

To: Hans Riemer, Chair
PHED Committee

From: Tiffany Ward, Chief Equity Officer
Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice

Re: ORESJ Comments on Thrive Montgomery 2050, Public Hearing Draft

Date: August 16, 2021

SUMMARY: The County has set the goal of reducing and ultimately eliminating racial and other disparities experienced by residents of color across Montgomery County. ORESJ is focused on advancing racial equity and dismantling structural racism within County Government.

Thrive Montgomery 2050 is the first general plan to propose racial equity policies to address the structural racism in County land use policies and practices.

ORESJ strongly supports the inclusion of Racial Equity as a goal in Thrive Montgomery 2050 and recommends critical improvements to fully address Racial Equity in Land Use in the General Plan:

First, there should be more community outreach to residents of color, done in a way that reaches them where they are, and then, and only then, there should be more County Council public hearing dates in the fall. The community input process for the drafting of the Racial Equity legislation is an example of an excellent outreach process. As a result, the MORE coalition, and many local non-profits participated with substantive amendments that became part of the new law. That has not happened here.

Second, and of equal importance, the Planning Board Draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050 must be reframed to address the institutional failings of government and the private sector to create policies and provide services to communities of color that are the right of all residents.

Finally, Thrive Montgomery should contain a separate chapter on Racial Equity that neither the Public Hearing Draft nor the Planning Board Draft has. This new chapter should include more historical detail about patterns of discrimination, and put back the greater historical detail that was in the Public Hearing Draft. A complete chapter can then be followed by detailed recommendations that can be found in one place, and not scattered throughout the draft.

Here are comments on specific sections of the Planning Board Draft and the Public Hearing Draft:

1. Planning Board Draft: Racial Equity and Social Inclusion

- p. 13, line one: *“who need”* should be changed to *“who are equally entitled to”/“who deserve”*. It is important to make clear that access to opportunity is not *“needed”* because of deficits among diverse populations, rather access to opportunity is required as a guarantee of full citizenship/recognition of equal rights as community members.

- p. 13, line three: *“But past patterns of discrimination – some intentional, some unintentional – have left many communities geographically, economically, and socially isolated.”* More historical detail about patterns of discrimination is needed. A vision statement such as this, is a prime opportunity for helping the community/County build a shared understanding of discriminatory policies and practices and the disparate negative outcomes they helped to create. A historical picture is needed for redressing inequities and imagining a more just and equitable future.

The section should be as explicit about what the discriminatory policies and practices were/are and how they have affected housing and school segregation in the county in the past and now.

- p. 13, line 5: *“After the Civil War...”*: It wasn’t just discrimination or exclusion from educational opportunities, health care and basic public services, it was predation and exploitation as well— wage gaps, high-cost lending, unequal quality and access to health care and education.
- p.13, line 8, emphasis added: *“Redlining and restrictive covenants created geographic divisions that have left a **legacy of injustice.**”* Redlining and restrictive covenants not only created “geographic divisions” (segregation), redlining and restrictive covenants also barred Black Americans from building wealth (the type of wealth used to invest in higher education, start businesses, and pass to heirs). Additionally, while these efforts did separate people by class, the racial dimensions of their segregation cannot be understated. Class can change, while race is fixed—it’s important to view these divisions within that context.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-27/-the-black-butterfly-maps-a-path-to-racial-equity>
- p. 14, line 1, emphasis added: *“Today communities with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities also show **lagging median household incomes.**”* This sentence needs context to explain why this is the case. As written it incorrectly/unintentionally implies that the reason for lagging household incomes is because they are racial and ethnic minorities. This is not true. Financial precarity is the function of many factors including racism and xenophobia. In Montgomery County, the factors include low wage job growth, concentration of people of color in those jobs, high rates of being uninsured, declining business starts, and lack of housing and displacement.
- P. 18: Environmental Resilience Section: *“The adverse effects of a changing climate will be felt most acutely by the poor and people of color, who are likely to suffer a disproportionate share of the damage to real property and personal health.”* This is true, AND it is also important to explain why, particularly as it relates to land use and zoning—patterns of disinvestment extended to infrastructure maintenance and management, limited/exclusionary housing options in locations facing greater risk of damages caused by climate change.

2. Public Hearing Draft: Racial Equity in Thrive 2050

- P. 29: “Policies that specifically support racial equity and social justice include:
 - creating more affordable housing in amenity-rich areas;
 - ensuring existing and new communities of color receive an equitable share of services and investments;
 - promoting the equitable distribution of prosperity throughout the county;
 - addressing health disparities and narrowing the gap in health outcomes; and
 - implementing a shared-power approach to ensure previously marginalized residents have a voice and influence in planning and decision-making processes.”

These are not policies, rather they are aspirations. Policies can help to realize these aspirations, but without statements about “how”, including emphasis on collecting and disaggregating data and engaging directly with the community, these so-called “policies” are unlikely to hold water and/or create the kinds of changes articulated in the Plan’s vision.

- P. 30: *“While equity is the desired outcome the way to get there is to prioritize marginalized populations.”* How does Thrive Montgomery 2050 do this? The Public Hearing Draft of Thrive Montgomery was 100+ pages long and littered with terms and assumptions that are not familiar to the lay person. The Public Hearing Draft is shorter, but no less difficult to understand. There are few, if any, definitions, for terms and concepts that are foreign to those who are not familiar with urban planning. This makes Thrive Montgomery inaccessible to the average resident. There should be a concerted effort to make this long-range 30-year plan accessible to the whole community.

What efforts have been made to engage communities of color on Thrive Montgomery 2050? How is Thrive 2050 accessible to all residents, is the document accessible to screen readers? Are there plans to create a plain language version of this document, coupled with outreach, that prioritizes clarity and understanding?

- The various discussions on Racial Equity are scattered throughout the Public Hearing Draft. Unlike the Planning Board Draft, the Public Hearing Draft has many more substantive, detailed recommendations in the form of goals, policies and actions. These recommendations, however, are lost in a sea of other recommendations. Because this is the first time that a general plan has directly addressed Racial Equity, and because it is one of the three overriding outcomes, ORESJ believes that Racial Equity should be cohesively addressed in a separate chapter. This chapter should be more explicit about the policies and practices that led to the County's current state of housing segregation, and conversely, this section should also provide more detailed land use recommendations that will help remedy segregation, and address real concerns about displacement.