

11/14/2021

Dear Town Council

I wanted to just add some comments from the meeting from Monday. I completely understand people's opposition to Thrive, but also feel it is so important that people understand the barriers that have been placed on people of color in regard to zoning and unfair housing policies.

I admittedly do not want to see our wonderful neighborhood overcome with development. However, I think changes do need to be made as well as the language we use around equity and diversity. I feel it is so important that we recognize and acknowledge the ills of the past so we can move forward. I also feel we need to change the language used in the letter to incorporate our understanding of the issues.

Here are my thoughts on the statements,

(1) I don't believe statement (1) fully articulates our knowledge and understanding of what Thrive aims to accomplish. Why must we build inclusive and diverse communities? How do we applaud the efforts?

I believe we should acknowledge upfront the early zoning and ordinances were discriminatory. We should be explicit in our understanding that exclusionary housing practices kept families of color from accessing safe and secure housing and building generational wealth.

I know that this is briefly touched upon at the end of the letter but due to its significance on the issue it should be front and foremost. We cannot right the wrongs of the past, but we can work together to fix them. If we acknowledge we fully understand the intentions of Thrive we can then work constructively toward making meaningful change.

(2) Again, with statement 2, I think we need to be more explicit. What will more time achieve? Arguably the consultation was sought with little engagement. What opportunities do we feel could be put forward to facilitate more meaningful engagement?

It is clear that there is a lot of misinformation and lack of education on the subject. Could we facilitate more workshops and forums to encourage engagement? What actions can we take that will provide more meaningful and purposeful actions through engagement?

(3) Statement 3 makes me feel the most uncomfortable. One of the aims of missing middle housing is that middle class professional (teachers, nurses, firefighters etc.) would be able to live closer to work, many of these jobs do not have the ability to work from home.

While COVID has undoubtedly changed the way people live or want to live, we need to be mindful not everyone has the means or opportunity to move to larger homes with areas to work from home. This statement inadvertently is more advantageous to higher socio-economic

groups. One of the aims of Thrive is more equitable housing and that means we should look at opportunities that foster inclusiveness and do not create further barriers that restrict access for housing opportunities. There is undoubtedly a need for development in transit-rich areas, how we go about this is controversial but there are many different ways it can be achieved. This statement screams 'privilege' and detracts from the laudable efforts of Thrive. If this were to be left in I would recommend it be the very last statement.

(4) Statement 4 is a genuine concern for most residents. I believe we can create meaningful engagement by concentrating and dissecting this topic further. As a strong and vibrant community, I believe we all share common values and can work together to address these issues in a meaningful and impactful way.

Rezoning is an issue faced by many communities. Much of the opposition to zoning amendments is that it is a blanket approach, and that density alone does not always equate to better and fairer housing options. It has also been argued that this approach can exacerbate the intention of zoning amendments by creating expensive housing and further displacing people in protected classes.

(5) Statement 5 does not address the commitment Thrive has made to addressing climate issues. Thrive does indeed aim to address stormwater management and preserving tree canopies, topics that are dear to many town residents. In fact, the Pike and Rose development reduced stormwater run off by over 70%. We should acknowledge that they aim to address these issues and clarify what the county is going to do regarding building codes and storm water waivers.

In the limited number of forums that I have attended Council Members have asked for actionable recommendations. The actionable recommendations in the town's proposed letter are vague. They only recommend prolonging the process and do not provide any insight on how we can purposefully move forward. I feel we are so concerned about the unlikely event developers will come and take over Somerset we are failing to see the bigger picture.

Some statements I believe are more impactful are,

Provide significant time for residents to engage in missing middle housing in specific residential areas. Ensure residents are provided with education on how housing needs are currently met and how we can overcome patterns of segregation. We would like Thrive to include meaningful actions to combat discrimination and provide opportunities that foster inclusive communities free from barriers that restrict access to opportunities based on protected characteristics. We would recommend more time for engagement so communities can comment and better understand how they contribute toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

Thrive 2050 highlights missing middle housing but fails to address affordable housing. We need more housing of all types, including both market-rate and subsidized affordable housing, in places with high quality transit, education, and jobs. We would like to preserve and protect

affordability of current naturally affordable rental units in the greater community. We believe measures should be in place to ensure a number of naturally affordable rental units are available for households earning 50% or less of median family income (MFI) . We request the planning department conduct a study to understand why naturally occurring affordable housing in the Bethesda and Chevy Chase area are not utilized by the people who need it most. What are the barriers preventing protected classes in accessing this type of housing opportunity?

We would like Thrive to consider how current and new developments are going to contribute to fairer housing including zoning. By creating purposeful and more aggressive housing policies we can ask developers to do more to fight displacement and create fairing housing for all. Considerations for housing policies should include but not limited to, size and scope of projects, magnitude of historical exclusion, the elevated risk of directly or indirectly displacing neighbors, environmental impact. New developments should not provide further injury to communities. We need to ensure we move forward in an inclusive way that combats segregation and poor housing conditions that prevent people from building generational wealth. If we do nothing to ensure affordable and attainable housing is available in new developments, we are doing nothing but afflicting protected classes with the same historic issues of the past.

We acknowledge the opportunities that come from exposure to affluent areas, creating greater opportunities for housing can improve outcomes in health, employment, and education. We believe Thrive should be intentional about zoning and what it is intends to achieve. If specific matters are not addressed the aim of creating a more inclusive and complete neighborhoods would fail to diversify communities and only achieve the goal of creating more expensive housing. As the Chevy Chase and Bethesda areas already have a significant amount of mixed housing and new developments, we would request the planning board study how the current housing needs are met, and the impact of gentle density in specific SFH communities. We believe this will provide actionable measures that ensure affordability and diversity goals are met.

Thank you for your consideration,

Best,

Leanne Bonter  
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