

Edgemoor Citizens Association

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VIA EMAIL
Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

September 19, 2020

Re: Request to Defer Consideration of Thrive Montgomery 2050

Dear Council President Katz and Members of the Montgomery County Council:

I am President of the Edgemoor Citizen's Association (ECA), a civic organization representing residents of the Bethesda neighborhood encompassing Edgemoor, Bradley Village and parts of Bradley Hills. I am writing on behalf of the ECA regarding Thrive Montgomery 2050, the update to the County's General Plan. The current schedule calls for publication of the Working Draft on September 24, a public Planning Board hearing on November 19, transmission to the Council in March 2021, and approval around April 2021.

The ECA respectfully requests that the County Council and the Planning Board defer consideration of Thrive Montgomery 2050 for at least a year. The County and its residents are experiencing unprecedented economic and social disruptions, and many residents are experiencing significant personal stress, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This deferral will allow sufficient opportunity for the impact of the pandemic to be carefully and fully considered as the plan goes forward, and give residents, many of whom are now of necessity focused on employment, health, and family concerns, an effective opportunity for review and comment.

The current draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050 contains 46 goals, more than 150 policies, and more than 210 actions, some that go significantly beyond the land use and natural resources addressed in previous General Plans. These goals, policies, and actions need informed, transparent, and diverse public debate. Additionally, although the draft plan is available online, the implementation section has not yet been made public. For such an important and comprehensive plan, which is intended to guide the County for the next 30 years, the present timeline is overly optimistic. In these days of social isolation and limited interpersonal interactions, many residents are not even aware of the plan or its significance. For those who are aware, the pandemic has severely limited their ability to fully participate in this planning project. We recognize that the Planning Department has made efforts to reach out to communities online, but for Thrive Montgomery 2050 online meetings are an inadequate substitute for the back-and-forth discussions that can take place in face-to-face community meetings.

The current Thrive Montgomery 2050 draft relies on pre-pandemic data and assumptions. The data need to be updated and the assumptions need to be reconsidered, which cannot be properly done on the current schedule. As the draft itself states, "While the full impact of this crisis is not yet known, it is certain that it will be a factor in how Montgomery County evolves in the future.

COVID-19 will have lasting impacts on how we interact with each other, how we do business and much more.” Recent data suggest we are facing significant changes in how we live, spend, work, commute, study, and play:

- Metro weekday ridership overall has declined more than 90% since March. Many former riders are working at home, and of those going to their place of employment, the ones who can drive or carpool are doing so. Whether, to what extent, and when Metro (and bus) ridership will return to pre-pandemic levels cannot be predicted with any level of certainty at this time.
- Multiple businesses in the County (and elsewhere in the area) have closed permanently and others have laid off thousands of employees.
- Weakness in high-cost rentals is apparently not translating into lower rents, with implications for housing policies.
- Companies and employees are learning from the pandemic experience that telecommuting can work well and saves time and money. This is likely to cut into the commercial real estate market and to alter the residential market in favor of homes with work space and outdoor recreation space on site or nearby. Fewer working in offices also means fewer services to those offices will be needed.
- Government funding for services and pressing capital needs will be severely circumscribed by both diminished revenues and costs of meeting immediate needs precipitated by the pandemic.

It is impossible to know which changes will be lasting, but their potential to affect housing choices, education, commuting patterns, brick and mortar retail, recreation, and transportation (among other things) must be recognized and taken into account. While the plan acknowledges the likelihood of increased telecommuting, it does not account for the pandemic and the resulting speed of the switch to telecommuting since March. It also does not consider the effect the pandemic will have on where and how people will continue their lives once the pandemic fades. We will learn much more about that in the next 12-18 months, and to serve the County well a 30-year vision must take into account today's changed reality and the likely effects of the pandemic changes on the future.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



David Barnes
President, Edgemoor Citizens Association

cc: Marc Elrich, County Executive
Casey Anderson, Chair, Planning Board