

Good afternoon, members of the County Council, and thank you for hearing my testimony in support of ZTA 24-01 on behalf of Montgomery for All, although I'll be providing my personal perspective as well. Montgomery for All is the grassroots Montgomery County branch of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, and we are over 200 members strong, advocating for more welcoming, inclusive neighborhoods.

You all know that Montgomery County has a dire housing shortage, and there is no cure-all. The passage of Thrive 2050 led the way, and upcoming efforts on missing middle housing and various master plans will play a key role, but we believe this ZTA can play an important part in providing more housing to meet the county's needs, while helping faith institutions leverage their land to help their congregations and their surrounding communities, all while leveraging on existing affordable housing programs in a clever and efficient way.

By allowing faith institutions to build structures up to 60 feet if projects meet one of four affordability thresholds, this ZTA would provide more opportunities for the kind of abundant, more affordable housing that we so desperately need, led by long-standing members of the community such a project would take place in.

As I've talked about occasionally in my advocacy, I am not a person of faith, nor for that matter, a believer in any sort of higher power, and I'd rather confidently guess that I'm among the most lapsed of Catholics. But people come to affordable housing work from different places in different ways, and we should celebrate where we intersect. This is an opportunity to come together to create welcoming, inclusive communities, and I'm confident that will be the result of this ZTA. I like to think I do a lot for my community, but whatever my disagreements on scripture and tenants of faith I know that a lot of people and institutions are motivated by their faith do as much and more – from helping the unhoused directly, to general community aid, to the institutions that might seek to balance their finances and help people find shelter at the same time under this ZTA. The belief that people should be housed safely and affordably is something that should unite us all and a value that should be reflected in our land use laws.

As strongly as we support this legislation as it is, we would still like to suggest an amendment that we believe would help the ZTA achieve its objective even more effectively. This allowance for religious institutions to build housing on their land should be by-right, and if not by-right then should allow the fewest barriers to entry. Our understanding is that this could be achieved by making housing in this ZTA utilize the site plan review process rather than a conditional use.

This legislation is a common sense, flexible, and significant step to help address our housing crisis while simultaneously giving more flexibility to institutions of faith to meet their needs and missions. We urge your support for it.

Thank you.
Mike English
Silver Spring