transit 23 minute walk	21 min drive 1 hour / 10 minute transit	26 min drive 1 hour / 50 minute transit	31 min drive 1 hour / 2 minute transit
Waters Landing	6 minute drive 16 minute transit 26 minute walk	20 min drive 55 minute transit	28 min drive 1 hour / 13 minute transit	31 min drive 1 hour / 45 minute transit

In terms of transportation, we need an “all of the above approach”. We certainly need to focus on walkability and transit. For instance, the Chamber recently support a road diet on Middlebrook Road to help improve the pedestrian connection between the high school and the town center and I know there is a long list of similar projects that could greatly improve walkability and safety in suburban areas of the County. And we certainly need increased transit. Again, the Chamber has been one of the few consistent voices for the Corridor Cities Transitway and increased MARC service in Germantown, Boyds, and Gaithersburg. I understand and support the goal of reining in suburban sprawl and agree with the vision of the Thrive 2050 plan. However, we cannot meet our current or future transportation needs without increasing road capacity. We need a more comprehensive plan for how the suburban cul-de-sac communities in upper Montgomery County fit into the Thrive 2050 plan going forward.

One major solution for the housing / transportation / jobs conundrum that exists County-wide is to bring more jobs to the Upcounty. If we had more jobs in Germantown, we would have much shorter commute times, less traffic congestion, and much less greenhouse gas emissions. Thrive 2050 does reiterate the Wedges and Corridors Plan for Germantown to emerge as an important center for office employment but states it as “hope” versus a strategic goal (p.48).

As a point of clarification, the plan calls for concentrating all new growth along existing and planned rail and bus rapid transit corridors. It is important to know whether this means growth *in addition to* the un-built density that already exists in various master plans or would this mean that areas that are not transit oriented could lose density. For instance, Germantown already has significant remaining commercial density. We need that commercial development to meet the goals and vision of the existing Germantown Master Plan. Increased commercial activity in the Upcounty also serves the goal of promoting the equitable distribution of prosperity throughout the County as Germantown continues to be one of the most diverse communities in the nation. Increasing jobs in the Upcounty will put jobs closer to a large employment base.

In addition to the overarching goals of the plan, there are two specific issues I would like to address.

- The map on page 31 highlights large, medium, small “centers”. Germantown is labeled a medium center. What does that mean? Are these labels descriptive or prescriptive? If they are descriptive, how can Germantown be in the same category as Clarksburg, Burtsonsville, Rock Spring, and Grosvenor/Strathmore. If they are prescriptive, that will inhibit the necessary commercial growth in Germantown.
- The I-270 corridor is portrayed as benefiting from “successive cycles of investment and reinvestment” to the detriment of other corridors including Georgia Avenue (p.28). The Plan goes on to suggest that the I-270 Corridor is the “favored quarter” (p.36). Trust me, no one in the Upcounty would consider the I-270 is the favored quarter. The I-270 Corridor is not monolithic, neither is Georgia Avenue. The initial investment in the Silver Spring redevelopment and recent investment in Wheaton and Glenmont may surpass recent investment in North Bethesda. Investment in north I-270 pales by comparison. This is more than nit-picking. If the plan makes a case that I-270 is over invested, a case is being made to reduce investment in the corridor. That should not happen.

The plan states that the concept of corridor-focused growth is a fundamental organizing element for Thrive 2050. The I-270 Corridor needs to be part of that future. As the draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 General Plan moves forward, we are asking for more explicit inclusion of the upper Montgomery County communities. The draft plan creates an exciting vision for Montgomery County. We want to see our communities represented in this vision. Thank you for your hard work and dedication to our community.

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