

Many of us in Montgomery County have observed that our Planning Board seems to function in fealty to a narrowly focused, questionably funded lobby group branded as a non-profit. My concern is more about ethics than policy. That Maryland State Ethics Commission cited the Board with lobby group violations is not a surprise. Whether or not this affiliation results from board member altruism, it still deprives the public of due administrative process for plans or legislation that can profoundly change our lives down to street level. This is not the way for planning to expand inclusivity nor attain public “buy in.” In recent years, questionable affiliations between “Astro-turf” (organizations whose supposed agendas mask their actual goals) with decision-makers have stymied public input and tainted county-wide land use and transportation plans.

The following list briefly explains why Montgomery County residents are concerned by recent evidence of Astro-turf access to and influence upon our Planning Commission:

1. The Planning Board took a publicly reviewed Planning Department draft of the new General Plan, Thrive Montgomery 2050, profoundly altered its structure and content, and submitted it to the County Council for vote without public feedback to fulfill administrative procedure. Lack of public ability to engage during a global pandemic did not temper the Board’s expediency. Though not an elected body nor representative of the county’s diverse communities or demographics, an ambiguous or Astro-turf group had been able to confer on the plan with Planning Board and some Council members to the extent that a Councilmember is on record in video saying of it, *“This Coalition has not only taken a seat at the table. It is chairing the conversation in many ways.”*
2. Only after Thrive was in Council hands and, more indicative of marketing and PR than engagement, were Zoom meetings held with impacted communities at their own request. As public knowledge of Thrive and outrage against it grew, the Council conceded to hold a Zoom Thrive Town Hall. But the tightly choreographed production cast a “soap box” spotlight on the group’s salaried representative, and only allowed for only a handful of vetted public comments.
3. Due to complaints about this skewed Town Hall, the Council designated a Listening Session. Yet the lobby group knew about the session before it was publicly advertised. The group mobilized minions take most if not all slots. In response to my query, my Councilmember’s office Chief of Staff emailed back, *“I am not sure how that happened or even why Council staff had the link up and running before it was announced publicly but that should never have happened.”* Public dissatisfaction has necessitated more “listening sessions.” But these require the public to answer specified questions rather than allow their views unfettered.
4. The group that seems to fit Ethic Violation citations for access and influence on Montgomery County decisionmakers has an ambiguous official status. It claims to be a non-profit yet its website lacks 501(C)3 imprimatur; donations to support it must funnel through a different group. Its financial resources link to developers--the industry with most to gain from what Thrive proposes and whose clout can further political careers.

Conclusion:

We hope MD Bill 59 lessens bureaucratic impediments to keeping Montgomery County appointees and elected officials honest. Ethics evasions render residents powerless and

voiceless. To grow Equity, Inclusion, and Economic Sustainability, planning Best Practice is to follow not a narrow interest view or corporatized rhetoric but rather a community's own definitions of quality of life, wants and needs. A developer can build buildings or housing, but it's the people who live there who make the place a community.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Most Sincerely,

Nancy Abeles

WMCOG Transportation Planning Board CAC

BRAC Implementation Committee, Bethesda

MD 355 South Bus Rapid Transit CAC