

Testimony of Monika Carter Laws
On behalf of Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs
Montgomery County Council Public Hearing on the FY23 Operating Budget
for Montgomery County Parks
April 19, 2022

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Montgomery County Council, I am Monika Carter Laws, resident of Montgomery County, Board Member of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs and Park Advocate for Black Hill Regional Park located in Boyds, Maryland.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you this afternoon to testify in support of Montgomery Parks Foundation's budget request for FY 2023, which covers important funding for Black Hill Visitor Center and Nature Programs.

The County Executive's Parks budget is \$1.7 million less than requested. The Black Hill Visitor Center and Nature Programs enhancements were budgeted and estimated to be approximately \$1.2M, in FY'2022 with carryover to FY' 2023, so the planned FY' 2023 budget "cuts" mean that Black Hill's initiatives and requests for community gardens, ballfields, trails, cultural resources, and more are not being funded under the current FY2023 Operating Budget.

Black Hill Visitor Center and Nature Programs provides environmental education for local schools, offers a rich diversity of natural history and recreation opportunities for all visitors to Black Hill Regional Park, as well as creating and maintaining spaces for play and educational enrichment and awareness for people of all ages within our very diverse community. On average, the Black Hill Regional Park Visitor Center serves over 45,000 visitors annually.

Please note, Black Hill Visitor Center needs immediate funding to repair structural damages to the Visitor Center's popular viewing deck including replacement of the railing to make it ADA compliant and grading work to reverse damage to the building's foundation.

Black Hill Visitor Center staff have persisted over many years now to bring a net-zero energy and water, state of the art SEED classroom to Black Hill but additional and significant funding is still needed to improve the site and make it safe and useable for our forest preschool program and the Clarksburg/ Germantown community. This site will also include a community garden and storm water management. The SEED Classroom will be an incredible teaching tool to help meet guidelines set forth in Montgomery County's Climate Action Plan.

It is important to note that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Hill Visitor Center staff and the Board of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs have worked tirelessly to engage and support Montgomery County residents in their pursuit and expressed need for access to fulfilling and enriching programs at Black Hill Regional Park.

The Board of Friends of Black Hill Nature Program is an all-volunteer Board. As Board members, we dedicate considerable time out of our professional and family lives to assist Black Hill Visitor

Center staff to meet their community Park goals. Volunteer coordination is a critical part of building community and daily, Black Hill Visitor Nature Programs staff do an outstanding job in sustaining and growing the volunteer efforts associated with Black Hill Regional Park across the volunteer spectrum.

Going forward, the Black Hill Visitor Center staff are steadfastly working toward efforts to create a robust high school internship program to help young people overcome barriers to careers in natural resources and parks and to build a diverse workforce of the future. The Board of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs is committed to continuing to work with the Black Hill Visitor Center staff to bring this initiative to fruition.

Collectively, Black Hill Visitor Center and the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs continue to answer the call of our Montgomery County residents and other visitors to Black Hill to provide a stellar Park experience at Black Hill. We are now therefore calling on the Montgomery County Council to join us in this effort by providing full funding for Montgomery Parks in the FY' 2023 Budget as requested by the Montgomery County Parks Foundation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please note, the Board of the Black Hill Nature Programs stands ready to work with the Montgomery County Council and Montgomery Parks Foundation to secure adequate funding for Black Hill Regional Park programs and initiatives.