

December 16, 2021

Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th floor
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear President Alborno and Members of the County Council,

I am submitting these comments in lieu of testifying at the listening sessions on November 30th and December 14th. For clarification, I asked to speak but was told I was not included because I had testified before in June of 2021 when the Thrive Document was in draft form at the Planning Board. It has since undergone many changes, but I was not allowed to testify even though it is now a different document. Also at the first session there were 30 citizens who didn't even bother to show up. I think you were relieved not to hear from citizens. I did not appreciate being silenced.

Thrive will form the policy and legal foundation for long-term and large scale community development and redevelopment. Many Council Members along with CM Riemer insist that "Thrive has nothing to do with zoning". It is a policy document that is a vision and a strategy for the next 30 years. However it is a legal document that has to be in place when zoning changes are recommended and introduced. Those ZTA's are already composed and waiting in the wings. When they are introduced, Thrive will be presented as the foundation for these changes and will be repeatedly cited, emphasized and relied upon, chapter and verse. Thrive will create the legal requirement that a ZTA must be consistent with the General Plan. Those Council Members who repeatedly say that "Thrive does nothing...it is just a vision" are disingenuous and misleading the public. Council member Katz said at the Council Briefing on Thrive that " We shouldn't keep saying that Thrive doesn't change anything. It is a land use plan. We should remind people that this is a complex issue and it will affect their lives. It should not be taken lightly". CM Katz continued to say that "the amount of density referred to in the Thrive document is a number that we need to know before we begin discussions."

There are so many holes in Thrive. First and foremost, Thrive should have an in-depth chapter on Economic Competitiveness. Montgomery County is facing a severe financial strain exacerbated by slow economic growth. We have to attract jobs to the county with good salaries so that people will be able to afford their homes. Household incomes have declined over the last 15 years. This is not sustainable. Complete communities and more density will not create jobs, except for the developers and builders who don't even live in the County. The rapid growth of jobs in Virginia has nothing to do with complete communities. Just a case in point, my two daughters left the area because jobs were better elsewhere. They are not coming back. Montgomery County residents deserve a more comprehensive discussion of the interrelationship between economic development and planning for our future growth. Builders will not build housing unless there are jobs- not the other way around. We need an environment where innovation, job training and entrepreneurship are allowed to flourish.

Thrive Montgomery's recommendations cannot and should not be implemented with a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Area Master and Sector Plan processes should be in place to help refine plans tailored to specific neighborhoods. This is an established process that has been used successfully. It should continue. The use of Area Master and Sector Plans insure that there is specific and appropriate development that secures local support for the proposed changes. Citizens' Advisory Groups should be incorporated in the planning process as it affects their neighborhoods. People are not opposed to thoughtful beneficial changes. They are opposed to changes that have a "cookie cutter" like principal that does not consider the very different parts of the County that exist.

Thrive will not solve the problem of affordable housing and racial disparities in home ownership. Building more density in already dense areas will create expensive housing. Land is expensive and the infrastructure needed is too expensive for the County to afford. When the biggest employer in the County is THE COUNTY, you have a problem. These duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes and townhomes will not be affordable. Townhomes start at \$800,000. This push for increased density along already dense corridors is riddled with problems. The areas under consideration will be the focus of developers funded by hedge fund and private equity groups. The homes on the chopping block are not "McMansions", but the smaller tract homes that can be bought more

cheaply. The homes sacrificed to businesses with absentee landlords will be those that are Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH). Swaths of existing affordable homes or apartment units will be sold to the highest bidder. See this latest from the WP: [Global investors profited from U.S. rental homes, foreclosure crisis - Washington Post](#)

Take Battery Lane as an example of over 400 affordable apartments that will turn into luxury high-rises with a small percentage of MPDU's. There is a net loss of affordable units.

The Thrive view of compact development that supports “dense, vibrant and energized” communities does not take into consideration that the work environment has changed after almost two years of a pandemic. Suburban homes for families are a material component of the County's stock of attainable middle -income housing. This lifestyle is desired by many families as well as seniors. Households consisting of one person have not increased exponentially. In fact they have only increased by 4%. The “vision” that a huge swath of the county is looking for dense single person units is misleading. The work/home pattern is rapidly changing. Many people have been working remotely for almost 2 years. This pattern is here to stay. It may moderate a bit when we finally control the virus to endemic levels, but the genie is out of the bottle. More people will opt to work from home, if just part-time. There is a great need for space and home offices. That need will increase and space is, and will be, necessary. Do not denigrate suburban developments where families, seniors as well as singles, find the right mixture of amenities that they want at a price they can afford.

Transportation is a keystone of dense population. Thrive does not account for how this infrastructure will be planned and financially supported. Also storm water management, sewage capacity, grid and electrical capacity are all parts of infrastructure that will have to be paid for and sustained. Schools will have to be expanded or rebuilt. Attracting more people because of more housing will not build a tax base unless people have jobs that pay well. That means we have to attract business first. We need to attract jobs at 6 figures to drive the economy. More density with affordable houses for lower income groups won't pay the property taxes to support all the infrastructure needed. Impact taxes paid by developers is always the stated solution. Those taxes are not enough to sustain this enormous new infrastructure.

My last observation is that the Montgomery County Planning Board, led by Casey Anderson and Gwen Wright (who doesn't live in Montgomery County), has spent millions of dollars in the creation of this "vision" that is Thrive Montgomery 2050. The Planning Board and Staff have done this during a pandemic, the likes of which we as a county and country, have never seen. The country has lost over 800000 people. This is an epic event, not equaled by the Civil War, the Epidemic of 1918 or WW2. It has changed the way we live, work, and interact with each other. Public transportation may never be the same. Living and working where we live have become the norm. Sea changes are happening and Thrive has become an outdated vision of its time. This plan should be stopped, shelved or rewritten to reflect what we are seeing and living with now, and what will necessarily change in 30 years. Life is not going to revert back to what we once knew. The virus has changed all that. Please look around and understand what is different. When you do, give your citizens a voice in this process. Thank you,

Patricia Johnson
Chevy Chase, Maryland 20815
Board Member of Kenwood Citizens Association
Executive Board of CCCFH