



July 7, 2021

Written Testimony: Planning Board Draft of the Thrive Montgomery 2050 Plan

Dear Council President Hucker and members of the Montgomery County Council,

On behalf of the Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC), thank you to Council President Hucker and the entire County Council, as well as Chair Anderson, the Planning Board, and the Planning department staff for the time and careful thought that has been dedicated to the Thrive 2050 process. We are proud that our County has proposed a forward thinking plan designed to address some of the deep racial systemic inequities that have existed, address the housing shortage, and bring us closer to achieving necessary climate goals. However, this plan omits a key element of a thriving and equitable community: food and its interrelation with other systems directly addressed in the plan.

In addition to food insecurity, there is a need to address access to food in a broader sense as it is interconnected with virtually all of the sections of Thrive 2050. It is important to highlight that food is not simply just another “amenity,” but a basic human necessity that is deeply connected to all aspects of life in our community. We hope our long-term planning will include a vision for how our County can cultivate a more robust local food supply for ourselves and our region, the role of the food sector as a crucial part of the local economy that can both grow and protect our food workforce, and how we will address the environmental impacts of food production and consumption.

Thrive 2050 should apply a food system lens throughout, as with other critical priority areas such as housing and transportation, by discussing possibilities for growth, infrastructure, zoning, and design, and incorporating insight from diverse perspectives when considering health equity, food justice, economic opportunity, and environmental resilience.

We applaud that Thrive 2050 so thoroughly addresses one of the root causes of food insecurity in the County--the high cost of housing--but see a gap in addressing key food access issues. The “Complete Communities” and “Transportation and Communications Networks” goals should specifically and intentionally address access to nutritious food and include provisions for multiple food access points at which culturally-appropriate, affordable, and nutritious food options are available within each community and which are accessible via public transportation for those unable to walk or bike. As currently written, Thrive mentions “retail and other services,” and “amenities,” but doesn’t include specific mention of large or small groceries or co-ops, corner stores, farmers markets, cafes, restaurants, or other gathering points that integrate community space with food.



We suggest developing recommendations in Thrive 2050 that would align with the [2017 Retail Trends Study](#), and support the establishment of healthy corner stores, farmers markets, and other access points for federal benefits usage in communities with the highest rates of food insecurity. County data collection and analysis should identify and eliminate the “concentration sources of unhealthy food” within our communities and work towards establishing more inclusive, nutritious, locally produced offerings with a focusing on access for populations at higher risk of food insecurity, including people living below the self-sufficiency standard, seniors, children, people with disabilities, and foreign-born residents. The goals in this section should recognize that food access is likely to remain an issue for many residents, and is a major component of fostering an affordable and attainable lifestyle in Montgomery County.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is estimated that the number of Montgomery County residents experiencing food insecurity has risen to more than 100,000 people. As climate and health emergencies beyond COVID-19 continue to impact global food production and distribution, strengthening and supporting our local food production and processing capacity will be increasingly important to feed our County and region, as well as a growing economic opportunity for our community. Both long-term vision and investment in education, infrastructure, and resources tailored for farms and food businesses are critical to developing Montgomery County into a national leader in the field of innovative food production.

We encourage you to imagine what it might look like if Montgomery County could facilitate more growing, processing, distributing, consuming, and composting of nutritious, culturally diverse locally-grown food and to include that vision in Thrive 2050. While Thrive 2050 recognizes the importance of maintaining the Agricultural Reserve (AR), an opportunity is missed here to provide a more robust vision for how the AR can be utilized more fully to provide food for our community, address climate goals, and to address historic racial land inequities. The stated goal in “Compact Growth” (p.33) to “preserve and enhance the Agricultural Reserve” does little to address what it means to “enhance” the AR and fails to explore the possibilities that the AR itself can and should play in providing for our growing local food needs while reducing, mitigating, and adapting to climate change.

Over 20 food producing farms have committed to providing produce, meat, or eggs to the innovative Farm to Food Bank program in 2021. However, the County should ensure that these farmers, who serve as the cornerstone of our local food system, have equitable access to the land, infrastructure, and resources that they need to reach more consumers through culinary, grocery and wholesale outlets. We must find new and innovative ways to encourage new and historically disadvantaged farmers to grow food in Montgomery County.

We recommend the following to further bolster our local food economy:

- To support our growing local food and beverage sector, shared use kitchens, cut and wash facilities and processing equipment for farm produce, meat, and grains, and aggregation and distribution infrastructure, as well as long-term access to affordable farmland and protected land leases, are needed for local small businesses to accommodate expanding local procurement opportunities and to address future crises.



- More robust support for and conceptualization of growth of urban and community gardening, as well as residential agriculture, to bolster a sustainable, nutritious and culturally appropriate local food supply.
- We also encourage the inclusion of plans to explore and implement food waste composting infrastructure within the County's borders, to bring us closer to meeting the County's Zero Waste goals.

The "Parks and Recreation" section addresses the health of the community and residents, but omits reference to food here as well, despite nutrition being a key social determinant of health. Access to healthy food is as important a component of a healthy community as access to recreation and green space. The "Parks and Recreation" section could more fully address food in a variety of ways, including urban and suburban farms and gardens which are only mentioned briefly, as well as composting and recycling, and access to healthy, culturally appropriate, and local food as a key component of health outcomes.

Finally, community education and outreach efforts, especially to residents in traditionally under-invested neighborhoods with limited food access, should continue to be purposeful and focused, to ensure the inclusion of equitable food system support strategies within the Thrive 2050 Plan. These engagement efforts will effectively build relationships, strengthen trust, and foster partnerships within Montgomery County, and elevate the voices of community leaders seeking meaningful changes. Intentionally integrating the expertise of our community, including farmers, food producers and other food workers, food assistance providers and recipients, and residents, to develop this vision is an important first step in centering Thrive 2050 implementation around community engagement in and ownership of its success.

That Thrive 2050 essentially omits food from its vision underscores the need for dedicated County staffing and resource allocation for food systems planning. The connections between food systems and other systems that combine to make a community thrive--housing, transportation, health, local economy, ecological systems--are critical and having County agencies working together on strategic, intentional, systems-based strategies would expand progress and streamline efforts.

Neighboring jurisdictions like Baltimore City and Washington, DC are good examples of where food has been established as a priority lens for all planning initiatives, and there are food systems experts within their planning departments and local government. Likewise, Montgomery County could benefit from staff to lead this kind of integration of food systems into all County efforts, including long-term planning as with this Thrive 2050 General Plan along with other initiatives under the purview of the Planning Department. Dedicated County food systems staff would also be able to coordinate and integrate food systems with other types of planning such as the existing [Food Security Plan](#) and any future versions, as well as the Climate Action Plan, and other important plans of this nature and scope.

Additionally, data mapping and research will help to identify gaps in service, expand SNAP access points, and inform all food security programs; this had been indicated as a priority in the preliminary Thrive 2050 draft plans. Utilization of mapping technology and existing County data will assist the County in better understanding and repairing the unequal distribution of public and private neighborhood-based food services relative to underserved communities.



The Food Council looks forward to continued collaboration with the County government to envision and pursue a roadmap to build a resilient, sustainable, and equitable local food system in our County. Thank you for your continued leadership and support of our local food system during these challenging times. Please do not hesitate to contact us at the email address and phone number listed below should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Heather Bruskin

Executive Director

*The Montgomery County Food Council is an independent council formed and led by individual community members and representatives of local businesses, government, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions that broadly represent the food system both substantively and geographically. Our mission is to bring together a diverse representation of stakeholders to cultivate a vibrant food system in Montgomery County that consciously produces, distributes, and recycles food, making it accessible to all residents while promoting the health of the local food economy, its consumers, and the environment.*

