

Reforestation among best ways to mitigate climate change

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Opinion: Montgomery County must update and strengthen its outdated forest protections

By the Montgomery County Forest Coalition | July 9, 2022 | 7:00 am July 9, 2022

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The risks posed by rapid deforestation and our changing climate make it imperative that county leaders update and strengthen Montgomery County’s forest conservation law. We urge the County Council to strengthen forest regulations this year to protect public health, community well-being, homes and businesses.

The climate crisis is bringing more intense storms that drop a deluge of rain in short periods of time, causing damaging floods, particularly in low-lying urban areas more likely to be inhabited by economically vulnerable residents and people of color. Montgomery County’s 2021 Climate Action Plan states that the county plans to cut 80% of its emissions by 2027 and 100% by 2035. Protecting our existing forests and planting new forest is one of the most affordable and effective nature-based solutions to sequester carbon and reduce emissions.

Reforestation is also among the best ways to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change by helping to reduce flooding, cool land and air, and purify our air and water. Forest ecosystems absorb immense amounts of water while also removing water pollutants such as nitrogen and phosphorus, which trees use to grow. Updating the forest conservation law to ensure a net gain of forest would be consistent with both the county's Climate Action Plan and its new draft general master plan, Thrive 2050.

Montgomery County's Forest Conservation Law has remained largely the same since it was put in place in 1992, even as other Maryland counties have recently increased forest protections to mitigate climate change and protect the water we drink.

Montgomery County's 30-year-old forest regulations only require developers, in most cases, to preserve or replant about one-fourth of the trees they cut down—the minimum required by state law.

The county's regulations are lax compared to jurisdictions that have gone beyond state forest law minimums. For example, Carroll County approved regulations in 1992 that require developers to replace every 1 acre of forest cut down with 1 acre of new forest planted. Newly released data from the Chesapeake Conservancy and Chesapeake Bay Program show that Carroll County has gained about as much forest as it has lost to development in recent years. But over the same time span, Montgomery County lost 660 acres of forest to newly constructed roads, rooftops and lawns, while adding only 100 acres – a major net loss. Another 1,800 acres of forest in Montgomery were fragmented or otherwise impacted by development, making them more vulnerable to invasive vines, deer and other threats.

Other Maryland counties have made improvements to their forest protection laws over the past few years. Anne Arundel increased its forest conservation protections in 2019, substantially increasing the cost for failing to replace forest that's been cut down. That same year, Howard County required new residential developments to plant more trees on-site and expanded the definition of forests that receive protection to include small, wooded tracts. In 2020, Frederick County passed the strongest local-level forest protection laws of any county in the state of Maryland.

The Montgomery County Council has an opportunity this year to introduce and pass a bill to improve its forest laws and, with its statewide influence, re-assert itself as a leader in forest protections.

We, the Montgomery County Forest Coalition, are asking for the council to adopt the following policies:

- Require developers to replant 2 acres of forest ecosystem for every 1 acre of forest ecosystem cut down and incentivize replanting forest in the same watershed.

- Decrease the amount of credit developers get for preserving existing forest on other properties after they remove forest for a project located at an entirely different site. While preserving existing forest is commendable, without new forest areas being planted, this policy is resulting in massive forest loss.
- Give priority to development plans that protect existing forest on-site.
- Adopt forest biological community standards for newly planted forest to ensure the replacement forests are healthy ecosystems that support a diversity of wildlife and vegetation.
- Prioritize long-term tree and forest maintenance and create green job opportunities through community-based workforce development.

In April, the Montgomery County Planning Board proposed slight improvements to forest protections in the county. We're asking the County Council to go beyond the Planning Board's recommendations by using the above recommendations.

As part of a comprehensive update to Montgomery County's forest and tree laws, we also plan to work in the future with the Department of Environmental Protection to strengthen the Tree Canopy Law and with the Department of Transportation to improve components of the Roadside Tree Law.

We urge the County Council to act now to strengthen forest conservation. On Jan. 13, 2021, during a Transportation & Environment Committee public hearing, Council Member Tom Hucker committed to "address the [forest replanting] ratio later this year" and he and Council Member Evan Glass specifically committed to "do more" in terms of tree and forest protection. Council Member Hans Riemer said, "We definitely should be looking at the bigger goal of forest protection." Despite this, the council has not yet introduced a comprehensive forest conservation reform bill.

We believe the time to strengthen forest protections and safeguard public health for our families and future generations is now.

We, the undersigned, believe the time to strengthen forest protections and safeguard public health for our families and future generations is now.

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Margaret Schoap, organizer, Transit Alternatives to Midcounty Highway Extended (TAME Coalition)

**This organization is also a member of the Montgomery County Climate Action Plan (CAP) Coalition.*

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