

**Remarks by Council President George Leventhal
At Committee for Montgomery Breakfast
December 12, 2005
North Bethesda, Maryland**

Thank you for that introduction. It's an honor to be president of the County Council and to be here with so many of my friends and neighbors.

Through your efforts, the Committee for Montgomery brings together the collective energies of our entire County to promote our interests in Annapolis. More success there means more resources to fight traffic congestion. More support for our schools. And more help for vulnerable children, seniors, and the disabled among us.

Thank you for all you do. You are the ambassadors from Montgomery County to the rest of Maryland.

We rely on you to tell our story in Annapolis. And we have a great story to tell – but it's a complicated story. It is complicated because we are so big and because we are so misunderstood.

We live in a great County. We live in a diverse urban, suburban and rural County. We live in a County with many needs that require a real partnership between the federal, state, and local governments.

The rest of the state believes we can afford to solve our problems by themselves. And we have made an effort on our own to address our biggest problem: traffic congestion. This County Council has increased spending on transportation infrastructure by one-third since we took office. We have broken ground on the Montrose Parkway, built or begun construction on nearly two dozen new intersections and interchanges, and significantly increased Ride On bus service. But we need the state's help if we are going to ratchet up our anti-congestion efforts to the next level. We need a Governor who's engaged on

something other than the Inter County Connector, as much as I support that project. We need state action to get the Purple Line and the Corridor Cities Transitway moving. We have to move on the priority road and transit improvements that we have submitted to MDOT. In this session, we need \$5 million in matching funds from the state to build the Silver Spring Transit Center. Senators Mikulski and Sarbanes, Congressmen Van Hollen and Wynn have come through for us at the federal level. Now, the ball is in the state's court.

The rest of the state believes we have a great public school system – and we do. But it is also a system with real needs. Our enrollment of nearly 140,000 kids – more than the total enrollment of 16 Maryland school districts – includes nearly 24 percent who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals because of their low family income. 25 years ago, that percentage was 4 percent.

Since 1983, the percentage of minority students in our system has risen from 27 percent to 58 percent. We enroll 40 percent of the state's entire total of those in English for Speakers of Other Languages – or ESOL – program. Our students come from 159 nations and speak 134 different languages.

To address these needs, we need the state to be a partner with us. Our public school construction request is \$125 million – and we need every penny. And the Thornton Plan included a Geographic Cost of Education Index to account for our high cost of living and working here. That deal has not been kept. It should be. And we need a much stronger commitment to ESOL programs from the state.

The rest of the state believes we are rich. And we do have a high per capita household income in this County. But over 120,000 of the County's approximately 500,000 jobs pay less than \$30,000 a year.

Because we are so big, we have greater social needs than any other jurisdiction, except for Baltimore City and Prince George's County.

Almost twenty percent of households in our high-cost County have family incomes of less than \$40,000. That works out to more than 50,000 households – with tens of thousands of kids.

Nearly 40 percent of renters in the County spend over 30 percent of their income on housing. We have an average of 1630 homeless people in this County every night.

We estimate that 80,000 County residents do not have health insurance. While we are implementing our Montgomery Cares program to provide universal access to health care, the state is moving in precisely the wrong direction. We have had to step up to the plate once again to expand our Care for Kids program to cover 1200 children kicked off the state Medicaid rolls. We need to reverse that policy and restore Medicaid coverage for those kids.

We are a successful county. We are a generous county. But we can't do it alone. We need a partnership with the state to help with critical needs in education, transportation, and a helping hand for the vulnerable in our midst.

Another major challenge that we must confront is the surge in condominium conversions that displace our neediest residents. We will work with our allies in the state legislature to develop better protection for renters who have no other housing options.

Let me close with a word about the issue that has received so much attention recently. The problems in Clarksburg, at the Planning Board and in other agencies will continue to preoccupy the County Council for the next two to three months. I want to make sure we adopt a package of legislative reforms on

Planning Board governance before we receive the County Executive's budget in March.

County residents deserve – and expect – good government and good management. They expect stability and predictability. They expect there to be a clear set of rules and regulations and someone to make sure they get followed to the letter.

What is the basic lesson of Clarksburg? Let me tell you.

We are here to serve the people of Montgomery County. Those of us in government cannot forget that. We are here to meet the needs of the people who sent us here and who pay our salaries.

If county residents want to see records, the records damn well ought to be available.

If county residents call and ask questions, they are entitled to have their phone calls returned and their questions answered.

And the lessons of Clarksburg are not limited to Park & Planning. I am talking about all county government agencies. We need to re-instill a culture of customer service in county government.

I am going to work on that over the next year, and I look forward to working with all of you to make sure we get our fair share of assistance from the state.

We have a great story to tell, but it's a complicated story. That's why we're lucky we have such good ambassadors to tell it.

Thank you very much.