COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

MIX OF USES AND FORMS

While the Wedges and Corridors Plan was extraordinarily progressive in advocating a transit-oriented, compact form of development, it rejected the idea of mixed commercial and residential uses. The plan said the spaces designated for different uses should ultimately work together to achieve a "pleasant and economically feasible whole" but that these uses should be physically separated. It recommended Euclidean zoning, with areas set aside for multifamily, townhouse, and single-family housing along with isolated commercial and industrial zones, saying:

"[C]ommercial and industrial zones should exclude residences both because good residential neighborhoods cannot be maintained in such areas, and because business and industry can function more effectively where space allotted them is uninterrupted by housing."

In addition to a rigid separation of uses, the plan insisted on the desirability of barriers, buffers and transitions between land uses to achieve harmony and compatibility:

> ***"[L]ong established commercial centers expand into nearby residential neighborhoods, causing more transitional problems. The end result is a disease known as urban blight. This disease is contagious and is almost sure to spread where preventative measures are not taken."***

While the polycentric urbanism embodied by the 1964 plan's corridor cities concept was fundamentally sound, its approach to the separation of uses and emphasis on transitions and buffers was not entirely successful in producing pleasant and economically vibrant commercial districts, and its other shortcomings have become increasingly obvious, namely:

- The separate-and-buffer approach failed to anticipate – much less meet – the demand for housing in mixed-use centers of activity. The corridor cities neither achieved the densities nor provided for the variety of uses, building types and services necessary to maximize their value in attracting residents and workers looking for more vibrant and appealing places to live and work.
- A handful of locations in Montgomery County have attracted investment in office, retail, and residential uses, but most lack the combination of elements – including a compact form with diverse housing types, commercial uses, transit and a walkable public realm – that support the kinds of human interaction common to the most successful places. Meanwhile, the areas surrounding our most eclectic centers of activity largely remain characterized by a separation of land uses and uniform lot sizes, lot coverage, and building forms.

The separation of uses and associated homogeneity in lot sizes, development standards and building forms, coupled with the commitment to barriers, buffers and transitions had the effect – whether intentional or not – of discouraging connections among people and places and reinforcing racial, social and economic divisions between neighborhoods and parts of the county.

The implementation of these approaches also made access to the full range of economic, educational and cultural opportunities (as well as services, amenities, and infrastructure) far too dependent on access to cars. By separating uses and investing heavily in roads, we have made driving the only practical way for many residents and workers to meet their daily needs – trips that should be feasible on foot, on a bicycle, or on a train or bus.

The preservation and protection of neighborhoods dedicated exclusively to detached single-family houses has left residents disconnected from retail and other services, encouraged the construction of stand-alone public facilities, and perpetuated the inefficient use of land.

Our land use policies have evolved in recent years to reflect a changing social and demographic context as well as changing preferences. The county also has evolved from a bedroom community to the District of Columbia to a county with several distinct employment centers. These changes have coincided with the emergence of increasingly strong market preferences for transit-oriented, mixed-use communities with a unique sense of place. Our plans have been responsive to these trends to some degree, but implementation of transit-oriented, mixed-use development has been limited due to economic and regulatory constraints.

In addition to transit-oriented, mixed-use development, the concept of "15-minute living" has emerged as a way of reimagining existing communities to maximize their attractiveness and efficiency by locating living spaces in each neighborhood or district within walking distance of services, infrastructure, facilities, and amenities that serve the daily needs of the people who live there. While a rigid application of 15-minute living is unlikely to be practical in every part of the county, the concept is a useful way to think about how to build complete communities and should be an organizing principle in planning for their success.

To ensure that demand for future development in Montgomery County is harnessed to embrace complete communities and 15-minute living – both by building new centers of activity along corridors and by making existing ones more complete – the county will pursue the following policies:

Identify and integrate elements needed to complete centers of housing, retail, and office development and plan to make 15-minute living a eality for as many people as possible.

- Update zoning allocations and standards to encourage the integration of varied uses, building types and lot sizes.
- Apply flexible approaches to accommodate infill and redevelopment that improve access to amenities, active transportation, parks, and open spaces, and a broader range of housing types at the neighborhood scale.
- Prioritize neighborhood-level land use planning as a tool to enhance overall quality of community life and avoid reinforcing outdated land use patterns.
- Allow sufficient densities to make a wide range of uses economically viable in complete communities. Encourage densities sufficient to support convenience retail and other local-serving amenities at the neighborhood level. Provide guidance for accommodating additional density in a context-sensitive manner.
- Ensure that complete communities are integrated into their surroundings and supported by a public realm that encourages walking, biking and rolling, as well as social interaction through the configuration of sidewalks, paths, landmarks, and gathering spaces.
- Adopt planning approaches that prioritize providing more complete communities in service to improving the quality of community life throughout the county.

Encourage co-location and adjacency of all essential and public services, especially along growth corridors and in complete communities.

- Maximize the utility of existing and new public facilities by extending their reach into the surrounding neighborhoods through active transportation improvements that prioritize walking, biking, rolling, and transit use.
- Develop standards for colocation of public facilities that promote mixing of uses or services and compact development strategies. Encourage public-private partnerships and ensure they promote social interaction and physical activity.

Retrofit centers of activity and large-scale single-use developments to include a mixture of uses and diversity of housing types and to provide a critical mass of housing, jobs, services, and amenities for vibrant, dynamic complete communities.

- Ensure employment uses in economic clusters develop in a mixed-use format along with housing, retail, amenities, and transit, and ensure they are integrated into the surrounding communities.
- Allow creation of co-located subsidized housing, discussed further in the Affordable and Attainable Housing Chapter, for industries that employ large numbers of employees (permanent or seasonal).
- Encourage higher density economic and housing cooperatives (live/work areas such as home occupations, artist villages, farmers' market/villages, tech/life-science startup incubators).

MONTGOMERY COUNTY HAS REACHED A STAGE WHERE GREENFIELD OPPORTUNITIES LARGELY HAVE BEEN EXHAUSTED AND THE GENERAL LOCATIONS OF BUSINESS DISTRICTS, RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS, AND FARMLAND HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED, OR ARE AT LEAST PLANNED

Montgomery County has reached a stage where greenfield opportunities largely have been exhausted and the general locations of business districts, residential neighborhoods, and farmland have been established, or are at least planned. For example, the downtowns of Silver Spring and Bethesda; the new life sciences hubs anticipated in the Great Seneca Science Corridor and White Oak; and the emerging town centers in Germantown and White Flint have zoning capacity as well as physical space for tens of millions of square feet of development.

The task of this plan, therefore, is less about identifying new locations for large government or corporate tenants and more about making parts of the county that already have been developed or planned more attractive to residents and workers, which in turn will help attract employers. The central premise is that making individual neighborhoods and districts more complete is among the most effective ways to accomplish this goal. Combined with a compact development footprint, clear standards to ensure quality of design; complementary transportation infrastructure to support walking, rolling, and riding; and appealing parks and recreation offerings for active lifestyles; more complete communities are essential to our competitiveness.

The combination of strategies that can help create a more complete community in any particular place depends heavily on context. The scale (village vs. town center vs. downtown), location (inside vs. outside the growth footprint) and type of district or neighborhood (e.g., office park vs. central business district vs. residential neighborhood vs. suburban shopping center) all influence which elements should be incorporated and how they should be tailored. Despite the varying needs and conditions of different parts of the county, however, the concept of encouraging more diversity of use and form is relevant in almost every location. For example:

- Existing suburban office parks in locations such as Rock Spring or Clarksburg's COMSAT site have large existing buildings that can accommodate employment but lack the integration of uses, services, and amenities necessary to succeed in an increasingly competitive office market. Complete community strategies can help reposition these employment centers through infill and redevelopment to incorporate housing, restaurants, and public spaces along with better transit service, making them more attractive to both residents and employers.
- Likewise, for places the county hopes to see emerge as important centers for office employment, such as White Flint, White Oak, or Germantown, the integration of additional housing options can help to encourage activity beyond regular business hours, creating the sense of energy and activity during the evening and on weekends.
- Centers of activity in suburban and rural areas, which range from large retail shopping centers such as Aspen Hill, to clusters of commercial and neighborhood serving retail uses like the shopping areas in Potomac Village or Four Corners, offer convenience retail for surrounding subdivisions but often lack safe pedestrian accommodations, good transit connections, or high-quality parks and public spaces. In some places, new kinds of commercial development, such as medical offices, will be viable even where office space or other employment-related uses are difficult to attract. The recommendations in this chapter and elsewhere in the plan can help make these neighborhoods more walkable and livable.

Each complete community will embrace a mix of uses including employment and diverse housing types to accommodate as many daily needs as practicable. Implementation will be organic and incremental, through infill and redevelopment within centers of activity along corridors as well as within existing downtowns, town centers and rural villages. This implementation will be primarily market driven, using the development review process to funnel contributions from private developers to streetscape improvements, dedication and construction of parks and public spaces, and the addition of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

As explained in the chapter on Compact Growth, development of new or substantially expanded centers of activity should be focused along corridors. Limited, organic development beyond the corridors and defined growth areas should be allowed to increase the diversity of housing types in existing residential neighborhoods and make these areas more complete, particularly near existing centers of activity or development. Opportunities for increased housing diversity outside the defined growth areas will allow neighborhoods to evolve over time to address current and future housing needs and become more racially and socioeconomically integrated.

How Complete Communities will serve the goals of Thrive Montgomery 2050

Planning for complete communities, with a true integration of uses, diversity of building types, and variety of lot sizes, represents a departure from the automobile-oriented land use planning of the last several decades and the embrace of a planning paradigm that is far more likely to help attract employers, workers, and residents by offering convenience, walkability and a quality of place only available when the needs of people are considered ahead of the needs of cars.

As previously explained, the creation of vibrant, dynamic complete communities that include housing, jobs, services, amenities and opportunities for social gathering and interaction will attract employment, advancing our economic performance and competitiveness. This approach will not be sufficient standing alone and it is not intended as a substitute for other elements of a comprehensive economic development strategy. In an era with limited demand for new office construction and a strong market preference for locating businesses in high-quality, mixed-use, walkable and transit-oriented areas, however, it is one of the best strategies available to local government to attract and retain employers.

In addition, flexible use and development standards that allow variety in lot sizes, building types, and building placement offer an opportunity to increase commercial and residential diversity within neighborhoods. A broad assortment of retail, office, and live-work spaces designed to fit the needs of individual businesses can support different kinds of work and employment arrangements. The diversity of housing and employment types provides a means for renters, first-time homebuyers, or new business owners to access and participate in competitive markets.

Diversity in development is especially important to producing housing that matches the needs of our future. The integration of accessory dwelling units, duplexes, and multi-family buildings within the same community supports a broader range of households and incomes, reduces the concentration of poverty, and increases racial and economic equity. A mixture of housing types – coupled with strategies to use the built environment to encourage social interaction – can help create integrated communities where people across the ethnic, racial, social, and economic spectrum not only live and work together but develop a sense of shared purpose and community. These elements also create opportunities for housing suitable to every stage of life, allowing residents to stay in the same neighborhoods as they age.

Finally, complete communities will also create long-term sustainability for both human and environmental health. A mixture of uses and forms, together with a built environment that facilitates active lifestyles, allows more trips to be completed by walking, biking, rolling, and transit, reducing vehicle miles traveled and dependence on cars while increasing physical fitness and opportunities for social interaction. Likewise, the mixture of uses, co-location and adjacency of public services and amenities improves sustainability by reducing building footprints, cutting energy use. Co-location also helps to maximize community use and social interaction.

In assessing proposals related to the creation of complete communities and measuring the success or failure of the approaches recommended in this plan relevant measures may include:

- Population density in centers of activity along corridors as well as within existing downtowns, town centers and rural villages
- Diversity uses and structures
- Racial, ethnic, and income diversity
- Median age/life stages concentration
- Percentage of employment growth overall and by area of the county
- Car ownership levels
- Transit usage for inter-county travel
- Weekend transit usage
- Numbers of co-located facilities/amenities
- Public investment ratios for walking, biking, rolling, transit, and automobile
- Median vehicular expense per county household
- Median housing expense per county household
- Emergence of key population and mixed-use centers
- Increasing commercial activity in otherwise residential neighborhoods