



April 7, 2021

**OPERATING BUDGET TESTIMONY
Montgomery County Park -Community Garden Program**

Council Chair Huckler and Members of the Council:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony in support of additional funding of the Montgomery County Parks Community Garden Program.

It is with a deep personal understanding of the needs of food-insecure residents, through my work in the community and my own personal experiences that I urge you to make the Community Garden Program currently offered through Parks a priority in the upcoming Operating Budget.

My name is Vanessa Pierre and I am a White Oak resident and food activist in Montgomery County. I run an organization whose mission is to build strong, self-sufficient, empowered, and healthy minority communities through food & gardening education, demonstration, & advocacy.

I have the pleasure of serving on the Client Leadership Council with the Capital Area Food Bank and the Food Security Citizen Advisory Board with the Montgomery County Food Council. In the past year, I have witnessed firsthand the burden placed upon Food Distribution sites such as Kingdom Fellowship, Manna Food, and the Capital Area Food Bank. These organizations show up each and every week to feed families and end up having to turn many away.

An alternative solution organizations such as mine and other garden educators take is to teach families how to grow their own food as a means to reclaim their self-sufficiency. We are all aware of the age-old adage “Teach a man to fish”. During the pandemic, we saw our food system collapse under immense pressure and this Council and our nonprofits step up to the plate.

In the midst of the chaos of 2020, many families in the County sought refuge in the Community Gardens. It provided horticultural therapy as well as a means to regain control and feed their families. In many ways, the garden was the difference in how many fared socially, economically, and mentally.

Many of the residents I teach do not have access to a backyard or land to begin to grow their own food. Many of our at-risk population did not want to wager on public transportation to the few farmers’ markets or risk standing in food lines only to be turned away.

There is a clear and abundant need for services, and this is an all-in-one solution.

If our mission is to increase self-sufficiency and end food insecurity in our County, we cannot do it without Community Gardens. These gardens fill the void between food education and distribution. As it stands, these programs are magnificent but severely underfunded. What seemed like a recreational activity in its creation, has now become a tool for people to feed themselves and others.

There are simply not enough gardens to meet the new need of energized residents ready and willing to

take matters into their own hands, get dirty, and provide for themselves and others.

We only need your support.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

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