

5810 Ogden Court
Bethesda, MD 20816
September 4, 2021

Councilmember Andrew Friedson
Stella Werner Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Councilmember Friedson:

As you and other members of the PHED Committee continue your review of Thrive Montgomery 2050, please take the time to read my comments on Thrive Montgomery 2050. **My primary concern is that you delete River Road as a Growth Corridor**, but I have other, more general issues with the plan.

There is no explanation in Thrive Montgomery 2050 why River Road and Connecticut Avenue are included as Growth Corridors. I cannot speak to Connecticut Avenue but having lived nearly 25 years on a cul-de-sac with 25 homes that is parallel to River Road, I can tell you why **River Road does not meet most of the criteria the planners have established for Growth Corridors**.

River Road Does Not Provide Multi-Modal Transit Options

Limited Public Transportation. If you overlay the map of the Master Plan of Highways and Transitways¹ onto the map of Corridor-focused growth², you can clearly see that except for River Road and Connecticut Avenue, the other Growth Corridors are either where Bus Rapid Transit exists or is proposed, along the Metro, where a light rail (the Purple Line) will go or near the MARC train. None of these transit lines is on or proposed for River Road.

River Road is serviced by one WMATA bus line, the T2, which runs from the Friendship Heights Metro to the Rockville Metro via River Road and Falls Road. The T2 is scheduled to run every 30 minutes from 5:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., weekdays. On weekends, a Ride-On bus runs *every 50 minutes* from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. *This is not the level of transit service needed for a “car less or car free” residential area.* In fact, several years prior to the covid-19 pandemic, WMATA cut rush hour service on the T2 from every 20 minutes to every 30 minutes. The result was that several residents in my neighborhood went from riding the bus to the Metro to driving downtown or driving to a Metro parking lot.

If the Council or the planners think that making River Road a Growth Corridor and allowing multiplexes, especially tri- and quadplexes, to be built in the bordering neighborhoods will improve bus service and get people onto public transit, think again. I’m sure you’re aware of WMATA budget constraints, which may only increase in the next 30 years as the Metro system gets older and needs more repairs. In addition, improved bus service that only goes from Friendship Heights to Rockville and back, will not entice a significant number of homeowners – whether they live in a single-family home or a multiplex --

¹ Figure 2: Map of Adopted Planned Transitways, *Technical Update to the Master Plan of Highways & Transitways*, Approved and Adopted, December 2018, p. 20.

² Figure 29: Corridor-focused growth, *Thrive Montgomery 2050*, Planning Board Draft, April 2021, p. 31

to leave their cars at home and take public transit. It's not just how often a bus runs, it's also whether it goes where residents want to go.

Crossing River Road: Taking Your Life in Your Hands. Crossing River Road from the bus stops can be challenging as several stops aren't near traffic signals, nor are there crosswalks, indicating a pedestrian crossing. The bus stop closest to my house, Ogden Road, has no traffic signal or crosswalk. While my husband took the bus to the Metro every workday before he retired a few years ago, I would pick him up by car at Friendship Heights in the evening so he wouldn't risk his life crossing River Road. Even crossing at the traffic signals is dangerous. There is scant time given for pedestrians to cross before vehicles make left and right turns.

A Dangerous Road to Drive, Bicycle and Walk On. It is also dangerous to drive, bicycle and walk on River Road. Although the speed limit has been lowered from 45 to 35 m.p.h. from the Beltway to Ridgefield Road, that hasn't significantly slowed traffic. The speed of most vehicles is upward of 40 m.p.h. Bicycle lanes were painted on River Road a few years ago, but because of the volume of traffic, its speed, the turning lanes and the topography of the road with hills and valleys there are few brave and experienced bicyclists on this road.

Walking is not a consideration; it is simply unsafe. There are no sidewalks or paths along River Road going west from Ridgefield Road until past the Beltway. If someone is walking on the shoulder, it must be an emergency.

River Road is Mainly a Connector Road. River Road from the Beltway to Western Avenue is a connector, a pass-through for many of the drivers, even if it's classified as a major arterial road. It doesn't really go anywhere eastbound from the Beltway. The eastern point of River Road in Montgomery County hits the District line and goes from four lanes of traffic to two lanes with a lane of parking on either side, abruptly ending in Tenley Town on Wisconsin Avenue. It does not continue to downtown D.C. where many of the drivers, especially during rush hour, want to go. From the Beltway, traveling east, drivers turn right to Goldsboro Road, Westbard Avenue, Little Falls Parkway, and to a lesser extent, Western Avenue – which will get them to Massachusetts Avenue to get downtown.

West of the Beltway to Potomac Village and beyond, River Road is basically a two-lane road with occasional turning lanes. With the toll lanes on I-495 and I-270 potentially in the future, there also exists the possibility of a big interchange at River Road and the Beltway. I assume this is based on one line in the appendix of the Master Plan of Highways and Transitways Functional Classification, which has planned 6-8 lanes for River Road from the Beltway to Ridgefield Road. Yet, Thrive Montgomery 2050 suggests that there should be no "planning or constructing of new highways or major road widenings for cars."³ There is a constant lament in Thrive Montgomery 2050 about how driving causes more greenhouse gases and that walking, biking and rolling should be encouraged, but clearly the only major arterial road where this isn't going to happen is River Road.

Significant Compact Growth Unlikely

Activity Centers are Few and Far Between. Potomac Village, which is considered a "Village or Neighborhood Center," the lowest in the hierarchy of Activity Centers, is the only one noted along River

³ Ibid, p. 80

Road in Thrive Montgomery 2050.⁴ Presumably in the next five-10 years when the redevelopment of the Westbard Road section of the Westbard Sector Plan is redeveloped, Westbard will be considered another Activity Center. These two activity centers will be almost seven miles apart, along a busy and dangerous road. Most of the other activity centers noted in Thrive Montgomery 2050 are closer together, some separated by just a few miles between Metro stations. It *is* possible to walk, bike or roll between centers around Metro stations, but that is not possible on River Road.

According to the presentation made by planners to the County Council, “Compact growth along corridors will lay foundation for focused development in centers of activity.”⁵ Given the nearly seven miles between the two activity centers along River Road this is unlikely.

Emphasis Should be on East County Investment

River Road is Part of the “Favored Quarter.” Thrive Montgomery 2050 makes a very strong point that the 1993 Refinement of the Wedges and Corridors Plan removed the I-95/Route 29 corridor from areas appropriate for growth and subsequent investment was focused on the I-270 corridor, which became the “favored quarter.”⁶ River Road is off of this “favored quarter” and consequently doesn’t need additional investment or development. Traveling east from the Beltway, River Road has very little commercial development until you hit the Westbard Sector area east of Ridgefield Road continuing until Little Falls Parkway. River Road is lined with lots of greenery – perhaps to make up for the pollution caused by all the traffic – and public and private schools, churches, country clubs and homes. The Council should follow the advice in Thrive Montgomery 2050 by focusing investment and development along corridors in East County, so that they can prosper as the western side of the county has.⁷ **River Road should not be considered a Growth Corridor.**

Other Problems with Thrive Montgomery 2050

A Negative, Depressing and Distorted Representation of Montgomery County. As I read the plan, the first time to understand it and the second to analyze it, I came away with a negative, depressing and distorted view of the County I live in and love. Not until the conclusion is anything positive stated about Montgomery County. In fact, the most positive item about our community is almost the last line, “Our community is in the 99th percentile of all counties in the country in terms of household income and educational attainment, with an annual economic output of almost \$100 billion and an amazingly diverse population.”⁸ In journalism this is called “burying the lede.” Instead of working with our strengths and building and growing them so the entire county can benefit, the plan denigrates the county. Yes, we have problems, but given what we have to work with economically and educationally, we can overcome them.

Integration is Happening Organically. A 2019 map showing the “Predominant Racial or Ethnic Group by Census Tract”⁹ appears three times in the plan. On the page with the first representation of the map, it

⁴ Ibid. p. 31

⁵ Thrive Montgomery 2050, Planners’ Presentation to County Council, June 15, 2021.

⁶ Thrive Montgomery 2050, p. 35

⁷ Ibid., p. 36

⁸ Ibid., p. 137

⁹ Ibid., p. 14, 94, 108

is juxtaposed with a 1936 Federal Housing Authority map that delineated economic and racial divisions for housing in the county.¹⁰ However, in an earlier draft of Thrive Montgomery 2050, a third map was included that showed where the major racial groups lived in 1990. That map didn't make this version. But, comparing that map to the current map, shows that **organically** within the past 30 years, without the push from planners to develop "social capital," nearly 1/3 of the county has no predominant ethnic group. Racially and ethnically our neighborhoods are integrating without any assistance from the Planning Department. It is happening on my street, and I have the utmost faith this will continue to happen.

Low - and Moderate-Income Housing Focus Needed. I understand the need for housing at all income levels and types, but the clearest need is for low- and moderate-priced housing, based on the statement, "By 2045, the people of color are forecast to make up 73 percent of the county's population, with a significant percentage earning less than \$50,000 per year."¹¹ I'm not sure how to fully analyze that statement because according to a Maryland state website, a \$53,000 income for a family of four with two children is currently considered low income.¹² If many of the county's population will be earning under \$50,000 in 25 years then we need to: 1) find companies ready to invest in jobs in this county so wages will increase; and, 2) concentrate on building safe, clean housing near transit that will enable low- and moderate-income families to get to work, school and shopping to take care of their needs.

Consistent Vilification of Single-Family Homeowners. Throughout Thrive Montgomery 2050, single-family homeowners are vilified, as if it's our fault that two-thirds of the county's housing stock are single-family homes. What happened to "The American Dream"? The high percentage of single-family homes in the County reflects the choice of most people when this county was first developed and what most people in suburban areas still prefer. The plan refers to "entitlement-centered" development as if homeowners were responsible for single-family home zoning and for the high prices many of our homes command. We weren't. Prices are high for these homes because: 1) they're desirable; 2) there is more demand than supply; and 3) there are people who have the finances to afford these homes today.

Maps and Metrics Given Without Putting Them in the Larger Context

Home Value for Tax Purposes, not Homeowner Wealth. In the "Affordable & Attainable Housing" chapter, there is a map of the median home value of owner-occupied homes throughout the county.¹³ This is the value of homes on paper. It's what the State Department of Taxation claims homes are worth so they can collect taxes, which support government agencies, including the Planning Board and County Council. It does not reflect homeowners' income, what they paid for their homes, how long they've lived in their homes, or the price they could sell their homes for. Because this is not put into context of other figures, it gives a false impression of homeowner wealth.

"Overhoused" Issue Ignores Aging in Place. Thrive Montgomery 2050 also points out that nearly one-third of owner-occupied homes are "overhoused."¹⁴ The conclusion it draws is that "this is partially a

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14

¹¹ Ibid., p. 96

¹² Federal Poverty Guidelines, The Maryland People's Law Library, Peoples-law.org.

¹³ Thrive Montgomery 2050, p.95

¹⁴ Ibid., p.93

function of the fact that more than one-third of the county's land area is zoned for single family housing. . . .¹⁵ The conclusion I draw is more nuanced. According to a 2018 survey by AARP¹⁶, most adults want to age in place. Aging in place may be one of the reasons a large percentage of homeowners ages 65 and over are still in their homes and consequently are "overhoused."¹⁷

The Role of Banks is Never Mentioned. Thrive Montgomery 2050 often makes the point that the high cost of housing exacerbates inequality and segregation by race and class. To remedy this, the plan promotes building a wider variety of sizes and types of housing to "help diversify the mix of incomes in neighborhoods across the county."¹⁸ A chart of homeownership by race¹⁹ shows that 75 percent of Non-Hispanic Whites, and Asians are in owner-occupied homes, compared with 55 percent of any householder of color. The next chart shows wealth accumulation by race. It is unclear whether the wealth accumulation is because of homeownership value on paper or separate from it. What isn't acknowledged by the plan is that most banks will not lend you money for a home if your debt is greater than your assets, even if your income will cover the monthly mortgage payments. While neighborhoods are racially and ethnically diversifying organically, whether they can diversify with a mix of incomes may rest more on banks and financial institutions than on the size and type of housing built.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Sincerely,

Phyllis R. Edelman

cc: Council President Tom Hucker
Councilmember Will Jawando
Councilmember Hans Riemer

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 92

¹⁶ [2018 Home and Community Preferences: A National Survey of Adults Ages 18-Plus \(aarp.org\)](https://www.aarp.org/research/2018/06/20/2018-home-and-community-preferences-a-national-survey-of-adults-ages-18-plus/)

¹⁷ Thrive Montgomery 2050, p. 91

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 103

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 104