

July 25, 2023

Testimony presented on behalf of the Climate Coalition Montgomery County to the Montgomery County Council on the Pedestrian Master Plan (PMP)

Good afternoon. My name is Kevin Walton, and I am here on behalf of the Climate Coalition Montgomery County. The Coalition represents 20 Montgomery County based organizations working to address climate change and sustainability. We are in favor of the Pedestrian Master Plan. As noted in the PMP, “For much of the 20th century, the Montgomery County transportation system was designed for motor vehicle travel to the exclusion of people walking and biking.” The goal of the PMP is to reverse this, and we applaud the effort.

However, we also want to provide some thoughts about how the PMP and its climate assessment could be made even stronger.

There are really two parts to the PMP. One, as noted in the plan, is to “develop a safe, comfortable and appealing network for walking, biking, and rolling “, ensuring safety, comfort, convenience, and accessibility. We appreciate the Plan’s focus as well as its emphasis on equity and connection to transit.

The other part is its role in climate mitigation. The county’s Climate Action Plan notes that greenhouse gas emissions from on-road transportation accounted for about one-third of 2018 emissions. A few statements in the PMP refer to lowering vehicle miles traveled but there is no quantitative assessment. The plan should be clear on how it will reduce the need for individual cars. We must acknowledge that a pedestrian master plan is essentially a climate plan.

As such, the PMP should emphasize the relationship between our existential climate crisis and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging people to transition out of cars. This messaging will help planners develop a more effective plan. It also helps the general public understand why this effort is critical as, ultimately, they are the ones who need to transition.

Which leads me to the other part of the process in approving the PMP, that of its climate assessment. This is the Planning Board’s first climate assessment. We understand the approach for conducting climate assessments is a work in progress, and we hope our comments are taken as suggestions on how to improve this process.

We greatly appreciate that the PMP was generally determined to have a positive impact on addressing the county’s greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the assessment is only qualitative. Some elements should have a quantitative evaluation. This may be due to the absence of quantitative measures in the plan itself for items like vehicle miles traveled, as already noted. Plans like the PMP may need to include these quantitative aspects in order for the climate assessment to fully evaluate the impact.

Second, we understood there would be ongoing public access to review the developing climate assessment during the planning process. However, we only saw the final assessment after the public hearing was scheduled.

Third, the assessment document does not “show its work”, i.e., how the conclusions were reached. Without appropriate documentation, it is impossible to evaluate the conclusions.

Lastly, we expected inclusion of recommendations for how to improve climate outcomes. Solely noting a negative effect is only half the process. The Climate Assessment law requires the Planning Department to offer recommendations for mitigating any negative impacts. We want to depend on the climate assessment to give the county guidance on how a plan can be more climate friendly.

We understand the climate assessment is complicated and greatly appreciate the effort that went into it. We hope to work with the planning board and staff to refine this process.

In conclusion, the Climate Coalition Montgomery County supports the adoption of the Pedestrian Master Plan and looks forward to seeing its implementation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.