

11/8/2021

TO: Somerset Town Council
FROM: Matthew Trollinger, Town Manager
RE: THRIVE Montgomery 2050 Staff Report

INTRODUCTION

THRIVE Montgomery 2050 is the update to the Montgomery County General Plan, first created in 1964, entitled *On Wedges & Corridors: A General Plan for the Maryland-Washington Regional District in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties*. Periodically, the County's Planning Board presents updates to the General Plan, which are then presented to the County Council for adoption. The Somerset Council is considering recommendations to be submitted to the County Council to improve the process and ensure better outcomes.

BACKGROUND

The foundation for planning in Montgomery County is its General Plan. The General Plan is amended periodically to account for demographic and infrastructure changes in the county, and to continue to channel growth along major roads, while preserving open spaces, farmland, and low-density residential uses. THRIVE represents the latest iteration and update to the plan, which also underwent comprehensive refinements in 1969 and 1993. Since 2018 the Montgomery County Planning Board has been working internally on the THRIVE document, with the goal of using that document as the lodestar for County planning through the year 2050.

THRIVE's primary use is as a guide for future land use planning; countywide policies and initiatives affecting community quality of life; infrastructure and community amenities; and private development. The County describes THRIVE as an "umbrella under which [Montgomery County] can plan and move forward together. It will be our shared vision – a guide to help us secure investment, take action and develop policies to preserve what we love while improving what can be better."

As a General Plan, Thrive Montgomery 2050 is not self-implementing. It does not automatically change any zoning or other regulations. Implementation of its policies will rely on several tools, including Zoning Text Amendments, which require separate passage by the County Council.

THRIVE Montgomery 2050 sets three broad overarching priorities for the County:

- 1) Economic Health;
- 2) Equity; and
- 3) Environmental Resilience.

Those goals are targeted through recommendations that are organized into six chapters:

- 1) Compact Growth: Corridor-Focused Development;
- 2) Complete Communities: Mix of Uses and Forms;
- 3) Design, Arts & Culture: Investing and Building Community;
- 4) Transportation and Communication Networks: Connecting People, Places, and Ideas;
- 5) Affordable & Attainable Housing: More of Everything;
- 6) Parks and Recreation: For and Increasingly Urban and Diverse Community: Active and Social.

Below are examples from THRIVE, which should illustrate the nature of the recommendations, and the level of detail/specificity:

- Encourage the production of more housing to better match supply with demand;
- Support arts and culture institutions and programming to celebrate our diversity, strengthen pride of place, and make the county more attractive and interesting;
- Concentrate growth in centers of activity along corridors through compact, infill development and redevelopment to maximize efficient use of land;
- Adapt policies to reflect the economic and environmental costs of driving alone;
- Focus on creating high-quality urban parks.

Each of the above recommendations also comes with several sub-categorical specific recommendations to help support those goals. For example, under the “more housing” recommendation above, the document lists:

Expand opportunities to increase residential density, especially along major corridors and in locations where additional housing can assist in the development of Complete Communities.

Affordable & Attainable Housing

Much discussion in Somerset has revolved around the question of the Affordable & Attainable Housing initiative.

In December of 2020, County Councilmember Will Jawando sponsored Zoning Text Amendment (ZTA) 20-07, which would allow owners of R-60-zoned properties located within 1-mile of a Metrorail station to build “[Missing Middle](#)” housing types, including duplexes, townhouses, and multi-family structures within the current R-60 lot coverage, building height, setbacks, minimum lot size and minimum parking requirements. Councilmember Hans Riemer also provided a draft proposal on “missing middle” housing.

The proposals from Councilmembers Jawando and Riemer, which the County Council did not vote on, and which have not been scheduled for a public hearing, prompted the County Council to ask the Planning Board for a ZTA, taking into consideration the proposals from the two Councilmembers. The Planning Board developed, in response, its Affordable & Attainable

Housing Initiative, which is separate from THRIVE Montgomery 2050. However, the recommendations align with the goals and recommendations included in THRIVE.

The Planning Board completed preliminary staff recommendations, which are continuing to be refined through Planning Board work sessions. Following review and approval from the Planning Board, the recommendations are expected to be transmitted to the Montgomery County Council. The Planning Board and County Council have pushed back the timeline for consideration, in order to first finalize THRIVE.

The Somerset Council and Mayor Slavin have suggested a public hearing to consider the Affordable & Attainable Housing recommendations once they have been released, and plan to include County Councilmembers Will Jawando and Hans Riemer in those discussions to better explain their text amendments.

Timeline & Process

The Planning Board began work on THRIVE Montgomery 2050 in 2018. After 18 months of planning, visioning, and analysis, a final issues report was delivered in February of 2020. In June 2020, the Planning Board staff presented draft vision and goals, and policies and actions. The first Working Draft of the plan was released in September 2020, and the Public Hearing was held in November.

After receiving feedback, the Planning Board held 10 work sessions from December 2020 to March of 2021, before approval and the plan being sent to the County Council. The County Council will ultimately vote on its adoption.

The Council's Planning, Housing, and Economic Development (PHED) Committee recently released a draft, which is now available online at:

HYPERLINK "<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/COUNCIL/Resources/Files/2021/PHED-CommitteeDraftThrive2050.pdf>" [Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee Draft - October 25, 2021 \(montgomerycountymd.gov\)](https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/COUNCIL/Resources/Files/2021/PHED-CommitteeDraftThrive2050.pdf)

The plan largely supports the Planning Board's document, but adds clarifications and edits to strengthen language, and more clearly define certain terms. The County Council will hold a listening session on this proposal on November 30, December 1, or December 2.

There is otherwise currently no schedule for full Council review of THRIVE. Similarly, there is no schedule for consideration of the Attainable & Affordable Housing Initiative.

The Planning Board completed preliminary staff recommendations on its Attainable & Affordable Housing Initiative, which are continuing to be refined through Planning Board work sessions. Following review and approval from the Planning Board, the recommendations will be transmitted to the Montgomery County Council. The Planning Board and County Council have pushed back the timeline for consideration to finalize THRIVE.

Thrive Neighborhood Coalition

Since fall of 2020, Somerset has been invited to participate in what is known as the “Neighborhood Coalition,” made up of 27 municipalities in Montgomery County, including, Chevy Chase Village, the Town of Chevy Chase, Kensington, Kenwood Citizens Association, Chevy Chase West Neighborhood Association, Drummond, and the Village of Friendship Heights, among others, which have worked to present a unified stance on Thrive Montgomery 2050 and associated ZTAs.

Somerset signed the initial letter sent by the Coalition in November 2020, which highlighted suggestions and concerns related to the six chapters (highlighted above) in the THRIVE plan. The Coalitions has continued to meet regularly, and has jointly issued several additional letters, including ones in February, May, July, which included follow-up recommendations. (The Coalition’s next meeting is tomorrow evening, November 9)

Mayor Slavin testified before the County Council on June 17th, coordinating testimony with a Councilmember from the Town of Chevy Chase, and which underscored some of the Coalition’s concerns and recommendations. Mayor Slavin called for a five-year review of THRIVE; specific staging away from car-centric transportation; more robust funding methods for infrastructure; incorporating a chapter on economic competitiveness; more detailed strategies on how affordable housing can be created through adaptive uses; mandating the use of traditional master & sector planning; and reinstating the concept and value of compatibility to ensure changes align with individual communities.

Proposal

Somerset Councilmembers Kabir Kumar and Debbie Heller presented a draft letter for the Somerset Council to consider as submission to the Montgomery County Council on Thrive.

The letter outlines five statements summarizing the Somerset Council’s collective point-of-view on THRIVE. They are, in summary:

- 1) Somerset supports the drivers behind Thrive: inclusivity and diversity, and the need to address climate change;
- 2) There has been insufficient public consultation on THRIVE during the pandemic;
- 3) COVID-19 has altered the long-term patterns of working and living and those changes must be better understood and incorporated into the plan;
- 4) There are trade-offs between development and unlocking housing stock from Somerset and maintaining a community, particularly the speed at which housing stock is unlocked; and
- 5) Level and Speed of further development would impact climate change mitigation efforts peculiar to the town.

Furthermore, the letter presents four recommendations to address the above concerns. They are, in summary:

- 1) Provide additional opportunities for community engagement working with local governments, and wait to vote on the proposal until after a mandate is given in the election;
- 2) Conduct a study specific to the effects of COVID-19 on work and living;
- 3) Provide an opportunity for testimony relative to climate change, and how that might inform THRIVE's frameworks;
- 4) Incorporate within Thrive itself a managed and/or phased approach to attainable housing.

The Council is also considering a statement and recommendations to the Planning Department and Board on Attainable Housing Strategies. As noted above, Somerset is also planning a public hearing to consider the Affordable & Attainable Housing recommendation in greater detail, and include County Councilmembers Will Jawando and Hans Riemer in those discussions to better explain and answer questions regarding their text amendments.

It is also important that all residents interested in this issue make their views known to the County Council by making comments via email, and at public meetings, including listening sessions and public hearings.