

November 12, 2021

Dear Town Council:

Thank you for your efforts to represent our Town in the countywide deliberations on Thrive Montgomery 2050. I appreciate that the Council has given residents more of an opportunity to provide input into your draft letter. I still believe that a great deal more discussion needs to take place around Thrive and housing issues, including information sessions, but especially, we need a deeper dialogue around our vision and values for our town.

As a Somerset resident since 2003, I care very much about our sense of community, as embodied in things like: Somerset Elementary School; fun and friendship for all ages with the Dolphins at the Somerset pool; information exchange, advice, buying and selling, and civic conversation on the Somerset listserv; our Town Council, Town Hall and wonderful staff, Town Journal, and soon-to-be-revamped town website; meeting and greeting neighbors out on a walk through our tree-lined streets; and yes, our town motto! I value these, and want to work together to preserve them amidst the inevitable huge changes coming to our world, including our county, and including our town, between now and 2050. I believe we can and will preserve the best of Somerset.

At the same time, I care deeply about my contribution, and our Town's contribution, to putting the brakes on climate change, and creating a more equitable and inclusive county, state, and country. I respect the efforts of the Planning Board to tackle these issues in drafting Thrive Montgomery 2050. I particularly applaud their efforts to provide for attainable housing and affordable housing in the context of the needs of our county's people, as well as the strategies to preserve and protect our natural environment. I very much hope that we in Somerset will do our fair share, blessed as we are with the valuable property we live on, and with our high levels of education and civic involvement, to contribute to solutions on these issues.

I believe that the Town Council's draft letter as written does not do nearly enough to applaud the analysis and vision of Thrive, and instead comes across as a plea for the county to delay action on Thrive. I wish the draft letter would highlight the serious and urgent needs of the county to remedy the mismatch of housing stock with residents' needs resulting in unaffordability; the pervasive and longstanding economic, educational, and racial and ethnic inequities across communities within the county; and the need for more energy-efficient development patterns to mitigate the effects of climate change. I hope the council would endorse Thrive's general approach to addressing our county's development needs, including (1) a compact form of development, with corridor-focused growth as opposed to sprawl; (2) combining retail, housing, and office space in ways that encourage people of diverse income levels to be able to live and work in proximity to each other; and (3) transportation networks that are less auto-centric and encourage walking, biking, and mass transit. Most important, I hope that the letter would convey that Somerset, too, is an integral part of Montgomery County and will do its part and participate willingly in solutions to these problems.

What follows are a few comments on the four "actionable recommendations":

1. Extend consultations – What is the goal of this? To more powerfully express opposition to further development in our town, or more broadly, to empower others' voices and interests across our county? I would propose that we in Somerset try to have more conversations with people and groups throughout our county, including Black and other residents currently underrepresented in the planning process, so that we ourselves better understand the challenges faced by our entire county, and build support for a version of Thrive that responds to ALL of those challenges, not just Somerset's.
2. Study of pandemic's effects on work and living – more information is often useful, but doing such studies would cause a significant delay of perhaps years in finalizing Thrive. How feasible is such a study, while the pandemic is still ongoing at a high level? Yes, the pandemic has had effects in our area, and some of these may affect long-term trends. However, the effects on work and living cited in the Council's draft letter do not seem to me to fundamentally alter the basic challenges Thrive seeks to address, nor its fundamental strategies for doing so.
3. Testify to the County Council about stormwater – How is it envisioned that this testimony will alter the high-level planning document that is Thrive? Yes, increased stormwater is a huge concern for Somerset residents, and a concern countywide. In my view, stormwater and other measures to adapt to the effects of climate change are already addressed in Thrive, along with the fundamental drivers of climate change: greenhouse gas emissions.
4. Managed and/or phased approach to attainable housing – In my understanding, the pace of building housing is driven by private-sector decisions by property owners – it is unpredictable, but not typically sudden. Somerset has 400 individual properties, so it seems that change will come slowly here. Instead, I would like to see Somerset's Town Council endorse the concept of attainable housing, and commit to doing our fair share to see that some attainable housing is built in and near our town. Details of implementation of this will be worked out in master plans, zoning text amendments, and other processes including oversight by the Town Council. But fundamentally, Thrive is an opportunity to change the exclusionary and inequitable history of our county's settlement patterns in a more favorable direction, to commit ourselves to participating in solutions. I hope the Town Council's letter would recognize that.

In sum, I hope that the Somerset Town Council expresses more enthusiastic support for the problems and solutions identified in Thrive Montgomery 2050. Insofar as the Thrive approval process extends into 2022, Somerset should participate in dialogues within our town and countywide, so as to educate residents, and elevate and enhance the equity, inclusion, and pro-environment aspects of Thrive. Most importantly, Somerset should lend real impetus for Thrive to move forward. I hope there will be more opportunities to discuss these ideas with the Town Council and our neighbors.

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