

2. Connectedness

Issues and Challenges

Humans innately desire connection with other people. Social engagement and participation in community and civic life is critical to our well-being. However, land use patterns; lifestyles and work styles; automobile dependence; isolation caused by poverty, age and linguistic differences; and fewer traditional public gathering spaces all limit our ability to connect with each other.

Our sense of connectedness and participation in real-life communities are at all-time lows, as is trust in each other and in government and other institutions. The places where we live, work, connect and play don't always facilitate and encourage social interaction and acceptance of all community members. We are losing our traditional gathering places such as local hardware stores, bookstores, places of worship and other places of social interaction. Even when there are such destinations nearby, they are not easily accessible except by driving. Both the private and the public sectors are moving toward consolidation of private places into larger facilities in fewer locations.

This includes retail centers and public facilities like recreation centers, libraries and other amenities. It is done primarily to save costs but at the expense of reduced opportunities for connectedness.

This trend reinforces the already dispersed development pattern with significantly greater impact on lower-income populations and the elderly who don't own cars or are unable to drive anymore.

Additionally, it is not convenient or accessible for everyone to participate in planning processes. Historically, inherently complex development processes have favored those with power and influence. The causes of this disparity are many: decision making that focuses on land acquisition cost without weighing the unseen costs to low-income communities, language barriers, lack of time and access to transportation to attend meetings, distrust of government institutions, and lack of provision for residents with disabilities.

Vision for Connectedness

Montgomery County is a place where every resident feels a sense of shared interests and values as well as a sense of belonging. It is a place where people of all backgrounds, cultures, ages, abilities, incomes and interests easily cross paths, exchange ideas and work together to improve their communities. Montgomery County builds on the importance of people, places and communities by strengthening the role of the public sector, in particular through its role in shaping the built environment, in promoting social interactions that increase trust, cooperation and belonging. Our built environment creates an atmosphere of acceptance of all people. Public spaces are community social centers where residents interact, enjoy each other's company, exchange ideas and collaborate to improve the community with a strengthened sense of connectedness and social capital.¹¹ Our communities are safe and inclusive, empowering all residents to fully participate and benefit from living in Montgomery County.

Opportunities to unite the community and build social capital expand beyond land and building design. Montgomery County seeks social, environmental and racial justice by strengthening relationships that bind our communities together rooted in the values of dignity, civility, mutual respect and inclusive democracy. Essential technology that connects us, like internet networks, are accessible to all, instead of only the privileged. Community capacity-building and civic engagement takes place through deliberate, sustained outreach to a diverse body of

stakeholders and shared leadership. This ensures that all residents have a voice and influence in planning and policy processes and in decisions to create an equitable future.

Social Interaction and Connectedness

The design of our communities can greatly influence whether and to what degree community cohesion and social interaction take place. Creating a higher degree of connectedness and social interaction, however, is both a physical and operational endeavor—we need both the hardware and software to complete this task. We need the built environment to be able to not only accommodate, but also encourage and make it easier for people to meet others and engage in social activities. For that, we need the right mix of housing types, nonresidential uses and places of gathering connected through easy and convenient walkable and bikeable paths and trails. This kind of physical layout is embodied in the Complete Communities idea described in the previous chapter. And as highlighted in that chapter, creating places that encourage social interaction will require retrofitting our existing neighborhoods through a sustained effort over a long time and constant attention to replacing archaic planning and zoning processes with a new and flexible regimen of land use and development decision making.

The second part of this endeavor—entities and processes that will create and support social activities and programs—is also critical to achieving social cohesion and interaction. It will require a cultural mind shift by all parts of the society to accept and support the idea of more diverse and cohesive neighborhoods. And it will require both the public and private sectors to contribute technical, financial and human resources to achieve the Plan’s vision. It will also require strong participation by residents in the community building process. The current land use and development decision making process needs to be improved to make it more accessible and inviting to all residents. Overcoming the barriers to greater participation will require collaborating with neighborhood organizations, cultural groups, religious institutions and other organizations with deep roots in the community.

Goals, Policies and Actions

Goal 2.1: Create strong neighborhoods and communities that foster communication and interaction among residents and create a culture of inclusion.

Policy 2.1.1: Use public space to facilitate active lifestyles, physical connections and interactions among diverse populations. Ensure each neighborhood has public spaces that establish a culture of inclusion and that encourage people to linger.

Action 2.1.1.a: Develop an index and metrics to measure the availability and performance of places that support inclusive social and civic networks. Emphasize the principles of universal design in the criteria for this index.

Action 2.1.1.b: Amend appropriate zones in the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance to incentivize and prioritize design features in private development projects that facilitate day- to-day interactions. These features could include wide sidewalks, inviting and well-designed public gathering spaces, outdoor seating and lawn areas, and pathways and trails.

Action 2.1.1.c: Develop incentives to promote designated heritage areas and historic sites and other properties with historical and cultural significance. Connect these sites with bike and pedestrian paths.

Policy 2.1.2: Ensure that every community has a network of inclusive, safe and accessible

public parks, trails and other recreational spaces that connect neighborhoods, increase opportunities for social interaction, encourage active lifestyles, and connect residents to nature.

Action 2.1.2.a: Study and identify all publicly owned underutilized spaces (e.g., buildings, rights-of-way, parking lots, garages, etc.) throughout the county that have a high potential for being transformed into parks and public spaces.

Action 2.1.2.b: Study the walking and transit accessibility of the existing network of parks and trails to identify opportunities to improve accessibility to parks and trails for all residents.

Action 2.1.2.c: Update the park classification system in the state-mandated strategic plan for parks, recreation and open spaces to reflect the evolving roles of parks in urban and urbanizing areas as platforms for social gathering, active and healthy living, and connection to nature. Utilize principles of universal design so that a wide range of ages, abilities, and cultures feel welcome and included in parks and public spaces.

Action 2.1.2.d: Create new design typologies for park facilities in urban areas such as community gardens, dog parks, skate parks, playgrounds, community open space, and picnic and grill spaces. Include guidance in the new typologies that the designs should reflect the culture and traditions of the communities where they are located.

Action 2.1.2.e: Create a “Nature Access Action Plan” that enables all residents to live within a 15-minute walk from a park or green space by 2035.

Policy 2.1.3: Design public infrastructure (e.g., streets, pathways and trails) such that social gathering, recreation and active living are major priorities. Use public art, seating, historic preservation and other placemaking techniques to create distinctive community-based places. Make these spaces safe, attractive, informative, convenient and easy to access for all ages and abilities. Promote active lifestyles and social interaction among diverse community members.

Action 2.1.3.a: Create a pedestrian infrastructure improvements priority list in coordination with county and state transportation agencies in order to implement walkability standards in communities underserved by safe, walkable infrastructure. Use the Pedestrian Master Plan and the mapping analysis of community equity emphasis areas to inform this list.

Action 2.1.3.b: Inventory and map opportunities along streets, paths and trails for neighborhood storytelling that celebrates underrepresented communities. Create tools to visualize, showcase and share these stories. Erect interpretive signs and create new heritage walking or bike trails that celebrate local culture and history.

Goal 2.2: Build civic capacity within communities and make government planning and decision-making processes accessible, transparent and easy for everyone to participate in and understand.

Policy 2.2.1: Build relationships and foster trust with community leaders, recognizing their knowledge of community dynamics. Develop protocols in consultation with community leaders for regularly engaging community members, even when master plans or projects are not underway in their neighborhoods. Help to build civic capacity to ensure true neighborhood representation.

Action 2.2.1.a: Launch an educational program, such as the Citizen's Planning Institute that

includes basic courses for residents and all stakeholders to increase understanding, accessibility, and participation in planning, regulatory, and zoning processes.

Action 2.2.1.b: Conduct a review of neighborhood-level civic representation organizations with effective power-sharing structures—drawing from national and local examples—to inform the creation of a new neighborhood-scale civic framework in Montgomery County.

Action 2.2.1.c: Develop a placemaking toolkit to continue and enhance community-led initiatives for placemaking, neighborhood identity and social enrichment. Periodically update the toolkit in close consultation with community leaders.

Action 2.2.1.d: Create a civic engagement Code of Conduct in partnership with community leaders and request that all Montgomery Planning staff, residents and partners sign and agree to uphold these standards.

Policy 2.2.2: Remove barriers to community engagement and improve engagement of diverse participants including renters, people with disabilities, people of color, people experiencing language barriers and others who are underrepresented in civic life.

Action 2.2.2.a: Conduct a biennial community outreach and engagement survey about awareness of, participation in and satisfaction with Montgomery Planning's outreach efforts. Set a baseline to track data over time and determine whether strategies to engage communities improved and if so, the extent of improvement.

Action 2.2.2.b: Develop a civic engagement toolkit to guide each Master Plan's Civic Engagement Plan. Include guidance on the development of demographic-based outreach strategies, equitable civic engagement, guidelines for accessibility (including scheduling and location of activities, translation and childcare), and methods for evaluating and adjusting engagement practices.

Action 2.2.2.c: Launch a required cultural competency training program for Montgomery Parks and Planning staff working on functional plans, master plans and special projects to ensure the departments effectively engage residents from diverse communities, especially historically marginalized and immigrant residents.

Policy 2.2.3: Share information and increase transparency with residents, businesses and community organizations.

Action 2.2.3.a: Use technology to gather public comments and feedback during the development of master, functional and park plans, and the review of regulatory cases. Use technology to inform the public about the status of recommendations in approved and adopted plans, and to track the efficacy of implementation.

Action 2.2.3.b: Develop strategies and tools to meet people where they are and to exchange information effectively. Employ tools such as digital technology/media protocols and an assessment of technology penetration within different neighborhoods and communities.

Action 2.2.3.c: Continue branding and marketing campaigns to increase public awareness of the role of Montgomery Planning and Montgomery Parks in the county and the impact on residents' lives.

Goal 2.3: Improve access to neighborhood-based services such as housing, jobs, professional and government services, educational opportunities, and parks and open spaces at the local, countywide and regional level. Focus on county residents with the greatest socioeconomic needs and for those who are geographically isolated from these services.

Policy 2.3.1. Ensure a network of equitably distributed, easily accessible neighborhood-based services, ideally within walking or biking distance of residents' homes to allow for increased social connections.

Action 2.3.1.a: Complete a countywide study mapping the distribution of public and private neighborhood-based services relative to underserved communities. Produce equity-access metrics at the local level to be evaluated and monitored in a timely manner.

Action 2.3.1.b: Evaluate the equitable distribution of public services and new development across the county and make recommendations for retrofitting or investing in underserved communities. Emphasize decentralized, neighborhood-based facilities for services.

Action 2.3.1.c: Survey county residents to identify disparities in access to quality services by area or region. Consider adding questions to surveys conducted by other government agencies such as the biennial Community Livability Survey of residents conducted by the Montgomery County Executive Office.

Goal 2.4: Use technological innovation to increase community connectedness and resilience for all residents.

Policy 2.4.1: Equitably distribute new and existing communication and information technology to better connect areas of the county that have limited access. Technology may include hardware, software and network infrastructure.

Action 2.4.1.a: Inventory the use and availability of existing and emerging technology within disconnected communities to ensure that all residents have equal access to information infrastructure. Use the analysis of community equity emphasis areas to create a map of technology access deserts and a list of priority areas for bridging the digital divide.

Action 2.4.1.b Identify poor coverage area "dead spots" in rural areas that are suitable for network expansion and information technology installation.

Policy 2.4.2: Meet the diverse technology needs of people in typically disconnected groups such as seniors, lower-income households, people with disabilities and people with cultural and/or language barriers.

Action 2.4.2.a: Facilitate digital literacy programs that enable people to find, evaluate, utilize, share and create content using information technologies to increase resident confidence and efficiency of use. Consider employing multigenerational approaches and informal community-based programs such as student community service hours to facilitate improving digital competency.

Policy 2.4.3: Expand communication and information technology infrastructure and equitably implement existing and emerging technologies.

Action 2.4.3.a: Identify locations in the county for free public network access to information technology services, such as public kiosks, Wi-Fi connected street furniture and other future means. Use public-private partnerships to provide network access in privately-owned public spaces and in parks.

Action 2.4.3.b: Review current zoning and land use standards, permitting processes, and development standards to identify barriers and opportunities for locating existing and emerging technology infrastructure.

Action 2.4.3.c: Establish a new program in which the county is a public technology provider to create the network infrastructure needed for all citizens to access affordable and high-quality services.

Action 2.4.3.d: Develop a countywide technology strategy to anticipate and plan for emerging technology transforming the use of public infrastructure, including but not limited to autonomous vehicles, delivery robots and drones, and the supporting technology such as networked urban sensors, wireless mesh networks and energy microgrids. The strategy will emphasize that municipal technology is a public good, does not compromise privacy or security and narrows equity gaps.

Goal 2.5: Assess racial equity and social justice impacts across all Montgomery Parks and Montgomery Planning initiatives.

Policy 2.5.1: Employ strategies to assess racial equity and social justice impacts of master, functional, regulatory and parks plans to inform improvement of planning, decision-making and resource allocation for more racially and socially equitable policies, programs and plans.

Action 2.5.1.a: Develop a model using socioeconomic criteria to identify community equity emphasis areas¹² within the county. Use the results of this model to analyze racial equity and social justice issues for community and park planning and as a guide for Montgomery Parks to prioritize Capital Improvement Projects.

Action 2.5.1.b: Develop composite displacement risk and opportunity access indices. Use them to assist in making decisions about growth, assess investment strategies to maximize equitable development, and bring racial equity and social justice considerations into the master planning process.