

## **Thrive Montgomery 2050 Needs Clearer Definitions and Concepts**

To: Council President Katz, Vice President Hucker, Councilmember Albornoz, Councilmember Friedson, Councilmember Glass, Councilmember Jawando, Councilmember Navarro, Councilmember Rice, and Councilmember Riemer:  
Cc: Marlene Michaelson, Pamela Dunn

### **Subject: Thrive Montgomery 2050 Needs Clearer Definitions and Concepts**

The current draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050 has both definitional and logical flaws that should be corrected. Ambiguous definitions or concepts lead to the danger that they will later be reinterpreted or misinterpreted in ways that the original adopters did not anticipate. Definitions and concepts in a planning document should be express and unambiguous.

#### **15-Minute Living is Defined by Distance, Not Time, and that Distance Should Be Walking Distance**

Thrive Montgomery 2050 (“Thrive”) advocates that “15-minute living” “should be an organizing principle in planning” for the success of complete communities. (P.45.) The concept is that living spaces should be within 15-minutes of services, infrastructure, facilities, and amenities that serve daily needs. The 15 minutes defines a distance, however, not a time. It is the distance determined by this measure that will be used to determine where to put infrastructure and facilities, and which dwellings are within the 15 minute neighborhood.

The current draft implies that this is the distance one would walk in 15 minutes. It suggests that walking distance should be 0.5 mile. (P.151.) (P.45) A half mile is consistent with typical walking speeds. <https://greatist.com/health/average-walking-speed#average-speed-by-age>. The reason that a distance rather than “15-minutes” should be expressly stated is that previous discussions had suggested that the boundary should also be defined by 15 minutes on a bicycle. At average bicycle speeds a beginner would cover 2-4 miles. <https://www.roadbikerider.com/whats-the-average-speed-of-a-beginner-cyclist/>. Indeed, Thrive describes a “short” bicycle ride to be 5.9 miles! (Fig. 43 on p. 82.) Unlike a distance walkable in 15 minutes, a 2–4-mile bicycle ride would be impractical for most people, and would undermine the proposed benefits of 15-minute living. (See below.) Therefore, Thrive Montgomery 2050 should expressly state that the 15-minute distance is a walking distance such as 0.5 mile.

#### **Thrive Montgomery 2050 Conflates Walking, Bicycling, and Rolling, But These Activities Have Very Different Properties and Implications**

Thrive Montgomery 2050 repeatedly advocates replacing automobile trips with “walking, bicycling, and rolling”. *E.g.* “[It is] essential that we decisively reject the impulse to make sure that driving remains as easy and convenient as possible in favor of making walking, rolling, bicycling, and transit the most practical and attractive ways of getting from one place to another.” (P.83.) Walking and bicycling, however, are distinctly

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different activities. Thrive Montgomery 2050 repeatedly relies on the convenience and reasonableness of walking while ignoring the drawbacks of bicycling.

Walking is something that everyone does. Practically everyone would agree that one should walk rather than drive to a place only a short walk away. Bicycling is different. Only a small minority of county residents bicycle, and many bicycle only recreationally and not as a preferred mode of transport. Thrive Montgomery 2050 clearly wants to increase the number of bicyclists. But the most optimistic reasonable projection is that the increased number would still be a minority.

Thrive should consider the majority of residents who cannot or do not want to bicycle. A substantial number of county residents are aging, and some can no longer feel safe bicycling, or cannot bicycle at all. Many residents have small children, and although some people carry their children on their bicycles, many others would not feel safe doing so. There are many reasons why people may not want to bicycle:

Walking is an all-weather activity. If it rains you use an umbrella. If it is snows you bundle up and possibly wear boots. Whereas bicycling in the rain is difficult and can be dangerous. Bicycling in the cold is difficult without extra protective clothing beyond what one would wear for walking, and bicycling in the snow is almost impossible.

For longer distances Thrive Montgomery 2050 prefers public transit. People who live near transit usually walk there. Whereas bicycling to transit requires a safe place to leave the bicycle and helmet. Bicycle racks could be constructed, but the Plan does not acknowledge that bicycling to transit will be different from walking. Many people will be reluctant to leave their bicycle outdoors in public for long periods of time.

Thrive Montgomery 2050 wants to encourage people to walk, bicycle, and roll to shop instead of driving. The only example is a reasonable reference to walking: “A quick trip to the grocery should be manageable on foot ....” (P.81.) But visit a supermarket in a neighborhood where numerous residents own bicycles—you will see very few if any using their bikes to shop for food. The dynamics of shopping with a car and a bicycle are apparently different.

One goal of reducing automobile use is to reduce traffic-related fatalities and severe injuries. (P. 84.) But switching to bicycles will still result in serious accidents unless helmet use and bicyclist compliance with traffic laws is enforced, which is not currently done.

A dream of Thrive Montgomery 2050 is that walking, pedaling, and rolling will somehow “facilitate[s] the casual social interaction that build a sense of place and community” (P. 78) and “will enhance human interaction and build social capital.” (P. 84.) People on foot may have casual social interactions with people they meet walking by, and stop to investigate things they pass. It is laughable to contend that people speeding to their destinations on bicycles will have casual social interactions.

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What is the point of this lengthy description of the obvious differences between bicycling and walking? The reason is that from beginning to end of Thrive Montgomery 2050 the phrase “walking, bicycling, and rolling” is repeated almost as a mantra. The discussion improperly conflates these different modes of transport. Most of the examples of why these are desirable relate to walking. The differences, inconveniences, and limitations of bicycling are ignored so that bicycling benefits from its association with walking. Adoption of Thrive Montgomery 2050 in its current form should not provide a justification for bicycle enthusiasts (a potent political force) to get advantages and policies that help bicycles but inconvenience everyone else. Rather, all enhancements to bicycle use (and many would be beneficial) should be analyzed and justified based on the reality and implications of bicycle use itself, and not merely because “walking, bicycling, and rolling” are lumped together as collectively good in Thrive Montgomery 2050.

In contrast, the lack of creative planning for automobiles in Thrive Montgomery 2050 is short-sighted and incompatible with the necessary role autos play and will continue to play in the lives of most residents of all economic groups. There is no plan for the coming transition to electric vehicles, and for the essential role autos play and will continue to play in the economy. What is needed is an intelligent, forward-looking plan for automobiles. The current “plan” essentially only says we will make it as difficult and inconvenient to drive and park as possible—go walk and bicycle! This will not work and is unacceptable.

### **“Rolling” Should Be Removed from Thrive Montgomery 2050**

Thrive Montgomery 2050 repeatedly refers to walking, biking, and “rolling,” mentioning “rolling” at least 20 times. “Rolling” is moving “via wheelchair, scooter, or other conveyance.” (P.145.) We want our neighborhoods to be wheelchair accessible. But otherwise, the major 30-year plan for the county should not be based on the unknown capabilities of scooters and undefined “other conveyances.” The practical role of these modes of transport is trivial. The word “rolling” should be removed completely from the document to focus on the well-understood and intended activities of walking and bicycling.

Thank you for your attention and consideration. We hope you will adopt our recommendations.

Sincerely,

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