



*ACS supports Howard County nonprofits in the achievement of their missions
because strong nonprofits improve the quality of life for all*

HoCo by Design Public Comment January 31, 2023

On behalf of the Association of Community Services and our over 150 member organizations and community advocates, I offer these comments to advocate for the HoCo by Design Public Draft to more fully incorporate equity into **all** facets of the plan, particularly when it comes to the implementing actions of the policy statements.

Howard County is at a critical inflection point of recent years raising greater community awareness and acknowledgement of racial equity locally while also being in a time of planning for our future in ways that have the potential to both repair harms and mistakes of the past and literally build a better, more equitable future for us all through HoCo by Design as our guide. These comments will focus specifically on equity in relation to HoCo by Design. For more detailed recommendations around the policy statements and implementing actions, please reference comments and resources from the Howard County Housing Affordability Coalition¹, of which ACS is a member.

Despite the long existence of the locality of Howard County under different names, stewardship, and ownership throughout history, Howard County as we know it today is largely a function of the 1960s and 1970s as rapid growth moved Howard County from a Commissioner-led government to our current form of government and the work of Jim Rouse that built up Columbia in radical ways for its time. This history also exists in the context of being in the U.S. where centuries of racism, whiteness norms², and additional forms of oppression have shaped both the systems and policies of our nation and continue to the present day, creating and perpetuating inequities and systematic racism, of which Howard County is not immune from its effects. As such, despite the great diversity and wealth in Howard County, it is also a place where it takes approximately \$75,000 per year for families to be self-sufficient and financially stable, Asian residents and Hispanic/Latino residents are approximately half as likely to live in poverty than Black/African American residents, and white residents are a third as likely to live in poverty than Black/African American residents³. As much as we may value equity as a county, our data and people's

¹ Howard County Housing Affordability Coalition: <https://www.hocohac.org/>

² "Whiteness Norms" or "White Normativity": Those cultural and societal assumptions, policies, and practices that promote and take for granted whiteness as "natural" and "right" and which are promoted and sustained in societal and institutional structures, policies, practices, cultural assumptions, historical narratives, laws, etc., even when attempting to be attentive to those factors. (Various Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression resources, including Baltimore Racial Justice Action, among others, as presented by Ayira Core Concepts, LLC to the ACS Community of Practice for Racial Equity).

³ See ACS Self-Sufficiency Indicators Report: <https://www.acshoco.org/self-sufficiency-indicators/>



*ACS supports Howard County nonprofits in the achievement of their missions
because strong nonprofits improve the quality of life for all*

stories show that there is a significant space between our values and the realities in which many of us live that must be bridged through many deliberate, practical, do-able actions.

There is significant repair (e.g., building better streets and roadways infrastructure throughout the entire county; investing in safe and quality renter and home ownership options that are affordable at every income level) and innovations in both new and re-development design projects so that Howard County is truly a place where anyone can live, work, play, and thrive throughout the entirety of their lives. Every aspect of this general plan should explicitly prioritize and tangibly work on racial equity so as not to default to the methods, actions, and outcomes that have yielded significant disadvantages for many and relative advantages for others. We have building blocks readily available that can serve as a guide and reference point to HoCo by Design through the County Council's Racial Equity Task Force's recommendations and the Housing Opportunities Master Plan, as two examples. We strongly recommend that the resources already available be incorporated into the policy statements and implementing actions to help us move forward.

Within that, I would be remiss if I did not mention how critical all of this work is for the nonprofit sector in Howard County. When one reviews the policy statements in the draft reports, these are not solely theoretical ideas that would be nice have; they are interconnected mechanisms that we need in order to keep going – both as a local nonprofit sector and as a county. For instance, the history and present realities of nonprofits being under-resourced means that: 1) we are limited in how many residents we serve despite the level of needs, 2) nonprofit employees are often not able to earn a living wage with benefits for the critical work we do (and subsequently have many prohibitive difficulties in living here due to housing shortages and commuting here due to the transit infrastructure), and 3) nonprofits face increased challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce which inevitably affects the level of service we can provide to the larger community. Given that many nonprofits provide essential services for residents that are provided by local governments in other jurisdictions, HoCo by Design must explicitly prioritize building and implementing the plan with nonprofits intricately involved in every step of the decision-making and design processes.

Howard County is well-known for its diversity, the racial inclusivity of the Jim Rouse vision, the public school system, and so much more. Let's build a future where we become known for equity both in vision and action so that race is no longer the strongest predictor of how one will fare in life.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent Howard County nonprofits. Please let me know how we can be a resource to you.

Sincerely,
Val Traore, Executive Director