

**Testimony  
Thrive Montgomery 2050**

**December 9, 2020**

The League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC) applauds and supports much of the General Plan that is outlined in the Thrive Montgomery 2050 document.

Reviewing each proposal through the lens of economic health, community equity, and environmental resilience is essential to growing a healthy Montgomery County, and these elements of the Thrive plan clearly align with League positions.

The county must make changes in housing, transportation, development patterns, preservation of open spaces, and our environment in order for the county and its economy to thrive. LWVMC will focus on five Thrive topics in this testimony: transportation, land use, housing, the environment, and agriculture. However, first we wish to emphasize the following two factors regarding clarity and evaluation:

- (1) The title of section 5 must include the word “Housing.” The title “Affordability and Attainability” is not sufficient for statements about housing.**
- (2) It would be helpful to explain the evaluation process, albeit briefly, in the main document as well as having an extensive explanation in a separate document. The public needs to know how the county is tracking progress toward its goals and what the timetable is for evaluation.**

**Transportation:**

Prioritizing transit will have a major effect on equity, the environment, population growth, health, and our economy. The county is making strides, but **LWVMC encourages a more coordinated effort across all transit modes to produce a greater impact.** Retrofitting an existing environment is difficult and working with our diverse population poses many challenges, but transit will be key to resolving many issues in the coming years.

- Our streets and highways currently lack good design, appropriate speed limits, and pedestrian and bike accommodation; there is clear need for improvement. The county must update old methods of measuring vehicle speed and congestion, create new criteria for sidewalks and bike paths, prioritize capital improvement projects for building of infrastructure, and improve cooperation with state entities.

**Land Use:**

The key themes of this document -- such as urbanism, active lifestyles, social connection, housing, transforming major roads into boulevards, regional solutions to problems, diversity as our strength, etc. -- could have come directly from League positions!

- LWVMC recognizes that many of these topics are controversial and agreement is not always possible, for example, whether there should be solar power in the agricultural reserve; where businesses should be located; how we should expand public services and where; how county policies will affect schools, jobs, and community services; and how much we should invest in climate change and the environment. The county should incorporate changes into the General Plan that promote a vision or an aspiration for where the county wants to go.
- Proposals that come before the county should meet the high standards that the General Plan sets. Enforcing these standards will not be easy. Aspirations in words have to be turned into concrete plans.

**Housing:**

Montgomery County continues to need more housing, especially low-income and “missing middle” housing designed for low- and middle-income households. (“Missing middle” includes garden apartments, plexes of various types, and other low-rise, smaller, more affordable units.)

- Even if our population only grows at a rate of one percent, the county will need to house a minimum of 200,000 more people by 2045, and the demographics of households have changed as well as the numbers, necessitating changes in the units to serve them.
- For example, we need to accommodate much larger numbers of single-person households as well as greater numbers of very large households. We have a decreasing share of middle-income residents, at least in part because we do not have sufficient appropriate housing to accommodate them.

Corridors are a great location for some of this much-needed housing, which could be safer as well, because communities of these units would offer residents access onto major arteries; this is safer than small single-family units with driveways feeding onto them. We also need to preserve existing affordable housing or replace it without a net loss and preferably with a net gain. Draft Thrive 2050 offers dozens of options for achieving these goals, some new and some building on existing tools, and we hope many of them will be implemented.

**Environment:**

The League agrees with the County that climate change is the most important environmental factor facing us between now and 2050 and that 100% clean energy is a correlating goal that should help decrease the level of greenhouse gases.

We also appreciate recognition of the need to change from “wedges and corridors” to a complete community concept that includes compact development, and we should focus on other factors as well -- such as encouraging healthier living (with reduced reliance on cars), protecting wildlife, limiting light pollution, encouraging local food production via the agricultural reserve, and better managing forest conservation.

**Agriculture:**

We strongly support continued preservation of the agricultural reserve. In addition to its importance for local food production, the reserve provides diverse jobs, water quality protection, and other environmental benefits that must be conserved.

From: Co-presidents Diane Hibino and Kathy McGuire