



Montgomery County's Advocates for Better Transportation

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Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Ave.
Rockville, MD 20850

March 11, 2025

Re: Workforce Housing N.O.W. - ZTA 25-02

Dear Council President Stewart, Vice President Jawando, and Councilmembers:

On January 10, 2024, the Action Committee for Transit (ACT) sent a letter to the County Council requesting legislation to address the housing crisis. ACT wants to thank the sponsors of the Workforce Housing N.O.W. package of ZTAs and budgetary measures, and we are supportive because it is part of the solution to achieving a future of housing affordability and abundance instead of continuing the status quo of artificial scarcity.

According to the Federal Reserve Economic Data website, almost one third of all households in the county are paying 30% or more of their income for rent or a mortgage.¹ CountyStat from the Office of Management and Budget states 23% of renters pay 50% or more of their income on housing.² Restrictive zoning harms people. It is tightly correlated with widening wealth inequality and homelessness.³ ZTA 25-02 legalizes duplexes, townhomes, and apartment buildings with a workforce housing requirement along major corridors such as Georgia Avenue and Old Georgetown Road. Strategically locating more housing near corridors is a tried and tested measure. Minneapolis generated greater levels of affordability after allowing more residential development in major corridors and transit hubs.⁴ Increasing the supply of housing in this manner provides the opportunity to live closer to public transportation. Many corridors are on major bus routes or near the WMATA Red Line. More people will have the choice not to drive everywhere they need to go. With fewer people driving to conduct their daily lives, we can reduce carbon emissions, reduce the time we are all sitting in traffic, and offer our residents the opportunity to save money on transportation costs.

¹ Burdened Households (5-year estimate) in Montgomery County, MD, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/DP04ACS024031>. Accessed 9 March 2025.

² Montgomery County Housing Affordability, https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/countystat/housing_insights.html. Accessed 9 March 2025.

³ Bertolet, Dan. "Nine Reasons to End Exclusionary Zoning." *The Sightline Institute*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.sightline.org/2021/09/29/nine-reasons-to-end-exclusionary-zoning/>. Accessed 9 March 2025

⁴ Liang, Linlin, et al. "Minneapolis Land Use Reforms Offer a Blueprint for Housing Affordability." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2024/01/04/minneapolis-land-use-reforms-offer-a-blueprint-for-housing-affordability>. Accessed 9 March 2025.

ACT has three recommendations for improving ZTA 25-02 that are in alignment with the intention to build more housing for the workforce. Firstly, we can reinforce the relationship the ZTA has with encouraging transit use by legalizing more residential building types within one mile of WMATA Metro stations, Purple Line stations, and MARC stations. This buffer should not extend into the Agricultural Reserve. One mile from transit infrastructure is the same standard recommended by the National Center for Smart Growth and the Purple Line Corridor Coalition for building more mixed-income housing near the Purple Line.⁵

Secondly, ZTA 25-02 should include the side streets of corridors and corner lots. The ZTA as currently proposed requires parcels of land to have an address directly on the corridor. This restriction unnecessarily limits the supply of housing needed to moderate prices. Locating every unit of new housing on arterials could send the unintended message that the workforce the county needs is a burden. Teachers, first responders, construction workers, grocery clerks, and bus operators deserve more affordable housing options in opportunity rich communities. Moreover, streets must be redesigned for safe walking, rolling, and biking. Risking life and limb to reach a Metro stop or a grocery store is cruel. Corner lots provide some of the best locations to redesign our communities for complete streets.

Lastly, ACT urges the County Council to consult with homebuilders, including Enterprise Community Partners and Habitat for Humanity, to ensure housing actually gets built. Workforce housing should not face more hurdles than homes that are being torn down all the time and then rebuilt as a larger house. This is an equity issue. For example, people who depend on public transportation due to disability deserve more accessible housing options such as apartments near their means of transportation. The county should not put up more barriers. Changes in the economy and demographics have coincided with more people looking for housing that is not one home on one plot of land because they are relatively more affordable.⁶

Further to our three primary suggestions, ACT would also support rezoning unused shopping center parking lots for mixed-use development in light of the loss of retail post pandemic. In addition, the County Council could take this opportunity to start the process of adding more areas to master plans for rezoning. These plans set the direction for future land use, and more housing for the workforce should be part of the future.

Decades of land use policy decisions contributed to having a housing stock that is broadly unaffordable. We now have a situation in which our land use is undermining the financial health of the county. Montgomery County is failing to attract and retain the workforce and employers we need to grow our tax base to provide essential services.⁷ A robust tax base is what pays for

⁵ Knapp, Gerrit J. et al. "Purple Line: Equitable Transit-Oriented Development Strategy." *National Center for Smart Growth*, September 2022, p. 26, <https://www.njtod.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Purple-Line-Equitable-Transit-Oriented-Development-Strategy-Full-Report.pdf>. Accessed 9 March 2025.

⁶ Shendruk, Amanda, et al. "Opinion: Here's Why Townhouses are Quickly Becoming the New American Dream." *The Washington Post*, 21 October 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2024/american-dream-buy-townhouse/>. Accessed 9 March 2025.

⁷ Kraft, Benjamin. "The Third Place: Repositioning Montgomery County for Prosperity, Part 2: Montgomery County's Income Shifts in Regional and National Contexts." Montgomery County Planning Department, 13 March 2024,

schools, parks, and libraries. It will help pay for the infrastructure we need to address the climate crisis that is affecting us all right now in addition to the housing crisis. Montgomery County has committed itself to world-class mass transit and active transportation options in Thrive 2050, the Pedestrian Master Plan, the Bicycle Master Plan, and the Climate Action Plan. Public services such as transit depend on financial support from both public use and funding. More residents means fewer zeros in the out years of capital budget projects.

Montgomery County needs various policies from zoning reform to allocating more money in the budget to ensure current and future residents can simply find a place to live. The County Council can bring a future of housing abundance and affordability closer to reality with the passage of a robust ZTA 25-02 plus the overall package that comprises Workforce Housing N.O.W. It is necessary for building sustainable communities near transit that are economically and socially healthy.

Sincerely,

Michael Larkin
Vice President, Housing and Land Use
Action Committee for Transit