

Compact Growth: Corridor-Focused Development

When the Wedges and Corridors plan was adopted much of Montgomery County was undeveloped. The plan recognized, however, that what seemed to be abundant available land must be used wisely:

“Land should be treated as one of our most precious possessions, using efficiently what we need for accommodating expected urban growth, and conserving the rest for the unforeseeable future. Land is too valuable an asset to be heedlessly wasted by allowing it to be developed aimlessly in a scattered pattern.”

Accordingly, the Wedges and Corridors plan recommended two distinct patterns of growth: the urban pattern and the rural pattern. The urban pattern was envisioned as a compact form of urban development, concentrated in the existing urban ring and proposed corridor cities along significant transportation corridors within the region, including the I-95/Route 29 corridor as well as the I-270/Route 355 corridor. The rural pattern, by contrast, was envisioned as serving four broad purposes:

“1) to help mold the urban pattern into an efficient and pleasant one, 2) to provide and protect large open spaces for the “change of pace” and recreational opportunities needed by present and future generations, 3) to provide a favorable rural environment in which farming, mineral extraction, hunting, fishing and other natural resource activities can be carried on without disruption, and 4) to conserve natural resources and protect the public water supply.”

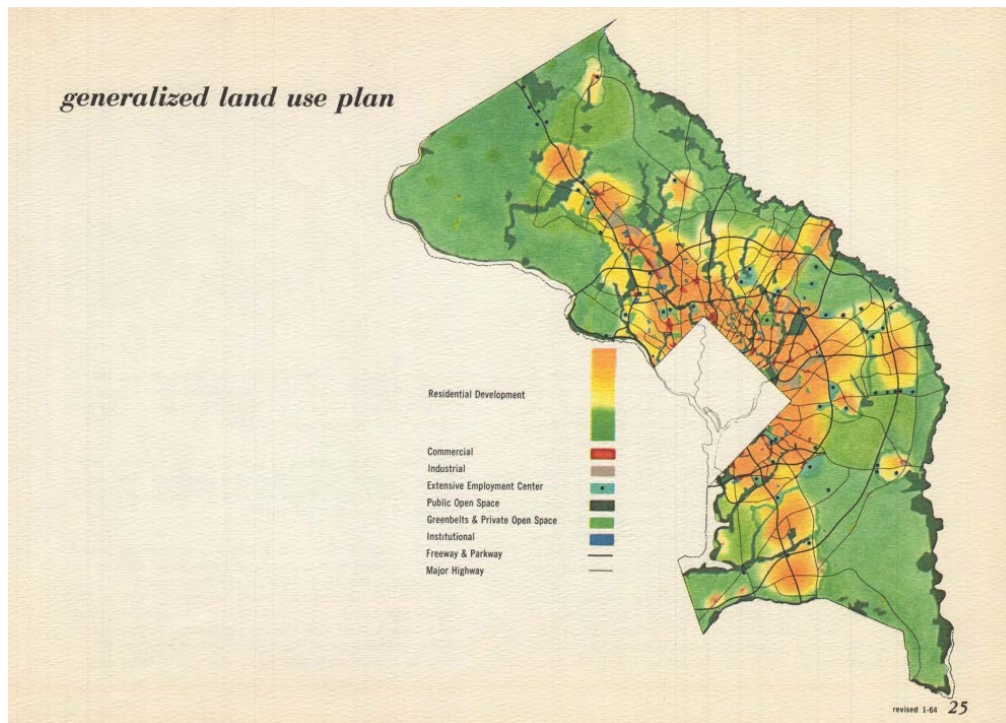


Figure 1: 1964 Wedges and Corridors Plan - Urban and Rural Patterns

While the Wedges and Corridors plan was visionary in recognizing the consequences of sprawl and the value of land preservation, subsequent land use and transportation planning decisions did not always adhere to the 1964 plan’s guidance, illustrating the political economy of sprawl. On one hand, resistance

to the kinds of dense infill and development in areas within the growth footprint identified by the 1964 plan left the urban form unrealized in many areas. On the other hand, the desire of property owners to maximize the value of their land in some cases led to more development in outlying areas than contemplated in 1964. The failure to impose tighter limits on sprawl allowed development to disperse, increasing the cost of roads, water, sewer and other public infrastructure by limiting economies of scale. The premature development of land on the outer edges of the growth envelope also limited opportunities to offer cost-effective transit service.

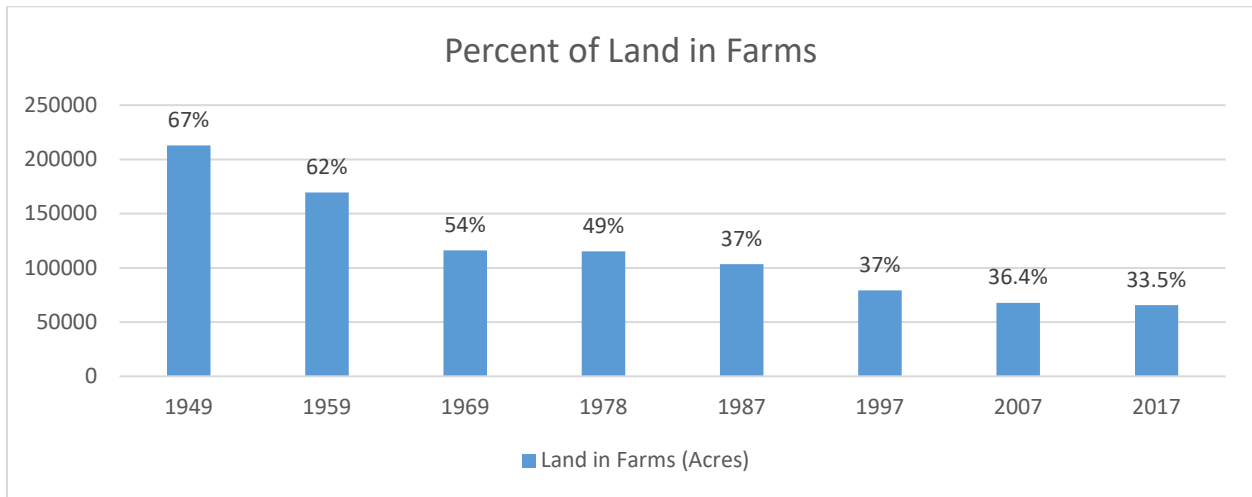


Figure 2: Acres and Percent of Land in Farms (Census of Agriculture 1949-2017)

Conversely, the 1964 plan envisioned corridor cities along I-270, I-95 and Route 29 yet subsequent planning efforts, including the 1993 refinement, disregarded and ultimately removed the growth corridor along Route 29 and I-95 in the eastern portion of the county. The excision of the Route 29 corridor effectively directed new public and private investment away from the East County and toward the established urban ring and I-270 corridor. As a result, the I-270 corridor has benefited from successive cycles of investment and reinvestment, even as other corridors – including Georgia Avenue, where Metrorail’s Red Line was built – were largely left behind. This recurring pattern aggravated the racial and economic disparities between the eastern and western parts of the county that remain today.

Moreover, the Wedges and Corridors plan neglected to fully articulate how the broader public should expect to benefit from maintaining a rural pattern over much of the county’s land area. The plan explained that land preservation is important to recreation, agriculture and conservation of natural resources but did not describe how people living in urban parts of the county would access these opportunities. The result is that many people who live outside what became the Agricultural Reserve are unfamiliar with it and have limited opportunities to visit, enjoy and develop an appreciation for the value of continued preservation of land for farming, recreation, and environmental stewardship. They also miss out on opportunities to learn about the county’s rural heritage, eat and drink locally produced food and beverages, and participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, camping and fishing.

If we fail to make efficient use of land, the available space for growth, outdoor recreation, agriculture and natural resource conservation will rapidly diminish. The cost of building and maintaining water and sewer infrastructure, roads, and public services will become harder to manage. Problems such as traffic congestion and climate change will be exacerbated. Thrive Montgomery 2050 proposes a

recommitment to concentrating growth in intensively developed centers of activity, or nodes, along major transportation corridors. Outside of these corridors, development must be managed in ways that help to form more complete communities without expanding established development footprints. Preservation of land for recreation, agriculture and environmental management must be ensured.

Insert Corridor-Focused Growth Map Here

The concept of corridor-focused growth is a fundamental organizing element for Thrive Montgomery 2050, as it recognizes not only that intensively-developed centers of activity and preservation of land both play a vital role in our quality of life but that neither pattern can exist without the other. By identifying the places where growth should be encouraged, this chapter establishes the framework to create complete communities, which depend on a compact footprint to give them coherence. The scale of development, building types and diversity of uses envisioned within this footprint are discussed in greater detail in the Complete Communities chapter. In turn, the design elements that complement and reinforce complete communities are discussed in the Design, Arts and Culture chapter.

In order to maximize the efficiency of land use and public investment, the county will pursue the following policies and practices:

- Concentrate growth in centers of activity along corridors through compact infill development and redevelopment to maximize efficient use of land.
 - Amend land use, design and zoning regulations, including the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations, to remove regulatory barriers and permit corridor-focused compact development. Appropriate densities will vary but should be sufficient to support, at a minimum, the efficient provision of transit service along these corridors.
 - Improve the environmental sustainability of growth by encouraging infill and redevelopment to curb sprawl and bring areas built out in an era with little or no environmental regulations up to robust standards for stormwater management and other state-of-the-practice environmental standards.
- Promote and prioritize public investment in infrastructure along growth corridors and leverage it to attract future private investment in a compact form.
 - Adopt new methods of financing public infrastructure, such as value capture, tax increment financing, and other mechanisms to facilitate investment in areas identified as appropriate for more intensive development and accompanying infrastructure.
 - Establish high-quality transit infrastructure along growth corridors through capital investment and ensure reliable, frequent service through operational investment.
 - Leverage federal, state and local incentive programs, publicly owned land and land investment opportunities for corridor infill development and redevelopment.
- Limit growth beyond corridors to compact, infill development and redevelopment in complete communities to prevent sprawl. Apply principles of urbanism at an appropriate scale along a rural-to-urban transect as outlined in the Complete Communities chapter.
 - Sustainably manage land outside growth corridors and complete communities to increase biodiversity, improve the health of natural habitats, preserve privately-owned forests, protect watersheds and aquifers, and improve water quality while providing expanded opportunities for outdoor recreation, including vigorous physical activity.

- Preserve and enhance the Agricultural Reserve and manage the areas designated within the footprint for a rural pattern of development for the benefit of the entire county.
 - Maximize the benefits of the Agricultural Reserve through policies designed to ensure the continued viability of farming as an economically productive and sustainable activity, discourage sprawl, facilitate a broad range of outdoor recreation and tourism activities, conserve land and natural resources and promote practices that advance environmental quality.
 - Improve access to the Agricultural Reserve for the public to experience and directly benefit from this valuable resource for locally grown food, outdoor recreation and tourism.

Montgomery County’s population is projected to grow by approximately 200,000 people over the next 30 years, and these policies and practices are critical to not only accommodate this growth but also to achieve Thrive Montgomery’s key objectives as well as combat and adapt to climate change. Nearly 85 percent of the county’s land is already developed or otherwise constrained. If we fail to maintain effective barriers to sprawl, we will paint ourselves into a corner where space for farming, recreation, and resource management is exhausted along with space for additional growth.

We must encourage compact infill development and redevelopment to accommodate anticipated population growth in a way that supports dense, vibrant, energized communities. The strategy of concentrating growth within nodes along corridors will direct population and employment to locations served by infrastructure, services and amenities – including transit – and create focused centers of activity. This focus will in turn reduce the cost of public infrastructure and deliver more favorable returns on both public and private investment. Compact infill development and redevelopment also align with the increasing desire of residents, businesses and employers seeking walkable, transit-oriented communities, as demonstrated by transit-oriented areas across the region and country.

The identification of growth corridors in the East County – particularly along Route 29 and the Georgia Avenue corridor along Metrorail’s Red Line – is vital to reversing decades of disinvestment and ensuring that the benefits of growth are more equitably distributed across lines of geography, class, and race. Political opposition to development in the East County – most clearly expressed by the removal of the I-95/Route 29 corridor in the 1993 refinement of the Wedges and Corridors plan from the areas identified as appropriate for growth – pushed public and private investment to the west. Subsequent public and private investment was focused along the I-270 corridor because this area appeared to offer the best prospects for growth and success. Meanwhile, the East County became relatively less attractive for employers and residents, feeding a cycle of disinvestment. This pattern is consistent with what real estate developer and scholar Christopher B. Leinberger has described as the phenomenon of the “favored quarter.” Leinberger observes that in many metropolitan areas, decisions about the geographic allocation of resources made decades in the past are reinforced and repeated. Once an area receives resources and attention from the government and private sector, Leinberger argues, future investment tends to follow in the same location, reinforcing its head start and leaving other areas farther behind.

The evolution of the I-270 corridor as the “favored quarter” and accompanying limits on development in the East County were not the sole – or even the most important – cause of the racial and economic divide between the eastern and western part of the county. The logic of the favored quarter, however, was and is a significant factor in reinforcing disparities in access to investment, infrastructure, and services as well as the concentration of poverty and diminished access to opportunity. By focusing investment and encouraging development along corridors in the East County, this plan will establish the

foundation for complete communities that will create a more prosperous and equitable future in this area.

Among the most clear-cut benefits of the efficient use of land, including compact corridor-focused growth together with reinforcement of the rural pattern outside of the corridors, is to make development more environmentally sustainable in general and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in particular. By concentrating development in a limited footprint, corridor-centered growth facilitates walking, biking and transit use and reduces emissions from motor vehicles. A compact form of development reduces driving even among people who continue to rely on cars because trip distances decline as a wider range of needs can be met within a short distance, reducing vehicle miles traveled.

Compact growth also improves the environmental performance of both sites and buildings, as it allows the redevelopment of areas developed prior to the adoption of modern stormwater controls and often characterized by high proportions of impervious surface cover. A compact form of infill development or redevelopment can reduce stormwater runoff and heat island effect using green infrastructure, green roofs and other green cover as well as building design and orientation to reduce urban temperatures.



Figure 3: Improved Environmental Performance of Infill Development in the Pike District

Finally, compact, corridor-focused development is essential to the continued protection of the Agricultural Reserve and preservation of land for environmental stewardship and recreation. As our population grows and the region continues to develop, pressure on rural areas and natural systems will increase. The preservation of the Agricultural Reserve reinforces the concentration of growth and maximizes the land available for farming, recreation and natural resource conservation.

While farming should remain the primary use in the Agricultural Reserve, the area set aside for the rural pattern also provides opportunities for recreation, tourism and natural resource conservation, uses that must be acknowledged and supported. The Agricultural Reserve improves the attractiveness and livability of the county because it provides opportunities for locally grown food, outdoor recreation, education and tourism. The continued preservation of the Agricultural Reserve, along with the county's

park system, also protects the county's forests, wetlands, meadows and streams, supports biodiversity and natural habitats, and protects watersheds, aquifers and water quality.

In assessing future plans, projects and proposals related to the efficient use of land and measuring the success or failure of the approaches recommended in this plan, relevant measures may include:

- Amount of infill development / redevelopment along major corridors.
- Proportion of new population, employment and housing within a mile (or half-mile) of priority corridors.
- Non-Auto Driver Mode Share (walking, biking, transit use) and corresponding reduction in VMT.
- Public and private investment in infrastructure, services and amenities along corridors, overall and by area of county.
- Acres of farmland, natural habitats, forests and environmentally sensitive areas protected.
- Economic productivity of farming.
- Amount of space for outdoor recreation and variety of activities supported.
- Percentage increase in environmental performance of buildings and sites, overall and by area of county.
- Number of visitors from outside the Agricultural Reserve for recreation, commerce, and tourism.
- Maintenance and improvement in measures of stream water quality.
- Reduction in impervious cover and increase in area of impervious cover treated.