

11/14/2021

To: Montgomery County Council

Re: Thrive 2050

Dear members of the Montgomery County Council:

We, the elected representatives of the Town of Somerset, in Chevy Chase, MD, submit the following statements and recommendations on Thrive 2050 to the Montgomery County Council.

Our point of view:

We make the following six statements summarizing our point of view on Thrive 2050:

- (1) **We strongly believe that we must build inclusive and diverse communities and address climate change, which are some of the key drivers of Thrive 2050.** We applaud efforts to update a dated 60-year general plan and to develop interventions to make Montgomery County a diverse and thriving community. We recognize that there is a housing scarcity in Montgomery County and the existing housing stock in neighborhoods like ours is not easily affordable for many. We recognize how single-family zoning is considered part of a series of exclusionary policies that have kept communities of color and less-affluent populations from accessing certain neighborhoods. We cannot easily right the wrongs of the past, but we can work together to fix them.
- (2) **While we support the key drivers of Thrive, our town's residents have not had the opportunity to meaningfully engage with this historic general plan since most of Thrive's consultation process was conducted during the pandemic.** The bar for engagement from the Montgomery County Planning Department needed to be higher given the historic nature of this general plan update and unusual circumstances provided by the pandemic. For example, despite being well-intentioned, it was clearly inadequate to send a postcard summarizing an over 100-page document on a 60-year general plan update with strategies that are intended to impact people's way of life in our County for decades. As a result, it is widely acknowledged in the County that there is a lot of misinformation and lack of education on this subject.
- (3) **We believe the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted patterns of work, commuting and what communities value, perspectives that must be incorporated in any multi-year planning effort, especially a 60-year update like Thrive.** The pandemic will have profound long-term effects on people's preferences for living and working (for example, emergence of a blended workforce, preferences to retire in place, preference for access to trails vs transit lines), exactly the kind of big picture direction that needs to be reflected in a high-level general plan. The pandemic may have also challenged the underlying

population growth assumptions behind Thrive. Our town is already experiencing the effects of these changes.

- (4) **We believe there is likely a trade-off between how (i.e., level and speed) a town like Somerset unlocks housing stock, under the broader framework for Thrive, and the level of community we can maintain.** More housing stock from our town, one way or another, will of course improve the likelihood of more people moving to our neighborhood, expanding the possibility for more to be part of our wonderful community. But there is a trade-off between the level of and the speed with which we unlock housing stock and the level of services we offer and the community we can maintain. Our infrastructure and services across the board will not easily sustain the cumulative impact of multiple overlapping attainable housing strategies.
- (5) **We believe Thrive will be a stronger general plan if it acknowledges local conditions on pre-existing densification to inform attainable housing approaches.** Though Thrive recognizes local contextual factors at points in the document, that perspective is not explicit in the attainable housing chapter. For example, our town shares a boundary with Friendship Heights, one of the densest areas in the County, where there is both planned development and opportunities for further development which will directly impact the overall densification in our area. That pattern of existing dense residential development is potentially unique among neighborhoods in the growth corridors intended for infill development in the Thrive document.
- (6) **While we applaud Thrive's broader commitment to climate change, we believe our town's own efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change, specific to the unique circumstances of our town, will be impeded by the level and speed of further development.** For example, our recently adopted ordinance on stormwater goes further than County measures because of the unique topography and nature of stormwater challenges in our town. Most of our homes are vulnerable to flooding or in naturally occurring watersheds made worse by rainfall.

Actionable recommendations:

Based on the perspectives above, we make the following four actionable recommendations:

- (1) **Extend the consultation period on Thrive 2050 to give residents and communities more time to engage.** We recommend the County Council to create more opportunities for residents to engage with Thrive 2050 documents as currently drafted with involvement from local governments to facilitate discussion and dialogue. Emphasis could be placed on older residents, people of color, younger families and many others underrepresented in the consultation process to date. In addition, the County Council could also lean on the upcoming election process to solicit views and perspectives on Thrive, holding a vote on the plan after the mandate from elections.

- (2) **Request the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee or the Planning Board to conduct a study to incorporate the pandemic's effects on work and living, which in turn impact the underlying assumptions for Thrive.** Such a study could simply reaffirm the direction of Thrive as is or it could reveal new directions not previously considered and important for this historic general-plan update.
- (3) **Give our town the opportunity to testify on how we are attempting to mitigate the impact of climate change specific to the circumstances of our town (e.g., on stormwater).** We contracted a specialist firm to conduct a comprehensive study on stormwater and related issues using GIS data. Our town has eight naturally occurring watersheds which have been aggravated by historic rainfalls brought about by climate change.
- (4) **Request the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee or the Planning Board to update the attainable housing section in Thrive to address a managed or phased approach to attainable housing.** The attainable housing section of Thrive should include a framework to guide and inform a managed or phased approach to attainable housing. The framework can include a way to assess the cumulative impact on any one town or area from multiple overlapping attainable housing approaches and the unique circumstance of a town or area relevant for densification.
- (5) **Request the Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee or the Planning Board to update the attainable housing section to address local site conditions on densification.** The chapter needs to be updated to address local densification conditions as an important contextual factor in attainable housing. Our town is not alone in possessing unique characteristics relevant to future urban planning.

We hope our comments will strengthen the ambitious general-plan process and you will consider them within the timelines established for Thrive 2050.

Sincerely,

The Mayor and The Town Council
Town of Somerset

CC: TBD