

<https://youtu.be/T9ibMK69wBQ>

On April 16, 2021,. The Coalition for Smarter Growth (CSG) hosted “Talking Thrive 2050 with Hans Riemer.” The gleeful councilmember (CM) praised CSG, a pro-densification lobbying group, for helping to “tie the bow” on 10 years of work to urbanize Montgomery County. Riemer congratulated CSG for “not only *taking more than just a seat at the table*” but “in many ways *chairing the conversation*” that led to Thrive. The million plus County residents with no place at CM Riemer’s table might ask who these people are and who elected them to “chair” our County’s land-use policies?

CSG originated, ironically, as the offshoot of the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), a NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) juggernaut in Virginia, founded in 1992 to “preserve the traditional character and visual order of the countryside.” When Disney proposed to build a theme park in Prince William County, according to a [1994 account in the Washington Post](#), horse country patricians rallied against their neighbors who viewed the park as a powerful new source of investment, tax revenues, and jobs. “Millionaires vs. the Mouse,” declared the headlines, as PEC quickly raised more than \$1.2 million from wealthy donors such as local resident Paul Mellon, the Delaware DuPont Foundation, and other well-funded sources. Unsurprisingly, despite massive Disney resources, the Mouse lost, and the millionaires won.

In 1997, says CSG, “leaders from the PEC, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Audubon Naturalist Society, Clean Water Action, and the Sierra Club, among others, founded CSG to challenge the proposed Outer Beltway and to promote a better way to grow in the Washington DC region.” Their mission promotes a “network of walkable, livable, inclusive, transit-oriented communities, connected to a revitalized District of Columbia by an expanding network of high-capacity transit.” So far, so good! But in 2007, CSG merged with the Washington Regional Network for Livable Communities (WRN), which in the 1990s had endorsed a plan to build the same kind of project, a controversial Mall of America in downtown Silver Spring in Montgomery County, that PEC had defeated in Virginia horse country. Although the proposal was defeated, such “smart growth” eagerness to move undesirable density to other jurisdictions brought accusations of [selective environmentalism](#).

In the past 20 years, CSG has picked up steam and allies, joining Planning Board Chair Casey Anderson and his close friend, CM Riemer to promote increasingly sweeping measures like Thrive Montgomery 2050 and the Accessory Dwelling Units law that passed in 2019. As the Council has charged forward with Thrive 2050, despite the pandemic, to advance Thrive behind its Zoom-fortified closed doors, CSG has relentlessly promoted the measure through social media—blasting out emails urging members to email the Council, organizing and offering to write testimony in favor of the bill. Meanwhile, as hundreds of constituent emails to the Council remain unanswered, CSG gets a front seat at most discussions on Thrive. At a recent “Virtual Town Hall,” supposedly about the measure, the moderator allowed no questions from would-be participants until the CSG lobbyist had logged into the discussion; which then lasted only another few minutes.

Although the County’s executive agencies were excluded from the Thrive-planning process, the Council has given CSG unparalleled access to its staff and work sessions on Thrive. At the October 4, 2021, meeting of the

Council's PHED committee, staff recited CSG's recommendations to reduce parking minimums, a highly controversial move, and to ensure that the budget reflects CSG's transportation priorities. They deferred to CSG's calculations about commute times by transit, car, and bicycle.

Despite its zealous support for building multi-unit homes in Montgomery County single family zones, CSG recently opposed similar measures in Prince George's County. "Before we upzone," intoned CSG policy director Cheryl Cort, "protections should be in place to not put residents at further risk...Upzoning isn't right for every neighborhood. If increasing density limits are likely to increase rents, cause displacement, or disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, municipal governments should avoid it." Yet why, if it isn't right for every neighborhood in Prince George's County, is CSG pushing one-fits all upzoning with no such protections in Montgomery County, with its thousands of similarly vulnerable residents?

CSG's funders include a hefty list of developers, architects, land trusts, and the National Association of Realtors which stand to profit from land use policy: <https://smartergrowth.net/about/annual-report-financial-information>. Although some of these companies support environmental sustainability, their influence may create conflicts of interest for CSG. For example, in 2002, a CSG representative submitted testimony opposing the proposed route for the Metropolitan Branch bicycle trail near the Takoma Metro, which was being blocked by two developers, one of whom was still listed as a CSG donor in 2019. In February 2021, a letter to CSG's executive director requested an explanation of this issue, but remains unanswered.

CM Riemer's campaign to urbanize Montgomery County, driven by the ever-present CSG, sidelines voters and undermines the Council's credibility. No private interest group should so powerfully dictate our County's public policy.