

Testimony on Thrive Montgomery 2050—June 29, 2021

My name is Elizabeth Joyce, and I am a longtime resident of Silver Spring. I support the goals of Thrive 2050 but not the dubious claim that **By Right** densification of single-family zones is the only solution to our future housing needs. Successful densification plans from other jurisdictions show why Thrive falls short.¹

Vancouver, British Columbia’s Brent Toderian, who led his city’s model plan, rejects what he calls “[stupid density](#),” sweeping but poorly calibrated zoning changes. “I don’t believe in an absolute NIMBY code,” he says, “but I also don’t buy the argument that we should just get rid of all zoning codes and have at it, build as much as we can.” By eliminating single-family zoning in hopes that “complete communities” will magically evolve, Thrive would do just that.

Although these walkable communities form the basis of Thrive’s future zoning plans, Thrive as currently proposed provides almost no evidence-based documentation of how the County would fund and plan the infrastructure required for these models to work. Furthermore, the executive agencies with high-level expertise in the issues affecting these plans have not been contacted, let alone engaged, in devising this comprehensive 30-year plan.

Vancouver starts with a “[deliberate regulatory framework](#).... Every decision is made...by working backward from a clear vision of what city residents want.” But our Planning Board has done the opposite. Despite public forums held over the past few months, the Planning Board has included few of residents’ suggestions in its proposed Thrive’s plan. For example, Thrive doubles the originally suggested radius for densification around Metro from one-half to one mile² and eliminates

¹ *I am aware that Thrive is a proposal not yet approved by the Council and represents a “vision” rather than a fully developed strategic plan. Yet the thrust of recent Council proposals such as ZTA 20-07 in December 2020 and the constantly rebranded labels—from “affordable” to “attainable” to “attainable housing options”—as well as the comments of the Planning Board chair and staff over the past six months—clearly indicate the indiscriminate, density-based penetration of single-family neighborhoods advocated by these powerful influencers of our County’s 30-year plan).*

² ZTA 20-07 proposed eliminating parking requirements within one-half mile, not one mile, of Metro and other public transit. Thrive recommends “removing regulatory barriers such as

minimum parking requirements (ignoring Missing Middle best practices for genuinely walkable communities. See missing middle expert Tony Perez to the [Planning Board, March 16, 2021](#), who recommended at least one parking space per unit in multifamily dwellings).

Even more important is the failure to integrate [successful models for walkability](#) from experts around the world. Walkability standards vary, but in general, there should be only ¼ mile from the center of a walkable area to the perimeter. But our Planning Board, fixated on a misinformed concept of the radius for density, is advocating for quadrupling to one mile the radius for densification. And also, where such models have been successfully implemented, planners have engaged community members, followed best practices, and been open to give-and-take between community residents and planners. Our County appears resistant to such processes, while claiming to be following their “successes” in other communities. And even more concerning is that while a groundswell of community concern is rising, the Council appears to be doubling down on flawed previous proposals and processes for planning our next 30 years.

It’s also noteworthy that in prosperous Vancouver, not unlike prosperous Montgomery County, recent housing prices have skyrocketed to the point the benchmark rate for ALL housing types is over [one million dollars](#) in 2018. How will Montgomery County avoid replicating this commonly repeated trend that typifies even jurisdictions with much more sophisticated and well calibrated plans than Thrive proposes? And how will our County prevent the gentrification, and elimination of genuinely affordable housing, as developers buy up and convert small properties owned by lower- and middle-income residents?

Under Thrive, the County will likely continue using ZTAs (zoning text amendments), which bypass the infrastructure requirements for the schools, roads, public safety, and stormwater runoff management that all residents need. Unless paid to do so, developers produce houses, not infrastructure, but Thrive leaves these details to chance. Furthermore, how can citizens trust that once Thrive becomes law, the Council will not regularly grant developers further ZTAs

parking requirements within one-half mile of Metro and Purple Line stations” (Goal 8.3: Policy 8:3:1)

to circumvent setback, height, and other compatibility requirements for new multifamily units in single-family neighborhoods?

Magical thinking will not solve our County's housing problems. Even before considering "attainable housing options" for upper middle-class future residents, the Council should insist on a plan to provide genuinely affordable housing for low- and middle-income future residents. And before enacting an unworkable urban-based "vision" for our geographically diverse 500-square-mile County, which is NOT a city, the Council should insist on a better plan. The cost of delaying the passage of a highly flawed plan will be much less than that of going back to the drawing board, engaging all stakeholders, and devising a plan that all our residents can live with. What's the rush? It's a 30-year plan, and we need to get it right.