




Thrive Montgomery 2050 Worksession No. 5: Compact growth: corridor-focused development

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Introduction

The main topic of discussion for today's worksession and approval by the Planning Board is the draft of the revised diverse and adaptable growth chapter now called Theme # 3—Compact growth: corridor-focused development (ATTACHMENT 1). It lays out the issues and existing conditions related to land use and growth in the county, and the goals and policies Thrive Montgomery 2050 proposes to address these issues. It also addresses the ways in which these policies will further the key objectives of Thrive Montgomery 2050, and includes a set of potential measures to monitor the progress towards achieving the Plan's goals of compact, sustainable and equitable growth.

Staff will also present a summary of major themes of the public hearing testimony about the draft Plan's recommendations related to growth and concentrating all new development along transit corridors to maximize efficient, equitable and sustainable use of land.

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 4 worksession— Design, arts and culture: adding value and building community (ATTACHMENT 2).

Major themes of public testimony related to growth

Major themes that emerged from the growth-related comments included evolution of the Wedges and Corridors concept, impacts of denser development, location of growth, how to pay for growth, the role of the Agricultural Reserve, and the need to accommodate new growth.

As mentioned in the staff report for the previous worksessions, because of the inherent overlap between the topics of the Plan's chapters, there were many comments about growth and compact development that also touched upon the role of growth--and more specifically the idea of compact growth and urbanism--in supporting diverse and affordable housing, Complete Communities, sustainable and healthy environment, equity and economic development.

Evolution of the Wedges & Corridors concept

Some commenters focused on the draft Plan's assessment of the evolution of the Wedges and Corridors (W&C) concept from the 1964 General Plan (the '64 Plan) to a web of corridors and centers today. Comments included: requesting that Thrive Montgomery 2050 clearly state the failures of the '64 Plan and that Thrive Montgomery 2050 provide more clarity on the proposed Web of Corridors and Centers concept. Perceived failures of the '64 Plan were mainly that its protection of the wedge, including the Agricultural Reserve, and the focus on "corridor cities" resulted in auto-oriented sprawl. Others stated that the draft Plan was abandoning the original W&C concept. Commenters advocating for the retention of the original W&C concept want to protect the residential communities in the Wedge because they think Thrive Montgomery is proposing to turn the entire county into a high-density urban area. Some of these comments also raised the need for more emphasis and increased commitment to the corridor cities of Germantown and Clarksburg to make them into major employment centers.

Impacts of denser development

Many commenters fully supported the idea of compact growth concentrated in transit corridors and the Plan's emphasis on urbanism to protect natural resources and reduce sprawl. There were others who supported the idea but noted the need for additional strategies to reduce the impacts of denser development including stormwater runoff, loss of natural habitat, increased imperviousness and heat island effects, loss of forest and urban tree canopy, loss of existing affordable housing, and displacement of existing vulnerable communities.

As described in the housing chapter staff report, many commenters were concerned about the negative impacts of introducing higher densities and compact development in existing single-family neighborhoods primarily for the reasons of compatibility and potential changes in the character of existing neighborhoods. They see the Plan's emphasis on "urbanism" and compact growth as a way to turn the entire county into an urban area, which they believe would be contrary to "*the reality of existing neighborhoods.*"

While many commenters accepted the draft Plan's rationale about compact development and urbanism as a desirable approach to grow sustainably, some also stated that the Plan should put more emphasis on the protection of the environment and fighting climate change as the most important criteria for all growth in the county.

Location of growth

Much of the public testimony was supportive of focusing growth in walkable, transit-oriented communities, but some were skeptical about the idea of compact growth in general and concentrating such growth along transit corridors in particular. They assumed that the existing single-family housing between the centers will largely remain unchanged as large numbers of

individual homeowners will not be converting them. There were others who wanted to expand the idea of compact growth and diverse communities beyond the 15-minute walk of transit stations.

There were many comments suggesting that more detailed information was needed to clarify where growth would be focused, how growth would vary among the urban, suburban and rural portions of the county, and how the compact form of development envisioned would translate to the existing residential communities and rural areas. Many of the commenters who asked for more information were concerned about how the Plan's recommendations would impact their neighborhoods. Some suggested listing the transit stations where growth would be focused, others asked for a map of the county showing areas where the higher-density compact growth will be located.

How to pay for growth

There were a number of comments that questioned the county's ability to pay for compact growth in order to create and support diverse, sustainable, walkable and equitable transit-oriented communities. Several commenters believe that the recent projections of reduced revenue for many years to come due to the slow economic growth, further exacerbated by the pandemic, would make it difficult for the county to make the investment need to achieve the ambitious goals of the Plan. They were concerned that the draft Plan did not provide a clear path for the county to be able to fund improvements such as reliable and efficient transit, schools, utilities, healthcare facilities, libraries, parks and open spaces, and community centers that would be necessary to create compact growth patterns along revitalized corridors. To some of them this meant that new development will be allowed to proceed without the needed infrastructure and services in place to support the new growth.

Role of the Agricultural Reserve

Public testimony suggested that the draft Plan needed to demonstrate the relationship more clearly between future growth expectations and the Agricultural Reserve. Most of these commenters believe that the Agricultural Reserve is facing pressure to allow non-agricultural uses, and that the Plan should provide a strong argument for protecting the Agricultural Reserve and how it should be used in the future to meet the county's goals as well as balance competing interests. These comments range from providing a stronger economic vision of why the Ag Reserve is needed; the need for preserving the economic vitality of farming and new ways of producing food; limiting any new non-agricultural uses in the Agricultural Reserve; finding ways to make it useful to the entire county, not just people living and working in the Agricultural Reserve; and connecting down county communities with this unique resource.

Need to accommodate new growth

While much of the public testimony related to growth was supportive of accommodating growth in the county, a few people questioned the basic premise of the need to accommodate approximately 200,000 people in the next 25-30 years. In their view, we should not try to plan for the projected growth but instead either stop population and housing growth or limit growth to a smaller, more manageable amount out of a concern that the county will not be able to provide infrastructure and other public services to support the projected population growth in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Attachments

ATTACHMENT 1 is the draft of **Theme #3: Compact growth: corridor-focused development**

ATTACHMENT 2 is an outline of **Theme #5: Design, arts and culture: adding value and building community** that will be discussed with the Planning Board on February 4, 2021.

ATTACHMENT 3 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](#)