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Isiah Leggett
County Executive

MEMORANDUM
September 28, 2007

To: Marilyn J. Praisner, President
Montgomery County Council

From: Isiah Leggett, County Executive

Subject: Fiscal Year 2007 Annual Report

In this first annual report as County Executive, I want to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the County Council and everyone who is helping me to build on the good government Montgomery County has long enjoyed and is working to make it even better.

As I said in my inaugural address, “This is our home; the one in which we have a vested interest, the home where we want people to feel comfortable and achieve the American Dream. This is our home where the goal is to ensure a quality education, a clean environment, decent and affordable housing, and safe and secure streets - regardless of race, religion, age, ability or disability for each and every Montgomery County resident.”

It has been nine months since I took office, and this administration is starting to make significant progress in building a better government where we can “*keep what is working, fix what is broken, and make certain that everyone has a seat at our table and a voice in the outcome.*”

To that end, I have been holding Town Hall Meetings and budget forums around the County to hear directly from our residents regarding their thoughts, needs and expectations of government. I am also gearing up to start, in the next month, a regular televised call-in show on the government access channel 6, County Cable Montgomery, as well as an online “chat” – a virtual town hall meeting -- with our website visitors. I intend for these to provide our residents with additional opportunities to be heard and to receive responses to their questions and concerns.

We have also embarked upon a program to improve customer service and develop a 311 system that will simplify the process for residents seeking information about government services. In addition, we’ve created a CountiStat Task Force to explore the possibility of a new system to track County agencies’ delivery of services.

Listening carefully to what our residents had to say, I was mindful during the budget season to make the difficult choices in my proposed operating budget in order to hold the line on taxes, while increasing funding for such priorities as schools, affordable housing, seniors, community health, public safety and libraries. I believe this sets Montgomery County on a more sustainable fiscal course – a path for future generations to follow.

In fact, with lower revenue due to a slow real estate market and the need to set aside \$32 million to address the Governmental Standards Accounting Board's (GASB) new disclosure standard for the full cost of retiree health benefits – we have still managed to cut taxes for 80 percent of County homeowners this year.

During Fiscal Year 2007, the County made great strides in a number of areas, and some of those were evidenced by the significant number of national awards bestowed on Montgomery County. Among them: the coveted "Triple-A" bond rating from the three major bond rating agencies on Wall Street; America's Top Digital County Government Award from The Center for Digital Government; the Award of Excellence from the International Public Management Association for Human Resources; and the prestigious national "Facility of the Year Award" for the County's Correctional Facility and Detention Center, awarded by The National Commission on Correctional Health Care; and a ranking of Montgomery County's Public Libraries for the fifth consecutive year by Hennen's American Public Library Ratings as one of the top 10 public library systems in the nation.

Other notable accomplishments during the year included:

Education

Education is among my highest priorities, and I supported the record investment of nearly \$2 billion – or more than \$14,000 per pupil – for this year. In addition to providing a first-class education for more than 137,000 students, the County more than doubled the funding – to nearly \$6 million – to prevent youth violence through programs to identify students who are vulnerable to joining gangs, provide early intervention to prevent them from joining gangs, and prevent gang violence.

Affordable Housing

Affordable housing is a top priority of this administration, as I believe that everyone who lives and works in Montgomery County deserves to have a decent, safe and affordable place to live. During the year, I recommended that nearly \$30 million be put in the Montgomery County Housing Initiative Fund – a 50 percent increase over last year's, and \$10 million more than previously used funding formulas – to acquire and rehabilitate affordable housing. We have celebrated successes in Silver Spring and Gaithersburg, where two affordable housing projects were renovated with Housing Initiative Funding and reopened.

Other efforts to preserve our current stock of affordable housing and make it available to those who need it include the new Right of First Refusal legislation that I proposed and Council enacted over the summer, and our appeal of a disappointing Circuit Court ruling that favored an apartment complex that refused to accept Section 8 vouchers for rent. In addition, I appointed a 35-member Affordable Housing Task Force to find ways to

increase the availability of affordable housing in Montgomery County, and I look forward to their report to me this fall.

Seniors

Overall spending on seniors programs will rise by more than \$2 million this year. Last year, Ride On began the “Seniors Ride Free” service on Ride On and Metro buses during non-peak hours. Starting in January, the service will be expanded to provide free rides to seniors and disabled residents all the time. I have included several initiatives for the growing number of seniors in the County, including reducing the personal care waiting list; expanding the number of residents served by contractual chore services; piloting a Montgomery County Adult Day Care program; and expanding Adult Protective Services to protect seniors from neglect or financial exploitation.

In March, the County launched a voluntary certification program to encourage accessible design features in new home construction and renovations so that seniors can more easily age in place in their own homes. The guidelines for the program incorporate design features such as a no step entrance and other accessibility and safety features, making it safer and easier to accommodate seniors and individuals with temporary or permanent disabilities.

The County’s Fire and Rescue Service launched a “Summer of Safety” program this year, involving several community-based, senior center activities aimed at preventing senior fire deaths and injuries. The program followed release of a report by the Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force, which was created to address the high rate of fire deaths among seniors. Over the past four years, 15 of the County’s 23 fire deaths were seniors, and we are working to prevent such tragedies.

The Department of Health and Human Services provided seniors with a Nutrition Hotline during the year, offering information on diet and nutrition on Wednesday mornings at 240-777-1100. Topics include how to lower sodium intake, how to find reliable nutrition information on the Internet and how to choose the healthiest cooking oil.

Health and Human Services

After a three-year effort to establish a day labor center in Gaithersburg, we opened a temporary center in April on County property just outside the city limits. Since that time, the center has been increasingly successful in matching workers with employers who need help.

We expanded the Montgomery Cares program this year, providing health care access to 20,000 more low-income, uninsured residents, and providing a 50 percent increase in resources dedicated to providing health care for the homeless. In addition, a new behavioral health site is in the works.

The Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services also expanded its hours this year in order to make its programs more accessible to residents. Evening hours are now offered every Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m. at three locations – 8818 Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring; 1301 Piccard Drive in Rockville; and 12900 Middlebrook Road

in Germantown. During the expanded hours, applications will be accepted and screening services will be available for income support programs, health care programs and child care subsidy and rental assistance. Some programs, such as emergency services and medical assistance for long-term care, require appointments. The Health and Human Services Information and Assistance Unit continues to help callers at 240-777-1245.

Public Safety

Ensuring the safety and security of County residents and their property is a high priority, and this year's budget includes funding to hire 43 new positions in the Police Department to enhance our community policing efforts. Of those, 38 are sworn officers, with 30 of those in new patrol positions. Six officers are being added to the centralized Gang Task Force.

The Montgomery County Police Department began implementing the state's pilot automated photo speed enforcement program in March. Actual citations have been issued since May to those drivers caught on camera speeding in residential neighborhoods and school zones. Police also launched a regional Street Smart Pedestrian

Safety campaign in March in an effort to reduce injuries and deaths among pedestrians. The pedestrian safety effort includes enforcement actions against aggressive drivers, engineering enhancements in crosswalks and roadways, and funding for educational materials in multiple languages.

Gang and youth violence prevention efforts will continue this year with funding for the centralized Gang Task Force initiatives and increased police overtime hours to respond to disruptive behavior incidents occurring in public libraries.

The County Fire and Rescue Service implemented a new four-person staffing plan in April, effectively reducing response times for paramedics to life-threatening emergencies and improving firefighter safety on the scenes of fires and other emergencies. Thirty-six new firefighters are funded this year to support the plan, and 22 new inspectors will help broaden the County's Fire Code Enforcement capabilities – providing more frequent inspections of all new and existing building fire protection systems.

A significant amount of new fire and rescue equipment was ordered during the year to enhance the County's emergency response capabilities. This includes 37 new pumper trucks, 17 ambulances, 9 ladder trucks, and 3 rescue squads, all equipped with the latest technologies to assure the safety of the occupants and to maximize visibility. We are looking forward to delivery of the emergency vehicles in the next month, and ground will soon be broken for new fire stations in Takoma Park and Germantown to further enhance service to residents.

Transportation

Since a comprehensive and balanced transportation system is vital to the County's economic health and quality of life, we have been working to expand our transit services – adding 45 new buses, expanding routes, and developing new transit centers in Silver Spring, Takoma/Langley Park, White Oak, and at Montgomery Mall. Our Ride On service is prepared to serve an additional one million passengers this year, and free Ride

On and Metrobus service will soon be offered to all County seniors and persons with disabilities at all times. SmarTrip cards, now accepted by Ride On, further improve service to passengers.

New weather alert systems have been put in place to allow the Department of Public Works and Transportation to better track developing storms, improving allocation of appropriate snow removal resources.

Libraries

During Fiscal Year 2007, two new libraries opened. The new \$26 million, 100,000-square-foot state-of-the-art library in downtown Rockville now serves as an anchor for the new Rockville Town Center project; and the new \$19 million, 44,000-square-foot library facility in the Germantown Town Center is located next to the BlackRock Center for the Arts.

In an effort to reach out to the County's diverse population, the Montgomery County Public Libraries hosted a variety of programs during the year. They included Hispanic Heritage Month events; Asian Lunar New Year Programs; a series of Black History Month programs; a preview of an historical film on deaf life in America, along with American Sign Language classes and a Book Discussion Group in Sign Language; a "Save the Planet" environmental series; separate summer reading programs for adults, teens and children; workshops for small business entrepreneurs; and a funding seminar for nonprofit agencies serving immigrants and refugees.

The Department of Public Libraries also celebrated a significant milestone this year in June -- the 25th Anniversary of its "Ask-a-Librarian" telephone reference service at 240-777-0001; TTY 240-777-0902. The service, which also responds to emails at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/library, provides answers to brief, factual questions, and information on library locations/services, special collections, book reservations and holds, and how to proceed with more complex research. Questions run the gamut from "What time is it in Paris?" to "When was mountain climbing first done as a sport and on what date is it celebrated?"

This year, I have increased hours at the eight libraries that are open on Sunday, in order to provide greater community access to these important facilities. In addition, I have added \$380,000 to the library collection budget, enabling Montgomery County Public Libraries to provide its residents with a wider variety of materials.

Recreation and Arts

Independence Day fireworks were held in both Germantown and Kensington this year. In addition, improvements are scheduled for neighborhood recreation centers in the Scotland, Ross Boddy, Clara Barton, Good Hope, and Plum Gar communities, with program enhancements scheduled for the Tobytown Community Center. The first skate park in the County opened at the Olney Regional Park, and it already has more than 1,500 members with over 100 users daily. The Germantown Indoor Swim Center completed its first full year of operation with more than 65,000 admissions.

A 60 percent increase in the County's Arts and Humanities Council budget this year will provide project grants, fellowships and operating support to local arts and humanities

organizations. The increased funding includes \$500,000 for discretionary grants for smaller and emerging arts organizations, and funding is also included to partner with the State of Maryland and private developers to bring a music venue to downtown Silver Spring.

Environment

To preserve and sustain Montgomery County's environment, the County has assumed maintenance of the Montgomery County Public Schools' stormwater management structures. The County will conduct additional water quality monitoring with increased funding for stream gauges. Two gas-to-energy facilities are being built this year at the County's closed landfills to produce clean energy, and full implementation of a new plan to reduce cross lot water drainage in neighborhoods.

Economic Development

This year, we have invested more in small and minority-owned businesses with the opening of the Germantown Innovation Center and increased support for the Silver Spring, Wheaton and Rockville Innovations Centers. This year's budget increases economic development efforts by 12 percent to support the health of our business community, and funding is included this year to hire a Germantown Business District manager to facilitate economic development in this growing area.

The County's Local Small Business Reserve Program (LSBRP) has had great success in the past year, awarding more than 30 percent of available procurement dollars to local small businesses, exceeding the 10 percent requirement. More than 600 businesses are registered with the program, and small businesses can now find all solicitations over \$5,000 on the County's Office of Procurement website.

Labor Agreements

Since government is only as good as the employees on the front lines, and County employees should be adequately rewarded for the good work they do – day in and day out – we reached agreement on new three-year contracts with Local 1994 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (MCGEO), which represents nearly 7,000 County general government employees, and with the Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 35, which represents 1,158 sworn officers of the Montgomery County Police.

In January, an agreement was also finalized that is the first of its kind in the nation, giving volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians a host of benefits. These include an improved death benefit, additional medical expenses associated with annual physicals, and length of service awards.

Now that we have moved into Fiscal Year 2008, we are continuing with many of the programs that we've started, and we are initiating other programs in an effort to make Montgomery County government the best it can be. I look forward to working with you in the coming year to make Montgomery County a place that we are all proud to call "home."