

1. Complete Communities

Issues and Challenges

The county's current development pattern of separation of land uses grew out of the dominance of the automobile as the primary mode of travel. Starting after World War II, separating residential areas from retail, community services, office districts, and even parks became a popular planning practice in suburban development.

Separation of land uses left us disconnected and dependent on our cars. Our car-oriented culture contributes significantly to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Impervious surfaces of roads and parking lots pollute our streams and increase flood risk. For many in our county, commutes are long and hard due to lack of affordable housing near transit and because jobs are concentrated in certain areas of the county. Our single-family neighborhoods are frequently not walkable, bikeable or accessible, particularly to people with disabilities partly because they don't have connected sidewalks, bike paths and trails, but also because generally there are no corner stores, services or places to walk to nearby.

Decades of planning, zoning and market preferences for suburban living had profound effects. Today there are few remaining vacant or greenfield properties. Approximately 85% of the county's land area is constrained by environmental and other factors leaving only about 15% of land available to accommodate future growth. County zoning and subdivision regulations—as well as restrictive covenants—have created neighborhoods defined by one housing type or another: single-family detached, townhouses, garden apartments, and mid- or high-rise rental apartments. Zoning techniques like minimum lot size requirements in single-family neighborhoods created uniform housing, which resulted in neighborhoods defined primarily by income.

Though Montgomery County is among the most diverse counties nationwide, the overall racial and ethnic diversity of the county is not reflected at the neighborhood level in many parts of the county. Access to better-paying jobs, high-quality housing and education, healthy foods, parks, recreation and open spaces, and high-quality healthcare and other vital services also varies dramatically by geography and demographics.

The lack of housing diversity by unit type and size is also a significant burden for the county's older adults. Most would continue to live in the same neighborhood where they raised their families if there were options to downsize. However, the current pattern of development forces them to continue to stay in larger houses they don't need or move to locations away from their families and social support network.

Vision for Complete Communities

By 2050, Montgomery County is no longer developed around automobile usage. Instead, the county is made up of a series of people-focused complete communities, each designed to reflect their urban, suburban or rural context. While complete communities in urban centers look and feel different from those in suburban neighborhoods or rural villages, each complete community shares defined features that contribute to a high quality of daily life, regardless of location. Complete communities include a built environment with a mixture of uses; diversity of housing for all ages and abilities; and parks, trails and open spaces where people from different backgrounds can gather, be active and live healthy lifestyles. Each complete community allows safe and comfortable walking, rolling and biking access to destinations and integrates nature, arts and

culture into its streets, buildings and infrastructure. Complete communities also provide access to food, healthcare, education and transit. Complete communities are equitable, anchor a strong economy and function sustainably to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Complete communities are loved by all residents and are places where the people of Montgomery County can thrive for generations to come.

Complete Communities Achieve Multiple Goals

The concept of Complete Communities is a critical component of Thrive Montgomery 2050. It permeates all other General Plan themes and sets the foundation for a more sustainable and equitable future. A compact form of development with a variety of uses and housing types affordable to a range of incomes is needed to address increasing inequality in our society. It will also encourage more walking and biking and address climate change at the neighborhood level. (See more on the compact form of development in the Diverse and Adaptable Growth chapter). Creating complete communities with more people near parks, supermarkets, cafes, schools, libraries or other local services and amenities will not only provide more vibrant and lively places, it will also encourage a more active lifestyle, increase social interaction and reduce our carbon footprint.

At its core, a complete community will be ethnically, racially and economically diverse as well as include a mixture of housing types, uses, amenities and services accessible by walking, biking and transit. Complete communities in urban, suburban, and rural areas will have distinguishing characteristics unique to each community and be based on factors such as the size of the community, proximity to transit, parks and public facilities, variation in physical features such as topography and environmental resources and the unique history and building form of each neighborhood.

Complete communities in urban areas will include every element necessary to support daily life within a 15-minute walk, with a mix of uses and high-density commercial and residential development near Metrorail and Purple Line stations. Complete communities in suburban areas will be located around and near MARC and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) stations and will support a mix of uses as well as moderate density housing, including types such as duplexes, triplexes, and low-rise multifamily buildings. Complete communities in suburban and rural communities will be supported by microtransit and characterized by a variety of uses, amenities and housing types to meet daily needs.

Currently, many places in the county have elements of complete communities. The Town of Kensington, for example, is a good example of a complete community in a suburban area. It has a diversity of housing types ranging from single-family to multifamily and senior housing, a diversity of services and amenities including offices, neighborhood serving retail and services, parks and a train station all within walking distance. Its main challenge, however, is that it is currently divided by major streets which are not walkable and safe for pedestrians and bicyclists. And its housing is very expensive. Lyttonsville is another neighborhood with some elements of a complete community, including a shopping center, restaurant, park and elementary school. The town of Damascus, on the other hand, is a good example of a rural community with some of the features of a complete community.

Since most of the county is already built out, creating complete communities means retrofitting our existing neighborhoods to accommodate new uses, housing types, services and amenities, and creating walkable and bikeable connections where none exist today. This will take a long time. And it will require changing some of our long-held practices and values about what is

important to us including decades of preservation and protection of single-family zones, and what kind of change we would be willing to accept. We should also be open to future opportunities for making our communities complete that are not currently feasible or available. Today's market dynamics, for example, do not support corner stores and coffee shops in smaller, off the main road locations. But as more and more people work remotely, there may be more demand for neighborhood coffee shops and even local work sites (such as shared workspaces in more urban locations) that people can walk or bike to. At the same time, these neighborhood places of gathering could also address the need for interaction and socializing with others.

Goals, Policies and Actions

Goal 1.1: Retrofit existing communities and create new communities where people can meet their daily needs without a car.

Policy 1.1.1: Allow and encourage a variety of uses within communities, with sufficient density to make these uses viable, so that people can experience 15-minute living. Every resident should have the opportunity to live, work, play, exercise, shop, learn and make use of public amenities and services within a 15-minute walk or bike ride.

Action 1.1.1.a: Initiate a Complete Communities Functional Master Plan to assess neighborhood needs and gaps in the uses/services that would result in a broad array of complete communities throughout the county within the urban, suburban and rural context.

Action 1.1.1.b: Initiate master, sector and corridor plans to analyze and apply complete communities on a neighborhood-scale. Identify strategies to increase overall neighborhood diversity and enhance single use areas through land use, transportation, public space and urban design improvements. Integrate the natural and built systems that are necessary to achieve complete communities.

Action 1.1.1.c: Review and revise the zoning categories and requirements in the Montgomery County Zoning Code as needed to accommodate a variety of uses and densities within complete communities.

Policy 1.1.2: Prioritize walking and bicycling as the highest priority mode of transportation in communities and the most critical infrastructure needs through master plans, future development and county funding of Capital Improvements Program (CIP) infrastructure projects.

Policy 1.1.3: Create diversity in housing types by allowing residential buildings of various densities and types suitable for their urban, suburban and rural context for people at every phase of life.

Action 1.1.3.a: Further the [Missing Middle Housing Study](#) by identifying options and implementation strategies to increase the variety and density of housing types in areas zoned for single-family detached and semi-detached housing, particularly in areas located within a 15-minute walk or bike ride of rail¹⁰ and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT).

Policy 1.1.4: Encourage co-location of essential services such as schools, medical clinics, daycare centers, libraries and recreation centers within communities to make access to public services and amenities more convenient and accessible by walking and bicycling from home.

Action 1.1.4.a: Implement innovative school design on more compact parcels of land and in adaptively reused buildings to promote walkable schools.

Goal 1.2: Orient communities around convenient social gathering places accessible to neighborhood residents by walking and biking.

Policy 1.2.1: Locate and design public buildings, including parks, libraries, recreation centers and schools, as places where social gathering is encouraged. Promote walking and biking to gathering places. Assure that the architecture and the site design are civic in nature and promote social gathering.

Action 1.2.1.a: Work with county agencies including Montgomery Parks, Montgomery County Department of General Services (MCDGS), Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to develop best practices manuals that maximize the public benefits of existing and new assets through co- location, redevelopment, consolidation, redistribution, partnerships and a focus on design excellence.

Action 1.2.1.b: Promote design excellence in public buildings through programs like design competitions and priority funding in the CIP budget.

Policy 1.2.2: Preserve and support unique gathering places and sites that enhance neighborhood character and reflect local culture. Acknowledge and physically connect complete communities to their past through preservation and placemaking in historic and cultural sites, especially in locations where the past intersects with the experience of historically marginalized communities.

Goal 1.3: Promote active lifestyles by making parks and open spaces a central element of the community.

Policy 1.3.1: Ensure all people in urban and suburban communities have access to parks or public spaces that provide opportunities for vigorous physical activity, social engagement and quiet contemplation or connections to nature within a comfortable 15-minute walk from their homes.

Action 1.3.1.a: Employ the [Energized Public Spaces Functional Master Plan](#) to identify opportunities for new parks or open spaces, such as publicly owned land, property acquisition or public-private partnerships to more equitably serve communities with limited access to parks and public spaces.

Goal 1.4: Equitably distribute the benefits of land use planning and public and private investment throughout the county. Ensure that no community is disadvantaged by a disproportionate share of adverse impacts from future land use decisions and investments.

Policy 1.4.1: Eliminate disproportionate adverse impacts affecting communities and avoid creating new adverse impacts from future land use policies and capital investments.

Action 1.4.1.a: Conduct a racial equity and social justice impact analysis when planning, designing and budgeting for new community facilities such as libraries, recreation centers, schools, parks and public infrastructure to determine whether the new amenity will be

accessible to nearby residents of all backgrounds and will reduce any existing inequities in access.

Action 1.4.1.b: Advance racial equity and social justice in master plans, studies and projects. Develop metrics to monitor implementation of recommendations that advance racial equity and social justice and measure outcomes.