

MARC ELRICH

DEMOCRAT for COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Here's my response to the blog post that grossly misrepresented my views and statements. As someone who has lived in Montgomery County for 50+ years, attended county public schools, taught for 17 years in a high-poverty elementary school, served as an elected official for 30+ years (including the last 12 as an at-large county councilmember), I know this county well; I know its challenges, and I understand the many complex issues we must deal with.

The recent attempt by Greater Greater Washington (GGW) to characterize my views on housing, growth and development was surprisingly misinformed, especially given that the authors had access to my answers to a [lengthy questionnaire](#) and to a recorded 1 hour and 20 minute interview with me. Because GGW's opinion piece contains many alternative facts, I would like to set the record straight.

"Elrichism, in a nutshell"

While I am honored that my views have been given a unique name, I'd like to present them accurately.

Regarding development, here's Elrichism in a nutshell:

The question is not whether we grow, but how we grow. Adequate infrastructure - which includes schools, transportation, parks and public safety - must accompany development. We must plan for the future with the people who live here now. Developers must contribute sufficient funding to provide the infrastructure needed to support their projects. The consequences of not doing this are the gridlocked roads and crowded schools we have today. Most people don't think our growth management is working, and I agree.

Elrichism distributes growth around the county with the greatest density centered on transit hubs and with lower densities farther from transit - this is the essence of smart growth, and it's why master plans outside of Metro station area plans have lower densities. Elrichism focuses on small business support, incubators, restoring economic development specialists to our regional service centers, and employee ownership and

expansion of existing businesses. Elrichism understands that we can have growth that does not overburden our existing communities.

We all know the county is growing; how we accommodate that growth is the urgent question.

We must get people out of their cars, and we need a transportation system that connects people from where they live to where they work. That is why I researched, initiated and pushed for the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network, which is now part of the county's master plan.

The three major goals of BRT are:

1. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
2. Reduce vehicle hours travelled (VHT) and vehicle miles travelled (VMT).
3. Reduce auto usage sufficiently so that there will be room to accommodate additional growth.

Thinking regionally, I have said that the BRT network could potentially link to adjacent counties and the District of Columbia. I have also advocated for 2 reversible lanes on 270 (one as a BRT lane) and a 3rd track for MARC. I understand that people have long commutes and are stuck in traffic; I want to help solve those problems.

Greater Greater Washington wants to shut down Frederick and Hagerstown and insist everyone move to DC and nearby?

No, of course they don't - that's as ridiculous as what they wrote I said. First, I never said, "Just go to Frederick" (they should check the 1 hour, 20-minute recording). I said, "I prefer to put jobs in Frederick" in response to a question about how to deal with long commutes from Frederick through Montgomery County and into other parts of the region. In other words, I proposed balancing jobs and housing so that people don't have such long commutes - which is the basis of the regional planning of the Council of Governments (COG). Nothing I said at any point during the interview suggested I would want to send jobs out of Montgomery County and into Frederick - Greater Greater Washington blatantly mischaracterized my statements.

Do you really think that we want a lot of people living in Frederick but driving to Montgomery County to work? And folks from Frederick, Hagerstown, and West Virginia who commute on I-270 aren't just coming to Montgomery County; they're going to DC and Virginia as well. The 30-to-80-mile one-way commutes are environmental disasters and constitute a major loss of time with family; yet people have chosen to live there, suffer the loss of time, and pay for the gas because of other factors that make the long-distance commute worthwhile.

So, if you believed in Smart Growth in general, you might ask what Frederick should do to be a Smart Growth city? Wouldn't they try to add jobs to their core, to save residents from these long commutes? If you don't think Frederick should have a better housing/jobs balance, and if you agree that Frederick being a bedroom community for the DC area is an environmental disaster, then the only solution in your strange logic would be for towns like Frederick and Hagerstown and countless others outside the core to shutter their windows and depopulate.

People with jobs in Montgomery County (or DC or Virginia) endure long commutes because they can't get the housing types they want at a price they can afford in Montgomery County. It is pretty much impossible, I think we all agree, to build many more single-family homes here: we certainly aren't adding more single-family houses to the urbanized cores, we don't build family-sized apartments (largely because there's little demand for them – at least at the prices they'd command in a place like Bethesda), and developers have been loath to build townhouses - let alone affordable ones - near Metro stations.

I can't believe anyone would think that job growth in small cities and towns is a bad thing - unless you seriously think that all jobs should go here and nowhere else. I'm not proposing that Frederick should become a major metropolis, and I'm certainly not proposing that Montgomery County should forgo jobs and send them to Frederick - I'm proposing regionalism, which all of the COG jurisdictions, Montgomery County included, also support.

Regionally, growth should be balanced so that jobs are not concentrated in one part of the region while housing is concentrated elsewhere. GW writes that I "framed talk of allowing more people or jobs into Montgomery County as 'grabbing' growth from other counties." **That is also not what I said.** "Grabbing" references getting into a stupid bidding war, which everyone says we should avoid. Instead, the Council of Governments tries to balance growth across the region and recognizes, as I do, that all parts of the region must prosper.

Yes, there's room in the county for future growth

There's no need to panic, as I explained in the interview. We've already added lots of new zoning with enough density to accommodate the projected growth. The many master and sector plans the council has approved over the last 10 years have increased density all over the county - that is for future development, not yet designed or approved.

More important, it is our master plans and the zoning in these plans that is the basis of the county's projected growth over the next 30 years - not the American Community Survey (as one of the authors guessed during our interview). In short, the growth that's coming is the growth we've planned for. In the meantime, we have more immediate capacity for dramatically

increased commercial growth (about 180,000 additional jobs - 6 jobs per 1000 square feet - , including both existing vacant space and approved projects) and residential growth (27,000 units in approved projects). If we build what we've planned plus what's already in the pipeline (projects that have been approved for construction but are not yet being built – see further explanation below), we are well situated to accommodate the projected growth.

GGW seems to think development should be allowed pretty much anywhere (except the Agricultural Reserve); I believe it should happen where we've planned it, and I prefer that our Metro station area master plans follow the widely accepted formula for Transit Oriented Development (TOD), which states clearly that development should be within a ½ mile of a transit hub: ¼ mile for commercial and up to ½ mile for residential.

Here's how [Metro looks at](#) how far residents will walk:

“How Far is Walkable?” First, we defined walking distance as a half-mile from Metrorail, and a quarter-mile from Metrobus, for a number of reasons:

1. Of all the passengers who walk to Metrorail each morning, the median walking distance is just under a half-mile (0.35 miles, actually). Riders walk farther to some stations than others, but the systemwide average is just shy of a half-mile. Since rail riders are on average willing to walk a little under a half-mile today, it is reasonable to use a half-mile as an upper limit for walking in the future. (We don't have similar survey data on Metrobus – yet.)”

When residential development goes beyond these smart growth principles, the new residents become drivers, not walkers.

Growth should begin as close to transit as possible. That is the underlying principle of smart growth. I only *suggested* exploring the idea of growth boundaries, a tool used in other jurisdictions as a broader planning and staging policy. The purpose of this suggestion was to determine how we might best implement smart growth principles, not to impose an ironclad prohibition on any sort of development. Setting growth boundaries does not stop growth: it prioritizes it in the right places.

Some development does need to happen in non-TOD areas - for example, residents in some suburban areas who are far from transit want and need grocery stores and other amenities within an easy drive. But those commercial properties should not have massive high-rises. If we don't delineate where development should be, it will go where it is easiest and cheapest, which is generally sprawl-inducing (and anti-environmental). For example, development as part of the approved Rock Spring and White Flint 2 master plans makes it easier and cheaper to develop in

those areas which are not TOD and disincentivizes development in the truly smart-growth areas, such as along the Red Line.

Understanding the “pipeline” and counting our already planned capacity for growth

GGW writes that I have *“a misunderstanding of the way the development process works. Some of the unbuilt pipeline is simply what's moving from one stage to the next (which takes time), but it also includes large-scale developments which market conditions don't actually support building and often wouldn't be a good idea anyway.”*

It is true that there is a misunderstanding, but it is GGW's. The pipeline – as they don't seem to understand – has construction projects that already have approval. From the [Planning Board](#): “The Montgomery Planning Department tracks the residential and non-residential development Pipeline for Montgomery County (Rockville, Gaithersburg, Laytonsville, and Poolesville included*). The Pipeline is an inventory of development projects that have been approved by the Montgomery County Planning Board but not completely built. This inventory covers unbuilt dwellings units and unbuilt non-residential building gross square footage.” That is, projects in the pipeline can be built tomorrow – they do not need to go through any more permitting or meet any tests regarding traffic or schools. They are good to go. So, when talking about what is planned for the future, the pipeline projects are the most likely; the only other mechanism to determine the capacity is to look at the zoning and density that is approved via the master plan process. Zoning is more theoretical than permitting – zoning doesn't mean it will happen. Together, the pipeline projects plus the allowed zoning and density gives a picture of existing – but not yet built – capacity.

Yes, there are some projects that have approval (meaning they are in the pipeline) that may not be built, but based on developers' statements and actions, we have to assume that many *will* ultimately be built. This is evident from the county council's actions: when considering whether to extend project approvals that would otherwise expire (meaning the developer would have to go through the permitting process again), developers have lobbied the council, insisting that their approvals be extended. Those extended approvals are extremely lucrative because those projects can be built *without any more of a permitting process*. And many of these already-approved projects would likely not meet current requirements for approval, which is why developers don't want the approvals to expire and to have to start over. So, given that market changes could propel many pipeline projects forward, and given that those projects can start without any further permitting, they should be counted as part of future development.

Because the council acquiesced to developer requests to extend the approvals for pipeline projects, sprawl projects that should have expired may still be built. For example, GGW writes

about the 2012 Rock Spring Centre approval that is in the pipeline and will likely not be built. That does not sound like a bad outcome to me - Rock Spring Centre is far from real transit. It is in a non-TOD area, and employers are moving out of that area, so I hope they choose to relocate along the Red Line where we have plenty of zoning to accommodate them.

However, the pipeline projects may still be built there. And, oddly enough, the new Rock Spring plan *increased* the amount of commercial zoning; from a transit-friendly perspective, it would have made sense to have left the area as it was rather than rezoning it to incentivize increased density and development. But now we have both pipeline projects and increased density via the new zoning, which will allow future growth in Rock Spring.

Before announcing that we need more density in many more places, we should first look at what is already available via pipeline projects and already-approved zoning – but not yet built. And only after we have done that do we need to decide if more areas need to be rezoned. GGW seems to have forgotten (or never knew?) that there are numerous places around the county that are zoned for increased density but that have not yet been built to their full allowed density.

Housing - allowing people to stay in this county while welcoming new residents

GGW writes that “many activists [GGW] agree[s] with but for whom housing is not their top issue are supporting Marc Elrich.” That statement suggests GGW is unfamiliar with my decades of work on - and success at - improving housing affordability and access. My record on this issue is dramatically different and better than any other candidate running for County Executive and is one reason I have a broad base of support.

I introduced the first tenant rights legislation passed in Montgomery County, based on Tenant Work Group recommendations. I asked the County Executive to convene that work group after a 2008 “Affordable Housing” group – one that included no renters – issued a report that did not address renters’ issues. Tenants make up more than 30% of our county’s population and are some of our poorest and most vulnerable residents. Neither of my council colleagues who are running for County Executive supported my multiple efforts to help them; Councilmembers Nancy Navarro and Tom Hucker and I were only able to get a reduced version of my bill through the council after the terrible explosion in the apartments in Long Branch in 2016, which dramatically demonstrated some of the many challenges renters face.

I have also been the leading - and often lone - voice on the council for the preservation of existing housing. In yet another inaccurate report of my statements and actions, GGW and other blogs have mischaracterized my stance on housing in the Long Branch area. I used the

term “ethnic cleansing” as shorthand for what the Planning Board proposed to do in Long Branch: provide encouragement to demolish the existing affordable housing there - which houses thousands of tenants, many of them recent immigrants - to be replaced with “better” (read: more expensive) housing. While the replacement development would have had some affordable units, it would not have had nearly as many affordable units as exist there today.

As I said at one of our first council discussions about the plan, “Couldn’t we for once just let the people who live here stay here after we fix a place up?” No one did anything in response to my question. Only after I dramatized the issue by likening it to ethnic cleansing in a meeting with Planning staff did anything get fixed: the proposal was withdrawn quietly, quickly and unanimously in committee. My comments and involvement saved real existing affordable housing. And GGW was conspicuously silent on a rezoning that would have massively displaced this minority and largely immigrant community. It may have been fine with them, but it wasn’t fine with me.

I would also note that I am a long-time advocate for rent stabilization, which I worked to improve in Takoma Park. Thanks to rent stabilization, families of modest and low incomes have been able to stay in the community and in the schools. And when people stay in the community, the families engage in the community, and it makes a difference in the schools. I’d encourage GGW staff to go visit and see for themselves.

Regarding GGW’s criticism of my opposition to an amendment to the Bethesda sector plan to give density bonuses for affordable housing at the edges: they fail to mention that the overall density was capped for the Bethesda sector plan. With that cap in place, incentivizing moving density to the edges would take density away from the core - AND incentivize the razing of existing naturally occurring affordable **family-size** units. Requiring new housing to go closer to the core would have preserved existing housing and added new units elsewhere.

While GGW seems to share my concern about the achievement/opportunity gap and the use of zoning to “re-segregate communities,” GGW’s zoning preferences foster segregation. In Bethesda, Rockledge, White Flint 2 and other places, the zoning decisions often encourage the destruction of family-size units and market affordable housing and result in tall, awesomely expensive apartments and condominiums that are being built out primarily as one-bedroom apartments. (The Planning Director, Gwen Wright, confirmed to me that the majority of new units in Bethesda - 80% - would be one-bedroom apartments. We had this conversation during the council’s discussion of the Grosvenor Plan, which I voted for because it was TOD - on top of a Metro station.) If tall, expensive apartments are the bulk of the housing stock being built, the inevitable result will be more segregated, family-free developments that do not offer

lower-income families the opportunity to move into the thousands of new units being built on the west side of the county.

That's why I have emphasized more preservation, some buildings with lower heights (buildings under 6 stories don't need concrete construction, which is extremely expensive), requiring more family-size units, and greater opportunities to accommodate new affordable housing. These policies would go farther toward addressing re-segregation than what GGW wants to see happen in our cores.

Finally, while GGW bizarrely complains that my policies would only help current residents, I believe I have an obligation to help the people who live here now - whether they are renters *or* homeowners. I'd also note that, while I was a Takoma Park City Councilmember (for 19 years), I helped tenants who found that their buildings were up for sale to another landlord to understand the process of converting their rental buildings to owner-occupied buildings. Homeownership is one of the most important components to income stability and I am proud to have helped tenants move into homeownership.

So if you are voting based on strong leadership and advocacy for affordable and decent housing, I'm clearly your candidate. In fact, that is a main reason why Progressive Neighbors, Progressive Maryland, CASA in Action, and D1 Neighbors - among more than two dozen organizations - have endorsed my candidacy.

And if you're voting based on better transit and schools, again, I'm your candidate - the architect of the BRT system and a former teacher, endorsed by the Green Democrats, Climate Mobilization MoCo, and by Montgomery County's teachers and other school staff.

I wish that, before GGW tried to characterize "Elrichism," they had listened to what I said and looked at what I've done. That might have helped them to get it right.