

TESTIMONY of Christina Micek, On behalf of Trail Riders of Today, resident of Montgomery County

**AGAINST CIP REDUCTION for MONTGOMERY COUNTY PARKS**

My name is Christina Micek and I am on the board of Potomac Bridle and Hiking Trails Association and TROT. Today I represent TROT or Trail Riders of Today which is a membership-based, umbrella association of equestrians who ride horses on natural surface trails and in open spaces and parkland throughout Maryland. One of our main interests is in protecting and preserving our parks and their multi-use natural surface trails for not only equestrian groups- but also for birders, hunters, hikers, trail runners, nature photographers, anglers, cyclers, dog walkers, and budding naturalists.

I moved to Montgomery County for two main reasons- 1. our amazing agricultural reserve and 2. the amazing park system. Over the last two years of covid, outdoor activities have become essential services, and use of our parks simply blossomed as our citizens looked for ways to enjoy themselves outdoors.

During COVID, our partners at DNR, the Department of Natural Resources, looked to limit access to the outdoors by specific user groups at the beginning of the pandemic by restricting ALL equestrian use on trails and parkland for months, as well as other user groups. Equestrians were not welcome to ride on DNR trails without explanation, but allowed similar user groups, ie mountain bikers that they were free to ride. This created an atmosphere of prejudice against certain user groups. Mountain bikers and equestrians have a lot in common- both activities are socially distanced by nature and the impact on the trail bed is similar. Equestrians also often live adjacent to parkland and natural surface trails so that they might exercise their horses in the absence of expensive indoor arenas. In comparison, our Montgomery County Parks were kept open for ALL user groups, and the parks department tried to do as much as possible to create new offerings that might fit with covid guidelines. For example, they began to allow the wonderful picnic in the park program to give places for groups to safely gather outdoors. Equestrians in Maryland will be forever grateful to the county parks that retained access as best they could.

By proposing to cut the Montgomery County Park budget by 19.4 million dollars, and general obligation bonds by 16 percent, is unconscionable when so many of our citizens consider parks an important refuge and use numbers are at an all-time high. You would be reducing the amount spent on parks from what was deemed by those professionals as the minimum to adequately support our parks. These cuts reflect a decreasing priority for the parks at a time when I, and other citizens of the county, believe the relative value of our parks to the quality of life of county residents is increasing- not decreasing.

No park project is immune to financial cuts, considering the magnitude of the Executive's reduction.

Everyone in the county will want to protect:

- Annual funding for lifecycle replacement of park infrastructure and amenities including playgrounds, trails, tennis courts and basketball courts.
- Annual funding to support rehabilitation and expansion of Montgomery County trail network and their Vision Zero safety project.
- Annual funding to improve the quality of park athletic fields.
- Annual funding to add amenities in urban areas, including dog parks, skate parks, and community gardens.
- Annual funding to meet mandates including the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Clean Water Act.

Our award winning parks are essential for sustaining livable and healthy communities. They build strong communities, protect our environment, and provide low-cost and free venues for physical activity and social gatherings.

To TROT, parks like horses are one of the best tools for fostering healthy, well-adjusted adults and children. They are the perfect antidote to today's digital mania. Parks and horses get kids off the couch and out into nature. Hiking and riding -- and the activities around taking care of horses such as grooming, pushing wheelbarrows, carrying buckets -- is terrific exercise while developing flexibility and coordination. With adult and childhood obesity tripling from 1971 to 2011, getting citizens off the couch and into nature is more important now than ever. Caring for our parks and for horses promotes responsibility, accountability, patience, empathy, dedication, and self-discipline – all key attributes to success to people of all ages.

Please act now to restore CIP funding for parks.