

Thrive Montgomery 2050 to Seniors: Let them Eat Cake¹

As baby boomers - born between 1946 and 1964 - age, the Census Bureau has noted that the year 2030 marks an important demographic turning point in U.S. By 2030, well within Thrive Montgomery 2050's time frame, all baby boomers will be older than age 65. One in every five residents will be retirement age."

<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>.

By 2040 the number of seniors is expected to double. Not only will 1 out of 5 residents be 65 or older in 2040, the diminishing cohort of boomers will be frail elderly, ages 76 to 94 years old. [The 2017 Park, Recreation, and Open Space \(PROS\) Plan - COMPLETE \(montgomeryparks.org\)](#). p. 22.

In 2020, Montgomery County had the highest Elder-Adult Dependency Ratio (the ratio of older dependents (people older than 64) to the working-age population (those ages 15-64)) in the region at **25.3%**. Thrive Montgomery 2050 p. 10, figure 9.

The Planning Board's Draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Thrive 2050) all but ignores seniors and their needs. It mentions "seniors" once (based on a word search), noting that there will be new residents who are seniors or persons with disabilities. p. 97. Similarly, "elderly" are mentioned once in the introduction, relating to social isolation. p. 20. In the text of Thrive 2050, aging is mentioned twice, one of which is in the context of missing middle housing. p. 105.

Other than that, seniors are overlooked and left in the general mix, without a real discussion of necessary accommodations, including accommodating mobility. It is as though the planners have not seen a grandparent or parent age, or were callously indifferent to the consequences and associated needs of aging. The Planning Board ignores the reference in their own 2017 PROS Plan to the condition of "frail" elderly, ages 76 to 94 years old.

Mobility is an important measure of successful aging. Loss of mobility is common among older adults, and has profound social, psychological and physical consequences. Harvard Health, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/two-questions-can-reveal-mobility-problems-in-seniors-201309186682>. Mobility limitations put older adults at risk for reduced access to medical services, poor psychological health, declining functional abilities, negative health outcomes and

¹ Figuratively, as the phrase is commonly attributed to Marie Antoinette, a deceased queen of France.

falls. About 30% of older adults (range of 22.5%–46.7% in various studies) have mobility limitations. See “The impact of mobility limitations on health outcomes among older adults”

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0197457217302057>. As one example, non-fatal falls among adults age 65 and older are very costly.

<https://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalafety/falls/data/fallcost.html>

Unconscionably, instead of reviewing the ways the large senior population gets around, with an evaluation that includes continuing and expanding those mechanisms given the increasing numbers of seniors, Thrive 2050 sweepingly and simplistically emphasizes its promotion of biking and walking. Biking and walking often won’t work for many seniors when they are grocery shopping, going to various doctors, running other errands, socializing with friends who do not live close by, going to a grandchild’s County Recreation Department activity or MSI soccer game, going out to dinner at night including in inclement weather, or going other than relatively short distances. Seniors thus often need and commonly use cars, which they drive significantly fewer miles, on average, than younger drivers. <https://www.iihs.org/topics/older-drivers>. By 2050, many of these cars will be electric cars.

But Thrive 2050 aims indiscriminately to cull significant numbers of cars without an accommodation of seniors’ needs. It refers broadly to “the needs of people [being] considered ahead of the needs of cars” (p. 50) but ignores the needs of many actual people - - seniors. While Thrive 2050 noted social isolation as an undesirable outcome (p. 20), for seniors, that is exactly what Thrive’s broadscale anti-car approach would lead to.

The foregoing, of course, is not opposition to walking or to use of available mass transit when viable for the tasks at hand of seniors or to the expansion of mass transit. But in reality, the fact is that mass transit in most areas of our County has been and, based on history, is likely in the future to be too limited to meet all or a significant component of the needs of large numbers of seniors.

Related to the need for cars is the need for convenient places to park those cars, both at seniors’ residences and at their various destinations. Again, Thrive 2050 works against seniors in its anti-parking spot theme.

Another important concern of seniors is where they reside. “Aging in place” is a well-recognized concept. Aging in place is a matter of preserving the ability for people to remain in their homes as they age for as long as possible. Per AARP, a

clear majority of American adults would prefer to stay in their current home as long as possible. [AARP Survey: 75 Percent of Retirees Want to Stay Put](#). And, aging in place has a broader connotation than simply living in one's home as they age. As noted in a study cited by AARP, many older residents distinguished between their physical homes and their neighborhoods. In other words, aging in place is also about "aging in a familiar area." Familiarity becomes important as one grows older. Choice is key. Older adults want to have a sense of independence for as long as possible. As adults grow older, they do not want their independence removed from them. AARP, [The Meaning of "Aging in Place" to Older People – 2011 \(aarp.org\)](#)

Thrive 2050 did mention to aging in place – once. It was in the context of adding more "Missing Middle" housing types, where Thrive 2050 said it would promote aging in place. p. 105. In other words, Thrive 2050 mentioned aging in place when convenient to support its preferred Missing Middle housing, but not in the necessary and important context of meeting the needs of seniors where choice is key.

It would not surprise me if a glib response to the foregoing is that the sweeping pressures advanced by Thrive 2050 won't take away cars or make parking impossible. But Thrive 2020's big squeeze play on cars and parking spaces is intended to remove cars, without an accommodation of seniors. And there is a problem with Thrive 2050 that is more fundamental and broader than cars and parking. While it talks about equity, Thrive 2050 failed to address the needs of a large senior population. For seniors, it is anti-thrive.

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