

INTRODUCTION

When Montgomery County's first general plan, known as the "Wedges and Corridors Plan," was adopted in 1964 much of our land was undeveloped. That plan guided the county's growth for more than 50 years¹ and helped make it one of the most desirable places to live and work in the United States. Our success was built on an award-winning park system and high-quality schools along with forward-thinking leadership in preserving farmland, fostering the emergence of urban centers and mass transit, and shaping the design of attractive suburban subdivisions. Montgomery County prospered under the Wedges and Corridors Plan.

Today, however, we find ourselves facing new challenges and changing circumstances that require us to rethink approaches that served us well in the past. Montgomery County has tremendous assets, including a highly educated workforce, proximity to the nation's capital, and a culture of openness to newcomers, but we also are struggling to attract businesses and house our residents, grappling with a legacy of racial and economic inequality, and facing the effects of climate change.

At the same time the demographic characteristics of Montgomery County residents have changed. As a group our residents are older, more diverse, and less likely to live in traditional family arrangements. We have evolved from a bedroom community to a complex jurisdiction with major employment centers, urban hubs, mature residential neighborhoods and rural landscapes. We compete with the District of Columbia and neighboring jurisdictions for talent, jobs and economic development. All this is unfolding as technology reshapes how we work, shop and live, influencing planning and real estate development in unprecedented way

The combination of rapid social, environmental, technological, demographic and economic shifts at the national and global level along with changes in our community require us to take a clear-eyed look at our strengths and weaknesses and to challenge the assumptions that have guided us to this point. While the Wedges & Corridors Plan was visionary, its implementation also had some unintended consequences such as such as inequitable investment between the eastern and western parts of the county, excessive reliance on automobiles, and zoning of more than one-third of the county exclusively for single family homes.

For Montgomery County to continue to thrive, we must be prepared to make difficult decisions and take bold steps to prepare for the future. Thrive Montgomery 2050 is the vehicle for assessing these shifts and adapting our approach to planning for the next 30 years.

¹ The Wedges and Corridors Plan was amended twice – in 1969 and 1993 – but its essential structure was retained.

WHAT IS A GENERAL PLAN? WHAT IS THRIVE MONTGOMERY?

A general plan is a long-range guide for the development of a community. Every jurisdiction must adopt some form of general or “comprehensive” plan as a legal predicate for the exercise of the government’s land use and zoning powers,¹ but Thrive Montgomery also serves a broader purpose in guiding how our community should respond to economic, social, and environmental opportunities and challenges – both the ones that are apparent now and the ones that will emerge over the course of the coming decades.

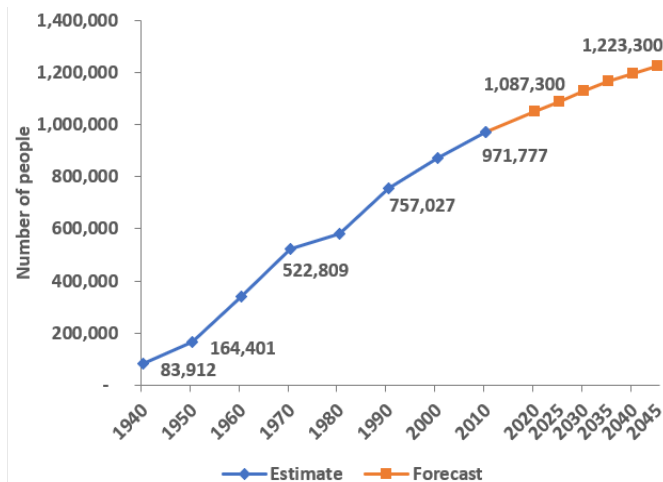
Thrive Montgomery 2050 defines the basic land use setting and context for all public and private actions in the county and directly addresses the land use and planning issues covered by all comprehensive plans. Its recommendations also touch on the objectives and actions of other public and private entities that are responsible for implementing and providing related services and amenities. For example, while M-NCPPC has no direct role in meeting the educational needs of the county, both the physical form (quality and types of housing, retail, and transportation) and setting of a community (location, proximity to schools, colleges, amenities, services and jobs) influence the educational prospects of its children and young adults.

The purpose of a 30-year plan is not to predict and respond to a single future but to be prepared to face multiple, unpredictable futures. We therefore must consider how disruption from climate change pandemics, or terrorist attacks as well as the implications of automation, artificial intelligence, and economic changes at the regional, national, and global scale.

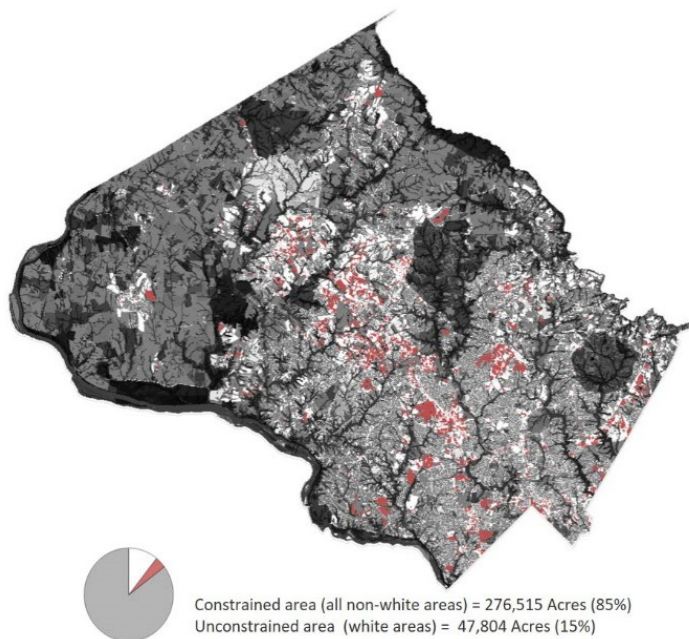
Thrive Montgomery 2050 does not abandon or reject the [Wedges and Corridors](#) concept but instead modernizes it to remain relevant. Just as the Wedges and Corridors Plan and its refinements framed issues for further action, Thrive Montgomery’s broad policy recommendations will require amendments to other plans, policies, and development rules before they can be implemented. In other words, this plan outlines issues and ways to address them but does not include zoning recommendations or other specific land use guidance in targeted geographic areas or discrete subjects such as transportation networks. Relevant area plans and functional plans will remain valid until modified pursuant to the guidance provided by this plan.

Overarching objectives of Thrive Montgomery 2050

Thrive Montgomery is about adapting to new realities, addressing historic inequities and shifting the way we think about how the county should grow. Montgomery County is growing more slowly than in past decades, but our population is still projected by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments to increase by about 200,000 people over the next thirty years.



The county has relatively little land left to accommodate this growth on previously undeveloped land even if new construction is relatively compact. With 85 percent of our land already developed or otherwise constrained, accommodating even the relatively modest growth expected over the life of this plan is an ambitious undertaking. The way we think about growth needs to change. We need to reconsider sites previously considered unsuitable for development such as parking lots or the air rights over existing buildings and find ways to use land more efficiently.



This plan outlines strategies to accommodate growth in ways that not only make room for new residents but also improve the quality of life for the people who are already here. It anticipates a county that inevitably will become more urban, more diverse, and more interconnected. It makes a case for why and how we need to take steps to become more prosperous, equitable, and resilient as we use growth and redevelopment to create places that are more economically

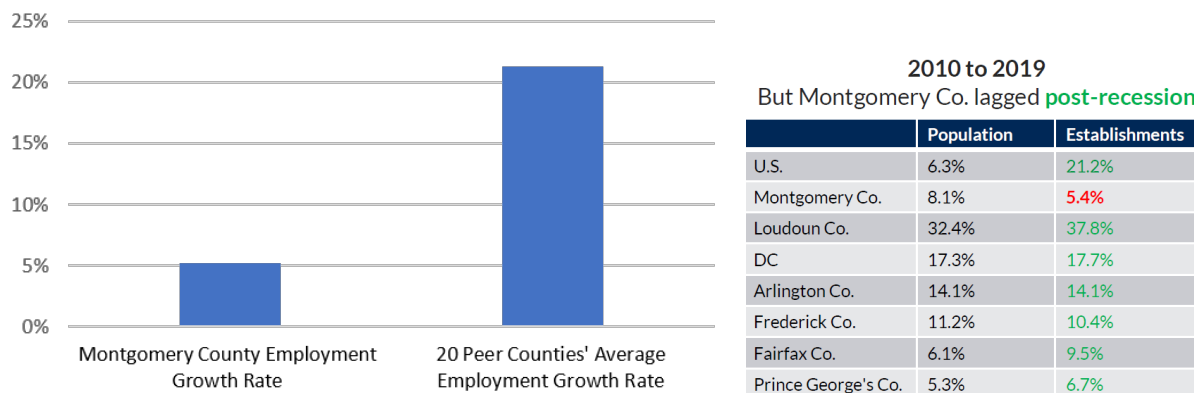
competitive, foster a stronger sense of trust and inclusiveness among people from different backgrounds, and improve environmental quality and public health in the process.

The ideas and recommendations in this plan are therefore organized to achieve three overarching objectives: economic competitiveness, racial and social equity, and environmental sustainability.

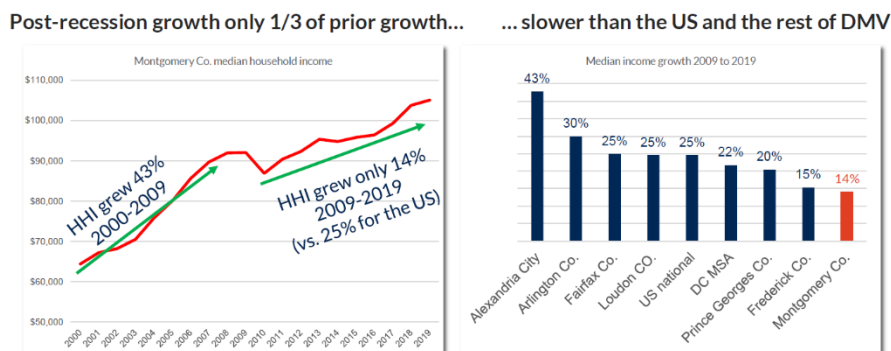
Economic performance and competitiveness

Our quality of life depends on the ability to attract and retain employers and the employees they need. Montgomery is in the 99th percentile of all counties in the United States in terms of household income, household net worth and educational attainment. While we continue to benefit from our proximity to the nation's capital, which draws highly skilled, educated, and motivated people from all over the world, the county's economic performance has been sliding since the Great Recession of 2008.

The total number of jobs in the county grew by five percent between 2004 to 2019 while 20 similarly sized counties across the country grew their employment base by an average of 21 percent. Montgomery County experienced the slowest rate of business formation in the Washington region from 2010 to 2019.



As a result, household income growth in the county lagged the national average (14 percent vs. 25 percent) and was the slowest in the region during this period. Montgomery County added jobs, albeit slowly, but growth came largely in lower wage sectors of the economy.





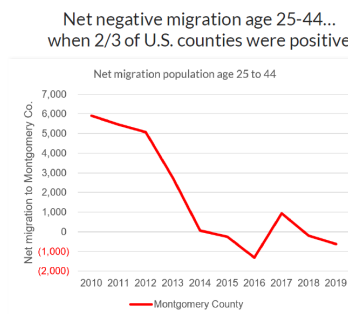
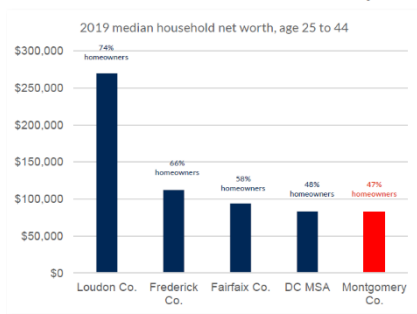
55% of job growth in lower paid jobs



61% of job loss in higher paid jobs

This weak household income and high-paying-job growth shrinks the county's tax base, limiting its ability to provide high quality amenities and services and limiting the ability of many county residents to buy homes, a key tool for building household wealth and investing in their communities. This is particularly the case for younger households, who struggle to afford a home and put down roots. Montgomery County is capturing a smaller share of young adults than similarly most counties across the country.

... lower net worth and homeownership rates

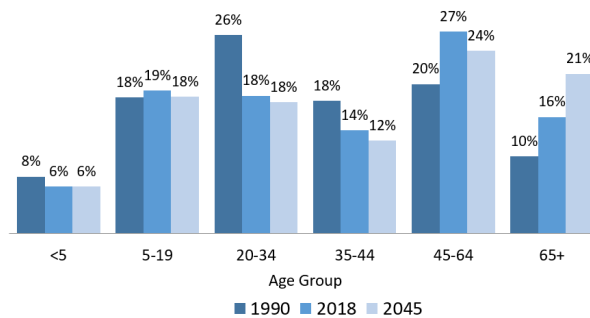


All this is occurring at the same time when large numbers of our residents are reaching retirement age, creating the region's highest elder-adult dependency ratio. Unless we can attract and retain more young adults, this aging of our workforce will put pressure on the tax base as the proportion of Montgomery County residents in retirement grows and the percentage of residents in their peaking earning years shrinks.

The region's highest
elder-adult dependency ratio...

County	2000	2010	2020
Montgomery Co.	16.7%	18.2%	25.3%
Frederick Co.	14.4%	16.4%	23.2%
Prince George's Co.	11.2%	13.4%	21.0%
Alexandria Co.	11.8%	12.1%	16.6%
Fairfax Co.	7.0%	9.8%	16.0%
Arlington Co.	12.2%	11.2%	15.0%
Loudoun Co.	8.2%	9.8%	14.9%

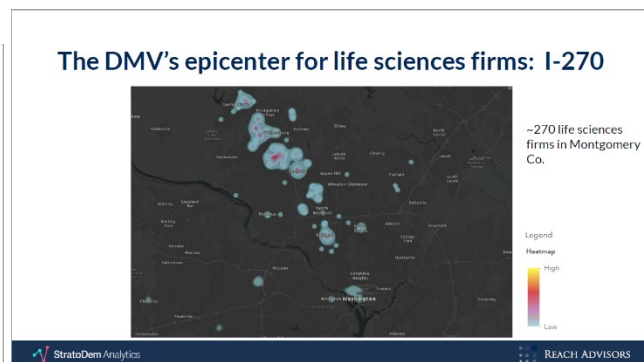
Percent of Population by Age Group, 1990-2045



Source: 1990 U.S. Census, 2018 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates; Age Forecast, Maryland Dept. of Planning.

This demographic shift means that the county's economic performance will have to get better just to maintain current levels of tax revenue and the services it funds, making economic competitiveness an even more pressing concern.

We are part of a dynamic regional economy with a rich mix of public institutions and private companies. The county has significant concentrations in two sectors: hospitality and life sciences, which together form a strong foundation to produce higher wage jobs and spur economic growth. Montgomery County is home to companies representing 50 percent of the market capitalization of the entire hospitality sector, and the Washington area is consistently ranked as one of the nation's top life science clusters, with I-270 as its epicenter. Vaccine development for the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to spark a new wave of investment in this sector. Local institutions such as the University of Maryland are leading ground-breaking research in emerging fields such as quantum computing.

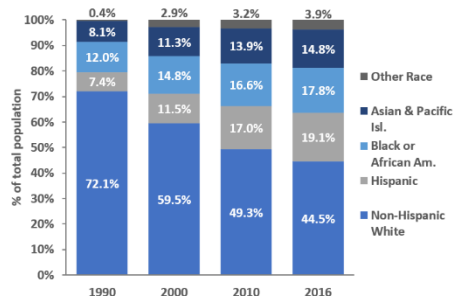


As we work to fortify the county's economic performance, we must simultaneously bolster our dominance in existing sectors, diversify our job base, improve connections to centers of employment and innovation throughout the region, and provide the kinds of infrastructure, services and amenities that will strengthen our ability to compete effectively in the future.

Racial equity and social inclusion

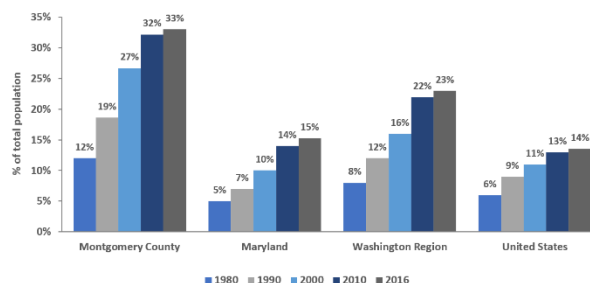
Diversity and inclusion are essential to our economic success as well as to our ability to produce more equitable outcomes for all our residents, who need high quality housing, education, jobs, transportation, and recreational opportunities. The county's overall population has steadily grown more diverse as a result of a steady influx of foreign-born immigrants, past patterns of discrimination – some intentional, some unintentional – have left many communities geographically, economically and socially isolated.

Racial and ethnic diversity steadily increases over the past three decades
Figure 5. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1990-2016



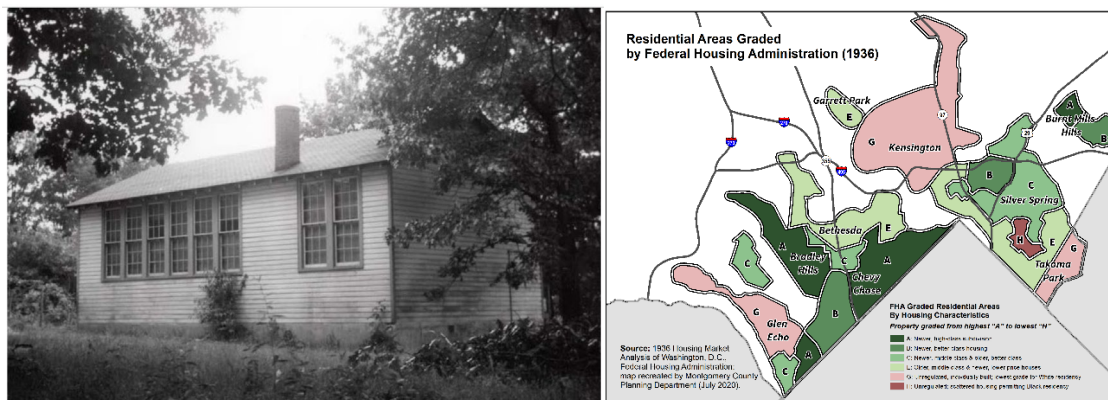
Source: 1990-2010 Census; 2016 American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 6. Foreign-Born Percentage of Population by Jurisdiction, 1980-2016

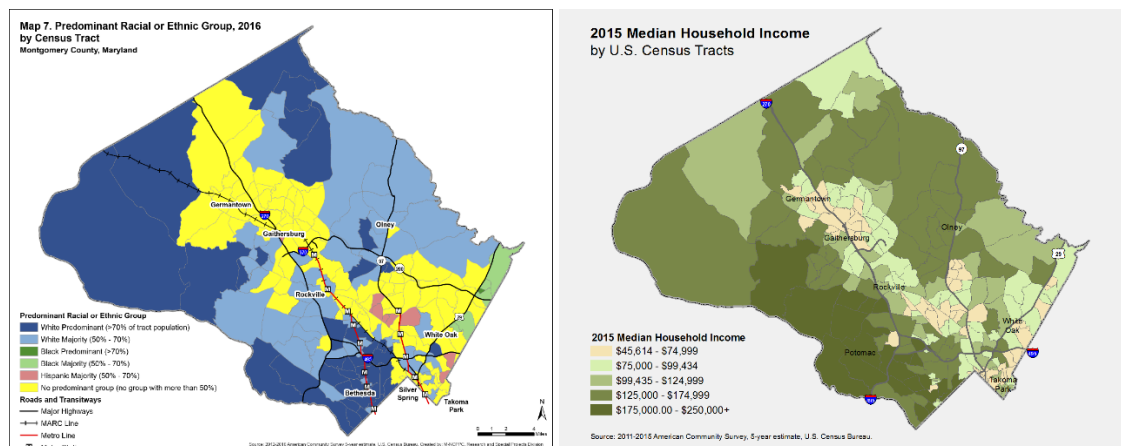


Source: 1990-2010 Census; 2016 American Community Survey, 1-year estimate, U.S. Census Bureau.

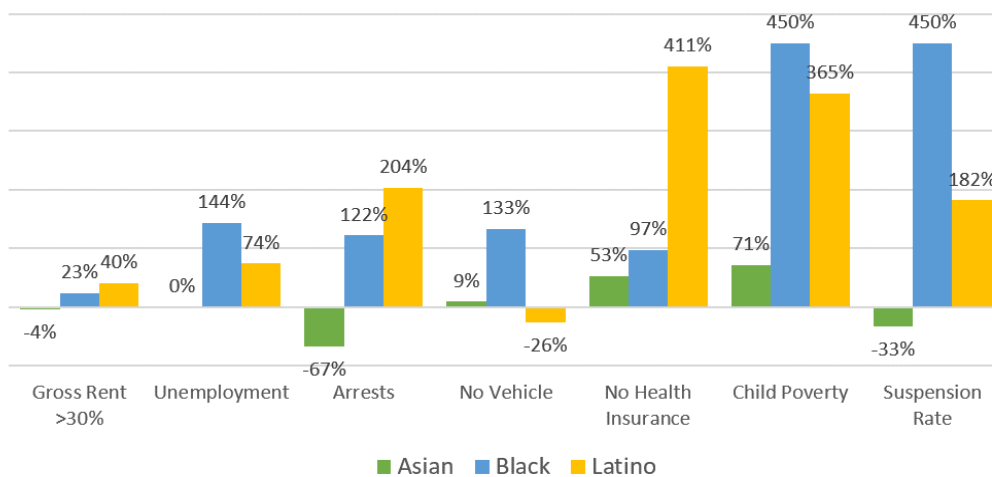
After the Civil War and the end of slavery, African Americans suffered from pervasive discrimination in the provision of economic and educational opportunities, housing and health care, and basic public services. The resulting alienation led to the creation of self-reliant kinship communities in many parts of Montgomery County in the late 19th century. Planning decisions and real estate development practices aggravated these injustices for most of the 20th century. Redlining and restrictive covenants created geographic divisions that have left a lasting legacy of injustice, and the effects of these efforts to separate people by race and class continue to be felt today. More recently, disinvestment from and abandonment of neighborhoods previously considered highly desirable, combined with the suburbanization of poverty have created new geographic divisions and barriers to equity and inclusion. The Wedges and Corridor plan's focus on the I-270 corridor and related planning decisions exacerbated this problem by discouraging growth in the East County, focusing public and private investment to the west.



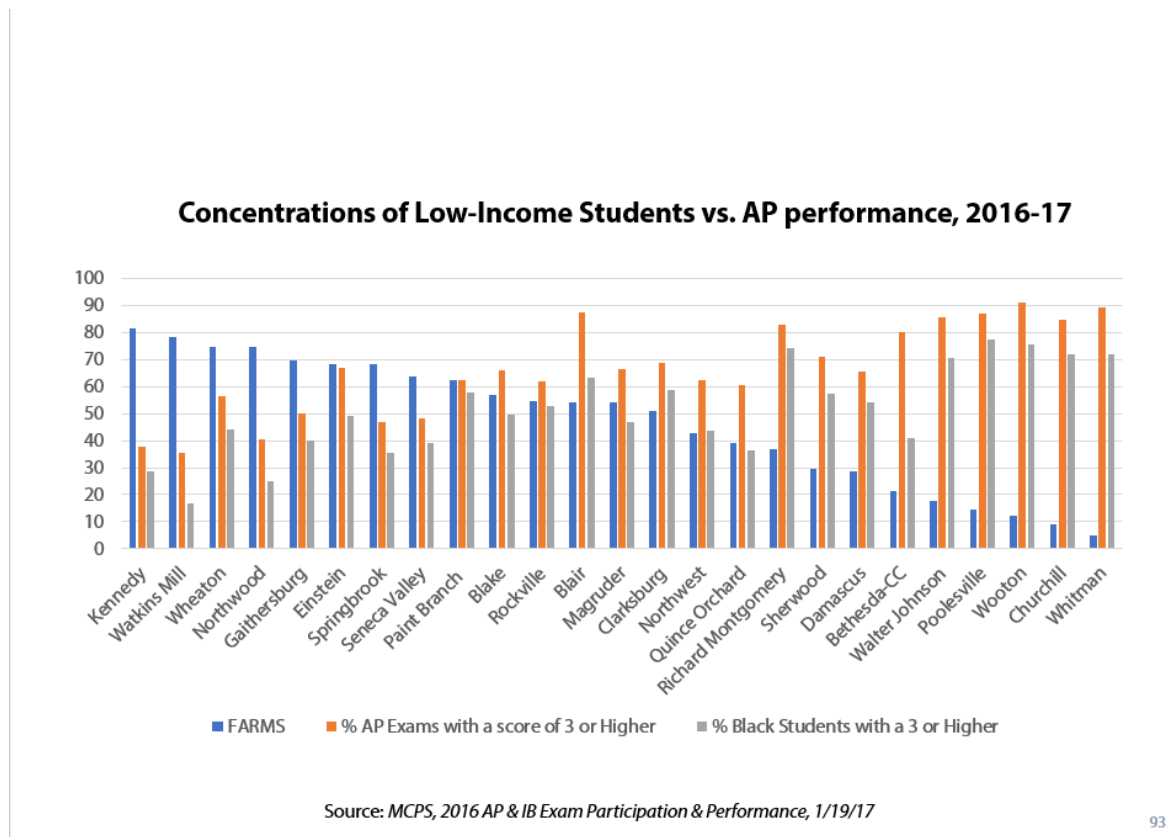
Today communities with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities also show lagging median household incomes. The resulting gaps in quality of life indicators can be seen among Black, Hispanic and Asian residents. Moreover, even as the county becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, our neighborhoods are still largely separated along income and racial lines.



Racial Disparities by Race/Ethnicity Compared to White Population



This separation of neighborhoods along lines defined by race and income has important consequences for access to educational opportunities and the life prospects of our county's children. In 2019, three-quarters of Black, Hispanic, and English learning students in Montgomery County Public Schools – along with more than 80 percent of all low-income students in the system – were enrolled in high-poverty-focus schools. By comparison more than two-thirds of all white, Asian, and multi-racial students were enrolled in low-poverty schools.



93

As we seek a future that is more equitable and inclusive, improved access to infrastructure and amenities in racially, socially, and economically isolated areas will not be enough – we also must facilitate the integration of neighborhoods by race and income. Increasing the share of racially and economically mixed neighborhoods and schools across all parts of the county is critical to ensure that the inequities of the past will not be perpetuated in the future.

In parallel with steps to reduce inequality in the geographic distribution of resources and opportunities, Montgomery County must work to build a shared sense of purpose that can help strengthen efforts to promote respect for diversity and build a foundation for greater trust. This concept, often described by academics under the umbrella term “social capital,” can pay dividends not only in sustaining support for racial and social justice but in bolstering civic capacity more broadly.

In this regard, decisions about land use, transportation, and public infrastructure can play an important role in building a sense of community. Different measures of social capital, including trust in public and private institutions, political participation, whether neighbors know each other, etc.) are influenced by qualities of the built environment. The design of our communities can greatly influence levels of community cohesion and social interaction. Creating social capital requires the built environment to encourage and make it easier for people to meet others and engage in activities. For this reason, Thrive Montgomery emphasizes the role streets, parks and public spaces play in creating a physical environment where a sense of community can flourish.

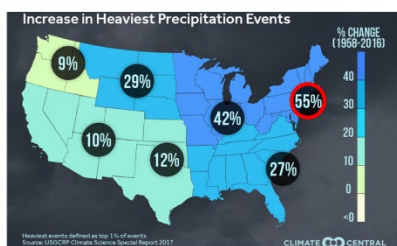
Advancing racial equity through just planning policies and public investments, promoting the racial and economic integration of neighborhoods, and focusing on the potential for the design of communities to help build social trust and inclusion while encouraging civic participation are among the most significant elements of Thrive Montgomery.

Environmental resilience

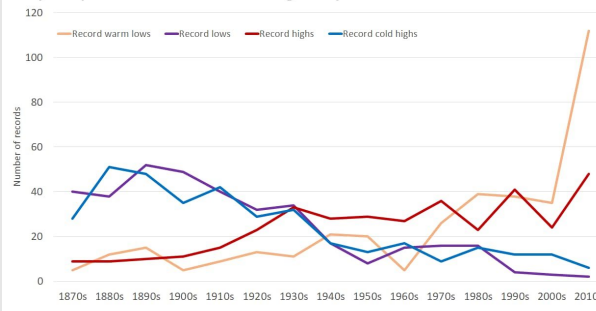
The Wedges and Corridors plan laid the groundwork for the adoption of forward-thinking environmental policies that emphasized land preservation for resource conservation and agriculture, protection of our streams, forests and trees and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. One-third of the county's land is now protected within the Agricultural Reserve and another 13.8 percent is under the stewardship of the Parks Department. Along with aggressive stormwater and forest conservation regulations, these efforts have established a strong framework for the protection of natural resources.

Despite these policies, the county cannot avoid the impact of global climate change. Precipitation in northeastern United States increased by 55 percent between 1958 and 2016. This trend has meant more frequent violent weather events like the flash flooding that occurred in July 2019, when the DC region received a month's worth of rain in a single day, causing streams to rise 10 feet in less than an hour, inundating vehicles, businesses, roads and closing the Metrorail system. The past decade has also been the hottest 10-year period in the region's recorded history, with rising hospitalizations due to extreme heat impacts. The adverse effects of a changing climate will be felt most acutely by the poor and people of color, who are likely to suffer a disproportionate share of the damage to real property and personal health.

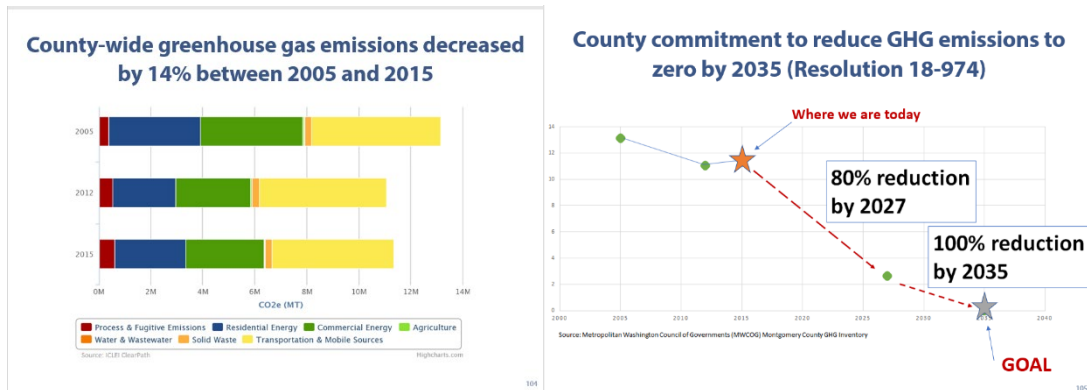
The US Northeast (including MD) heavy precipitation has increased by 55% between 1958 and 2016.



Daily temperature records in Washington by decade



Montgomery County has made progress in reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, a key contributor to climate change, but has much farther to go to meet its goal of eliminating these emissions by 2035. Together, buildings and transportation are responsible for more than 90 percent of our county's greenhouse gas emissions, making reduced reliance on driving and more energy-efficient development patterns essential to meeting our climate objectives.



In this regard a stronger focus on walking, biking and transit infrastructure will be crucial, but the significance of a compact form of development in reducing driving should not be overlooked. The environmental benefits of dense, walkable neighborhoods dovetail with the increasing preference across age groups to live in walkable places served by a mix of uses and amenities.

Of course, not even the most sustainable transportation planning and real estate development strategies will be able to resolve every environmental challenge facing the county. Thrive Montgomery 2050 builds on the tradition of robust protection of the natural environment. It proposes a series of strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change and minimize pollution. The plan also anticipates the need for public and private infrastructure to be made more resilient so as to withstand more severe weather and protect us from the effects of environmental degradation from sources that are beyond our ability to control.

Other important but subsidiary objectives

The plan also addresses other important but subsidiary goals that complement the three overarching objectives discussed above.

Improving public health and encouraging active lifestyles

The length and quality of human life are strongly influenced by both the natural and built environment. In 2018, more than three-fifths of adults in Montgomery County were overweight or obese. Five of the seven zip codes in the county with household incomes in the lowest quartile also have the lowest average life spans. And even though low-income residents and people of color are more likely to suffer from negative health outcomes for several reasons, all residents can benefit from a more active lifestyle supported by an emphasis on transit, walking, and biking and easy access to parks and recreational opportunities. Active lifestyles can serve to improve public health while simultaneously reducing the ecological footprint of human activity.

Elevating quality of design and highlighting role of arts and culture

The Wedges and Corridors Plan envisioned a variety of living environments and encouraged “imaginative urban design” to avoid sterile suburban sprawl. Nonetheless, that plan was a product of its time. It relied on design approaches that were typical of the 1960s, emphasizing the convenience of driving and rigid separation of land uses.



Good design is not a luxury but a critical economic development tool. Businesses and workers now prefer walkable, accessible, amenity rich, mixed-use places that facilitate the interaction and exchange of ideas that feed innovation. A greater share of residents across ages prefer walkable, transit-rich neighborhoods as well. Combined with the lack of undeveloped land far from transit, these forces dictate a shift toward redevelopment and infill that converts “parking lots to places” near existing or planned transit lines and incorporating walkable form.

Our arts and culture sector taken as a whole would be the county’s sixth-largest employer. The sector taps into creative, social, and economic networks, and its practitioners have developed tools to share stories, encourage empathy, and empower creative exchange. Supporting a healthy arts and culture ecosystem will not only enrich the lives of our residents and bring us closer together but also will help attract talent and spur innovation.

WHAT CAN THRIVE MONTGOMERY – OR ANY PLAN – ACHIEVE?

Planners have influence over the physical development of the communities where they work but their power is limited. They do not have the expertise, resources, or authority to control decisions not directly related to real estate development, transportation infrastructure or the administration of parks. Land use regulation can prevent or impose conditions on real estate development, but it cannot compel the owner of a property to build on it. Planning agencies can help other governmental bodies identify problems and suggest solutions but generally do not control budget decisions relating to public infrastructure or services.

So, what is the role (and value) of planning? Planning helps to facilitate the success of human settlements in specific places – in this case, the 504 square miles comprising Montgomery County, Maryland. People come together to live and work in groups in order to engage in economic, social, and intellectual exchange. The development of land to accommodate these groups produces settlements of varying size and scale ranging from a few houses or stores at a rural crossroads to a village, town, city, or ultimately a conurbation such as the Washington metropolitan area. The task of planners is to help guide the creation and evolution of the built environment in ways that will assist these settlements in maximizing the exchange value of place while minimizing the negative externalities associated with the development of land and intensification of its uses.

Planners are often asked to predict the course of technological, economic, or social changes that may influence a community's future prospects and to develop strategies for dealing with these changes. While planners must make educated guesses about future trends, the history of planning is littered with examples of predictions gone badly awry. This does not mean that planners have nothing to offer – only that they do not have a crystal ball, and to the extent that their proposals rely exclusively on assumptions about how the future will unfold, they are on shaky ground. We must consider how climate change, pandemics, or terrorist attacks might affect our future, and we need to think about the implications of autonomous vehicles, artificial intelligence, and economic change. However, the foundational elements of what make places work for people have proven remarkably consistent over time, and this plan relies on those foundations to establish a framework for the next generation of our county's development.

For Montgomery County in the early to mid-21st century, this means formulating strategies designed to strengthen economic competitiveness, reduce and reverse environmental degradation, and ensure that the benefits of development and growth are widely shared across lines of race, ethnicity and class while countering related inequities in the spatial distribution of resources and opportunities. It also requires creating solutions to improve the depth and breadth of civic engagement, foster a sense of place, and building strong community bonds.

Urbanism as organizing principle

Thrive 2050 applies the principles of urbanism – a term this plan uses as shorthand for a set of ideas about what makes human settlements successful – to guide their future growth. Urbanism draws on the lessons of thousands of years of experimentation and evolution in the design and development of villages, towns, and cities to apply the ideas that have proven to endure as the foundation for adaptable and resilient communities everywhere. An urbanism-focused approach to the development of land and related infrastructure (such as roadways, transit systems, and parks) emphasizes the value of: (1) a compact form of development; (2) diverse uses and building types; and (3) transportation networks that take advantage of and complement these two land use strategies, at all densities and scales.

This approach calls for focusing growth in a limited number of locations rather than dispersing it, avoiding “sprawl.” It means encouraging the agglomeration of different uses such as retail, housing, and office space as well as diversity within each type of use. For example, a variety of housing sizes and types near employment and retail helps to ensure that people of diverse income levels can live and work in proximity to each other. This over time produces more racially and socioeconomically integrated neighborhoods and schools, providing more equitable access to economic opportunities, public services, and amenities. It also emphasizes the importance of walking, biking and transit and reduces reliance on cars.

Of course, other factors – particularly quality and thoughtfulness in the design of buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and public spaces – are also essential. Combined with the fundamentals of urbanism, design excellence can help create a sense of place, facilitate social interaction, and encourage active lifestyles.

These principles of urbanism are equally relevant to rural, suburban and urban areas. In fact, the preservation of land for agriculture in a place like Montgomery County depends on concentrating development in urban centers instead of permitting sprawl, and even suburban and rural areas benefit from a mix of uses and housing types – at appropriately calibrated intensity and scale - to serve their needs.

With attention to both the functional and aesthetic aspects of design, urbanism is not only consistent with a commitment to maintaining the best of what has made Montgomery County attractive in the past but is necessary to preserve and build on these qualities while correcting the errors of auto-centric planning and its damaging effects on the environment, racial equity, and social cohesion.

These issues are complex and have multiple causes, many of them outside the scope of land use planning and therefore the direct influence of Thrive Montgomery. However, land use regulation and other policies adopted by local government play an important role in perpetuating, and even reinforcing, many associated undesirable outcomes such as lack of connectedness and the social isolation of the young and the elderly. As a result, our approach to growth and planning for the future must be comprehensive.

A blueprint for the future

While Thrive Montgomery outlines long-term goals and policies, the task of preparing Montgomery County to meet the challenges of the future is pressing and immediate. The job losses caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the racial unrest sparked by the killing of George Floyd, and the damage caused by the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events has highlighted the importance of taking steps to strengthen our economic, social, and environmental resilience without further delay.

The current public health crisis and emergent demands for action to address police misconduct may recede or be resolved in the coming months, but rapid technological, demographic, and social change will continue to test our collective ability to respond effectively and adapt to new circumstances. The consequences of these changes are already playing out in the lives of our residents, reshaping our hopes and fears about the future. Thrive Montgomery establishes a blueprint for the work of implementing the new approaches needed to respond, starting immediately and extending over a period of decades.

Related to the three primary objectives, the Plan is organized into six chapters:

- Compact growth: corridor-focused development
- Complete communities: mix of uses and form
- Transportation and communication networks: connecting people, places and ideas
- Affordable and attainable housing: more of everything
- Design, arts and culture: adding value and building community
- Parks and recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: active and social

Each chapter includes its own set of issues and challenges that are addressed through a set of goals, policies and actions. Each chapter explains how its recommendations serve the broader objectives of Thrive Montgomery and describes metrics to measure progress in implementing the chapter's ideas over time. No plan that is designed to provide guidance over a period of decades can anticipate every difficult problem, attractive opportunity, or useful idea that may emerge, so these metrics should be used to assess new proposals as well as measuring the success or failure of the plan's recommendations over time.

Thrive Montgomery 2050 is a blueprint for creating a community that offers equitable access to jobs, affordable housing, transportation, parks and public spaces. Just as importantly, it can help point the way to using design of the built environment to strengthen the social and physical health of our residents, supporting active lifestyles and encouraging interaction and engagement. This vision builds on the Wedges and Corridors plan, with a greater emphasis on the development of compact, complete communities and the role of corridors as places to grow, while preserving natural resources and the Agricultural Reserve. It is designed to integrate arts and culture into the fabric of our community and open opportunities for creative expression.

This framework calls for us to rethink the way we live and work. It will require us to make difficult decisions. As the noted urbanist Gil Penalosa says, though, the cost of doing nothing is not nothing. The failure to embrace new approaches will leave future generations grappling with the consequences of sustained economic underperformance, growing inequities and accelerated environmental degradation. The Wedges and Corridors plan succeeded in outlining the challenges of its time and focusing attention on ways to address them. Our responsibility is to set a new direction to solve a new set of challenges to build a better future for our community.