

Dear Councilmembers of the Montgomery County Council:

I am writing to you to express my support for *Thrive Montgomery 2050*.

While housing is just one part of Thrive, it has become the most discussed and controversial aspects of the plan.

To explain why I support Thrive's housing vision, let me start with pointing you to two passages: the first from *On Wedges and Corridors* and the second is from an article about housing conditions in Wheaton:

[On Wedges and Corridors, pg 7:](#)

"How much more time consuming and frustrating can your daily trip to the office get before 'you've had it'? How many more people can crowd into your community before you feel completely 'hemmed in'? How far into the distance will you let the rural countryside retreat before trying to preserve some of it for its soothing effect? [...]"

As suburbanites you have chosen to live outside the central city. Maybe you wanted sunlight coming through your windows, or more romping space for your children. Maybe you prefer the song of birds to the sound of buses, or maybe you just like a little extra room for gardening on your own land surrounding your own home. Most likely you have chosen to live in the Maryland suburbs because they offer pleasant living and good public services. But the suburbs are growing even faster than the Metropolitan Area as a whole."

["Wheaton group to meet about Overcrowding":](#)

"A group of Wheaton homeowners is having a special meeting this weekend to voice concerns to Montgomery County officials about the growing number of overcrowded houses in their neighborhood and a lack of action from the county.

Kim Persaud, vice president of the Wheaton Regional Park Neighborhood Association, said several small single-family homes were being run like boarding houses for immigrants and housing as many as 14 people, she said.

The result is too many cars that block traffic and too much trash that attracts rats and raccoons, Persaud said. Compounding the problem is a county government that is incapable of enforcing zoning laws that are already on the books.

'It's utter frustration,' Persaud said. 'They need to take their head out of the sand and do something about it.'

The number of overcrowding complaints in Montgomery County has more than doubled in the past six years, though county officials have found almost all of those complaints unfounded. That's partly because adults living in overcrowded homes can

easily skirt county zoning rules that prohibit more than five unrelated people living in a single house by saying they are all related.

Persaud said that was a loophole the county needed to fix. But finding a solution has vexed county leaders.”

What do we want to be as a county?

When we see overcrowding as described in the article, are we a county that kicks people out so some people do not feel “hemmed in”? Or are we a county that understands that the situation is a symptom of a systemic injustice, requiring us to build housing to accommodate the needs of people in our county? The just option is to provide housing for people.

That is what Thrive Montgomery 2050 lays the foundation to do.

The county is displacing people

As a millennial I’m keenly sensitive to the fact that the county has been experiencing net losses of people ages 25-44 since 2015 (with 2017 being the 1 exception) as documented in the Thrive document. The county’s housing policy is actively displacing millennials, a generation more diverse than any preceding generation. Millennials living in the county have struggled to afford to stay in the county and end up moving elsewhere, while others cannot afford to move into the county. All the while, the County Executive has made openly [ageist comments opposing housing for an entire generation](#). This situation will only get worse.

Montgomery County Public Schools’ enrollment has likewise been in [decline for 2 straight years](#) after nothing but growth. People cannot afford to start a family in this county; families cannot afford to stay in the county; families cannot afford to move into the county. Do we want a family friendly county?

Thrive Montgomery 2050 understands these problems and addresses them through a variety of plans, recommendations, and policies ranging from creating affordable housing to making our streets safer.

Overcoming history

Montgomery County did not escape the history of segregation and racism in the United States or Maryland. So much in the US depends on where someone lives. It impacts where someone goes to school and the funding of that school. It determines what amenities, jobs, and transit a person can access. It even determines the quality of air you breathe and the temperature outside. Historical policies and systems have created an environment where, as a whole, people of certain socio-economic statuses--mostly white people and especially the white and wealthy--have access to the best housing opportunities and everything that flows from that.

Impoverished whites are more likely not to live in concentrated poverty, while minoritized populations, especially black Americans, are more likely to live in concentrated poverty.

While our county has become increasingly diverse, integration has not followed suit. Some parts of our county have transformed from sundown towns into inclusive communities where there is no majority group, while other parts have not changed. In a county that is about 40% white, there are communities that are 80-90% white, and--by no accident--these often happen to be the wealthiest communities in our county. This socio-economic segregation is a healthy or ideal arrangement for our county nor the people who live in it.

Thrive's recommendations regarding inclusive development provide a first step at rectifying this situation. Adopting Thrive and moving forward to creating inclusive communities is essential for Montgomery County.

What are some of the other aspects of Thrive that I support?

- Protects Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH)
 - NOAH is part of Thrive's housing vision, but it is not offered as the only solution to affordable housing. Emphasizing NOAH over other housing options risks further concentrating poverty (a problem that disproportionately affects minoritized populations in contrast to the white population) It also risks concentrating poverty in older, lesser quality housing.
 - NOAH is a common-sense tool for affordable housing, but it shouldn't be the only solution which Thrive understands.
- Thrive promotes other innovative housing opportunities including
 - Transforming vacant office buildings into housing
 - Promoting multi-room housing in multifamily housing to meet the needs of families
 - Promotes social and cooperative houses, duplexes, condos, etc.
- Promotes the creation of tools to monitor and prevent displacement and gentrification
 - Thrive promotes collecting data on neighborhood change and making that data publicly available. This data is then to be used to monitor for displacement and gentrification to protect against them. While there has been some concern that Thrive will gentrify communities, the reality is that it creates protections and tools to protect against displacement that do not currently exist.
 - Thrive also advocates using metrics to promote racial integration in communities
- Investing in East County
 - Thrive proposes investing in East County to reverse decades of disinvestment by the county government
- Thrive supports transit-oriented development
 - More housing near transit means fewer cars on the road and less GHG.

- More housing near transit means greater access to other amenities and jobs, greater access to opportunity for those who need it most
- Promotes removing regulatory barriers to enable live-work spaces
 - This promotes people to create their own businesses in their own homes, helping people have housing while creating a business to support themselves. This will also enliven neighborhoods by promoting creative businesses right in the community.
- Promotes complete streets and better pedestrian and bike infrastructure
 - As Thrive notes, pedestrian deaths disproportionately affect minoritized populations. Creating safer streets is an essential part of promoting equity in our county.
 - Safer streets also means that people with disabilities have greater access to sidewalks and greater independence.
 - Creating safer streets not only protects people from vehicular violence, but promotes more walking, biking and healthier lifestyles by greater more attractive infrastructure that gets people to where they need and want to go.
- Thrive prioritizes our health and the environment over highways
 - By promoting transit over new highway construction and widening, further promotes sustainable development that is healthier for the environment and us.
- Promotes creating dedicated transit lanes
 - One of the greatest issues with buses for people is they just end up sitting in traffic. If you already own a car, why pay to take a bus to sit in traffic when you could sit in traffic in your own car. Creating dedicated transit lanes makes buses more efficient. This makes transit a more attractive choice as it will make it faster than commuting alone.
 - If we want to promote the use of transit and ensure people use it, dedicated lanes is one of the most essential things to
- The vision of the complete community
 - Thrive proposes creating so-called “complete communities” throughout the county. The plan admits that this style of development will not be appropriate in every place in the county, there are many parts of the county where it is appropriate.
 - The complete community vision emphasizes mixed development over so-called “euclidean development” which separates residential, commercial, and industrial areas from each other.
 - The intention is to ensure that jobs and amenities are closer to where people live. This means that people have access to grocery stores, to transit, to shops and restaurants and more.
 - At the same time this means that there are jobs closer to people increasing people’s opportunity and access to jobs.

- The complete community is also focused on the environment. So often people need to drive to run a quick errand to pick something, but in a complete community you can walk, take a bus, or ride a pick to run those quick errands.

Misunderstandings, Misinformation, and Myths

While trying to stay up to date with the happenings around Thrive 2050, I have come to find a lot of problematic misinformation and talking points. As someone who has recently tried to become more active in my community, it has been discouraging to see that often these are coming from community leaders. I believe that a debate on the merits of policies is essential for Democracy, but spreading misinformation and even scare tactics are toxic to the Democratic process, poisoning the well and discouraging earnest participation from the county at large. It is hard to say for sure where it is all coming from. Some folks are simply misinformed: they rely on a trusted source that is either creating misinformation themselves or they have also relied on other trusted sources to spread misinformation.

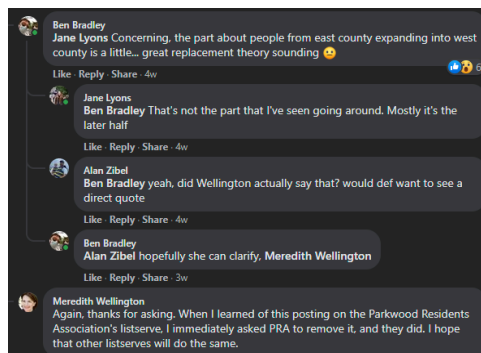
The County Executive's Office

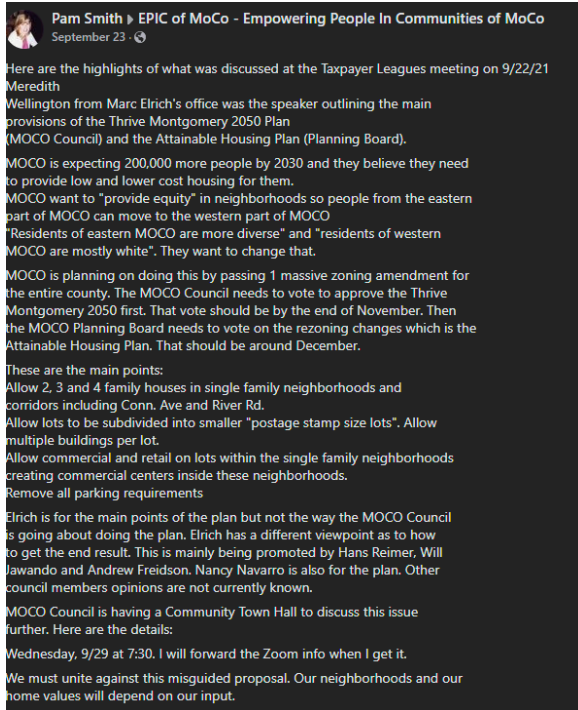
Many people believe that 1) Thrive's only policy or recommendation is to upzone the county 2) Thrive itself changes zoning and 3) Thrive will upzone the entire county. None of those statements are accurate about Thrive, yet these persist in the community.

One unfortunate thing to see is the County Executive and those acting on his behalf mixed up in this misinformation. Meredith Wellington, Land Use Policy Analyst in Elrich's office, has either made incorrect statements about the plan or had them attributed to her and has not clarified her statements. For example, she gave a presentation about Thrive to the Kemp Mill Civic Association. [The minutes of the meeting](#) (now amended) included commentary attributed to Ms. Wellington where it was claimed that various parts of Thrive in the original Planning Department draft were removed by the board and all that remained was up-zoning. When this issue was raised to her on social media, she wasn't very clear on whether or not she made those statements, but arranged with the Civic Association to have the information correct. So while the minutes are accurate now, they perpetuated misinformation, while it remains unclear if Ms. Wellington actually made those comments.

Problematic comments were also attributed to her which were purportedly made at a Montgomery County Taxpayer League meeting. Most concerning to me was how the equity vision of Thrive was framed: "MOCO want to 'provide equity' in neighborhoods so people from the eastern part of MOCO can move to the western part of MOCO. 'Residents of eastern MOCO

are more diverse' and 'residents of western MOCOC are mostly white'. They want to change that." I am concerned that this signals ideas about "replacement"; that people from the eastern part of the county will literally move and replace people in the western parts of the county. The idea of equity for housing is to provide housing opportunity, equitably, across the county, not change who lives where. The equity vision of Thrive is intended to make neighborhoods more inclusive, but this description makes it sound more like a part of the "great replacement theory". When asked on social media about this problematic comment, Ms. Wellington simply responded by saying she asked it to be taken down from a Listserv, but she did not offer any clarifying remarks about the statement or confirm whether or not she made that comment. The post about the Taxpayer League meeting also includes other misleading comments, such as stating that the attainable housing initiative will upzone the entire county. It is my understanding that the AHSI is intended to upzone targeted areas in the county and not the entire county. While pointing out this distinction may seem like nitpicking, I believe it is a critical distinction. There are people seriously concerned that Thrive and AHSI will upzone the entire county, and when someone like Ms. Wellington is invited as an authority on the topic and misstates something, it contributes to and perpetuates misinformation whether intentionally or accidentally.

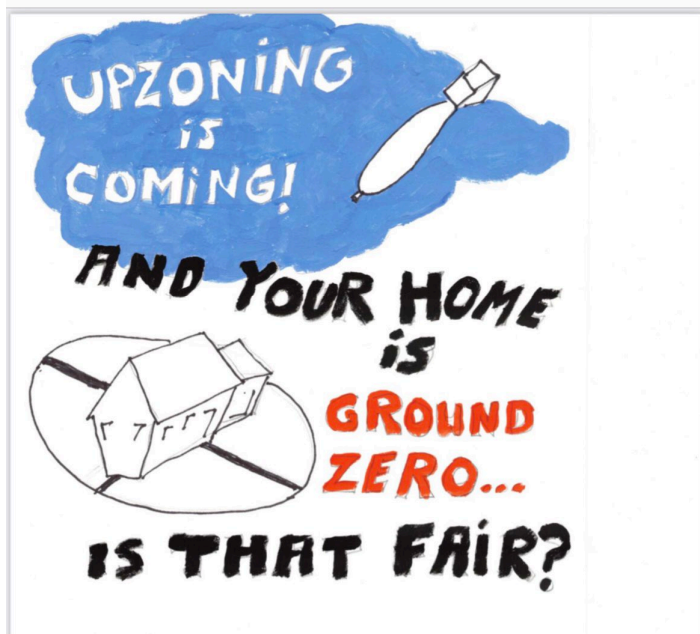




EPIC of MoCo (Empowering People in Communities of Montgomery County)

Founded by Kimberlyn Persaud, Ms. Persaud has used this organization to push misinformation about Thrive Montgomery 2050 and even utilized stigmas of minoritized populations to stir up fear about the Thrive Plan.

EPIC ran this image in a paid ad on Facebook:

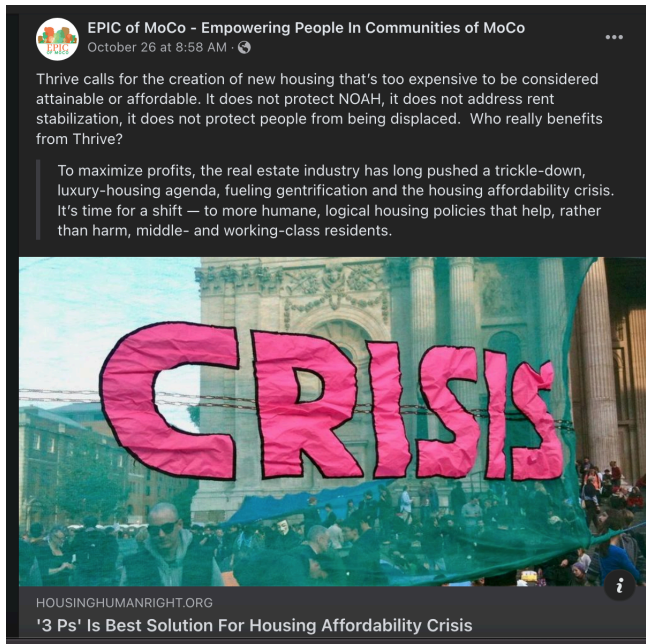


This ad implied that not only is Thrive targeting people's houses, but its intention is to destroy people's homes.

Ms. Persaud's activism with EPIC of MoCo has led her to be invited to speak at venues such as a Town of Somerset Townhall as well as an interview by Casey Aiken's Montgomery Community Media program "21 this Week". In her interview with Mr. Aiken, Ms. Persaud makes a number of misleading statements about Thrive including:

- The plan intends to transform every single community in the county into a 15-minute walkable community
 - However, the Thrive plan does not make this claim, and instead openly says that it would not be appropriate for all communities. The intent of the "15 minute community" model is to demonstrate the value of ending Euclidean Zoning so that jobs and amenities are closer to where people are.
- Ms. Persaud, when asked by Mr. Aiken about Thrive and affordable housing claims: "The only problem is it does not create affordable housing. They've moved away from that to attainable housing. Attainable for who? So what they are proposing is to eliminate single family homes and in their place put up duplexes, triplexes, and quadplexes..."
 - This is a complex issue because on the one hand, a general plan can't create affordable housing itself, it recommends and creates strategies, goals, metrics, etc for affordable housing. In this capacity, Thrive does a lot to help create more affordable housing as I discussed earlier in my letter.
 - The comment also perpetuates confusion by conflating Thrive with AHSI. Thrive continues to promote affordable housing while it also promotes creating more market-rate housing. To say that Thrive "moved away" from affordable housing is misleading and incorrect.
 - Finally, Thrive does not "eliminate single family homes." This misstatement is particularly pernicious as it stokes fear that people will lose their homes which is not true.

Ms. Persaud on EPIC of MoCo's social media has made a variety of incorrect and misleading posts. For example:



The post claims that Thrive only proposes housing that is neither “attainable” nor “affordable,” yet Thrive makes very clear recommendations about expanding affordable housing and building market-rate housing that is more “attainable” than the existing housing. She claims that Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing, yet Thrive has explicit recommendations to protect NOAH. Similarly she claims that Thrive will not protect people from being displaced, yet it contains explicit policies to monitor and protect against displacement and gentrification.

This misinformation is a concern for me because many in the county trust their local leaders to provide them with good information. This has led to an odd situation where people are often advocating against Thrive in favor of policies that Thrive itself advocates for, such as protecting NOAH. My hope is that you understand this culture of misinformation and take up your own responsibility as leaders to work against misinformation and elevate the discussion around Thrive beyond scare tactic ads and bogeymen.

To conclude: Thrive Montgomery 2050, is an opportunity for the county to start addressing the systemic inequalities in the county and create a better life for ourselves and future residents. The county must begin to intentionally focus on economic and racial integration of its segregated communities. The county must begin sustainable development to negate the damage we cause to the environment and, hopefully, begin to heal some of that damage. I hope that you, the County Council, will support this plan and take up your duty as leaders to work against misinformation...

Thank you,

Benjamin Bradley
Silver Spring