



OUR MISSION:

Working to enhance the economic prosperity of greater Silver Spring through robust promotion of our member businesses and unrelenting advocacy on their behalf.

April 20, 2022

The Honorable Gabe Albornoz
and Members of the Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue, Sixth Floor
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Council President Albornoz and Members of the Council:

On behalf of the Greater Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce, representing more than 300 employers, mostly small businesses, and several non-profit organizations in greater Silver Spring and surrounding areas in Montgomery County, we are submitting these comments for your review and consideration as you deliberate action on the County Executive's proposed FY23 Operating Budget and Public Services Program.

Our concerns this year focus on three critical budget areas that must be addressed in order to assure a clean, safe, and welcoming Silver Spring and protect the investments that both the County and countless private stakeholders have made in our community. These are: Public Safety, Quality of Life/Homeless and Mental Health Crisis Response, and Silver Spring Urban District Needs.

Even before suffering the pandemic of the past two years, we pointed out that Silver Spring was at a tipping point. The overall population of the Central Business District has grown dramatically since 2010, and more rental apartments are in the pipeline. At the same time, the commercial office market, which is key to a thriving daytime economy that brings a stream of customers to the ground floor retail establishments and restaurants in the area, has dwindled. (Yes, some of this could be a result of changes in the work-from-home or work-from-the-office dynamic, post pandemic, but the exodus was beginning as early as 2019, as I noted in the budget testimony I presented that year.) The absence of office workers, who spend thousands of dollars every year at stores and restaurants near their work, is not only a death sentence for restaurants and retail, but also contributes to a less than safe feeling for those who live and work in the district.

Further, as you all recall, late last year, GSSCC heard from residents, business-owners, property-owners, customers, and patrons of our arts and entertainment venues in Silver Spring, all expressing alarm about safety and security, in light of increasing violent criminal activity. We called you all to a Public Safety Summit last December to address this issue. Some steps have been taken, but much more is needed to assure that Silver Spring is a place where citizens and businesses can live, work, shop, dine, be entertained, and run a business, in comfort and security.

Public Safety Response - Montgomery County Police Budget

Among the "Action Items" that resulted from our Chamber's Public Safety Summit is increasing police presence in downtown Silver Spring to address the violent crime. But the Department suffers from a shortage of officers in the 3rd District, and County-wide. Police numbers have dwindled due to resignations, retirements, smaller than desired classes of new recruits, and other factors, due in no small part to the uncompetitive compensation package provided by our County. More than 20% of the entire Department is eligible to retire today. We recognized that if we are to succeed, real changes need to be made to the Police budget to address recruiting and retention (longevity). That's why a key long term Action item is "Assuring that Montgomery County Police are among the best compensated officers in the region, leading to increased longevity and the best police force in the region."

We are pleased to see that the County Executive has made, in negotiating with the Fraternal Order of Police, meaningful salary increases for most officers (PO1 through Sergeant). We urge Council to support this budget request.

At the same time, we are extremely concerned that the Executive seems not to have recognized the need to reward and retain management staff. As we understand it, the Executive has recommended only a one time increase of \$4,333, payable at the end of the next fiscal year, for Police leadership staff (Lieutenants and above). Assuming 26 pay periods per year, that amounts to only \$167 per payroll, and doesn't come for another year. As I believe you are already aware, 78% of the executive staff is eligible for retirement beginning July 1. Already, the Department has lost many executive officers attracted to other positions across the country. Without a respectable pay adjustment for the executive staff that is here, we risk losing even more experienced officers and good leaders.

We strongly urge Council to extend the compensation increase recommended by the Executive to all Police management.

And finally, while we were not able to find direct references to this in the "open budget" online, we support budget allocations that provide for increased security cameras and lighting in the downtown Silver Spring area.

Quality of Life/Mental Health/Homeless Response – Health & Human Services Budget

GSSCC has long advocated for a more effective and timely response to concerns about those on the streets in our community who are experiencing homelessness and/or mental health crises. County leaders have called for a response that, as often as possible, does not need to involve police. We do not disagree. First, police may not be in the best position to get the individual to the help they really need. Second, responding to an individual having a mental health crisis requires multiple officers for extended periods of time, taking them away from their jobs of fighting crime and maintaining peace and security in our community.

However, at this time, businesses and residents typically call 911 when they have concerns about an individual experiencing homelessness or a mental health crisis. Some of the County's service providers have suggested that we provide business owners with three numbers: one for police, one for homeless assistance, and one for someone who appears to be having a mental health crisis. That is simply unrealistic. As part of his reimagining policing, the County Executive long ago promised a new 911 system of trained operators to direct calls to the appropriate service provider. To date, that hasn't happened.

What we do see in this budget is a recommendation to create a special call center within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). We fail to see how this will accomplish the goal. People will still call 911, or be trained to call the new 988 national suicide prevention and mental health crisis line, once it is operational. We urge Council to redirect those funds to establish the 911 system that was promised.

Further, a true mental health crisis response system is capable of responding quickly. That is what people have come to expect when they call 911. But our current system is woefully inadequate to provide prompt responses. It often takes hours for someone to come. As we have testified before, Silver Spring needs more crisis response teams on the ground here. The addition of the current team is an improvement, but we support the HHS request for additional full time crisis responders.

The contract established with Pathways, in the past year, has been effective in improving the response to individuals experiencing homelessness. These case workers are able to respond relatively quickly and are adept at engaging those in need of services and persuading them to accept those services. We support the request for an increase in the in the Pathways Contract. Our concern is that this proposed budget calls for this increase to serve "Silver Spring and Wheaton." We need additional support in Silver Spring and want to make sure that the budget request is sufficient to provide the staffing we need.

Silver Spring Urban District & Parking Lot District Budgets

While our population has grown dramatically in recent years, the budget for the services that keep our community clean and safe has not kept pace with this growth. In fact, it has remained flat, at best.

Now is NOT the time to reduce investment in assuring a “Clean and Safe” Silver Spring. As our population continues to grow, we need more services to serve more residents. Further, if we are to attract commercial tenants that can provide jobs to those residents, presenting a “Clean and Safe” community becomes even more critical. We are concerned that the \$3.9 million “maintenance of effort” budget proposed by the Executive falls short in meeting the needs of our community.

As we have testified in years before, workers, shoppers, visitors, and residents walk the sidewalks throughout the day and into the night. They see the broken sidewalks, the bases of the street light poles where the paint has been etched away by road-treatment chemicals, litter on the sidewalk, rusty, battered, broken, and often-overflowing trash cans (especially on weekend nights) waiting to be emptied. We often hear the words shabby or scuffed, faded or dirty, when people talk about Silver Spring.

Our “Red Shirts” do an excellent job with the resources currently available, but there are not enough work hours in their days to keep up with the jobs that need to be done. Perhaps when the team is finally fully staffed – we understand that it is at least nine (9) positions down – it will be able to do more, but we have to be concerned that those positions have been open, even long before the pandemic.

What do we need?

We recommend a budget for the Silver Spring Urban District that will address the following:

- **Keep it clean.** Make sure all the trash and litter are removed, multiple times a day.
- **Replace the broken, rusty, damaged (missing lids and more) trash cans.**
- **Repair and paint the damaged light poles** – This should be the responsibility of the County’s Department of Transportation, but as yet, it has never addressed the matter. A few years ago, the Urban District sought and received permission to repaint the poles. This should be an ongoing effort to keep up with future inevitable wear and tear. And, the Urban District should be reimbursed by the Department of Transportation for taking on the responsibility.
- **Repair broken sidewalks** – This requires a multi-year effort to keep up and maintain what we have built. It should be part of general maintenance in order to keep up with future inevitable damage to sidewalks.
- **Be “on duty” later into the evening to support the Nighttime Economy** – Urban District “Red Shirts” are less expensive than police and can be deployed to be a comforting presence as customers and workers are going home and back to their cars at the end of a night out in Silver Spring. We support the budget recommendation to create teams that work into the evening hours.

More Than Just the Meters and Garages – Silver Spring Parking Lot District and Department of Transportation Budget

The Department of Transportation (DOT) is in the process of extending parking enforcement hours to 10 p.m. most days. With that should come extended enforcement of not just the garage hours and meters on the street, but also of the “No Parking” zones throughout the downtown area. We have, for years, heard complaints about the lack of enforcement of DOT-posted “No Parking” areas, along some of our major streets and in two key alleyways – Mayor’s Lane and the County right-of-way parallel to Colesville Road behind The Fillmore and the Lee Building. At this point people have come to believe that the “No Parking” signs are meaningless because they are never enforced. DOT has told us that the Department does not do enforcement in these areas, especially after 5 p.m. (or whenever its enforcement staff/ticket writers are no longer working). They suggest we advise our members to call the Police to handle parking violations “after hours.” We do not agree that this is a proper or effective use of Police resources and should be handled by the department that posts the signs.

We cannot discern through the “open budget” website whether the contract for the enforcement team has been extended into the evening hours, but it should be. And for chronic violators, towing needs to be enforced. We understand that implementing a towing policy does not create an additional expense for DOT, since it is a contract that requires payment by the violator.

One final point more related to public safety. We are pleased that we did not see in this proposed budget a recommendation that traffic enforcement be transferred from the Police Department to DOT, as we have heard suggested by the Executive and some Councilmembers. Two things about this are worth noting: First, how can DOT assume all responsibility for traffic enforcement when it does not do the same for all parking enforcement? Second, and even more important, we understand that traffic stops for various violations are one way that Police have been successful in getting guns off our streets. We heard just this week that, year to date, police have removed 450 guns from the street. We acknowledge that that is not all the result of traffic stops, but we know that traffic stops are one huge way to get guns off the street. We’re not ready to give that responsibility up to DOT.

In conclusion, both the County and many private entities have made enormous investments in Silver Spring. We believe that the requests we offer in this letter in lieu of testimony will serve to protect those investments and help to assure a safe, secure, and vibrant future for Silver Spring. We urge you to seriously consider our requests as you deliberate the FY23 Operating Budget.

Should you have questions, don’t hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Jane Redicker
President & CEO