

To: Planning Board Chair Casey Anderson
cc Planning Director Gwen Wright; Council President Sidney Katz and Councilmembers; and County Executive Marc Elrich
Re: Thrive 2050 needs greater and deeper public participation
From: Diane Cameron, TAME Coalition (Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended); Caroline Taylor, Montgomery Countryside Alliance; Anne James, Friends of Ten Mile Creek and Little Seneca Reservoir; Pamela Lindstrom; Ginny Barnes, Conservation Montgomery; Abel Olivo, Defensores De La Cuenca; Tony Cohen, The Menare Foundation.
Date: November 19, 2020

Within the current Thrive 2050 effort, we ask the Planning Board and staff to act immediately to invite effective public participation methods to creating a new visionary General Plan. The new Vision must build on existing structures that have worked well, including Wedges and Corridors, then add new elements and changes needed to make our county a more inclusive, economically and racially just, and ecologically and economically healthy place to live and work.

On the need for greater, substantive public input at this point in the Thrive process

For a subject as complex and as consequential as a new General Plan, the Planning Department and Board have programmed surprisingly little opportunity for substantive public input during this crucial stage in this process.

Planners have catalogued their extensive and appreciated campaigns of public outreach. But *outreach* from the staff is not a substitute for deeper discussion, i.e. genuine public *input* opportunities. The public input opportunities provided to date have not been adequate to the need for in-depth public understanding and input to craft the Vision for Montgomery County for 2050. Much of the outreach preceded the release of the October 2020 Draft Plan, thus has been unconstrained and not directed at eliciting final content. In particular, very little public input has responded to the October 2020 Public Hearing Draft Plan.

Insufficient public engagement to draft a Plan that has public approval -- and enthusiasm.

The staff's summary of [the public engagement program](#) is divided into four phases. Curiously, the final phase, starting this past September 2020 "will leverage the diverse community members and groups who have engaged throughout the plan process *to endorse the plan and testify to elected and appointed officials in favor of the plan...* Motivate community members to support of the Working Draft and advocate to the Board. Form new groups to support the main goals of the plan if there is strong opposition to certain parts of the plan. Leverage diverse supporters to endorse and testify in support of the plan. Help residents understand how their advocacy is needed."

This process skips the essential step of working with the community to craft an updated General Plan that strongly reflects public needs and community priorities, and that has public approval and even enthusiasm!

Examples of communities that could be more engaged with, and give more in-depth input to, Thrive 2050 and the October 2020 draft plan: renters' organizations; high school and college students; immigrant community groups; Black and Latinx organizations; Historic Freeman communities; rural residents; public health advocates; and groups representing low-income, elderly, and disabled people.

A few environmental and smart growth coalitions have participated extensively in the Thrive process. The draft Thrive document has evolved, as staff has incorporated some of their input. But, troubling questions remain. These include questions about whether the land use policy reflected in this proposed General Plan update fully reflects and is representative of the needs of all communities who

are directly affected by these land use policies, and who have significant input to provide, but are now constrained by the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns, economic inequities, and other limitations. Since Thrive 2050 will guide and heavily influence the quality and extent of different communities' access to housing, transportation, land, food, clean drinking water, parks and natural areas, it's crucial that wider and deeper public input be sought and provided to Thrive 2050 now, in Fall 2020 and the Winter of 2021.

Greater public input on these topics is required now, before the Thrive 2050 plan is adopted:

- The continuation of the Wedges and Corridors structure of the General Plan -- the current draft creates confusion with its use of the term "web of corridors."
- Housing, Food, and Transit Justice are intertwined, and much more robust public participation by communities most burdened by housing, transportation and food costs is required now at this stage. These communities' input is especially needed on whether the Thrive 2050 proposed land use structure and policies are the best and clearest path to achieving housing, food, water, climate and transit justice.
- The role of the Agricultural Reserve in providing food, fiber, and clean water through continued protection of its farms and forests – and the need to avoid conflicts from non-agricultural uses including commercial solar. While the October draft plan has strengthened the support for the Agricultural Reserve overall, there remains the need for much greater review and input from producers in the Ag Reserve. The Council's and Planning Board's support for commercial solar in the Ag Reserve must be reversed, since solar developers are offering tenfold and greater land rents, and farmers are being priced off of the land they now farm.
- The quality and quantity of Montgomery County's drinking water supplies and how Thrive 2050 will result in their greater protection.
- The October 2020 draft plan promotes use of autonomous vehicles and a network of urban sensors, new technologies that would require so-called "5G" radiofrequency cellular networks. The General Plan Update should not promote this highly-questionable change. Residents' input on this major change, along with that of public health experts familiar with the international scientific literature on radiofrequency exposures must be sought and thoroughly examined.¹
- The role of the Montgomery Parks system must be further highlighted, including the role of Park forests and other Park natural areas in the health and well-being of County residents. Further community input, including through in-depth discussion with diverse groups about their needs including adequacy of parkland access, is required.

¹ Though Wikipedia's entry on "5G" claims that concerns about public health and ecological damage from intensified radiofrequency exposures amount to "conspiracy theories," the body of scientific evidence on such exposures is robust and is cause for avoiding construction of 5G networks. See the [Bioinitiative](#) Report (2012) and its updates: "Bioeffects are clearly established to occur with very low exposure levels (non-thermal levels) to electromagnetic fields and radiofrequency radiation exposures...The trend continues to show that exposure to low-intensity ELF-EMF/Static Fields and RFR at levels allowable under current federal public safety limits pose health risks."

Inadequate opportunities remaining for public input.

The County Executive wrote on August 14: “With greater cooperation and mutual understanding – and with undivided time for full discussion with the community – I believe we will define a better, more equitable future for all County residents.” Among others, Mr. Elrich asked that the date for adoption of the new plan be delayed for six months to allow this discussion to happen.

The Planning Board and PHED Committee turned down this request. That can be acceptable, but only *if* the Board and Council schedule more substantial public input along the lines we suggested above, before the Plan is adopted. All that is currently scheduled is the one public hearing by the Planning Board on November 19, 2020, which is 4-5 months before the final draft Plan is adopted by the Planning Board, and one public hearing by the Council at least six months before they finalize the Plan. These public hearings are essential steps, but are inadequate to meeting the need for robust public review of, and input on, the October 2020 draft plan.

Request for more opportunities to discuss the General Plan with decision-makers.

We ask the Planning Board, PHED Committee and Council to offer and publicly-schedule additional opportunities to discuss the October 2020 draft plan with us and to invite public input from the broad array of community groups listed above. Many of us have a lot to say about the draft Plan. Staff has invited us to schedule private meetings and conversations. While we appreciate the opportunity for the private conversations, and staff may respond favorably at these meetings, the words in the draft Plan are what matters. *It is especially hard to discuss the major overall changes being proposed*, such as set out by Chairman Anderson and Executive Elrich, when only a few citizen groups and individuals are in the conversation and are seeing their needs reflected.

Given the economic inequities in our County reflected in the digital divide, and the lack of rural broadband, we believe face-to-face meetings are also needed.

Meetings are necessarily remote via various media that pose additional problems. These meetings are not available to those without fast internet access and are unreliable in rural areas. We all need to think about ways to overcome these problems, maybe with some way of conducting meetings face-to-face.

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