

**Remarks by
Montgomery County Council President Steve Silverman
at Committee for Montgomery Annual Breakfast
December 5, 2001**

Good morning. I want to thank the Committee for Montgomery for inviting me to talk with all of you this morning.

Last year's General Assembly session was a great success for Montgomery County. Much of the credit goes to our delegates, led by Kumar Barve; our senators, led by Ida Ruben; and our county executive Doug Duncan. Their hard work and team work paid off. But many of you in this room were also important partners in our county's success. There are too many examples to mention, but having said that, I'm going to mention some anyway.

There's Gene Counihan, who is helping to build a new Olney Theatre and helping to better our business community through the Chamber of Commerce. There is Sally Sternbach who must have been incredibly far sighted to leave AT&T before the telecom meltdown and transferred her energies to her community in Silver Spring and to education as president of the Blair High School PTSA. There is Fernando Cruz-Villalba who has pressed tirelessly for better health care and other needs of the Hispanic community. They and other members of Committee for Montgomery are leaders in so many different areas of this county. And yet you all take time out of your busy professional and community lives to come together on Montgomery County's behalf to make sure our voice is heard in Annapolis. You're an incredible resource for this county and this is my one time to be able to thank you publicly!

Now more than ever, we will need your voice in Annapolis. And yes, we need your clout.

The revenue picture for the county is sobering. Our budget "gap" is over \$200 million, and we know the challenges the state faces. I'm reminded of Winston Churchill who was in a meeting during World War II, when times were going badly. An aide brought him a note. After reading it, he said, "I've just been advised we're out of money. Gentleman, that means we'll have to think."

I don't envy Mike Miller or our senators and delegates for the tough choices you will have to make. But I believe all of us agree on the core commitments our residents have told us time and time again are their priorities: excellence in education for all of our children; and an ever-rising clamor to 'do-something-about-this-traffic-mess!'

Let's talk traffic. I cringe when I come to breakfasts like this because I always hear a story of someone's nightmare of a commute getting to the event. Traffic congestion is destroying our quality of life and threatening our economy, which last year produced nearly 40% of all new jobs in Maryland. It's the reason why a mother leaves work 40 minutes early to get to her son's daycare before it closes. It's the reason why a plumber charges \$75 extra for a job in Montgomery County during rush hour. It's the reason why a Silver Spring law firm won't hire paralegals living in Germantown because they won't stay once they experience the daily commute. The public expects action and we must all deliver.

Now Will Rogers once said that the only way to solve the traffic problem of this country is to pass a law that only paid-for cars are allowed to use the highways. Hopefully, it won't come to that.

There are the big transportation projects that have generated controversy for years, that make the headlines, but let's face it, they are not going to be resolved one way or the other until after the next gubernatorial election. There are other projects we need to move from paper to pavement. New interchanges at Rockville Pike and Montrose Road, at US29 and Fairland Road, and at I-270 and Watkins Mill Road in the mid-county would provide real congestion relief but the state's consolidated transportation program does not move them forward.

Let's focus on the road projects we all can agree on and get moving!

The governor has decided to move forward with an inner purple line, but we know under the most optimistic scenario, it will be many years before it is built. Prince George's and Montgomery County residents are on crowded buses and roads in that corridor right now. And thousands of others clog I-270 and Route 29 coming from Frederick and Howard counties.

In October we started "free wheeling" days, where fares are free or reduced on bus routes in the I-270 corridor. The Council's previous move to reduce the price of bus passes has already resulted in a big boost in ridership on Ride-on, which already carries over 20 million trips a year. We appreciate the state's transit initiatives, which will fund almost \$5 million in new bus routes this year and shorter waits on existing routes. With modest additional state funding, we could buy additional buses and buy down fares right now in other areas.

Building a new road or transit line can take years, but putting a new bus on the road or increasing transit subsidies can be done right now. This would help not only Montgomery County residents, but also those in Frederick, Howard, and Prince George's who commute to and through our county. And everyone wins. Every person who leaves a car at home and gets on a bus or metro benefits all of us--even if our own situation doesn't allow us to do so. That's because it takes more people off the road.

Yes, I know... even these relatively modest road and transit initiatives take money. Money which the state does not have.

But, let's not kid ourselves or the public. We need additional revenues for traffic congestion relief. Gas prices are lower than they have been for the last two years. The gas tax was last raised nine years ago. A three-cent increase would raise almost half a billion dollars over five years.

The conventional wisdom says "no way" to an increase. I say it's time to lay the groundwork for additional dedicated transportation funding—dollars that will go straight to new roads and transit to relieve congestion. The public is demanding relief from the traffic that is choking our region and we need to act now.

Turning to education, the Thornton Commission has given us much to chew on. Yes, the state's obligation must be to focus on an excellent education for all of Maryland's children. Yes, there are many other areas of the state with tremendous needs in education. And yes, we need to increase significantly our investment in our children's education. But poor children are poor children whether they attend Summit Hall Elementary in Gaithersburg, Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary in Baltimore City, or Rose Valley Elementary in Fort Washington.

The number of poor children in our schools exceeds the total enrollment of 16 Maryland school systems. In 1970, 8 percent of our kids were eligible for free and reduced meals, now it's nearly a quarter. We cannot accept a proposal that does not recognize the enormous needs of the school children in Montgomery County.

We cannot accept a proposal that under funds such key areas as students with limited English proficiency when Montgomery County has nearly half of these students in Maryland. We cannot accept a proposal that offers too little to help children with special needs when our special education enrollment has increased almost 50% in the last decade and state aid in this area stagnates.

Years ago Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, " many schools are inadequate to the task of providing adequate education and thereby entrance to the mainstream of society."

There is nothing more important to all of us in this room than to close the unacceptable achievement gap between African-American and Hispanic children and white and Asian children. To do otherwise deprives too many kids of the chance to succeed and deprives our community of the fullest contributions all our children can make when they grow up.

Our state superintendent Nancy Grasmick underscored this point when she said, "I do not exaggerate when I say that nothing else even comes close to forecasting our

economic vitality into the next century as our ability to close the racial and ethnic achievement gap.”

In tough times, we must target our resources to the early years and to those children most in need—wherever they live. That means full-day kindergarten and smaller classes in the early grades for the schools that face the most challenges, and it means adequate salaries for teachers in all our schools. This year Montgomery County received over \$3 million in state funding for class size reductions and over \$1.5 million in early childhood education funding which can be used for full-day kindergarten. We are grateful for that support. We also spend almost \$11 million in county funds for full-day kindergarten, small classes in grades 1 and 2 in our neediest schools, and small reading classes in every elementary school. Other similar efforts are going on in other jurisdictions across the state. We know these efforts work from experience in other states, and we are beginning to see results from our own student data.

And, just talk to a teacher who now has 16 students in second grade as I have. I went to a parent-teacher conference at my son’s school two weeks ago and stopped in to see Ms. Wilkins, who had my son in second grade. She thinks she died and went to heaven. She’s able to spend more time with the kids who face the most challenges, and she sees results on their faces... and their report cards.

While we need to take the Thornton Commission recommendations seriously, let’s not have a divisive debate pitting county against county. If we can’t agree this year on a massive restructuring of education funding, then let’s move forward on under funded special education and transportation programs. And let’s beef up our efforts on early childhood education and funding for class size reductions in the early grades. Remember, these children are only six once.

Whatever the tough choices we face in Annapolis and here at home in Montgomery County, I look forward to working with my council colleagues, the county executive, the school board, senators and delegates, and every person in this room to meet our challenge.

Woodrow Wilson once said, “ I use not only all the brains I have, but all that I can borrow.” Let’s all use our collective genius and smarts to move this county and state forward.

Thank you.