In 2018, the Montgomery County Planning Board and Planning Department started to rewrite the county’s General Plan, first created in 1964 and revised periodically since then. The General Plan is the mother of all master plans, the one that covers land use and recommends zoning in the entire county. The 1964 plan and its subsequent revisions focused on “wedges and corridors”, with the inner ring nearest the District of Columbia well developed and increasingly urban corridors radiating out from there, embracing natural resource wedges between the corridors (https://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/GeneralPlanWedgesandCorridors1964colorocr.pdf). Revisions over the years retained this underlying vision. Following the 2014 revision of the county zoning code, thoughts turned to bringing the General Plan into the 21st century, under the title “Thrive Montgomery 2050”. The overarching and vitally important goals in the draft plan are economic health, equity, and environmental resilience. The current schedule has Thrive Montgomery 2050 heading to the Council in March 2021 for approval.

There are three compelling reasons to delay further work on Thrive Montgomery, one pertaining to data and a second to underlying assumptions. We are in the midst of a census cycle, which will provide more up-to-date facts and figures not just about Montgomery County but also about other places that may provide significant information about what works – and what doesn’t – in meeting specific goals.

In addition, we are six months into the Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Covid-19 has already caused major disruptions to life – work, play, education, social interactions. And its economic effects on individuals, families, companies, and government at all levels will make it likely that we will have to make hard choices, and set difficult priorities, about how to spend reduced revenue. The draft plan itself states, “While the full impact of this crisis is not yet known, it is certain that it will be a factor in how Montgomery County evolves in the future. COVID-19 will have lasting impacts on how we interact with one another, how we do business and much more. This crisis underscores the importance of an updated General Plan as it highlights how unpredictable the future is.” To the contrary: when the future is so unpredictable, it makes little sense to rely on current assumptions for planning.

The third reason: with all the disruptions county residents are facing, it is simply not realistic to expect meaningful public input, especially from residents trying to pay the rent, feed their families, and stay healthy. This in itself is a basic equity issue. The draft plan – presented to the Planning Board in July 2020 but whose implementation section as of early August has not been made public – contains 46 specific goals, 154 policies in furtherance of those goals, and 218 recommended actions. Unlike previous plans, Thrive Montgomery covers far more than land use and natural resources, expanding into such thin gs as fostering art and culture, regulating civic associations, and requiring certain types of retail in development. These deserve informed and diverse public discussion.

It is time for a significant pause in this effort so that Thrive Montgomery can work from a set of data and from assumptions that derive from a more accurate analysis of our short- and long-term changed circumstances:

- In 2018, unemployment in the county hovered between 2.8 and 3.6% (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MDMONT0URN). Unemployment in May 2020 was nearly 9% (https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MDMONT0URN).
- Every day there are reports of businesses shutting down (see, for example, bethesdabeat.com, The MoCo Show, robertdyerblogspot, sourceofthespring.com). According to one recent national survey of more than 5,800 small businesses, half believed the pandemic would outlast their cash, and as many as 70% of smaller restaurants expected to close permanently if the pandemic

- Metro weekday ridership overall is down nearly 95% just from early March (https://www.wmata.com/initiatives/ridership-portal/Rail-Ridership-Change-Data-Portal.cfm).
- Movie theatres and live performance venues in the county are shuttered.
- Nationally, more than 20 million cost-burdened renters (those who pay more than 30% of their income for housing) may face eviction as the pandemic and related effects continue. Half of Montgomery County residents fall into this group (http://montgomeryplanning.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/RHS_Strategy-Document.pdf).
- Residential occupancy in Montgomery County is showing signs of weakness now at the higher end, but this is not resulting in lower rents. Instead, we see conversion of existing long-term rental units to short term (for example, https://www.furnishedhousing.com/md/bethesda/flats-8300/48816 and https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/development/montgomery-county-cant-keep-up-with-short-term-rental-violations/) and amendment to one site plan to allow short-term units in buildings under construction (https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/development/short-term-rentals-approved-for-bethesda-development/).
- Many businesses have discovered that employees can work effectively from home. A Morning Consult survey published in early July found 73% of US adults whose jobs would allow them to work remotely now are more positive toward doing so, and only 24% of this group would not work from home at all (https://morningconsult.com/form/pandemic-remote-work-preferences/). Commercial occupancy faces precipitous drops. Stonebridge has yet to sign a tenant for a new office building in a prime Bethesda location, despite breaking ground more than a year ago, and the Stonebridge/Donahoe proposed building for life sciences companies near NIH had not signed a tenant, broken ground, or obtained a construction loan, according to Bisnow. (https://www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/neighborhood/how-bethesda-development-boom-could-be-impacted-by-the-pandemic-104598).
- The pandemic affects the appeal of various residential settings. Elevator etiquette in the pandemic age means fewer passengers at a time, longer waits, and more worry for many. Crowded living units are known to be at higher risk. The combination of factors like these with a more positive view of working from home means that those who can telecommute may seek less crowded communities in outer suburbs, with more space to accommodate home schooling, teleworking, exercise, and housing extended families

- Higher education was already facing significant challenges, as enrollment was falling even before the pandemic (summary at https://store.chronicle.com/products/the-loomings-enrollment-crisis); state and county budgets will likely cut funding for public higher education.
• As all these pandemic and economic effects sort out, racial and socioeconomic equity issues may shift and require different methods to address them appropriately.
• It will be far more difficult for government and private organizations to fund the necessary initiatives needed to ensure basic life needs for county residents. As reported by Seventh State, the county faces shortfalls in revenue of $522 million for the period covering FY20 through FY26 (http://www.theseventhstate.com/?p=13306), probably exacerbated by declining assistance from the state and federal governments. Digging out of the short-term hole clouds the long-term picture.

No one knows how the changes we are experiencing will sort out: which will be permanent, which will mutate, which will go away. Montgomery County cannot count on avoiding a coronavirus resurgence, and we must plan for a second wave. (Indeed, many experts anticipate more, and more frequent, pandemics – see, for example, https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/managing-epidemics-interactive.pdf and https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK525302/). The most important work before us all is responding to the immediate challenges relating to the strains on so many parts of our system as a result of the pandemic.

Most county residents are focused on staying healthy, paying the rent or mortgage, educating their children, working from home, finding a job, getting food, getting health care. As a result of changes in how we are living temporarily (we hope), there may be significant, long-lasting changes in how we live in the future.

It’s time to pause work on the Montgomery County general plan so that we don’t end up with a blueprint based on assumptions that lead to counterproductive policy decisions and allocation of resources. Will reliance on online retail and delivery services continue to increase? Will companies and workers move toward more telecommuting from home? How will the county maintain revenue, or increase it, and how will that burden be shared?

Our professional planning staff has an impossible task: anticipating life for the next 30 years and building a scaffold to support it, for all the residents, business operators, property owners, schoolchildren, teachers, service professionals, consultants, rich, poor, in between, young and old, white and people of color. The Montgomery County Council and Planning Board must call a pause, restarting only when there is consensus that conditions have stabilized. That’s at least a year away, but that’s when we’ll start to understand which changes are long lasting, and that’s when there can be broad public participation in shaping Thrive Montgomery 2050.