

Why County Executive Elrich thinks the County Council should not approve Thrive at this time:

Yes, they should, but it is not because of the most recent scandals at the Planning Board. The problems with Thrive in its current form are numerous, but the most glaring problem is the insufficient attention given to equity issues. The Planning Board exempted themselves from a racial equity analysis, and while the Council did eventually request a consultant to conduct a racial equity analysis of community involvement, the consultants reported that they did not have enough time to do a thorough review, and they raised some serious concerns that cannot be addressed quickly. And it is important to note that the consultants did NOT conduct an equity review of the plan itself; there has been no analysis of whether the zoning and recommendations would improve current conditions or exacerbate existing racial inequities.

Furthermore, despite the rhetoric, there are no concrete proposals in Thrive to improve housing affordability. The Thrive conversation included discussion about “missing middle” housing and “attainable housing.” Planning’s own study in Silver Spring showed that “missing middle” housing would be more expensive than existing housing and unaffordable to most people. Planning’s definition of “Attainable Housing” is “unsubsidized market housing that is appropriate and suitable for the households that live here.” It further notes that “Attainability is being used in recognition that our housing needs go beyond a sole focus on affordability of the housing unit.” [emphasis added]

Sadly, this County has never had a “sole focus” on affordability; that statement is an insult to the approximately 50,000 households here today who are burdened by housing costs. Additionally, our innovative MPDU program has only produced a net total of 6,700 rental units since its creation in 1973 – 6,700 units for a county of 1 million+ and in 50 years.

Zoning is not the problem. Right now, today, in the development pipeline, there are 35000 housing units already approved by the Planning Board; all the developer needs to do is get a building permit. Add to that another 85000 units that are part of our approved master plans within existing zoning, the vast majority near transit.

Those 120,000 (35,000 + 85,000) units are sufficient to accommodate the approximately 200,000 people forecast to come here by 2050. This information is never shared in Thrive; instead, Thrive asserts that there must be a countywide rezoning to accommodate future growth. We have zoned for the housing we need; the question we need to ask – and it is not asked nor answered by Thrive – is why is it not being built and how we can get the housing we need.

One major mistake is that both the Planning Board and PHED drafts of Thrive used the wrong Growth Map (the drafts used the 1964 map rather than the 1993 map). The public has not yet seen the correct Growth Map even though the Thrive Working Group—a collection of more than 10 Executive departments—pointed out this deficiency in comments to the Planning Board in August 2020.

I hope we can put politics and ideology aside and appoint Board members who understand the economic, environmental, transportation, and housing issues the county faces, who represent our diverse community, and who show respect for the viewpoints of residents, developers, and others with business before the Board. Everyone is entitled to fair and transparent processes. It must be our task to restore trust and predictability in our planning process. Appointees should not be sitting elected officials – above all, there should be no hint of political interference.

While it is unfortunate that we're in this situation, we have an opportunity here to lay out a new vision. One where the Council doesn't make an insular decision, but rather consults the stakeholders in government before making a decision that affects the County in such a massive way. I would hope that the County Council would seek input from me and my experienced team on identifying strong candidates who will restore trust in the Planning Board. We need Board members who wish to serve in order to advance the public good and not their own personal ambitions. At this point, it may be simply laying out the qualifications we hope for and conveying a strong desire for some "clearer eyes". How the Council handles the appointment process is extremely important – appointing "insiders", or not having an open clear process that the public can follow would further diminish public trust. While it isn't my intention to endorse specific people for the Board, the County Executive can veto appointees, and I think it would be productive for me to be part of the conversations.