

## In Thrive Montgomery 2050, Schools Are Left Out of Complete Communities

As President Obama said: “a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite.” His first Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, said “public education has to be the great equalizer.”

So where in the Planning Board’s draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Thrive 2050) are the schools for the current and increased population in Montgomery County?  
ESSENTIALLY NOWHERE.

A central element of Thrive 2050 is Complete Communities, pp. 41 – 54. Complete communities are not defined in the chapter on Complete Communities or in the Glossary (Appendix B). The draft report does say that the concept of “15-minute living” has emerged as a way of reimagining existing communities to maximize their attractiveness and efficiency by locating living spaces in each neighborhood or district within walking distance of services, infrastructure, facilities, and amenities that serve the daily needs of the people who live there. (p. 45). And it encourages “co-location and adjacency of all essential and public services . . . in complete communities.” (p. 46). But where are the MCPS schools?

It is shocking that the chapter on Complete Communities does not mention “schools” (based on a word search). They are not in the picture. Schools could be co-located with park areas, but while co-location is mentioned, schools are not. So, there you have it, a draft General Plan that prides itself in calling for equity but fails to address where public schools could exist and could be built.

My comments (12/8/20) to the Planning Board on the Public Hearing Draft of the Thrive Montgomery 2050 plan said:

The notion of local schools that children can walk to in Complete Communities is both wholly unrealistic and potentially socially problematic.

Excluding areas that have been newly built out, and at least in the down county, in general and far more often than not since I have lived here, school construction has involved demolishing school buildings and building new school buildings on existing school properties (e.g., Somerset school), building a school on a property that MCPS had used (e.g., Silver Creek Middle School in Kensington) or additions to existing schools (e.g., Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School). Land is too expensive and land condemnations too disfavored to acquire new land for schools. In light of this, the implicit notion of building new local schools that children can walk

to in Complete Communities, is unjustified and wholly unrealistic, at least in built-up down county areas.

Beyond that there are issues with local schools, including diversity.

The Planning Board Draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 sent to the County Council (April 2021) did not address this major shortcoming on property/land for schools in any way.

It is axiomatic that land is very expensive in Montgomery County. And in the relatively recent past, which may be prologue, Montgomery County Public Schools did not acquire many parcels of property for new schools. See [Land Acquisition: MCPS \(P546034\) | Montgomery County Maryland Capital Budget \(montgomerycountymd.gov\)](#). On top of that, land acquisition has not been eligible for state funding. OLO report, [OLO Report 2017-4 New School Construction Costs.pdf \(montgomerycountymd.gov\)](#), pp. 6, 30. Ultimately, local funds support 80-85 percent of total new and replacement school construction costs. OLO report, page after p. 66.

What is in store for MCPS students -- overcrowding, no or inadequate playgrounds/playing fields at schools? Where is the equity?

Thrive Montgomery 2050 cannot go forward until school properties and school buildings for increased numbers of students including from new residential units are examined thoroughly and addressed. Residents deserve answers to these questions. How will there be at least very good MCPS schools in the corridors? How will there be at least very good MCPS schools for the complete communities?

The absence of schools in Thrive 2050 is all the more problematic given the uses to which school buildings are put. School buildings increasingly have been used beyond classic public education for elementary school, middle school and high school students. For quite a while, they have been used for recreation programs on their fields and in their gyms. Increasingly, schools are used for early childhood education (pre-Kindergarten) and community activities.

*Lloyd Guerci*  
4627 Hunt Ave.  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

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