

## Thrive Presents an Alluring Feeling as To Parks but Leaves a Void as To Future Parks

The discussions of parks in the Complete Communities and the Parks and Recreation sections of the Planning Board's draft Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Thrive 2050) has a sirenic ring. Yet it evades the questions of what parks would adequately serve the populations expected by 2050 and, taking into account some relevant history, what parks are likely in 2050?

There is a lot of good sounding stuff about parks in Thrive 2050, but its warm glow must not allow the County Council to avoid studiously examining whether adequate parks are likely to be built for the populations that Thrive 2050 contemplates.

Several matters need to be considered. First, to set the stage for further inquiry and for a look into the future, has there been enough funding for parks that, the Council has recognized, are needed or for which land has been acquired? If not, it cannot reasonably be assumed that funding will be available for new parks for anticipated residents under Thrive 2050.

Second, is it reasonable to assume that developers will provide the necessary parks?

Third, are countywide impact taxes available for parks?

Fourth, what parks would be needed by 2050?

Fifth, to gauge feasibility, as an order of magnitude, what would the new parks needed by 2050 cost?

### DISCUSSION

1. There has not been enough money to develop parks that exist on paper. Based on the past, there is a very real possibility if not probability that new parks will not be built for the new complete communities and other growth areas that add new residents under Thrive 2050

The following are real world examples in an area south of Bethesda, where I have lived for over 25 years, of shortcomings in actually bringing parks into fruition.

#### Sector Plan showed a park that, even after decades, was never built

The 1982 Westbard Sector Plan contained a park near Springfield, which has been referred to as Springfield Park. While existing on paper, the park was never built. To this day, the area within the Westbard Sector Plan boundary has no M-NCPPC local, neighborhood or recreational parks.

#### Sector Plan calls for needed parks but they are way beyond what likely will be built

The County Council Resolution (18-135) on the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan stated: "One of the four overarching goals of the Sector Plan is to increase parks and open space in Bethesda. The Sector Plan identifies several projects in the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) to achieve this goal, but the capacity of the current CIP to fund these projects is limited and the cost of acquiring and developing new parks in a developed area will be significant." "This Plan

recommends the exploration of new financing mechanisms. . . This includes the park impact payment recommended for the Overlay zone, as well as other potential alternative financing mechanisms.” (Resolution at pp. 43 – 44). The Council went on to consider and adopt a park impact payment fee in the Bethesda Overly Zone. In discussions before and by the Council in 2017, there were estimates that in the Bethesda Downtown Sector Plan area, parks would cost approximately 110 million dollars, and estimates that park impact payments of \$10/sq foot (subject to exclusions) to buy FAR could generate \$ 40 million dollars. There is a huge funding shortfall with no reasonable expectation of full funding for property acquisitions and development of parks in Bethesda.

Parks Department buys property but does not have/allocate funds to develop it

Over 25 years ago, in 1995, the Parks Department purchased 5320 Willard Avenue, a lot with a house on it, to add a little over an acre to the Willard Avenue Park. As of earlier this year, the house is still being rented and the property has a chain link fence around it, precluding any public use. Thus, for decades property owned by the Parks Department has not been developed as a park.

2a. Any reliance on developers to build parks except as they are absolutely required to do so is entirely misplaced

The planned Kensington of Bethesda assisted living facility in Westbard is an example of how developers will NOT provide parks under the standard method in the County zoning ordinance. The site plan came before the Planning Board on December 17, 2020. As explained by area resident Susan Spock, under the previously adopted preliminary plan resolution covering the site, certain land (0.64 acre counting a stream) had to be dedicated to M-NCPPC for a park. People in the area wanted Kensington of Bethesda to develop the land as a park, and not simply leave it as a lot. Kensington of Bethesda refused. Transcript of Planning Board hearing beginning at about 3:21:37. Planning Board Chair Anderson addressed the issue: since you brought it up . . . on developer’s obligation to develop the park. The problem is that this is a standard method project. No public benefit is required. ... Not required to make those contributions toward a public benefit. Transcript 3:25:21 - 3:26:59. Susan Spock then made a prescient statement in light of the foregoing exchange that in Thrive’s complete communities, we won’t have parks. While a majority of the Planning Board approved the site plan without requiring the applicant to develop a park, Commissioner Natali Fani-González voted against approval.

2b. There will be less park area and open space than reasonably assumed based on a reading of sector plans as developers’ plans offer less than the public expects

The 2016 Westbard\_Sector Plan calls for creation of a civic green open space area of approximately ½-acre but no less than 1/3-acre on the Westwood Shopping Center site. Not surprisingly, in the preliminary/site plans the NYSE-listed property owner opted toward approximately the minimum 1/3 acre making the sector plan’s range to half an acre (not counting the road, discussed next) all but meaningless. The proposed green area was located

adjacent to the principal commercial ingress/egress internal road to the shopping area, apartments and townhouses, which road the developer specified to not have curbs in order to count the road as part of open space on the imaginative theory that this facilitates the incorporation of that space, when closed to vehicular traffic, into the open civic green. On top of that, the developer's plans cluttered the open space with items that would improve its commercial operations. This civic green was approved by the Planning Board.

The 2016 Westbard Sector Plan also provides for a Springfield Neighborhood Green Urban Park of approximately ½ acre. The developer proposed a park approximately one-half acre in size. But the area proposed by the developer for the park was encumbered by easements going through it to a condominium to the rear. In fact, the easement area was paved over for vehicular traffic. Fortunately, that attempt to provide such a patently unacceptable park was foiled. Unfortunately, if the easements could not be removed by an agreement between the Westbard developer and condominium, instead of moving a proposed on-site building back to accommodate the park in its general location in the sector plan, the Planning Board approved a plan that would move the park off site, across a 4-lane road.

Chevy Chase Land Company, founded by segregationist Senator Francis G. Newlands, owns the Collections which are very close to the Friendship Heights Metro Station. An objective of the 1998 Friendship Heights sector plan is to encourage walking by creating an attractive pedestrian environment and improving pedestrian access to Metro. In the sector plan, Wisconsin Avenue was described as an "urban boulevard" that should feature a high level of pedestrian amenities, including special paving, custom benches, landscaping features, and ornamental lighting on the sidewalks. The sector plan called for a 20-foot public sidewalk along Wisconsin Avenue in this area to adequately accommodate pedestrian activity and streetscape. In 2020, the Land Company proposed to amend the site plans to convert part of the sidewalk along Wisconsin Avenue -- public use space -- to private space occupied by a retaining wall and raised patio. This would be used for outdoor restaurant seating, although the owner could have moved the front windows and doors of the building(s) on its property back for outdoor seating and not taken part of the sidewalk. The net result was an 8-foot-wide tree panel and a mere 7-foot-wide sidewalk (total sidewalk width, for people moving in both directions) for people walking, people jogging, bicyclists, people walking dogs, people pushing strollers and people on wheelchairs. The width of the space for the tree panel/streetscape and the sidewalk (total width) would be reduced to about 15 feet, which would not be anywhere close to the 20-foot-wide streetscape and sidewalk the sector plan requires along Wisconsin Avenue. While a majority of the Planning Board approved the amendments to site plans allowing the incursion onto the sidewalk, Commissioner Tina Patterson voted against approval.

### 3. Needed parks would not be paid for by development impact taxes

In the County, a development impact tax is assessed on new residential and commercial buildings and additions to commercial buildings in the County to fund, in part, the improvements necessary to increase the transportation or public-school systems. Impact taxes do not pay for parks.

4. There is a glaring omission in Thrive 2050 of a discussion of what parks would be needed for complete communities and growth areas, including new populations, contemplated by Thrive 2050

M-NCPPC knows a lot about parks. One thing they no doubt know is that there have been metrics for adequate areas for parks based on populations dating back over 100 years. See e.g., Standards For Outdoor Recreational Areas | Golf Course | Parks (scribd.com); <https://www.planning.org/pas/reports/report194.htm>. Also, generally, an urban park is designed to provide effective services to people in a limited surrounding area, called a service area of the park, which is varied with the park's size and category. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5750939/>

Also, M-NCPPC has a lot of information on parks based on its parks system, sector plans and numerous sophisticated and powerful information systems and information bases including GIS based systems and information on populations.

Thrive 2050 identified and promoted growth areas. It also promoted and discussed complete communities and 15-minute living. In general, Thrive 2050 did not address the categories of parks that complete communities and growth areas should have, including as appropriate recreation-oriented parks (regional, recreational), which may not be likely to be added down county, countywide urban parks (civic greens, plazas, urban recreational parks), community use parks (neighborhood greens, pocket greens, urban recreational parklets) or community use parks (neighborhood parks, local parks) (for categories of parks, see the Energized Public Spaces Functional Master Plan (2018) pp. 28 – 29). In a limited manner, Thrive 2050 did say there is an urban parks shortage (p. 114). New soccer and ball fields were not addressed. Thrive 2050 referred to active recreation but did not explain what that means or requires. When finalized and adopted, Thrive 2050 needs to say what parks, including types and sizes of parks, complete communities and growth areas should have, at least as a target range.

The Planning Board could have examined areas in corridors and likely complete communities across the county (see the diagram in Thrive 2050 showing 24 centers and 9 villages and neighborhood centers, figure 29 p. 31 (“diagram should be considered in the context of the Compact Growth and Complete Communities chapters”)) and, applying metrics for parks to those areas, tallied an estimate of parks needs for them. Thrive 2050 did not do so. It keeps the Council and residents from knowing what the needs for parks likely will be. Good government demands that parks for the period to 2050 be reasonably estimated.

5. The costs of new parks and existing on-paper parks that have not been developed needs to be estimated to be transparent about whether needed parks likely will be built

Thrive Montgomery 2050 (Planning Board draft) is a bold general plan that proposes complete communities and growth areas. The realities attendant to increased populations need to be described. If not, the plan misleads the public. In this context, it is necessary to have an estimate of what parks will cost in the aggregate. (The cost was estimated for Bethesda, so it is

possible.) That will enable a fair assessment of what new parks could come into fruition by 2050.

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

June 14, 2021