

# **Aging in Community Minutes**

**February 11, 2025**

Attendance:

Betsy Carrier (co-chair); Wayne Berman (co-chair); Commissioners: David Engel, Laurie Pross, Kendell Matthews, Joyce Dubow, Kate Stein, Linda Bergofsky, Mary Sweeney, Peter Illig (HHS Staff), Pazit Aviv (HHS staff), Lisa Govoni (Dept of Planning), Somer Cross (DHCA), Gail Lucas (Dept. of Permitting), Neil Blanc (consultant), Dean Packard (developer), Tadese Tafere (guest), Eric KuoHwa Wang (guest)

The meeting was called to order at 9:30

The minutes from the January 11 meeting were approved.

## **Meeting overview:**

To provide updates and to discuss affordable housing for older adults in Montgomery County, with a particular emphasis on the Design for Life program and the Home Accessibility Rehabilitation Program. Challenges and potential solutions for the Design for Life program were discussed, including the need for better outreach, simplification of the application process, and incentives for developers. The committee also identified several action items, including promoting the Design for Life program, working on a rental program, creating a housing clearing house, and facilitating a work session to bring accessibility to the forefront.

## **Meeting summary and Next steps**

- Organize an in-person work session with other commissions, developers, and stakeholders to discuss bringing accessibility to the forefront in housing development
- Advocate for creating a clearinghouse for accessible housing information for older adults and people with disabilities
- Explore developing a HARP-type program for rental properties
- Promote Design for Life program through villages and 50 Plus in Montgomery TV show
- Follow up with Summer Cross for suggestions on further discussions with the county regarding Design for Life and accessibility issues
- Discuss at the next meeting how to implement Wayne's suggested action items and follow up on Design for Life program improvements
- Neil to send his paper on Design for Life program improvements to the Commission
- Dean to keep the Commission updated on the progress of the 123-unit affordable housing project in Damascus

- Commission members to send any additional suggestions for following up on Design for Life issues to Betsy

### **Presentations:**

Panel 1: Montgomery County Housing Initiatives Update. Speakers were Lisa Govoni, Housing Supervisor and Somer Cross Chief of Housing. They provided an update status of planning and regulations that may help to address housing availability and accessibility.

Lisa presents an update on housing initiatives in Montgomery County. The planning department is working to meet regional housing targets, aiming to build 31,000 units by 2030. Recent efforts include a zoning amendment allowing more housing on faith-based properties, increased use of Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) programs to support affordable housing, and updates to accessory dwelling unit regulations. Lisa also discusses the "More Housing Now" package, which includes measures to promote workforce housing, convert vacant office spaces to residential use, and expand homeownership assistance programs.

#### Senior Developments and Infrastructure Concerns

In the meeting, Lisa discussed the latest legislation and senior developments in Montgomery County. Somer presented a list of senior developments under construction or in the pipeline, including the Grandview, Willow Manor at Cabin Branch, Pinnacle of Bethesda, Heritage Gardens, Potomac, Hillandale Gateway, Corso Chevy Chase, and Wildwood. Lisa also mentioned the Faith-Based Development Initiative and the Mixed Income Community-Based Plan Process. Kate raised concerns about the county's housing shortfall and the potential impact of new developments on infrastructure. Lisa responded by mentioning the creation of an Infrastructure Task Force and the need for additional funding mechanisms. Joyce raised concerns about the impact of new developments on hospitals and emergency services. Wayne and Joyce also discussed the potential for affordable housing in the county. The conversation ended with David introducing the next panel on the Design for Life program and the Home Accessibility and Rehabilitation program.

Panel 2: Focus on improvements being considered for the Design for Life Program (DFL) and the Home Accessibility Rehabilitation Program (HARP). These programs help pay for home modifications that help adults with temporary or permanent physical disabilities remain in their homes. Speakers: David Engel, Past CoA Commissioner; Somer Cross; Neil Blanc, Rodgers Consulting; and Gail Lucas, Director of Permitting Services.

#### HARP and Design for Life Programs

David initiated a discussion about the Home Accessibility Rehabilitation Program (HARP) and Design for Life, two programs utilized differently. Summer provided an overview of HARP, its funding mechanism, utilization, current drawbacks, and potential advocacy. She noted that the program has been in operation for less than three years and has utilized close to a million

dollars in that timeframe. The program is funded annually from the Council budget, with a current proposal to increase the annual asks. However, one drawback is the lack of programming for rental marketplaces, which David emphasized should be a focus for the Commission on Aging. Gail then discussed the Design for Life program, which has been in existence for over ten years and is a tax incentive program aimed at encouraging more development of accessible housing. She emphasized that the program is not just for people with disabilities or seniors, but for anyone who loves their home and wants to stay in it for as long as possible. Gail also mentioned the challenge of applying the program to rental properties, but noted that property owners of rental units can take advantage of the program.

### Design for Life Program Updates

Gail discussed the three levels of the Design for Life (DFL) program, which includes accessibility features, visitable, and livable. She highlighted changes to the program, including the addition of new accessibility features such as lever door handles, chairlift devices, and non-slip flooring. Gail also explained that the permitting process for accessibility features has been simplified, with auto-issued permits for highlighted items. She clarified the tax credit amounts for each level of the DFL program and the process for submitting proof of payment for the tax credit. Gail also mentioned that the tax credit application is handled by the finance department, with Michael Parent being the key contact.

### Design for Life Program Discussion

Gail presented the Design for Life program, emphasizing its underutilization despite being funded for \$500,000 annually. She highlighted the program's outreach efforts and its participation in various conferences and events. David expressed his appreciation for the program's changes, particularly the improvements in usability. Joyce raised questions about counseling for those contemplating home modifications and the eligibility for the credit after making modifications. Gail clarified that one can apply for the credit within a year of making modifications. David suggested the idea of having certified Design for Life contractors for better guidance. Kate asked about the reimbursement for visitable houses, which Gail confirmed as up to 50% of the cost.

### Tax Credit Program Challenges Discussed

Kate, Gail, David, and the Commission discussed the challenges and potential solutions for the tax credit program for home modifications. Gail clarified that while a permit is not required in advance, a form must be filled out to allow inspectors to verify the modifications. The group acknowledged the complexity of the process and its deterrent effect on homeowners. The

Commission suggested engaging with contractors and developers to simplify the process and increase utilization. Gail mentioned that the application process is being streamlined and should be up and running by the end of the month. The Commission also proposed conducting focus groups with developers to gather their input on making the program more accessible. Neil added that the issue is a lack of proper incentive and that the program's complexity is a significant challenge.

### Improving Outreach and Utilization of Program

Wayne expressed concern about the lack of outreach to village communities, which he believes could benefit from the Design for Life program. Gail confirmed that they would attend events and organizations to promote the program. David suggested that the Commission on Aging could work on advocacy for the program. Neil discussed the low utilization rate of the program, suggesting that the funding could be increased or used for better outreach, purchasing better outreach, or paying for permitting reviews. Gail and Dean confirmed that they are accountable to the Council and various commissions, and that they are working to improve the program's usability. Dean suggested that in-person training could be beneficial for homeowners.

### Design for Life Program Challenges

The meeting focused on the challenges and potential solutions for promoting and implementing the Design for Life program. Dean shared his experience as a developer and engineer, highlighting the difficulties in financing projects and the lack of interest from builders and developers. Wayne suggested using a small percentage of the funds to pay for contractors to attend training at Montgomery College, creating a resource pool for Design for Life. Neil emphasized the need for the program to succeed first before contractors can buy into it. David questioned why other developers haven't adopted the program, and Dean suggested making it part of the expedited review process as an incentive. The team agreed on the need for more direction and creative use of funds to promote the program.

### Montgomery County's Accessible Design Challenges

Dean expressed his determination to continue his work despite the challenges he faces, and his desire to make Montgomery County a leader in accessible design. Neil discussed the need for a work group to address the conditional use requirements in the Montgomery County zoning code that restrict the implementation of the Design for Life program. He suggested that the program should lean towards incentives rather than restrictions to encourage development. David suggested that the program could be broken into two categories: one for homeowners and contractors, and another for developers. Kate emphasized the need to move forward

despite the county executive's opposition to development. Wayne outlined several action items for the committee, including promoting Design for Life, working on a rental program, creating a housing clearing house, and facilitating a work session to bring accessibility to the forefront. Don suggested having a summer session to discuss further with the county on these issues.

Next meeting of the Committee will be March 11 where we will discuss the implications of the demographics of the older population in Montgomery County.