

FOMH COMMENTS ON MONTGOMERY COUNTY PEDESTRIAN MASTER PLAN

July 25, 2023

Michelle Foster
President
Friends of Montgomery Hills
1718 Luzerne Ave
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Ave., 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

RE: Montgomery County Pedestrian Master Plan Planning Board Draft

Dear Montgomery County Council,

On behalf of the Friends of Montgomery Hills, I am pleased to submit comments on the **Montgomery County Pedestrian Master Plan Planning Board Draft** dated May 2023.

Friends of Montgomery Hills (FOMH) is a 501(c)3 neighborhood community organization dedicated to creating a sustainable, safe, and vibrant commercial center by bringing together businesses, residents, and community organizations. Our primary goals are to make Montgomery Hills more walkable and bikeable, create new business opportunities, strengthen existing ones, and better connect local businesses with adjacent neighborhoods. We worked closely with the Planning Department during the development of the **Forest Glen and Montgomery Hills Sector Plan** to ensure that the plan's recommendations supported the community's vision for this area. We strongly support the Sector Plan and its comprehensive recommendations to facilitate the corridor's improvement and redevelopment. We have also been working closely with the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) on their proposed improvements for MD-97 Georgia Ave, which runs through the heart of Montgomery Hills.

The draft **Pedestrian Master Plan** holds a pivotal role in Montgomery County's transformation from a bedroom suburb of Washington, DC, into a vibrant and sought-after destination for both residents and businesses. For decades, our infrastructure has been heavily influenced by car-centric planning ideals of the 1950s. The primary objective during that era was to maximize the efficient and swift movement of people through Montgomery County using vehicles.

However, with the rapid population growth and increased density, the landscape has evolved, giving rise to bustling downtown centers like Silver Spring, Bethesda, and Rockville. As a result, it is imperative that we now prioritize creating safe and efficient means of transportation that do not solely revolve around automobiles. This shift is crucial to accommodate the diverse needs of the community and to enable people to move around these dynamic urban centers comfortably.

In essence, the **Pedestrian Master Plan** represents a significant step forward in reshaping our county's mobility infrastructure, allowing us to embrace a more pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly and sustainable approach to transportation. By fostering accessible pathways, promoting active transportation, and encouraging alternative transit options, we can foster a thriving environment that prioritizes the well-being and convenience of all residents and visitors. Through these collective efforts, we aim to create a

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landscape where walking and non-vehicle modes of transport are not just viable options but the preferred choices for a vibrant and flourishing Montgomery County.

There are many important recommendations in the **Pedestrian Master Plan** that we support, but we would like to highlight and support four particularly important recommendations.

1. Support the designation of Montgomery Hills as a Town Center.

We specifically support the designation of Montgomery Hills as a Town Center in the plan, and the recommendations that accrue to town centers.

Downtowns may be the economic engines of the County, but Town Centers are where small, local businesses can incubate, innovate, and thrive. Town Centers can benefit greatly from safety measures for pedestrians and bikers because the visual clues and hardscape infrastructure are not as prevalent as in downtown areas.

2. Build and retrofit more walkable places in Downtowns and Town Centers.

Walkable downtowns are important for several reasons, as they offer numerous benefits to individuals, communities, and the environment. Some key reasons why walkable downtowns are highly valued:

- Improves health and wellness of residents
- Provides sustainable transportation options
- Provides increased economic activity
- Foster a sense of community and social cohesion
- Create a higher quality of life for residents
- Promotes accessibility for everyone
- Reduced infrastructure costs
- Reduced dependence on vehicles

Walkable downtowns play a significant role in creating sustainable, healthy, and thriving urban communities. They promote active living, foster social connections, and contribute to the overall well-being of residents while reducing the negative impacts associated with car-dependent urban planning. The County needs to be doing everything possible to create and retrofit Downtowns and Town Centers to be more walkable.

3. Follow the Bicycle and Pedestrian Priority Area Prioritization.

In the past, bike and pedestrian projects have often been funded not based on their overall importance or impact, but instead on the neighborhood that is the squeaky wheel. This was

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certainly the case with Dale Drive between Georgia Ave and Colesville Road in Silver Spring. Dale Drive (which importantly was once a state road) for years had an extremely high rate of traffic accidents and even one pedestrian fatality. Dale Drive connects two important North-South corridors in the County (Colesville Road and Georgia Ave) and often carries exceedingly high volumes of vehicles because it serves as a bail-out route for when the Beltway is congested. It also serves as an important connection to Sligo Creek, and has more than five school bus routes/stops (Woodlin ES, Sligo MS, Einstein HS, Blair HS, and the magnet bus to Blair). Yet the pedestrian and bike safety issues on Dale Drive were ignored until one Silver Spring resident was so frustrated, she started the Dale Drive Safety Coalition and organized almost 100 residents, elected officials, and media outlets to walk the road and experience the discomfort and safety issues for themselves. Very shortly after that, the County commenced and funded the Dale Drive Pedestrian Facility project.

This should not be the case. The County should fund pedestrian and bike improvements using a rational, well-articulated, and public prioritization plan. The Draft Pedestrian Plan supports this objective and FOMH believes this to be one of the most important recommendations.

4. Assume county control of state highways.

We acknowledge that the recommendation we propose is controversial and potentially costly. However, it is an imperative step if Montgomery County is to successfully achieve the goals outlined in the beginning of the Pedestrian Plan. Currently, all of the County's major growth corridors are state highways under the control of the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA). Historically, SHA's primary focus has been on facilitating vehicular traffic, leading to road designs that have unfortunately resulted in alarmingly high rates of pedestrian accidents and fatalities.

While SHA leadership has made efforts to enhance pedestrian safety in recent times, Montgomery County's state-controlled roads must compete with all other State roads for funding and resources. Consequently, our local roads often do not receive the priority or funding they truly deserve. This situation significantly impacts Montgomery County's economic prospects because delaying improvements to pedestrian and bike safety in our growing areas diminishes their attractiveness to both businesses and residents.

A case in point is Montgomery Hills, where residents and businesses have waited for over half a century for SHA to make improvements to Georgia Ave between 16th Street and Forest Glen Road. This one-mile stretch carries an astonishing 80,000 cars and trucks each day and has one of the highest accident rates for any state road in Maryland. For years, SHA primarily viewed Georgia Ave as a mere channel for vehicles onto and off-of the Beltway, disregarding the needs of pedestrians and bikers. Although SHA is now working on safer designs for Georgia Ave, the delay has taken a toll on the local Montgomery Hills businesses, leading to a significant decline in the entire commercial center.

Moreover, the division of responsibilities between State and County agencies regarding road management creates complexities and, at times, conflicting goals.

MICHELLE FOSTER
7/25/23

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To address these challenges effectively, we propose that the County take responsibility for crucial roads like Georgia Ave, Colesville Road, and Rockville Pike. By doing so, we can ensure that the County's goals and needs get the attention they deserve and are promptly addressed. Taking control of these major roads will empower us to prioritize pedestrian and bike safety, fostering a more vibrant and thriving environment for businesses, residents, and visitors alike.

I urge you to support the **Pedestrian Master Plan**. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "MFoster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michelle Foster

Friend of Montgomery Hills