

Northwood Four Corners Civic Association

These written comments are being submitted on behalf of the Northwood Four Corners Civic Association (NFCCA).[[1]](#footnote-1) Please include this submission as part of the November 19, 2020 hearing record regarding the Thrive Montgomery 2050 (TM 2050) planning process.

The close-in community of Four Corners in Silver Spring, which is located in southeastern Montgomery County, is made up of three neighborhoods—Northwood-Four Corners, Woodmoor, and South Four Corners—each of which are represented by their own civic associations. Montgomery Blair High School sits on the fourth quadrant. Although these neighborhoods and the high school are separated by major thoroughfares (US 29—Colesville Road and Route 193—University Boulevard) they function together as a racially diverse, cohesive, and appealing community stitched together by a distinct 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.

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. An in-depth planning effort to evaluate community-specific issues and update the Four Corners Master Plan and the Kemp Mill Master Plan, in our view, is a critical predicate to the TM 2050 planning exercise.

One could argue that the Four Corners community could serve as an ideal test case for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) effort to implement many of the goals expressed in the draft planning document: “Thrive Montgomery 2050 is proposing certain foundational elements that make places resilient and sustainable and have proven remarkably consistent over time. They are urbanism and Complete Communities, compact development, and transit and walkability. The Plan relies on these elements to establish a framework for the next generation of our county’s development. The goal is to create Complete Communities that are diverse and can provide most essential services within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or drive. The Plan calls it 15-minute living.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Transportation Barriers Impede 15-minute Living**

The Four Corners area is a major portal to up-county and downtown Silver Spring. There are two Beltway exits near the Route 193/US 29 intersection. These two multi-lane thoroughfares serve as major east/west and north/south transportation routes in the eastern portion of the county. Traffic is particularly heavy on US 29 because the options for north/south travel in the southeastern portion of the county are extremely limited (alternative routes are New Hampshire Avenue and Georgia Avenue.)

The goal of more efficiently moving traffic along densely travelled major thoroughfares should not impact the quality of life in nearby communities.[[3]](#footnote-3) One of the primary goals of the TM 2050 planning process is to promote the concept of Connecting Communities so that “Every resident should have the opportunity to live, work, play, exercise, shop, learn, and make use of public amenities and services within a 15-minute walk or bike ride.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The need to move high traffic volume through the Four Corners Route 193/US 29 intersection should be balanced against the desire of local residents to enjoy a walkable community.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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 installing traffic calming measures in residential neighborhoods and lowering highway speeds approaching this intersection. If east/west flow on University Boulevard Route 193 could be improved, fewer frustrated drivers would resort to cutting through these neighborhoods.

The Four Corners intersection is a busy crossroads that offers local residents the potential to safely enjoy a connected community. There are multiple public transportation stops (FLASH, Metro, and Rideon), as well as grocery stores, restaurants, a church, schools, a heavily used local park, senior housing, and multi-sector commercial businesses.[[6]](#footnote-6) Done right, future planning steps will enhance walkability and reduce pedestrian injuries and fatalities.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Walkability in Four Corners is not an amenity so much as it is a necessity. A number of pedestrians have been hit and even killed nearby on Colesville Road and University Boulevard.[[8]](#footnote-8) If this area is made safer, community residents will certainly walk to the many nearby businesses, restaurants, and public amenities.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We urge the County to install pedestrian safety measures and make changes to increase the walkability of the Four Corners area. To make 15-minute living a reality in Four Corners, additional walk-signs, crosswalks, caution signage, or blinking lights, or other measures should be installed. In particular, there needs to be a crosswalk and walk sign or blinking caution light on University Boulevard traveling west to allow pedestrians to cross to Safeway and the post office (currently a crosswalk and walk sign only serves pedestrians crossing University Boulevard traveling east.) Also, transportation planners should consider decreasing the length of the traffic light cycles at the intersection of US 29 and Route 193 to give pedestrians more frequent opportunities to cross safely with the walk signals. Walkers often cross when the light is red because long signal times discourage waiting.

NFCCA also supports efforts to enhance “last mile” transportation options.[[10]](#footnote-10) At a public forum last spring, agency officials stated that RideOn is considering micro-transit in the Four Corners area to encourage heavier use of public transportation. “Flex” is envisioned as a first/last mile service using on-demand small passenger buses to transport local residents to the local FLASH stop or the Four Corners commercial shopping center. The boundaries for this proposed “Flex” service, however, have not yet been established. If implemented in this area, “Flex” micro-transit system would tie the Four Corners neighborhoods into the broader transit system as well as support the health of the commercial establishments in Four Corners by increasing patronage by the local community.

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. TM 2050 should continue to support expanding the system of protected lanes to encourage the use of cleaner transportation options and increase their safety.

**Economic Development**

As mentioned previously, Four Corners is a major close-in urban community and sits at a major east/west/north/south transportation crossroad.[[11]](#footnote-11) Strong consideration should be given to expanding economic development support to local businesses and providing social services facilities at this key intersection.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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 child care and elder care, employment training, small business support and incubation, financial education coaching/counseling, recreation programs and assets, etc.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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.[[14]](#footnote-14) A more cohesive redesign that ties the businesses located on the three corners and in the median at this intersection would greatly enhance the inter-relation, unity, livability, walkability, attractiveness, and cohesion of the Four Corners communities.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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. Also, several key businesses—the Capital One branch, the Veterinarian office, and the Gamestop recently closed and remain vacant today.

Montgomery County agencies should work with commercial property owners to redevelop the land and buildings fronting University Boulevard to create a more vibrant and visually appealing commercial strip.[[16]](#footnote-16) Particular emphasis should be placed on providing additional parking to serve small businesses located on both Colesville Road and along University Boulevard by acquiring land for public parking to serve these local businesses.

Stores and restaurants fronting Colesville Road 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. Although the TM 2050 plan seeks to discourage driving by reducing public parking availability, adding more parking in the Four Corners area could in fact reduce driving by encouraging local residents to patronize nearby local establishments.

Last, but not least, strong consideration should be given to purchasing available property to replace the current Four Corners post office, which is too small and for which access and parking are extremely limited. This action was recommended in the 1996 Four Corners Master Plan.

It is time for the TM 2050 plan 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 this quadrant of Four Corners.

**Connecting Communities**

TM 2050 planning should evaluate how best to leverage the potential benefit that the public transportation hub at the Four Corners intersection 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.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Currently, there is second floor office space in the commercial properties that flank this intersection that could serve as an ideal location 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 child care 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.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Environmental Protection**

One of the TM 2050 goals is to: “Promote active lifestyles by making parks and open spaces a central element of the community.”

With the renovation and expansion of the Northwood 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. 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.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Unfortunately, some time ago the parks planning agency decided to decommission the recreation center in this park. The building was leased to a private school. Instead of serving the community as a whole, 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. 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 Northwood 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.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Northwood Four Corners is also bordered by the Northwest Branch park system, which includes extensive natural surface trails, wetlands, and the stream. This park is heavily used by neighborhood residents as well as others who can park at Burnt Mills.

The heavily forested Northwest Branch corridor, which stretches from Bonifant Road to the southeastern county line, is a key natural resource in an otherwise highly built-up urban environment.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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.

Natural trails in 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.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Northwest Branch would benefit from environmental improvements along feeder streambeds by removing over-growth and invasive vines and installing natural water-filtering plantings.[[23]](#footnote-23) 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 to Eastwood. Steep banks continue to erode in this section allowing sediment and unfiltered stormwater, to flow down into 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. The TM 2050 plan should be compatible with the Montgomery County Climate Action Plan.  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**

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 19th hearing record.

1. A map illustrating the boundaries of the NFCCA community can be found at http://www.nfcca.org/area.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan , Policy 4.1.3: Prioritize safe, connected, low-stress bicycle, and pedestrian networks in downtowns, town centers, rail and BRT corridors, and community equity emphasis areas over projects that increase traffic capacity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan , Policy 1.1.1: Allow and encourage a variety of uses within communities, with sufficient density to make these uses viable, so that people can experience 15-minute living. Every resident should have the opportunity to live, work, play, exercise, shop, learn, and make use of public amenities and services within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 4.7.1: Prioritize implementing safe and connected low-stress bicycle and pedestrian networks in rail and BRT corridors over projects that increase traffic capacity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 2.3.1: Ensure a network of equitably distributed, easily accessible neighborhood based services, ideally within walking or biking distance of residents’ homes to allow for increased social connections.    [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Action 2.1.3.a: Create a pedestrian infrastructure improvements priority list in coordination with county and state transportation agencies in order to implement walkability standards in communities underserved by safe, walkable infrastructure. Use the Pedestrian Master Plan and the mapping analysis of community equity emphasis areas to inform this list. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 4.4.3: Prioritize changes to the transportation system at locations with a history of high rates of crashes and address safety issues in areas with little or no crash history. Base priorities on an analysis of locations where future crashes are likely to occur. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Goal 4.4: Eliminate all transportation-related fatalities and severe injuries. Provide a transportation system that is safe for everyone. See also, Policy 4.4.1: Prioritize eliminating transportation-related fatalities and severe injuries in public and private planning and development initiatives and programs, including master plans, capital Public Hearing Draft Plan, Thrive Montgomery 2050 projects, and development projects. Area master plans and transportation capital projects must include safety analyses to inform plan recommendations and project design. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 4.1.8: Strengthen access from low-density areas to rail and BRT stations, commercial areas and other services by providing flexible transportation services, including microtransit and micromobility. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 7.2.1: Incentivize development and public realm improvements along rail and BRT corridors. See also, Action 7.2.1.a: Initiate master, sector, and corridor plans to transform rail and BRT corridors and station areas and identify opportunities to incentivize development and improvements.   [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 3.1.1: Support the efforts of the county’s economic development agencies to retain and grow existing businesses and attract new businesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan , Policy2.1.1: Use public space to facilitate active lifestyles, physical connections and interactions among diverse populations. Ensure each neighborhood has public spaces that establish a culture of inclusion and that encourage people to linger.   See also, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Action 7.2.1.b: Conduct an evaluation of the Commercial / Residential and Employment Zones Incentive Density Implementation Guidelines for development projects, including the required public benefits, and public benefit categories and criteria to provide incentives for increased density around rail and BRT corridors.   [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 7.1.4: Encourage redevelopment of underutilized properties, particularly near rail and BRT, by updating zoning and developing a suite of financial tools needed to catalyze redevelopment.   [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Goal 8.6: Ensure all communities benefit equitably from good design, regardless of their location or demographics. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan 2.1.1.b: Amend appropriate zones in the Montgomery County Zoning Ordinance to incentivize and prioritize design features in private development projects that facilitate day-to-day interactions. These features could include wide sidewalks, inviting and well-designed public gathering spaces, outdoor seating and lawn areas, and pathways and trails. See also, See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 8.6.1: Develop and implement tools and strategies to ensure that the quality of design of public and private buildings, streets, and public spaces in all parts of the county are equitable and respond to the needs of local residents. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Goal 2.3: Improve access to neighborhood-based services such as housing, jobs, professional and government services, educational opportunities, and parks and open spaces at the local, county-wide, and regional level. Focus on county residents with the greatest socioeconomic needs and for those who are geographically isolated from these services. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 8.2.5: Use placemaking activities to engage residents in higher levels of social interaction in public spaces. Create public spaces that are welcoming and encourage all residents to gather and interact in ways that build a sense of community. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Action 2.1.2.c: Update the state-mandated strategic plan for parks, recreation, and open spaces to reflect the evolving roles of parks in urban and urbanizing areas as platforms for social gathering, active and healthy living, and connection to nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Action 2.1.2.d: Create new design typologies for park facilities in urban areas such as community gardens, dog parks, skate parks, playgrounds, community open space, and picnic and grill spaces. Include guidance in the new typologies that the designs should reflect the culture and traditions of the communities where they are located. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 6.5.2: Protect, enhance, and increase the coverage, connectivity, and health of natural habitats such as forests, non-forest tree canopy, wetlands, and meadows through land acquisition, easements, habitat restoration, and ecosystem management. See also, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan Action 6.5.2.a: Conduct a study to identify forests and other natural areas with high value for climate mitigation, resilience, and biological diversity. Establish appropriate forest and nonforest canopy goals and strategies to protect plant and wildlife diversity and human health.   [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Action 6.5.2.d: Develop a long-range forest quality management plan to address fragmentation, deer pressure, invasive threats, and the forest’s capacity to withstand and mitigate climate impacts.  [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, Thrive Montgomery 2050 Public Hearing Draft Plan, Policy 6.5.5: Reduce and manage invasive and other problem species to levels that pose no significant threats to green areas. See also, Policy 6.5.6: Protect watersheds and aquifers and improve water quality and stream conditions through enhancements and retrofits such as green streets, increased tree canopy, and green stormwater management. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)