

Dear County Council Members,

We are in our mid-sixties and have lived in Bethesda for over 27 years. We support all of the goals of Thrive Montgomery 2050—community equity, better economic opportunities, and a cleaner and more sustainable environment. We agree that denser new development, such as at Pike and Rose, can help limit the use of cars and provide environmental and other benefits listed in the Thrive draft. We have concerns with the envisioned implementation of Thrive 2050, however. First, we feel that it does not promote enough affordable and truly attainable housing.

Second, we are concerned with Thrive's unrealistic and at times draconian limitations on parking and planning for cars. Car use should not be restricted so drastically when alternative transportation options are not available in many parts of the county, and will remain unaffordable, unreliable, and for many, not easily accessible.

WHY is planning for cars so unrealistic? WHO does the Board think lives in this county?

Many people in this county rely on cars, and the county is too big to serve everyone with efficient and reliable mass transit. Even though we would love to see more transit, and use it instead of a car whenever practicable, the idea that most county residents, especially seniors and families, will give up cars for bikes is a pipedream. PLEASE ensure that adequate parking is provided as part of Thrive. This is particularly important as more families help to save the environment by buying electric cars, which need to be parked near homes for their power source, and as parking is needed near BRT and Metro stops so that we can use transit more easily.

We try to be the type of family you hope to encourage with the Thrive plan. We chose our home in a walkable location, and frequently walk, bike, and take a variety of mass transit—I am one of the few neighbors I know who use various Ride-On bus routes and often take a bus to go downtown rather than drive. My husband (who signs below with me) has biked to work downtown for 26 years, and takes the metro otherwise.

We can (and often do) walk:

- 5 minutes to access buses that go to the Metro, Bethesda, and downtown DC
- 10-30 minutes to three strip mall centers with a variety of services
- 25 minutes to the library
- 30 minutes to Friendship Heights & Metro
- 60 minutes to Bethesda

Over the past 35 years, we have owned only one car, except for 10 years when our girls were in school, when we owned two. Our use of a car and other types of travel is shown in a chart below, designed to demonstrate that even though we live in a somewhat connected community, we still rely heavily on our car. The draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050 ignores this reality of many people's lives: no matter how much they may walk, bike, or take transit, they still need to use a car, especially in parts of Montgomery County that are much less accessible than ours.

In general, we have tried to limit our use of cars, but local driving has been, and will be, necessary:

- to do major errands involving bulky items, such as grocery shopping, picture framing, dry cleaning, and mailing packages. This is true even for people who live near a shopping center, and yet the county continues to reduce parking around shopping centers.
- to take children on errands or to activities, often scheduled all over the DC metro area (and beyond). This can be difficult without a car, as many sports, specialized art classes, summer camps, and music lessons are dispersed throughout the area, and will never all be located within each of the proposed “Complete Communities” due to economies of scale. Further, transit with children can be prohibitively expensive, and cars can be helpful to transport children while doing errands.
- to visit friends, family, and go to meetings, often in places with no ready access to transit. Unless there is frequent transit that covers the entire county almost block by block, there is no way that transit from one neighborhood to another will be able to replace the convenience of car travel.
- in very hot or cold weather, in rain or snow, and at night, or when we are dressed up and cannot comfortably walk. Most people like comfort, and will not willingly give up their cars in subpar conditions.
- to drive elderly or injured people or anyone with mobility or vision problems. Many elderly and disabled people cannot walk or bike, even for short distances, and as we age we may not be able to walk or bike the distances we currently manage. The Thrive plan ignores the changing demographics of the county. With a growing senior population, it is rash to plan as if they will be biking and taking scooters, when even walking is difficult for them. And not all seniors will move to Connected Communities.
- to access job opportunities outside concentrated employment centers. The draft is written as though all jobs will be in a few clusters of employment, easy for everyone to reach, but that is not the case. Housing near transit will continue to be prohibitively expensive for most lower income families, and jobs are widely spaced. The draft ignores the problems with getting from a suburban home to even one job cluster. This is unlikely to change. My daughters have had jobs in summer camps, in hospitals, and in nursery schools, and we know people with jobs as home health aides and landscapers. Cars have helped them to cover the vast territory of the county to reach jobs not on the Metro or a bus route.
- when needed to save time. Time is of the essence for many people. It is virtually impossible for someone to drop children off at day care, get to work on time, attend a soccer game, and shop at a store after work quickly, without a car. Even if better transit were available, it would have to go everywhere all the time throughout the metro area to make sense for all residents. This is possible in New York City; it is not financially feasible in Montgomery County.

A plan for the County’s future should be realistic. What may work in some clusters in the county cannot work for the vast county as a whole; and it is simply magical thinking to plan otherwise. While Thrive very properly encourages denser development around major corridors, with the expectation that car use could be substantially lessened, it is not a panacea. Even if jobs were available in a connected community, YOUR job could be somewhere else. Even if soccer fields were nearby, YOUR game could be

far away. Thrive 2050 is not just a vision; it is an active plan that will require changes in Master Plans, and must therefore be written thoughtfully and pragmatically.

These points address the reality that Thrive 2050 tries to wish away:

- Bike trail availability may not substantially change commuting patterns, and while good for the powerful bike lobby, may not be a practical commuting option for the overwhelming majority of residents: The resources in the Thrive appendix do not appear to include a survey of county residents to determine if they would commute by bike should more trails be available. Our very reasonable guess is that most would not. We live only a few blocks from the Capital Crescent Trail, which leads directly downtown and to Bethesda, and yet very few of our neighbors use it to commute. Most people are not strong enough, or willing to brave all weather; biking is not made feasible by their workplaces; and they have to use a car for other purposes during the day. In contrast, my husband is fit enough to bike 18 miles round trip each day, uphill much of the way on the return. He has bike racks and showers in his office, and a place to store his clothes. He does not have to carry equipment or large files back and forth with him. He has not had to worry about driving children or his parents, for I have done most of that during the week, as I work from home with a flexible schedule. Unlike most people, he actually enjoys biking, even in the dark and on days with inclement weather. He is clearly atypical.
- Transit will never be reliable, frequent, and universal: It is highly unlikely that various forms of transit other than cars will ever be able to satisfy the needs of people living throughout our large, spread-out county—it is far too expensive for the county to afford. Current transit is inadequate to meet resident needs:
 - Access to the Metro or major bus stops is already difficult. Ride-on buses often run only twice an hour (where they run) and are frequently late, travel circuitous routes, can be a mile or much more from some homes, and are not always well-integrated into Metro schedules, particularly at night.
 - Micro-transit options to reach transit are not widespread or attractive to busy people and families.
 - We have found that apps showing expected times of Ride-on and Metro bus arrivals are often inaccurate or not functioning, making it difficult to plan.
 - Changes from one bus to another are often required. Just to get across downtown Bethesda on the Circulator can involve a bus change, and it takes longer than walking.
 - The Metro is often closed or slowed for repairs at night.

Even current plans to add transit are controversial, and difficult to implement. Note that the Purple Line project is now suspended, and the rapid bus route is far from completion. Wishing people would take more transit does not mean they will be able to do so.

- Urban areas still need parking: While an “urban” center like downtown Bethesda could attract some people to live there without frequent use of cars, it still needs parking for visitors from other areas and for its residents to reach parts of the metropolitan area not conveniently accessed by transit. Metro and rapid bus stops in urban areas should provide parking to promote transit use, but the Thrive plan limits parking in those areas, using the pie-in-the-sky theory that most people can access transit without cars.

- Employers need to provide easy access for employees: I do not have data on this point, but if I were an employer, easy access, including car travel and parking, would be a priority for me in deciding where to locate. Has the county thoroughly researched the needs of future employers? Job growth is essential to allow the county to thrive.
- Traffic congestion before the pandemic was already a problem, and Thrive may help, but will also hurt: Thrive calls for dramatic reductions in parking, but the lack of parking spaces in areas that need them will back up traffic as drivers circle, looking for a space, adding to climate problems. People will not stop driving just because there is no parking. They will become angry and frustrated, or go to another location.
- The zoning code already restricts parking in ways that are hard to understand and that harm working families. For example, my in-laws live at Fox Hill, a Bethesda retirement community that was approved with so few parking spaces that employees have to park at a nearby church and take a shuttle—certainly not anticipated under the zoning code. Even then, there are so many aides and visitors to the site, and so few spaces, that many people park in fire zones. There is also very poor transit to the site. My easy 12-minute drive would take at least 40-minutes by transit, using two buses and walking—hardly how I would choose to drop off groceries to my in-laws or pay a quick visit. The zoning code also restricts parking for rehab facilities in ways that make no sense.
- Changing resident behavior is difficult unless the convenience outweighs the drawbacks: The Thrive plan does not propose any logical, convenient, affordable way for people to access transit or distant parts of the DC area. The plan is therefore unlikely to change residents’ car use radically, except within denser areas.
- The senior population is projected to double, and they are the least likely to use bikes or scooters due to health issues, fear of falling, problems with balance, and so forth. Ignoring their needs and the needs of disabled residents is insensitive.

“Planning for people instead of planning for cars” ignores the fact that people rely on cars. But make no mistake – we believe that promoting walkable communities is essential to help combat climate change and meet many other objectives of the Thrive plan. Getting people out of their cars is a laudable goal that we wholeheartedly support.

So please: build more parks, safe bike trails, and pedestrian paths. Please increase transit reliability, frequency, and geographic accessibility. Please construct more affordable housing, especially near transit. But please do not make the mistake of thinking that people will stop wanting or needing to use cars. Please let pragmatism outweigh the impractical idealism.

Thank you for considering these issues.

Sincerely,
Susan Spock and Caldwell Harrop

The chart below shows the way we use cars vs. other methods of movement.

Transportation Need	Not-car	Car
Commute to DC for work	bike almost always; metro in bad weather; sometimes walk/bus to metro	car drop off/pick metro in bad weather
Other family commutes to jobs near U at Shady Grove, Silver Spring, etc.	never	car only – mass transit would have been time-consuming, infrequent, and unreliable, requiring multiple changes
Drug store	often walk – 10 min.	car when en route or bad weather
Grocery store, dry cleaner, framers	rare	car 99%
Dentist and doctors	walk to some – 10 min. bus for some appointments downtown or further	car to many – Friendship Heights or suburbs
Transport for elderly or injured friends or family	never	car only
Library	often walk – 1 ¼ miles	car when en route or bad weather
Restaurants	sometimes walk 10-20 min.	car if out of area or in bad weather or to pick up hot take-out
Taking children to lessons or games after school	never	car always – transit infrequent, expensive, unreliable, and does not access all places
DC evenings downtown	metro if running well; sometimes bus to metro	car to avoid late night or infrequent metro or to get to the metro
Bethesda – errands or entertainment	occasionally drive then walk the last ½ mile; bike or walk once in a great while	car almost always
To airport	sometimes metro to National or metro/MARC/shuttle to BWI; have taken Ride-on to both Friendship Heights & Bethesda	car always to Dulles; often to National; usually to BWI
To visit friends	never unless neighbors	car 99%
Community meetings	rare	car almost always – usually at night or ½ + mile away
Car repairs	walk sometimes – an hour	car in bad weather or from farther service locations