Dear Montgomery County Planning Department,

For 123 years, Audubon Naturalist Society has inspired people to enjoy, learn about and protect nature. We thank Montgomery County’s Planning Department for working to revise, develop and create a new, comprehensive county General Master Plan. ANS sees this Plan revision as an opportunity to shape the future of the County where people can live, work and play in an affordable, diverse, equitable, safe, healthy, transit-oriented green and county. We applaud the Planning Department’s approach to have the core pillars of environment, equity, and economic health be at the heart of the new General Master Plan. Basing policy recommendations on those foundational pillars will provide a solid, fair and strong foundation for the County to grow in the next years. We thank Montgomery Planning Department for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Vision and Goals Report. We seek and recommend the continued protection of our green spaces and emphasize the implementation of sustainable, equitable, transit-oriented early design planning which enhances quality of life, lowers upfront costs, and builds resilient communities with adaptable infrastructure that mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

I. Draft Vision

The staff report for the Thrive Montgomery 2050 Draft Vision and Goals is a well thought out and a well-formatted vision representative of a modern and climate change focused, equitable and sustainable county. ANS would like to provide the following comments and recommendations for each of the Draft Vision sections:

- **Convenient:** We applaud the Thrive Planning staff for creating a people focused, instead of a car focused, approach to moving people around the county.
  - The Vision should include more remote assess convenience such as teleworking, telemedicine and reliable product and produce delivery to all county residents.

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• **Affordable:** We support the access for all people to affordable, transit-oriented housing.
  
  o The Vision should include access to nature and green spaces as part of a healthy and equitable solution to the housing and transportation needs for county residents.

• **Inclusive:** We support the commitment to assure inclusivity by actively hearing peoples’ thoughts and proposing to engage with all decision makers in the county to make this vision goal a priority.
  
  o The Vision should include as part of its “inclusive” vision statement an acknowledgement that inclusivity also means being part of critical decision-making processes.

• **Healthy:** We fully support the protection of natural resources such as our parks, waterways, natural sensitive environmental areas, wildlife habitats and Agricultural Reserve. In addition, we support the importance of the connection between nature and health.
  
  o The Vision should also make a connection that nature brings both physical and mental health.
  
  o The Vision should increase more well-balanced food options for all county residents.

• **Resilient:** We fully support the strong emphasis on focusing all natural and built environment around climate change resilience, adaptation and mitigation by expanding and protection our forests, waterways and stream valley parks.
  
  o The Vision should include the protection of the Agricultural Reserve as a key component for climate change resilience and source for local food security.
  
  o The Vision should also include an emphasis on green and affordable commercial and residential buildings.

• **Social, Safe, Flexible, Competitive and Inspiring:** We support a strong emphasis on creating welcoming and strong communities that are safe, inclusive, allow residents to choose their most convenient housing or community type and which have various job and economic opportunities. No additional recommendations for these vision sections.

II. **Issue Area Draft Vision and Goals**

ANS applauds the Planning staff for writing a comprehensive and well thought out General Plan Goals. Overall, we would like to recommend that all goals embed even more the components of affordability, equity and access to, as well as protection of, green spaces and waterways. The following are ANS’s Issue Area Draft Vision and Goals recommendations:

• **Connectedness:**
  
  o The Plan Connectedness goal should incorporate natural areas and environmental connectedness into the Connectedness concept, both to help connect people to place, and people to one another.
  
  o The Plan’s Connectedness goal should include access to all planning and decision-making process in multiple languages and learning formats.

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• **Diverse Economies**
  o The Plan’s Diverse Economies goal should include an emphasis on green jobs.

• **Safe and Efficient Travel**
  o The Plan’s Diverse Safe and Efficient Travel goal should include an affordability component to ensure all communities across the county have equal access to public transit and assure that the increase in public transit does not lead to displacement.
  o The Plan’s Diverse Safe and Efficient Travel goal should include a well-coordinated approach with other county and state agencies to halt highway expansions such as the proposed I-270/I-495³ expansion and M-93⁴.
  o The Plan’s Diverse Safe and Efficient Travel goal should include an analysis of the barriers new transportation infrastructure poses to wildlife connectivity alongside pedestrian and human connectivity.

• **Affordability and Attainability**
  o The Plan’s Affordability and Attainability goal should include access to nature and green spaces in conjunction with housing and transportation access.
  o The Plan’s Affordability and Attainability goals should assure there is a wide range of housing prices, housing options and locations and an increased incentive of opportunities for people to own their own property.
  o The Plan’s Affordability and Attainability goal should include rent control measurements to decrease displacement.

• **Healthy and Sustainable Environment**
  o The Plan’s Healthy and Sustainable Environment goal should not only strive to build net-zero but also have the ambitious goal of building net positive, biophilic buildings that serve as wildlife habitat, a source of food and renewable energy production for humans and wildlife alike.
  o The Plan’s Healthy and Sustainable Environment goal should emphasize the protection and stewardship of our parks, waterways, natural sensitive environmental areas, wildlife habitats and Agricultural Reserve for their irreplaceable ecosystem services such as natural climate change buffers.
  o The Plan’s Healthy and Sustainable Environment goal should increase the number of native trees, plants and soil diversity as natural tools to help reduce urban heat island effects, increase carbon sequestration, and increase people and wildlife’s health and wellbeing.
  o The Plan’s Healthy and Sustainable Environment goal should include improvements to the interior building environment such as to mitigate mold growing inside buildings which can cause respiratory problems in people’s health.

• **Diverse and Adaptable Growth**
  - The Plan’s Diverse and Adaptable Growth goal should assure that attractive, walkable, mixed used communities near transit stations have green infrastructure in place and are affordable to all at all income levels.
  - The Plan’s Diverse and Adaptable Growth goal should decrease food deserts across the county by increase the reliance and partnership between the Agricultural Reserve to serve nutritious and locally sourced produce needs for all county residents.

• **Culture and Design**
  - The Plan’s Culture and Design goal should also serve as a welcoming place for existing and new artists who can call Montgomery County home by increasing the financial opportunities for these artists to begin their careers here.

ANS is excited to continue to be part in working with Montgomery Planning on working and collaborating in this important and crucial redesign of the New General Master Plan. We hope Montgomery Planning will incorporate our comments and recommendations into the new General Master Plan. We believe it is important to continue the Thrive 2050 General Plan public outreach even during the critical public health crisis of Covid-19, while recognizing and making accommodations for the changed circumstances and recognizing that continued decision-making that requires public participation should likely be decided on a case-by-case basis. We will use our expertise to expand the number of people who can get involved with Thrive 2050. We have and will continue to engage with a broad list of community members and stakeholders to make sure everyone is an active participant of the new General Plan Revision. ANS along with other local conservation advocacy groups via the Stormwater Partners Network, have been holding bi-monthly in person (now virtual) meetings with Park and Planning staff to talk about Thrive. ANS has put out bilingual blog posts inviting county residents to submit their written testimonies to the Planning Department and will continue put out similar blogs for all future Thrive commenting periods. We have scheduled Director Gwen Wright to speak at ANS to those interested in the environmental components of Thrive 2050 in June and anticipate keeping the invitation and event even if goes virtual.

On behalf of ANS and our 28,000 members and supporters, we thank Montgomery Planning for considering our comments and suggestions.

Sincerely,

Denisse Guitarra
ANS Maryland Conservation Advocate

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