

September 16, 2025

Montgomery County Council  
Council Office Building  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Council President Stewart and members of the Council:

## **INTRO**

My name is Rich Biedrzycki, and I serve as a leader of Strong Towns DMV, an organization dedicated to making our streets safer and our communities more financially resilient and affordable. Strong Towns DMV strongly supports the University Boulevard Corridor Plan, which is an important step toward addressing our housing crisis, improving access to high-quality transit, and achieving the county's Vision Zero goals.

## **HOUSING:**

The University Boulevard Corridor (UBC) Plan is a critical first step toward tackling Montgomery County's severe housing affordability crisis. The median home price is \$645,000 (Redfin), and the average monthly rent is \$2,405 (Zillow). These high costs are draining the finances of county residents, with 23% of renters and 40% of homeowners spending a majority of their income on housing alone. This is an enormous financial burden, especially on essential workers, who earn far less than the county's median income. A first-year teacher earns roughly 50% of the county's median income, a new firefighter about 47%, and a starting social worker about 53%. When these critical workers are priced out of the county, the housing crisis becomes an education crisis, a public safety crisis, and a public health crisis. It also reduces the economic vitality of our region and prevents the next generation from being able to thrive and raise families in the area.

The plan modernizes zoning along the corridor to allow for an increased variety of housing types so that residents aren't forced into the most expensive option—detached single-family homes, with a median price of \$835,000. It would allow a broader mix of homes, such as townhomes, duplexes, triplexes, and small multifamily buildings. These options come at far more attainable price points, with townhomes averaging \$500,000 and condos/co-ops about \$279,000.

Permitting far more of these naturally affordable housing types is how we make homeownership possible for the people who keep our county running. Teachers could live near the schools where they teach. Nurses could live close to the hospitals and doctor's offices where they care for us. Firefighters could live in the communities they protect. Embracing the UBC Plan's zoning changes would bring affordability, economic growth, and a stronger future for Montgomery County.

## **LAND VALUE:**

If premium transit (like BRT) is added in this corridor, past experience indicates that this would also lead to higher land prices. However, increases in land value, generated by these improved transit services, should be returned to the transit agency that created it. Practicing "land value return" would avoid land price increases and ensure greater affordability and less displacement

in the corridor.

To return this value to the county, the property tax penalty on building improvements could be reduced and the rate imposed on the value of the land increased. The lower tax rate applied to building values would make them cheaper to construct, improve and maintain. The higher rate applied to land values would help keep land prices lower. Thus, without new spending or loss of revenue, this land value return “tax shift” could make both buildings and land more affordable while encouraging infill development where land values are highest – which is where we want development to occur. This would help in achieving the goals of Thrive Montgomery 2050 of economic competitiveness, complete communities, environmental resilience, compact growth, and housing for all.

## **BRT:**

The next important aspect of the UBC plan is the implementation of the BRT stations. The buses on this route are already the most used in the state, with more than 12,000 riders per weekday. There is clearly great demand for public transportation along this corridor. By completing the BRT route in the corridor, the County would be able to continue its expansion of a more connected network of public transportation, linking this corridor to the red line of the Metro system. This will boost economic activity of the corridor as it will become more accessible to the rest of the County and the region at-large.

However, these stations must be completed in a reasonable timeframe. The BRT was initially proposed in 2007 by then Councilmember Elrich. Since then, only one section of the network has been implemented, the US 29 branch. Even then, only half of the US 29 route is operational. For this plan to be truly successful, these BRT stations need to actually be built. Otherwise, we could see increased congestion as development proceeds without the improved transit network to relieve the pressure of increased development. Thus, it is imperative that the County begin planning and designing the UBC BRT as soon as possible.

## **AMENDMENTS:**

To make sure the Plan provides the most benefits possible, we propose here a series of amendments and recommendations.

First, all residential zones within the corridor boundary should be upzoned to increase density along the entire BRT and transit corridor, allowing for duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and townhouses by-right. At a minimum, residential properties should be zoned as R-40 to allow for duplexes by-right, and parcels closer to the corridor should be zoned to allow for townhouses (TLD, TMD, or THD). Transit-oriented housing is one of the most powerful tools we have to lower costs, reduce car dependence, and meet our climate goals. Limiting density to certain segments misses a great opportunity to put more residents within walking distance of reliable, high-capacity transit. Every additional home near the BRT is another family that can afford to live here without a car, another customer supporting local businesses, and another boost to our tax base without expanding infrastructure costs.

Second, increase the number of planned protected crossings. Despite acknowledging the long distances between many of the existing protected crossings, the Plan still includes multiple stretches with more than 750 feet between protected crossings. These distances lead to a more uncomfortable and inefficient walking network, making on-foot trips more difficult and more

time-consuming. Having more frequent protected crossings would also indicate a more active environment which would pressure drivers to slow down, making the corridor safer.

Third, commit to high-performance BRT design. For the corridor to deliver maximum efficiency and return on investment, the BRT must be center-running in dedicated lanes, with transit signal priority (TSP) at intersections—anything less risks slower speeds, less reliability, and reduced ridership. A world-class BRT system will make the corridor more attractive for both residents and employers, multiplying the benefits of the density added.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Strong Towns DMV strongly supports the University Boulevard Corridor Plan because it addresses Montgomery County's most pressing challenges: housing affordability, roadway safety, equitable mobility, and environmental sustainability. The Plan takes a comprehensive approach by adding diverse, attainable housing; redesigning streets to protect all travelers; concentrating growth near high-quality transit; and promoting environmentally responsible development. To fully realize these benefits, we urge the County to adopt our requested amendments. By implementing these changes, the County can create a safer, more affordable, and more resilient corridor that serves both current and future residents.