



Of the Anacostia River

Testimony on Montgomery County's General Plan Update: Thrive Montgomery 2050

July 6, 2021

I am writing on behalf of the Neighbors of the Northwest Branch, a citizen organization dedicated to the ecological restoration of the Northwest Branch. As stewards of one of our major streams and stakeholders in life on this planet, we are deeply concerned that this plan presents our parks and the Agricultural Reserve as constraints on development, their primary value lying in recreational opportunities-- rather than as critical assets in our efforts both to slow climate change and to mitigate its unavoidable effects. Absent those constraints, would it be acceptable to construct housing over the entire 504 square miles of the county?

In 2017, Montgomery County proclaimed that we are in a climate emergency. Since then we've seen our national parks (Glacier and Rocky Mountain) extensively burned, whole towns reduced to ashes, including Paradise in California in 2019 and Lytton in British Columbia a few days ago (6/29 temperature: 121 degrees). On July 4, the Washington Post reported 800 probable heat-related deaths because of the heat dome covering several western states. Already 44 current active blazes have burned nearly 700,000 acres. In Oregon, fires burn in what used to be a temperate rain forest. The temperature in Portland hit 116 degrees on June 28. California's cropland is suffering a multi-year drought. The drops in water level in Lake Powell and Lake Mead are frightening. What does this mean for food supply? Meanwhile in the Midwest, cars are abandoned on flooded highways, and Detroit drowns. Tropical storm Elsa, earliest ever 5th named storm, threatens Florida as of this writing.¹

Right here in Maryland, Dorchester County is disappearing into the Bay and in Prince George's and Montgomery counties, we are getting heavier, more concentrated rain than in the past, resulting in very damaging and expensive flooding. Twice in recent memory the Northwest Branch has gone over rather than under Colesville Road and twice Ellicott City's main street has become a gushing and deadly river. Major stream and bank remediation has been necessary along the Northwest Branch to avoid exposure and rupture of the sanitary sewer trunk line from storm erosion. The Council agenda for June 29 included a supplemental appropriation to deal with flooding in Potomac.

¹ See The Washington Post article on 7/4, p. A3, by Sarah Kaplan. She also noted that in what has been the coldest part of the world in Siberia, the temperature hit 118 degrees. See also <https://www.8newsnow.com/news/local-news/lake-mead-level-continues-to-drop-affecting-power-production/>.

At this critical moment, the Planning Board has fortuitously updated the general plan for the county—and has *minimized the urgent need to steward our parks and the Agricultural Reserve both to prevent greater climate change and to mitigate its unavoidable effects*. Climate change is mentioned *last* in the Introduction and *last* in the Conclusion. Gone is the 9-page chapter entitled “Healthy and Sustainable Environment” that provided a strong environmental rationale for moving to compact walkable, bikeable, 15-minute living served by transit to minimize greenhouse gases. Stewardship is not even included in the title of the chapter covering parks, only recreation. We assume that the statement in the Conclusion (p. 134)² and in the transmittal memo from Chairman Anderson that the plan is intended to “complement, not duplicate” the County Executive’s Climate Action Plan is intended to forestall the expected outcry. Chairman Anderson also advises that implementation items from the original document are now in an appendix that is not part of the plan. We understand that Thrive is a policy document. However, since the Planning Board controls land use, what are the implications of removing these actions from the plan?

We urge the Council to amend Thrive Montgomery 2050 in the following ways:

1. In the Introduction, move the discussion of climate change to the beginning and stress the urgency of reducing our carbon footprint through compact development and stewarding our parkland, our Agricultural Reserve, and all other undeveloped land. Make perfectly clear that Thrive Montgomery 2050, a policy document, will be carried out through the implementation items in the county’s Climate Action Plan and in its own appendix.
2. Move the “Parks and Recreation for an Increasingly Urban and Diverse Community” chapter to follow the Introduction and include stewardship in the title as well as the text. Lead the chapter with the discussion of land conservation and stewardship in addressing the county’s environmental sustainability goals (pp. 115, 122, 124).
3. Emphasize the primacy and importance of agriculture in the Agricultural Reserve. When other areas of the country can no longer support agriculture because they are too dry, Montgomery County’s Agricultural Reserve will be critical. This is the place for regenerative agriculture both to provide food and to sequester carbon.³ On land not cultivated, the policy should be to foster forests. Recreation and tourism goals are not appropriate here (pp 38, 39).
4. Include in the general plan policy that private property do its part in the climate effort through lawn reduction, decreased impervious surface, and increased tree planting. Montgomery County policy should discourage mansionization at the expense of the already-decreasing tree canopy.

Overall, this is a good, necessary, and inclusive plan. But given the climate crisis we face, eliminating the urgent need to address it as a prime reason for shifting to compact, transit-oriented, 15-minute living, while minimizing environmental stewardship, is a huge mistake. This

² Page reference numbers are to the page numbers (not pdf numbers) of Thrive Montgomery 2050.

³ See, for example, <https://medium.com/oneearth/regenerative-agriculture-can-play-a-key-role-in-combating-climate-change-cbaacef65d36>.

is an all-hands-on-deck moment. We must not only all pull in the same direction, but **understand the critical importance of pulling.**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anne Ambler". The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a light-colored background.

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