



COMMISSION ON AGING

February 11, 2022

The Honorable Gabe Albornoz
President, Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Council President Albornoz,

As a follow-up to your request at the County Council's Health and Human Services Committee Budget Hearing on November 17th, the Montgomery County Commission on Aging (CoA) is pleased to provide our perspective on the THRIVE 2050 Plan. The CoA is authorized by the Older Americans Act and was established by Montgomery County in 1974 to advise County government on the needs, interests, and issues of older adult residents, and to advocate on their behalf at the local, state, and national levels.

The CoA fully supports the concept of social equity as an overall guiding principle for all that we do. In general, we feel that the THRIVE 2050 Plan presents a strong vision to move forward on these priorities and principles (e.g., racial equity and age diversity), particularly as it impacts older adults in the County.

The CoA's overall view of the THRIVE 2050 draft plan is favorable. Given the audience for the Plan, we suggest that the technical jargon in the report be eliminated in favor of more consumer-friendly terms that make the Plan easier to understand by the public. For example, the Plan talks about an update to the zoning code using something called "Form-based elements." Unless someone is familiar with "Form-based elements," this terminology is unknown to the public, bureaucratic, and masks what is to be done. We urge that jargon and technical terminology be explained or eliminated.

To further strengthen the Plan, we offer the following thoughts on four key sections in the Plan: Housing; Complete Communities; Design, Arts, and Culture; and Transportation and Communications Networks.

Housing: The CoA supports the THRIVE 2050 Plan recommendation for more housing options and opportunities because of the anticipated increase in the older adult population and in the changes of the racial and economic make-up of the County. We offer the following comments for this section of the Plan:

- We support continued efforts to expand the availability of affordable rental housing.
- Affordable "missing middle" housing can benefit many different kinds of residents from middle income residents seeking a "starter home" to older adults wishing to downsize in or near their neighborhood, but are priced out of the market. As the plan notes, missing middle housing also can facilitate intergenerational interaction and aging in place, both of which are goals of the CoA.

Department of Health and Human Services

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- The CoA supports design for life policies, and we strongly suggest that the THRIVE 2050 Plan consider adding a recommendation that building codes require design for life /universal design (or, at a minimum, safety features such as grab bars, wheel chair access, no-step entrances, wider doors, elevators, etc.) in new multifamily senior housing and for modifications when upgrading existing housing for older adults who may choose to age-in-place. Such options and opportunities can have a great impact on the livability of housing and communities for older adults.
- We also recommend that the first four metrics for measuring success or failure, presented near the end of the Housing section, disaggregate the data by age and gender in addition to race.
- The CoA is pleased to see the Plan’s support for additional funding for the Housing Initiative Funds (HIF).

Complete Communities: The CoA believes the concepts presented in this section encourage integration and diversity of communities. By supporting a broader range of types of households and incomes levels, the concepts presented have the potential to reduce the concentration of poverty and increase racial and economic equity for all older adults in Montgomery County. The complete community concepts can encourage intergenerational housing and may enable older adults to have an active lifestyle in the communities where they may have lived for many years. We realize some older adults have resisted this concept as they worry about removing single-family home zoning restrictions because of the potential for more congestion and purportedly reduced housing values. Although this concept can potentially pit high-income and low-income older adults against one another, we believe that in the longer term, the overall benefit to older adults will outweigh the concerns. In addition, the concept contributes to stable communities and reduces the possibility that some older adults might have to move out of Montgomery County because of the high cost of housing. Notwithstanding our overall support for the concepts outlined in this section, we are concerned that the plan lacks sufficient changes to policies, regulations, or procedures to understand how the concepts can be actualized.

Design, Arts, and Culture: Overall, the CoA supports the concepts presented in this section. In particular, we believe the following quote on Page 41 is an important guiding principle to the Plan; “A desire for human interaction cuts across lines of age, race and ethnicity, and class and is critical to the happiness of individuals as well as the collective well-being of a community. Encouraging different kinds of people to interact in public spaces is important to building a sense of community with shared interests and values. Arts and culture spaces and programming can help us better understand and appreciate each other, strengthening support for diversity and inclusion and building trust.” In addition, we believe the THRIVE 2050 Plan would benefit from a high-level description of the anticipated changes to codes, design guidelines, regulatory tools and zoning modifications needed to facilitate shared use, encourage walkable communities, and create social interaction. Clear standards governing acceptable community-based forms will encourage the introduction of different housing types and neighborhood-serving retail centers, where essential services are within walking distance of most residences. As noted above, we are concerned about the lack of specifics with respect to the required policy, legislative, or regulatory changes needed to make the vision of the Plan a reality. The Plan should present how the goals and policies will be actualized.

Transportation and Communication Networks: We appreciate the goal of the THRIVE 2050 Plan to “create a world-class transportation system.” However, it appears that a world-class transportation system simply translates into just more buses, be they electric or hybrid. It does not create an environment for a broad range of innovative services that will serve not only older adults, but a range of demographic, racial, and spatial portions of the County. The Plan should create a vision where demand-responsive service in both urban and rural settings can function. For example, this might include transportation services like Uber and Lyft, especially in rural areas where public transportation is less accessible. The Plan also needs to account for the growth in privately-owned electric and autonomous vehicles that will inevitably be a part of our future transportation system, servicing all age groups in the County.

As the County begins to expand its broadband and wireless 5G network, we strongly believe that the THRIVE 2050 Plan needs to better incorporate ways to expand the use of that network. For example, the

Plan needs to create a vision for the use of technology that will support, strengthen, and enable innovation in health care services, especially for home and community-based services for older adults.

The Plan also should create a pathway to use the expanded broadband and wireless network that can enhance on-demand transportation services, emergency response, and future vehicle-to-vehicle communications. The THRIVE 2050 Plan must demonstrate that the County is ready to embrace the technological innovations that will be coming over the next 25-plus years and use it to enable improved services for County residents, young and old.

We hope these recommendations will help enhance the THRIVE 2050 Plan. We would appreciate the opportunity to continue to be a part of the Plan review process as specific components are further developed and articulated. Thank you again for your support and interest in the CoA and the opportunity to provide these comments.

Sincerely,

Barbara Selter

Barbara Selter, Chair