

Written testimony of the
Town of Garrett Park
Before the
Montgomery County Council
Regarding
Proposed 2009-2011 Annual Growth Policy
September 22, 2009

Good evening; I am Chris Keller, Mayor of the Town of Garrett Park. I appreciate the opportunity to offer the views of the Town of Garrett Park on the proposed 2009-2011 Growth Policy. Garrett Park is a 111-year old independent municipality that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and prides itself on its unique feeling of community. We are fortunate to *already* possess what the planning staff, in the Growth Policy draft, calls “quality of place.” Quality of place is a desirable characteristic and we understand why developers and others would like to duplicate it elsewhere. But it is also in some respects a fragile quality. The residents of Garrett Park work hard to maintain our sense of community and place. Town residents are pleased to work in partnership with our neighboring communities, with school parents, and with many others who strive to establish and sustain the important livable character that distinguishes our neighborhoods, and draws people to Montgomery County.

While we recognize that the discrete item before you tonight is the proposed 2009-2011 Annual Growth Policy, we also know that the several proposals currently under consideration at the Council – the proposed CR zone and White Flint Sector Plan, together with the Growth Policy – will have a cumulative impact, specifically on development in our immediate vicinity. It is important that the Growth Policy retain its historic function as an intelligent regulator of development, to ensure adequate public facilities. Other vehicles can serve to promote and incentivize development. The purpose of the Growth Policy should continue to be balancing development and infrastructure.

Our concerns center on three areas: traffic, schools, and the procedural framework for consideration of the various proposals before you.

Traffic. Garrett Park is located on either side of Strathmore Avenue, Maryland Route 547, very near White Flint. This puts us in a nearly unique position to be affected adversely by development that results in significantly increased traffic. Strathmore Avenue lies just a short distance outside the designated White Flint Sector Plan area. But it is critical to understand that, between the Beltway and Randolph Road, Strathmore is the only east-west route that intersects Rockville Pike in the White Flint area and provides access and egress for traffic to the east of the Pike. Strathmore Avenue/Rt. 547 already operates at a borderline-failure traffic volume at many hours of the day. We have considerable concern that, unless channeled by intelligent growth policies, development will exacerbate an already-tenuous traffic situation and lead to gridlock.

Specifically, we share the view that relaxing reasonable constraints based on quantifiable measures and shifting to an emphasis on exemptions is not an appropriate role for the Growth Policy and will lead to unacceptable levels of traffic congestion. We agree that the current Adequate Public Facilities ordinance has worked well for Montgomery County and should continue to be followed. Proposed changes to Arterial and Transit Levels of Service would result in worsening already-severe congestion. The current floor of Arterial LOS D should remain in effect.

We understand the basic intent of a Growth Policy to be to establish County-wide standards. The proposed Growth Policy, however, would single out and create unique management and funding procedures solely for White Flint, replacing the current Adequate Public Facilities process. Converting the Growth Policy from an ordinance designed primarily for intelligent County-wide development constraints to a document promoting specific development goals at particular locations represents a fundamental shift in the intent of the policy. Moreover, with specific reference to the Growth Policy's White Flint proposals, we oppose replacing the Local Area Transportation Review and Policy Area Mobility Review processes with undefined procedures specifically for White Flint. We believe that the current APF ordinance and oversight should continue to apply in White Flint as they apply in the rest of the County.

Schools. We also share the concerns raised by the White Flint Community Coalition, the Parent and Resident Committee for Sustainability, and others who consider that the proposed Growth Policy loosens reasonable constraints on development in such a fashion that the quality and stability of our excellent Montgomery County schools is jeopardized. The proposed Policy raises the threshold for when developers contribute to building new schools and allows more development even when it would lead to school overcrowding.

Specifically, Garrett Park strongly urges the County Council to support a Growth Policy that dedicates adequate funding for the schools involved in areas of development that could result in overcrowding. Alternatively, the Council should provide appropriate priority in the CIP, so that MCPS has sufficient time (5 years) to build or reopen a school. In circumstances where

development results in school overcrowding, we favor an extra source of school facility funding (not cluster redistricting) to aid these schools.

Procedural concerns common to the various proposals before the Council. Although we all recognize that growth and development are largely inevitable (and in some respects desirable), that very inevitability sharpens the need for intelligent, comprehensive planning that is sensitive to environmental concerns and the needs of established neighborhoods. Community concerns with respect to each of the three major proposals before the County Council have common elements – revolving primarily around the lack of balance between development density and infrastructure, including serious misgivings about the adequacy of traffic and school analysis to ensure sufficient facilities.

Beyond these substantive concerns, however, we are dismayed by the procedural posture that Council consideration of these proposals has taken. In particular, the fact that the Growth Policy proposes different standards for White Flint before the White Flint Sector Plan has even been considered by the Council is troubling. We have similar process-based concerns about the County Council's consideration of the new CR zone. The new zoning category, as yet not fully defined, contains incentives (such as environmental requirements) for developers to pick and choose in exchange for greater density; White Flint is the first sector plan to rely heavily on CR zoning. As a policy matter, incentives (vs. mandatory regulation) can be a desirable planning tool, but it is essential that the details of the CR zone be finalized before the White Flint Sector Plan is considered. Failure to provide a more coherent process for consideration of these closely-allied proposals not only frustrates informed citizen participation, it simply does not make sense from the standpoint of good planning. Montgomery County has an enviable and largely well-deserved reputation for enlightened and far-sighted land use planning. It would be a pity to both squander that distinction and endanger established neighborhoods by a rush to approve policies that are not fully considered and that have earmarks of being overly-permissive.

Conclusion. The residents of Garrett Park share the well-founded concerns of their neighbors about a sharp rise in traffic congestion, overcrowded schools, noise, pollution, unworkable density, and other threats to our quality of life. We hope you recognize, however, that expression of these concerns arises out of long experience, careful study, and research; it is not reflexive, NIMBY opposition. We recognize that, to preserve the fruits of the County's thoughtful planning (the Agricultural Reserve, an enviable system of parks, the 'wedges and corridors' initiative and other steps to preserve open space), greater density around mass transit stations is a worthwhile and useful device. It is essential, however, that increased density not outstrip the ability of infrastructure and public facilities to sustain it, or destroy the essential character of existing neighborhoods and schools. Residents have every bit as much of a vested interest in the success of carefully-planned growth – we stand to benefit from some of it. But it must not be purchased at the expense of the very qualities that attract and hold residents to Montgomery County.