

Dear Councilmembers and Planning Board,

I am writing on behalf of the Greater Olney Civic Association (GOCA), an umbrella organization representing 33 homeowners, civic associations, and individual members in the greater Olney community. Together, these groups represent over 80% of the households within the Olney Master Plan area. For over 50 years, GOCA has worked to advocate for and support the civic, economic, ecological, and cultural welfare of our community. We are writing to provide feedback on the Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative (ASHI) currently under consideration.

GOCA recognizes the critical need for attainable housing solutions in Montgomery County. As a suburb of Washington, DC, the housing shortage in our region is especially acute, and we acknowledge that action is needed to address this complex issue. After three hearings and public input, while we support efforts to make housing more accessible and understand the value of diversifying the county's housing stock, we have several concerns and recommendations regarding the current proposal.

1. The Need for a Comprehensive, Multi-Faceted Approach to Housing

GOCA agrees that creating more types of housing, in addition to single-family homes, is an important step, especially when 82% of Montgomery County's housing stock consists of single-family residences. However, this initiative must be part of a broader strategy that addresses the housing shortage from multiple angles, that are consistent with the needs of different communities in MOCO.

Exploring Alternative Solutions: In addition to zoning changes, we encourage the Council and the Planning Board to explore other solutions, such as retrofitting vacant or underutilized commercial buildings into residential properties. While these projects may be more complex and costly, they can help bring about the actual numbers needed to increase the housing stock. Moreover, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach like this could help dispel concerns that this zoning initiative is a singular, easy solution and would show that the Planning Board is working simultaneously on multiple fronts to tackle the housing crisis.

- **Ensuring Current Data and Projections:** Many of the data and projections used to support the Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative predate the COVID-19 pandemic. GOCA urges the Planning Department to update these data sets and ensure that current projections reflect the reality of today's housing and commuting needs. This will allow the initiative to be based on accurate, up-to-date trends and support more informed decisions.

2. Concerns About Infrastructure, Particularly Schools, Parking, and Growth Designation

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) are already experiencing overcrowding, and Olney is no exception. Adding more housing units without a clear plan to expand school capacity raises significant concerns about the quality of education and the overall strain on our local resources. In addition to schools, the reduction in parking requirements proposed by this initiative is problematic for a community like Olney, which lacks access to reliable mass transit. Without adequate public transportation, reducing parking will only create more congestion and hazards on our streets for drivers and emergency responders. GOCA recommends that parking requirements be adapted to account for local transit infrastructure, ensuring that areas like Olney, with limited mass transit, maintain sufficient parking capacity.

- **Olney's Designation as a Growth Corridor:** GOCA also questions why downtown Olney continues to be designated as part of a growth corridor. Olney is located over 7 miles from the nearest metro stations at Glenmont and Shady Grove, and bus connections to major employment hubs like Bethesda and Washington, DC, are sporadic at best. The Olney Master Plan envisioned a robust bus system, but this has not materialized as of yet. The growth corridor designation seems to assume a transit infrastructure that does not exist, making it an illogical designation for a community so heavily reliant on personal vehicles.

3. Concerns About By-Right Zoning and the Need for Performance Measures

A major concern with the Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative is the proposal to allow by-right zoning without fully understanding the intended and unintended consequences. Specifically, it is unclear how much housing will actually be produced in the next few years under this initiative. If a significant number of new units are built quickly, there's a risk that local infrastructure—particularly schools, roads, and public services—could be overwhelmed. On the other hand, if the initiative doesn't produce the intended level of new housing, it may need adjustments to be more effective.

- **Streamlining the Conditional Building Process:** GOCA also recognizes that the goal of the by-right zoning proposal is to streamline approvals and encourage builders to create more housing quickly. We understand the importance of reducing delays and red tape to meet the housing shortage. Therefore, we support finding ways to streamline the process for conditional building approvals, making it easier and faster to build while still ensuring that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support new developments.

- **Performance Measures as a Solution:** GOCA strongly advocates for the inclusion of performance measures and benchmarks to track the progress of this initiative. Implementing a review process would allow the Planning Board to evaluate whether the initiative is producing the expected results and to assess its impact on infrastructure and the community. If the initiative proves successful and achieves its housing targets without overburdening infrastructure, it may make sense to eventually allow by-right zoning. However, starting with a more conditional approach, alongside clear performance evaluations, would help ensure the community can adapt and respond to any issues as they arise.

In conclusion, GOCA supports efforts to address housing shortages but advocates for a more comprehensive, data-driven approach that considers Olney's unique characteristics and the broader impacts on our community's infrastructure and quality of life. While our position specifically addresses the Greater Olney area, we fully recognize that different parts of the county have different needs. Higher-density housing closer to mass transit may be appropriate in other areas, provided the infrastructure can support it or there is a clear plan to grow the infrastructure to accommodate these new realities. We believe that with the modifications suggested above, the Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative could become a more effective and community-supported tool for addressing our housing challenges. By taking a measured approach that includes performance measures, updated data, and infrastructure considerations, we can ensure that this initiative benefits the county while preserving the integrity of our neighborhoods.