

CODE RED: A Call to Action for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments

July 13, 2023

The Honorable Kate Stewart, Chair
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
777 North Capitol Street NE, Suite 300
Washington, DC 20002-4239

Dear Chair Stewart, Board members, and all other elected officials in attendance:

With the approach of your annual retreat this week in Cambridge, Maryland, our 41 organizations in Maryland, DC, and Virginia call on you to take urgent action to address the great challenges of our times – climate change, housing, racial and economic inequity, sprawl and unsustainable transportation policies.

Your guiding documents, including Region Forward, 2030 Climate and Energy Action Plan, Equity Emphasis Areas, and Regional Housing Targets (summarized in the Region United planning framework), have set clear and positive goals and commitments agreed to by each and every local government in our region. There is much to be proud of in your shared regional vision to focus 75% of new jobs and housing near high-capacity transit and walkable activity centers, to ensure that 75% of new housing is affordable, to address the East-West racial and economic imbalances and needs of Equity Emphasis areas, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions overall and from transportation by 50% below 2005 levels by 2030.

But implementation is falling far short, particularly in view of the urgency of our housing, equity, and climate crises:

- **Falling behind Affordable Housing targets** - Since 2019, no jurisdictions are close to reaching the regional housing target of making 75% of new units affordable. In addition, our large middle ring suburbs are falling behind in meeting total housing production targets that are needed to meet demand. We applaud the successes of various communities in recent years to expand housing opportunities, but the region as a whole must do more.
- **East-West divide continues** - COG's latest land use forecast through 2050 shows that while population growth on the Virginia and Maryland sides of the region will be equal, employment growth in Northern Virginia will outpace the Maryland Suburbs by almost 50%, increasing the East-West racial and economic divide and adding to traffic. The divide is also apparent when comparing the Route 1 corridor in southern Fairfax and Prince William counties to other areas of Northern Virginia.
- **Slow progress in reducing car dependence and GHG emissions** - The region's transportation plan, Visualize 2045 adopted last year made no progress in further reducing GHG emissions

and shifting more travel to sustainable modes compared to the previous plan adopted in 2018. This was not surprising considering Visualize 2045 would devote \$28.2 billion for highway expansion, versus only \$14.6 billion for expanding our transit, pedestrian and bicycle networks.

The struggles of too many families to find housing they can afford close to jobs and transit, and the recent CODE RED and CODE PURPLE days are a reminder of the need for urgent action. Your studies have confirmed that in addition to adoption of energy efficient buildings and electric vehicles, we need to reduce per capita vehicle miles traveled by 20% to meet our climate goals.

In the transportation sector in particular, the inclusion of 900 additional lane miles of highway and arterial road expansion in the Visualize 2045 plan, and even more road expansion in unconstrained plans like the Northern Virginia TransAction 2050 plan, will take us in the wrong direction on transportation and the climate. So will continued expansion of massive and environmentally destructive HOT lanes widening projects which do not “solve congestion,” and create inequality, fuel sprawl, and undermine investment in a more sustainable transit-oriented future. These transportation plans ignore adopted regional sustainability plans and local policies and pretend that well-documented and established induced demand – that road widening does not reduce congestion – doesn’t exist.

Therefore, we urge you to take specific local, regional and state action steps, including:

- 1) Stop massive highway expansion and shift the funds to maintenance, transit, housing, local street networks with safe walking and biking, and climate resilience of existing infrastructure.
- 2) Accelerate transit-oriented development and the conversion of dangerous arterial corridors by converting lanes to dedicated transitways with safe walking and biking and transit-oriented communities.
- 3) Prioritize funding for affordable housing in transit-accessible locations.
- 4) Address the WMATA and local transit fiscal cliff with long-term dedicated operating and capital funding.
- 5) Fund the Bus Transformation Project including network redesign for fast, frequent, reliable service.
- 6) Support and expand missing middle housing.
- 7) Stop approving auto-dependent sprawl development that is costly for local governments to serve, burdens families with high transportation costs, and reduces our climate resilience.
- 8) Change suburban planning to create 15-minute neighborhoods with services within a 15-minute walk or bike.
- 9) Increase funding for land conservation and combine with conservation easements and zoning to preserve farms, forests, drinking water supplies, and natural habitat.
- 10) Study the impact of data centers including high energy use, required transmission corridors, and burden on household ratepayers, and reduce the impact.
- 11) Accelerate green building retrofits and prioritize distributed solar, and electric buses, trucks, e-bikes, shared electric vehicles, and charging for multifamily homes.

12) Prioritize investment without displacement in the Equity Emphasis areas and fix the east-west economic and racial divide.

Sincerely,



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