

Edgemoor Citizens Association

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VIA EMAIL

Casey Anderson, Chair and
Members of the Planning Board
The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
2425 Reddie Drive
Wheaton, Maryland 20902

Re: Attainable Housing Strategies – Recommendations

Dear Chair Anderson and Members of the Planning Board:

I am the President of the Edgemoor Citizens Association, representing over 500 households in the residential neighborhood bordering the west side of Downtown Bethesda. This letter presents our comments about the Attainable Housing Strategies – Recommendations, which the Planning staff submitted to the Planning Board on June 17, in advance of a public hearing on June 24.

The June 24 Public Hearing is being held too soon. The Attainable Housing Strategy Recommendations were released less than a week ago, which deprived the public of the time needed to completely review them. Although staff prepared the Recommendations over a three-month period, using a process that was intended to provide for public feedback, the process was flawed. The County was just beginning to come out of pandemic restrictions, and there was not sufficient time for residents to review and fully understand the significance of the proposed changes, especially when the proposals changed in material ways during the preparation process. Public engagement occurred only in online meetings, which did not allow for the necessary interaction that in-person discussions facilitate, and pandemic precautions generally kept residents from the informal interactions through which neighbors could become aware of the proposals and process and discuss them. Data in the Recommendations show far too low a rate of public engagement for proposals of such significance to communities.

Thrive Montgomery 2050 should come first. The Recommendations state that they implement Thrive Montgomery 2050. Yet, Thrive has not even been considered by the County Council. Few residents have had the time to figure out what Thrive Montgomery 2050 is, much less what the Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative is, how the two interact, and their implications for either the County or their own communities. At a minimum, consideration of zoning changes to implement Thrive should be deferred until the public has had the opportunity to provide input to the Council about Thrive and knows what Thrive looks like. The clear assumption is that Thrive will retain substantially all the housing recommendations in the Planning draft, and that any public input provided will have little or no effect. The Planning Board must at least give the Council and the public the courtesy of allowing the Council to

complete its Thrive review process and to develop, consider, and adopt a general plan. Expecting members of the public to respond to Planning's views on complex aspects of implementing Thrive when the plan has not been fully vetted or adopted is irresponsible. (The Recommendations state that adjustments will be made to conform to Thrive, but there is no good reason to proceed on these Recommendations, and very good reason not to proceed, until Thrive has been completed.)

Further, until Thrive is finalized, many important concepts describing where the attainable housing recommendations would apply remain undefined, or subject to revision. These include what constitutes an activity center, a transit corridor, and a Corridor-Focused Growth Area. Without full understanding of these concepts, the public cannot have any clear idea what the Recommendations mean or how to respond.

The better way to approach the County's housing needs is through the Master/Sector Plan process. That process ensures community participation and community buy-in to any changes as significant as those presented here. It also permits consideration of the unique aspects of the different areas of the County, looking at those areas more holistically, with zoning in context. What may be a great idea for the empty land in the White Flint area may be a terrible approach for the Bethesda-Chevy Chase or Silver Spring area, with little or no empty space. The Planning Department itself has recognized this, through the Silver Spring Downtown and Adjacent Communities Plan, the Viers Mill Master Plan, and the Forest Glen Montgomery Hills Sector Plan. Although a major goal is to "to create more opportunities for home ownership for more households in more parts of the county," some areas offer opportunities for more housing at prices within reach of those unable to purchase at current prices. There is also a real risk of gentrification of naturally occurring areas of affordable and attainable housing, a risk that must be considered (and can be considered in a master plan process). In other areas the land prices would result in housing within the means of only the most fortunate. The County should focus on housing for those who are priced out, rather than adopting policies that, in the most densified (and most expensive) areas, only benefits more affluent residents who already have many good housing options. Additionally, looking more closely at the close-in down-county areas reveals a considerable amount of low to moderate income housing in the pipeline and other more moderately-priced housing that has been overlooked and could be retained with appropriate policies (if not up-zoned to permit more expensive apartments or condominiums).

Most, if not all, of the shortcomings of the Recommendations can be traced to the haste with which the Planning Department has felt compelled to put the recommendations together. The Recommendations reflect what some believe (or hope) will alleviate Montgomery County's housing shortage, but provide no discussion of best practices, and no examples of places where changes such as those suggested here have been so broadly implemented, much less where they have helped a housing shortage. Further, the Recommendations are a one-size-fits-all "solution" for a county of over 500 square miles and a population of over 1,000,000, with areas of urban to rural and everything in between. This is not a solution at all. It is an attempt to fix a very complex problem (a problem that exists in much of the country due to myriad factors) with a simplistic approach that will make a nice sound-bite. Montgomery County can do better.

The Recommendations do not fulfil the County Council's request. They are, in part, the response to the County Council asking the Planning Board to "consider zoning reforms that would allow greater opportunities for Missing Middle Housing in Montgomery County, provide opportunity for public input, and transmit a Zoning Text Amendment with [its] recommendations." Despite the Council's specific request, the Recommendations discard Missing Middle Housing and focus on "Attainable Housing" instead. Although not clearly defined, Attainable Housing is clearly different from Missing Middle. On the other hand, when asked repeatedly about the impact of the changes during HEAT group and community meetings, Planning Staff responded that impacts and infrastructure were not within the scope of their work. The Recommendations do not consider how to address and eliminate, or at least ameliorate, potentially adverse neighborhood effects of the changes that they propose, leaving that difficult task to the future. These include requirements to ensure that neighborhoods have adequate public facilities to accommodate the new residents, such as schools and classroom space, utilities (such as water, gas and electricity), sewers, storm water management, roads, and parking. In addition, the public has yet to see any feasibility studies on the pricing of the attainable housing given the current market conditions in various localities. Homes in Bethesda average over \$1M with price per square foot at \$407 while homes in Wheaton average \$480,000 or \$250/sq.ft. How does the Planning Board propose to mitigate such cost differentials? Developers will continue to seek out more lucrative zip codes with better margins and pass up neighborhoods that would greatly benefit from new and innovative design options. The Recommendations are also based on unrealistic assumptions (e.g., that a significant number of the desired new residents will have no cars or that "replacement home builders" and developers will abandon their current practices and begin to focus on less costly, less profitable, housing options, or that new "attainable" units built will be few in number).

The Recommendations do not address the County's needs for more affordable housing. What is now being called the Attainable Housing Strategy started out as plan to increase the supply of low to moderately priced ("affordable") housing as a means of fostering Community Equity. When it became obvious that, in many areas of the County, the planned policy changes would not create much housing affordable to the people who need it, the focus on affordable housing morphed into "Attainable Housing."

Housing is generally considered "attainable" if it meets the needs of those with incomes between 80% and 120% of the Area Median Income (approximately \$110,000 in this area). However, as presented in the Recommendations and in discussions with Planning staff, "attainable housing" here seems to mean simply housing that, because it is two or more homes on a single lot, is less expensive than the single-family homes already there, regardless of the actual cost. Under this usage, if a down-county lot is purchased for \$1.2 million, and a developer builds a duplex and sells each for \$1.5 million, the duplexes are "attainable" despite being out of reach for the vast majority of buyers. That makes no sense. Buyers looking in a price range of \$500,000 to \$1.5 million have a reasonable number of homes to choose from, including in the down-county areas and other areas close to transit. The Attainable Housing Recommendations are directed not at encouraging the development of housing for those priced out now, but rather at increasing density in residential neighborhoods

regardless of the price of the resulting new housing, the differing outcomes in different neighborhoods, the structural capacity of those neighborhoods to support additional density, or the effects on residents of those neighborhoods. The obsession with densifying single-family neighborhoods has led to simplistic, one-size-fits-all policies that don't account for specific local conditions and needs, don't have community buy-in, and overlook real opportunities to create housing that is attainable for those who are currently priced out of the market. The County Council and the Planning Board should restore the focus on housing that is affordable to those who need it, rather than rather than continuing to pursue an approach that will only succeed in enriching developers and creating more homes priced out of the reach of those buyers.

Finally, the Recommendations abandon commitments made by the County in the Bethesda Downtown Plan. These Recommendations are being made less than five years after the adoption of the Bethesda Downtown Plan, which included an objective to “[p]reserve and protect existing single-unit residential neighborhoods in and around the Sector Plan area.” Neighborhoods surrounding Downtown Bethesda reluctantly accepted the substantially increased density of the Downtown Plan with assurances that this was a trade-off – substantially greater density for the central business district in exchange for protection and preservation of the surrounding single-family neighborhoods. These Recommendations abandon what nearby neighborhoods saw as a commitment for the term of the Downtown Plan. Without a much better explanation of the goals to be achieved and evidence that the changes would achieve those goals, and without significant involvement of the affected communities, moving forward with the Recommendations would be a serious breach of trust that would affect not only our neighborhoods but also any other neighborhoods in their dealings with the County government. It is a basic principle of government that commitments made to its citizens be honored.

The County will have our help and support for housing policy changes that are made within the Master and Sector Plan process, that produce more low-to-moderately priced housing, and that minimize negative impacts on affected communities. But, we're not going to buy in to poorly-thought-out ZTAs and other policy changes that neither acknowledge nor address their unintended consequences.

Very truly yours,

David Barnes, President
Edgemoor Citizens Association