



Thrive Montgomery 2050 Worksession No. 7: Parks and recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: active and social

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Introduction

The main topic of discussion for today's worksession and approval by the Planning Board is the draft of "Theme #6 - Parks and recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: active and social" (ATTACHMENT 1). This is a new chapter in the revised draft Plan. It consolidates the recommendations related to parks, recreation and health in the current Healthy and Sustainable Environment chapter, but also in the Design, Complete Communities, and Diverse and Adaptable Growth chapters in the Public Hearing Draft Plan.

The revised chapter lays out the issues and existing conditions related to parks and recreational amenities designed for a suburban land use pattern dependent on cars. Urban parks were originally conceived primarily as "buffers" to protect suburban residential development from more intensive land uses (apartment buildings, offices, etc.). Recent trends, however, have recognized the importance of urban parks as central focal points of activity within urban centers. The chapter promotes an active lifestyle and community building for a diverse population with different cultural backgrounds and lifestyle preferences by making parks and recreational amenities a central element of walkable and diverse communities. And it includes a set of potential measures to monitor the progress towards these goals.

Park staff will present a summary of major themes of the public hearing testimony about the Public Hearing Draft Plan's recommendations related to parks, recreation, open space and health.

In addition, staff will present revised drafts of Introduction, Housing and Transportation chapters with changes (redlined) to show how staff has incorporated the Planning Board's comments in each of these chapters (ATTACHMENT 2).

In order to let the Planning Board and the public know what will be discussed at each worksession, staff publishes an outline of the revised chapter/theme two weeks in advance. Therefore, today's packet includes an outline of the main topic of discussion for the February 18 worksession— Complete Communities: mix of uses and forms (ATTACHMENT 3).

Major themes of public testimony related to parks, recreation and health

Following are the major themes that emerged from the written and verbal testimonies related to parks, recreation and healthy living.

Active living is healthy living

Almost all commenters supported the draft Plan's emphasis on creating opportunities for physical activity built into the daily life of county residents in all urban, suburban and rural communities. They asked for more parks, and safe and convenient pedestrian trails, sidewalks, and bike paths to access transit, schools, jobs and other destination. For many of them, experiencing nature should not be a special trip to parks, but a part of the daily experience. They support the idea of connecting people to their environment and promote healthy and active lifestyles through "15-minute living" and Complete Communities.

For some, walkable communities and reduced reliance on cars will not only promote more active lifestyles but also encourage social connections, environmental sustainability, and equity. Some commenters view our excessive reliance on cars as a public health issue that would be alleviated by more walking and biking, and cleaner air. They point out that cars have "by far the greatest environmental and health impact and should stop receiving priority." Some pointed out that this is a public health issue as well as a climate change issue as "walking and biking to destinations mean less automobile exhaust."

Healthy environment for better human health

Many commenters pointed to the strong relationship between human health and the health of the environment, clean water and air, healthy food, and access to nature. They believe that the county is losing biodiversity and a "healthy and stable ecosystems that sustain all aspects of our lives – food production, fresh clean water, climate regulation, moderation of floods and droughts, recreational benefits, aesthetic and spiritual enrichment."

Some commenters support the Plan's recommendation to transform the current land use pattern into diverse and walkable communities, but ask that future planning efforts also enhance environmental health and biodiversity conservation throughout the county through resource conservation, clean water initiatives, and habitat preservation and restoration.

Role of public parks and open spaces

The role of public parks and open spaces received many comments, including the role of forests and other natural areas on parkland in the health and well-being of county residents. These commenters indicated that high quality public parks are important for people to enjoy and for the ecosystem services they provide through things like increased air and water quality and habitat for wildlife.

They also point out that parks and open spaces contribute significantly to making neighborhoods more attractive and livable places. They believe that transforming existing single-family areas near transit into Complete Communities will require improving access to public facilities including parks and natural green spaces, among other things. They also indicate the need for parks to have better and more inclusive recreational facilities for communities experiencing changing demographic and cultural shifts. Suggested improvements include "converting underutilized tennis courts into soccer courts that provide safe, recreational fun that keeps youth active and engaged in positive activities during the day and at night."

Environmental justice issues

Comments related to unequal distribution of public services and amenities in the county highlighted the lack of adequate parks and open spaces, healthy food options, and safe and convenient sidewalks, bike paths and trails to access these amenities, and how the current inequities create greater hurdles for low-income communities to achieve healthy and active living. These neighborhoods experience a greater burden of public health issues due to unequal investment in different parts of the county. These comments support the draft Plan's emphasis on equity in planning to eliminate structural barriers that prevent the residents of vulnerable communities from accessing nature, but fear that climate change will further exacerbate the public health issues facing these communities.

How will more parks be funded?

There were some comments that raised questions about the county's ability to acquire and build new parks to support the recreational needs of a diverse population in compact Complete Communities. They believe that the county has not done well in promoting safe walking and biking, especially in the lower density areas. They question how the county will fund better and more parks and recreational amenities, while also providing reliable and efficient transit, schools, utilities, healthcare facilities, libraries, athletic fields, and community centers that would be necessary to support new Complete Communities featuring 15-minute living. They support dense development near transit, but believe that the value of properties in these places will make it prohibitively expensive to acquire new land for parks and open space.

Other comments

There were also a few comments that were skeptical of the Plan's approach that denser, compact, and walkable Complete Communities would lead to increased physical health. They stated that increased density would lead to more traffic causing reduced air quality since they believed that conversion to all electric vehicles will lag the increase in traffic-causing health impacts within the time span of Thrive Montgomery 2050. One commenter believed that improving public health is the purview of private industry regulated by FDA, Congress and other federal agencies, and therefore Thrive Montgomery 2050 should talk about parks and recreation facilities, but should not get into public health debate.

Attachments

ATTACHMENT 1 is the draft of Theme #6: Parks and recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: active and social.

ATTACHMENT 2 contains revised drafts of Introduction, Housing and Transportation chapters with changes (redlined) to show how staff has responded to the Planning Board's comments for each of these chapters.

ATTACHMENT 3 is an outline of Theme #2: Complete communities: mix of uses and forms, that will be discussed with the Planning Board on February 18, 2021.

ATTACHMENT 4 is an updated summary table of all testimony received by December 10, 2020 updated to include staff responses to the comments related to the topics being addressed during this worksession. As we proceed through subsequent worksessions, staff will add its responses to the public comments pertaining to the topic area of each worksession.

The transcript of the November 19, 2020 public hearing can be accessed [here](#).

All written testimonies submitted by December 10, 2020 can be accessed here: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#)