



Northwood-Four Corners Civic Association

These written comments are being submitted on behalf of the Northwood-Four Corners Civic Association (NFCCA).¹ Please include this submission as part of the November 30, 2021, hearing record regarding the Thrive Montgomery 2050 (TM 2050) planning process. NFCCA appreciates the substantial planning effort that has gone into developing TM 2050 and our community organization has weighed in at several points during the public outreach process.

To provide some context, which informs our views, the size and scale of Four Corners is best characterized as a “smaller center.”² This close-in community in southeastern Montgomery County is made up of three neighborhoods—Northwood-Four Corners, Woodmoor, and South Four Corners—each of which is represented by its own civic association. Although separated by major thoroughfares (US 29/Colesville Road and Route 193/University Boulevard), **these neighborhoods function as a racially diverse,³ cohesive, and appealing community, stitched together by a commercial district, shared schools, active church and civic organizations, and small-lot single-family housing stock that remains affordable to moderate- and middle-income families.**

NFCCA recognizes that TM 2050 is a planning blueprint and that further legislation or zoning amendments must be adopted to achieve the concepts laid out in TM 2050. Recognizing that fact, however, the NFCCA community will be highly impacted by many of the planning concepts laid out in TM 2050 as planning becomes reality. Why is that? Four Corners lies squarely within the Corridor-Focused Growth Area⁴ outlined in TM 2050 that envisions redrawing the growth map to “focus growth in centers of activity along corridors within the growth footprint.”⁵ TM 2050 further observes that, “The

¹ A boundary map of the NFCCA community can be found at <http://www.nfcca.org/area.html>. Northwood-Four Corners also includes the Forest Knolls community.

² See page 21, Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee Draft Thrive Montgomery 2050, October 25, 2021, which notes that “Smaller Centers are generally characterized by low- to medium-density residential neighborhoods, with clusters of commercial activity, including shopping centers and neighborhood-serving retail.”

³ *Ibid.*, see pages 61 and 71 for racial diversity maps.

⁴ TM 2050 maps growth corridors that run along Route 355 and US 270, Connecticut and Georgia Avenues, and Route 29.

⁵ Montgomery County Council Briefing, November 16, 2021, at p. 6 of PowerPoint presentation.

Corridor-Focused Growth area should have the largest share of new growth. It encompasses the most developed part of the county with highest-density population and employment centers, and the infrastructure to support existing and new development.⁶ “These [growth] corridors establish a web, connecting residents to existing and future centers of activity and Complete Communities.”⁷

TM 2050 outlines a vision to “concentrate growth in centers of activity and along corridors through compact, infill development and redevelopment to maximize efficient use of land,” and to emphasize “future land use and public infrastructure planning on growth corridors so as to direct development in ways that facilitate the emergence of Complete Communities.”⁸

NFCCA is concerned that many of the planning goals and principles outlined in TM 2050 will impact our community by increasing traffic and density. As explained, Four Corners is an area that already suffers from high traffic volume. Adding density north of this area has the real potential to make a bad situation worse. TM 2050 places an enormous emphasis on yet-to-be proven solutions to reduce driving, such as multimodal uses and public transportation.

In turn, there is much to admire about the goals in TM 2050 that call for creating safer, more walkable communities with attractive, economically thriving, well-designed commercial establishments nearby and amenities—such as parks and public gathering spots—to increase a more cohesive sense of community.

Four Corners as a “Complete Community” with “15-Minute Living”

TM 2050 incorporates the planning principles of complete communities and 15-minute living. “Complete Communities are places that include the range of land uses, infrastructure, services and amenities that allow them to meet a wide range of needs for a variety of people.”⁹ “The corollary concept of ‘15-minute living’ has emerged as a way of reimagining existing communities to maximize their attractiveness and efficiency by mixing housing, offices, and retail uses in each neighborhood or district so services, infrastructure, facilities, and amenities to serve the daily needs of people who live or work there are within walking distance.”¹⁰

TM 2050 seeks to “Ensure that Complete Communities are integrated into their surroundings and supported by a public realm that encourages walking, biking and

⁶ See page 21, Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee Draft Thrive Montgomery 2050, October 25, 2021.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 19. TM 2050 notes “These corridors also either have robust transit service in place or planned or are located close to existing concentrations of jobs, services, and infrastructure in ways that lend themselves to supporting more intensive development to produce the kinds of Complete Communities described later in this plan.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, pages 20-21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, page 31.

rolling, as well as social interaction through the configuration of sidewalks, paths, landmarks, and gathering spaces.”¹¹

The busy Four Corners crossroads offers local residents and transit users who pause there the *potential* to enjoy the principles embodied in the concepts of complete community and 15-minute living. There are multiple public transportation stops (FLASH, Metro, and Ride On), as well as grocery stores, restaurants, a church, schools, a heavily used local park, senior housing, and multisector commercial businesses.

Transportation Barriers Impede 15-minute Living

TM 2050 seeks to “design buildings, streets, and parking to prioritize the pedestrian scale and encourage walking and bicycling through smaller blocks, narrower streets, buffered bike lanes and sidewalks.” and to “slow vehicle speeds and minimize surface parking while adequately accommodating automobiles.”¹² For example, **TM 2050 states that “A quick trip to the grocery should be manageable on foot...”**¹³ **That would be true in Four Corners, but for the six lanes of traffic that act as a formidable barrier.**

TM 2050 concludes that “Our dependence on driving is rooted in generations of efforts to facilitate the movement of as many automobiles as quickly as possible while funneling traffic to a handful of north-south arterial roadways that tie otherwise disconnected subdivisions to job and retail centers.”¹⁴

Four Corners is a complex, jug-handled, multilane, commercially bisected intersection. US 29 is a heavily trafficked major portal to up-county and downtown Silver Spring. Route 193 is a major east/west thoroughfare. Adding to traffic volume, two nearby Beltway exits feed into this intersection. Traffic flooding from the north, east, and west peaks here; the Four Corners intersection is a traffic chokepoint producing significant backups before cars spill onto the Beltway or drive along to the Silver Spring metro and routes to downtown D.C.

Moving high-volume traffic along densely travelled major thoroughfares impacts quality of life in nearby communities. TM 2050 seeks solutions through “The evolution of corridors originally planned for the convenience of drivers into multimodal streets where transportation and land use are harmonized to support focused development of a compact mix of uses and building types will reduce driving and make our transportation system more sustainable and resilient.”¹⁵ TM 2050 continues, “In particular, filling in

¹¹ *Ibid.*, page 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, page 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 45. TM 2050 observes that, “Successive widenings to these roads have added more and more lanes for vehicles at the expense of space for pedestrians, bicycles, dedicated lanes for transit vehicles, street trees and anything else that might slow cars.... Reinforcing this vicious cycle is the fact that optimizing major arterials for cars has made these corridors unattractive and unsafe, discouraging private investment and compact, transit-oriented development even where high-quality transit infrastructure is already in place....”

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 53.

missing connections and breaking up large blocks to create a finer-grained network of streets along our suburban corridors will be challenging, but a more connected street grid is perhaps the single most important step to make our streets safer, more attractive for walking, biking and rolling, and reconnect communities divided by overbuilt highways.”

TM 2050 also argues, however, for denser development, observing that, “By concentrating development in a limited footprint, corridor-centered growth facilitates walking, biking, and transit use and reduces emissions from motor vehicles. A compact form of development reduces driving even among people who continue to rely on cars, because trip distances decline as a wider range of needs can be met within a short distance, reducing vehicle miles traveled.”¹⁶

This vision of urbanism sounds compelling, but NFCCA believes it is rational to remain skeptical that county residents will abandon their cars for public transit or personal travel modes. NFCCA is concerned that higher density could further increase the volume of traffic through the Four Corners intersection and that embracing higher density should be balanced against local residents’ desire to enjoy a walkable, safe community.

Done right, however, there are future planning steps that could enhance walkability and reduce pedestrian injuries and fatalities. **TM 2050 needs more specificity as to how to solve traffic and pedestrian safety concerns in denser, close-in communities.** To promote walkability and bike-ability in the Four Corners community, county planning and transportation agencies should **take steps to reduce cut-through traffic and discourage speeding by: prohibiting turns onto arterial roads at certain points, installing traffic calming measures in residential neighborhoods, improving crosswalks on nearby highways, and lowering highway speeds approaching this intersection.** If east/west flow on Route 193 could be improved, fewer frustrated drivers would resort to cutting through these neighborhoods.

As TM 2050 suggests, the County should “prioritize the provision of safe, comfortable, and attractive sidewalks, bikeways, roadway crossings, and other improvements to support walking, bicycling, and transit usage in capital budgets, development approvals and mandatory referrals.”¹⁷ **Pedestrian safety measures—such as additional walk signs, crosswalks, caution signage, blinking lights, or other safety measures—could increase walkability and make 15-minute living a reality in Four Corners.**

Walkability in Four Corners is not an amenity so much as it is a necessity.¹⁸ **A number of pedestrians have been hit and even killed nearby on Colesville Road and**

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 46. “The most obviously and acutely damaging consequence of this dynamic is that pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers are killed or seriously injured with disturbing frequency. Somewhat more subtle, but perhaps just as significant, is the effect that automobile-oriented design has on the vitality and appeal of neighborhoods and commercial districts alike. Safe, attractive streets encourage people to get out and walk, pedal, or roll, whether simply to get some exercise, to run an errand, to go to work or school, or to reach an intermediate destination such as a bus stop or rail station. This kind of

University Boulevard. If this area is made safer, community residents will be more likely to walk or bike to the many nearby businesses, restaurants, and public amenities.¹⁹

NFCCA also supports efforts to enhance “last mile” transportation options. Microtransit, such as “Flex” buses could increase public transportation ridership by offering first/last mile service using on-demand small passenger buses to transport residents to the local FLASH stop or the Four Corners commercial shopping center. Also, alternative local transportation modes, such as on-demand services for bicycles and scooters, would serve an important purpose in offering additional “last mile” options to connect to public transportation and limit the use of autos for short trips.²⁰

TM 2050 Encourages Housing Density in Growth Corridors

TM 2050 sets a goal to “amend land use, design, and zoning regulations, including the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations, to support corridor-focused compact development. Appropriate densities will vary but should be sufficient to support, at a minimum, the efficient provision of transit service along these corridors.”²¹

NFCCA is aware that **access to housing is an equitable concern for present or future county residents who are unable to afford rising housing prices** in this high-cost county. TM 2050 suggests the “Missing Middle Housing” problem can be ameliorated by redeveloping existing single-family residences as multiunit properties. Arguably, this would increase the supply of nonsubsidized, smaller housing types to facilitate downsizing or promote affordability of entry-level housing for moderate- and middle-income households.

NFCCA is concerned, however, that increased housing density—either in the Four Corners community or in the Corridor-Focused Growth Area to the north—will only further exacerbate the already congested and dangerous traffic conditions that exist here today. Furthermore, despite the emphasis in TM 2050 on good design and common standards, lot-by-lot multiunit redevelopment may not be visually cohesive in existing communities.²²

activity supports physical and mental health and facilitates the casual social interaction that build a sense of place and community. Ugly, unsafe roadways are barriers that degrade the quality of life of everyone who lives and works near them, even if they are never involved in a traffic collision and even if they do not personally enjoy walking, rolling or bicycling.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, page 49. TM 2050 makes a suggestion to “transform the road network by incorporating complete streets design principles with the goal of eliminating all transportation-related roadway fatalities and severe injuries and supporting the emergence of more livable communities.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, page 48. TM 2050 notes, “Recent and ongoing advances in technologies and travel modes may have a dramatic impact on the nature of travel demand. These include—but are not limited to—the introduction of or expansion in electric vehicles, connected and automated vehicles, delivery drones, ridehailing, bikesharing, dockless bikes and scooters, and telecommuting.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 22.

²² *Ibid.*, page 38. TM 2050 would “support the development of housing by replacing vague and subjective concepts such as ‘compatibility’ with clear standards for form, site layout, setbacks, architecture, and the location of parking.”

Montgomery County Planning staff incorporated ideas to foster Missing Middle housing redevelopment in the Attainable Housing Strategies report, which made preliminary recommendations to the County Council to consider upzoning changes to permit denser housing redevelopment.²³

In addition, changes are currently proposed in Zoning Text Amendment (ZTA) 20-07, as introduced, to permit redevelopment at higher density within a mile of a Metro station, and Council members are evaluating whether to make further changes permitting Missing Middle housing types in single-family residential zones within one-quarter mile of an existing or planned Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor if “the property has frontage on an arterial or higher roadway classification” or the property is recommended for Missing Middle housing in the applicable Master Plan. If adopted, these changes would directly impact the Four Corners community, as the BRT Flash buses are already operating on Route 29 and Route 193 from Wheaton to Langley Park is one of the recommended BRT routes in the Countywide Transit Corridor Functional Master Plan.

NFCCA acknowledges that TM 2050 is but a planning blueprint, and zoning text changes would need to be considered and adopted by the Council, but inclusion of the Missing Middle recommendations sends a strong signal of support to the Council.²⁴

In our view, **TM 2050 inadequately addresses the impact of higher density and increased traffic on livability for close-in communities.** NFCCA is concerned that over-reliance on the laudable goals of building out a robust infrastructure of high-quality transit, promoting live/work solutions, and making walking, biking, and rolling easier, may not adequately offset the negative impact that higher housing density will produce.

A preferable option would be to take a go-slow approach testing the concepts outlined in TM 2050 for improving outcomes while permitting higher housing density. For example, construction is underway on 5,000 housing units and seven million square feet of commercial space in nearby Viva White Oak. We can only hope that “planning for people not cars” as envisioned by TM 2050 (such as relying on live/work and public transit to reduce automobile volume, for example) will help ease the traffic burden from this major new development. It seems logical to **use the Viva White Oak development as a pilot case to determine if the urbanism concepts embodied in TM 2050 play out as envisioned, before increasing housing density by allowing**

²³ The Attainable Housing Strategies Report proposes to:

- Allow house-scale duplexes and triplexes “by-right” in the R-40, R-60, R-90, & R-200 zones and allow quadplexes by-right in areas closer to transit.
- Create an optional method of development to encourage development of duplexes, cottage courts, townhouses, and small multiplexes and apartments near transit, along Thrive Growth Corridors and near centers of activity.
- Support more corridor-focused master plans to identify locations ideal for larger-scale attainable housing, including townhouses, stacked flats, and apartments along select growth corridors.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, page 22.

“by right” redevelopment of Missing Middle housing along the Route 29 corridor served by FLASH.

Economic Development

As mentioned previously, Four Corners is a major close-in urban community that sits at a major east/west/north/south transportation crossroads. **Strong consideration should be given to expanding economic development support to local businesses and providing social services facilities at this key intersection. There is a higher concentration of low- to moderate-income households in the southeastern section of Montgomery County, creating a greater need for supportive social services**, such as affordable childcare and elder care, employment training, small business support and incubation, financial education coaching/counseling, recreation programs and assets, etc.

The small-scale businesses in the Four Corners commercial district would benefit from redevelopment to connect the surrounding neighborhoods to a vibrant, well-designed, safely walkable shopping district. A more cohesive redesign that ties the businesses located on the three corners and in the median at this intersection would greatly enhance the interrelation, unity, livability, walkability, attractiveness, and cohesion of the Four Corners communities.²⁵

TM 2050 observes that, “Good design is not a luxury but a critical economic development tool. Businesses and workers now prefer walkable, accessible, amenity rich, mixed-use places that facilitate the interaction and exchange of ideas that feed innovation.” The TM 2050 document adds that, “Of course, other factors—particularly quality and thoughtfulness in the design of buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and public spaces—are also essential. Combined with the fundamentals of urbanism, design excellence can help create a sense of place, facilitate social interaction, and encourage active lifestyles.”²⁶

In the mid-nineties, the county contributed resources to “refresh” the Woodmoor Shopping Center in the northeast quadrant. However, today, **commercial properties in the northwest quadrant of Four Corners fronting both US 29 and Rte. 193 remain a mish-mash of aging commercial-use buildings, a handful of which are converted single-family residences. Adding to arterial travel difficulty and the visual cacophony is a strip of commercial and fast-food establishments in the median of Route 193.**

It is time for to rethink how best to boost this area’s economic and commercial potential and to consider a strategic move to invest in and revitalize the commercial zone in Four Corners. In particular, **county agencies should work with commercial property**

²⁵ *Ibid.*, page 36. “Design of the built environment strongly influences our quality of life...the configuration of neighborhoods and districts; and the architecture of individual buildings collectively shape our perception of places and shape how we choose to travel, recreate and socialize.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, page 12.

owners to redevelop the land and buildings on University Boulevard to create a more vibrant, cohesively designed, and visually appealing commercial strip.²⁷

Although the TM 2050 plan seeks to discourage driving by reducing public parking availability, **additional parking in the Four Corners commercial zone could, in fact, reduce driving** by encouraging local residents at the farther ends of the neighborhood to patronize local establishments instead of driving elsewhere.²⁸ Commercial establishments in Four Corners struggle in great part due to lack of parking, which has contributed to the frequent failure and/or turnover of the small businesses located there. Customer parking spills over onto nearby streets; residents who can't find sufficient parking have resorted to paving much of their front yards.

TM 2050 planning for Complete Communities should evaluate how best to leverage the potential benefit that the public transportation hub at Four Corners can offer to the wider community. **Siting social services and training programs at this intersection would offer easy access to meet the needs of local community populations.²⁹ Currently, there is second floor office space in the commercial properties that flank this intersection which could serve as ideal public transportation-friendly locations** to offer small business education initiatives, workforce development programs, or house business incubators, e.g., kitchen space for small catering businesses.

Increasing support to businesses and social services facilities—such as affordable childcare and elder care, employment training, small business support and incubation, financial education coaching/counseling, recreation assets, etc.—would benefit low- and moderate-income residents who want to build a better future for themselves and their families.

Environmental Protection

NFCCA strongly supports the TM 2050 goals to: “Promote active lifestyles by making parks and open spaces a central element of the community” and to “Focus on social engagement and community building as a central role of parks and recreation.”³⁰

With the renovation and expansion of the North Four Corners Local Park, both residents who live in the community as well as people from nearby communities enjoy easy access to this park, which now attracts a diverse community of users.³¹ A bus stop makes it easy for families who live outside the neighborhood to get

²⁷ *Ibid.*, page 31. “...Clusters of commercial and neighborhood serving retail uses like the shopping areas in Potomac Village or **Four Corners** (emphasis added), offer convenience retail for surrounding subdivisions but often lack safe pedestrian accommodations, good transit connections, or high-quality parks and public spaces.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, page 50. TM 2050 seeks to “manage parking efficiently by charging market rates and reducing the supply of public and private parking.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, page 32. TM 2050 states it will “encourage co-location and adjacency of all essential and public services, especially along growth corridors and in Complete Communities.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, page 75. TM 2050 sets goals to:

- Include active recreation as an integral element in park planning and design.

there. The success of this major investment by the county and the parks department is evident in the significant number of people who are now using the playgrounds, walking tracks, picnic areas, and soccer field.

Unfortunately, some time ago, the parks planning agency decided to decommission the recreation building located in the park and lease it to a private school. Formerly, this space offered kitchen³² and meeting facilities that were used by the community for art and exercise classes, civic meetings, and private events. Instead of serving the whole community, this space is now occupied for use by a very limited number of people.

This recreational center facility should be repurposed for general public use when the current lease expires in 2023.³³ Doing so will enhance the community by providing an all-season gathering space and offering access to electrical and kitchen facilities for both indoor and outdoor community events. The platform in front of this building could serve as an ideal stage for community concerts or movies.

In the northwestern portion of the North Four Corners Local Park, there is a large field bounded by an oval walking track. Consideration should be given to how best this larger space could be used while still allowing free play. For example, installation of a gathering circle, gazebo, or combination band shell/movie screen could make this an even more successful community gathering place.³⁴

Northwood-Four Corners is also bordered by the Northwest Branch park system, which includes extensive natural surface trails, wetlands, and river. This park is heavily used by neighborhood residents as well as others who enter the park from the parking lot or walk there from the nearby transit stop at Burnt Mills.

The heavily forested Northwest Branch corridor, which stretches to the southeastern county line, is a key natural resource in an otherwise highly built-up urban environment. The Northwest Branch feeds into the Anacostia/Potomac rivers. The environmental health of this natural setting contributes to cleaner air in a highly urbanized area and, if properly managed, preserves clean water.

-
- Encourage active recreation as a key component of POPS in all parts of the county.
 - Deliver park and recreation facilities and programs designed to encourage residents of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities to engage in vigorous physical activity.
 - Support the continued renovation and maintenance of high-quality athletic fields.

³² *Ibid.*, page 76. TM 2050 makes a recommendation to “include food/beverage in planning and programming parks and recreational facilities where appropriate.”

³³ *Ibid.*, page 40 and page 74. TM 2050 seeks to “encourage property owners, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies to maximize use of parks and public spaces for artistic and cultural programming, activation, and placemaking” and to “offer programs in urban parks to encourage visitation, increase the amount of time spent in parks, and make these spaces centers of activity.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*, page 77. TM 2050 sets a goal to “make social connection a central objective for parks and recreation.” Adding that this can be accomplished by planning to “design park, recreation, and related infrastructure and services around building community, creating opportunities for interaction, and making parks and recreational amenities a central element of Complete Communities.”

Natural trails by the Northwest Branch near Four Corners are well-used; hikers and nearby residents regularly report sightings of a wide variety of wildlife—amazingly in an area that is within a mile of the Beltway and bisected by a heavily trafficked US 29. Preserving the environmental health and biodiversity of wildlife in the Northwest Branch corridor is an important environmental goal.

The Northwest Branch would benefit from environmental improvements along feeder streambeds by removing over-growth and invasive vines that are slowly killing native trees, and by installing natural water-filtering plantings.³⁵ Specifically, the county recently made stormwater control improvements at the end of Lockridge Drive; however, no work was performed in the portion of the stream bed that runs the remaining three blocks from Glenwild Road to Eastwood Avenue. **Steep banks continue erode in this section, allowing sediment and unfiltered stormwater to flow down into the Northwest Branch.**

NFCCA strongly supports planning efforts to enhance environmental health and biodiversity conservation in both urban areas and parks in the county through resource conservation, clean water initiatives, and habitat preservation and restoration. NFCCA is pleased to see that the TM 2050 plan will be implemented in concert with the Montgomery County Climate Action Plan (CAP).³⁶ The CAP lays out specific actions to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions by 2035 and to mitigate or adapt to the effects of increased heat and flooding, high winds, and drought brought by climate-related change. **Repetitive flooding at the Burnt Mills dam and over-wash onto Route 29 is a good example of the need to focus on mitigation actions.** Also, TM 2050 findings should comport with Maryland’s statutory and regulatory requirements for Environmental Impact Studies prior to commencing significant infrastructure changes or developments.

Conclusion

Recognizing that the goal of TM 2050 is to envision planning concepts and goals for the entire county, NFCCA would nonetheless like to underscore that a thorough planning process should recognize that the whole is a sum of its parts. NFCCA represents an area covered by both the Four Corners Master Plan and the Kemp Mill Master plan. **A detailed re-analysis of the Four Corners area’s housing composition, economic and commercial development opportunities, walkability, community amenities, social services and place-making needs, as well as the environmental and neighborhood impact of transportation/highway decisions that have been implemented in this area is long overdue.** The last Four Corners Master Plan was adopted in 1996—24 years ago. The Master Plan in nearby in Kemp Mill was last updated in 2001.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, page 76. TM 2050 sets a goal to “reaffirm the Parks Department’s commitment to resource conservation, stewardship, and sustainability practices such as innovative stream and habitat restoration projects.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, page 83.

NFCCA appreciates the opportunity to express our views regarding the Thrive Montgomery 2050 planning process and requests that this statement be made part of the November 30th hearing record.