

4/20/22

I'm Eric Brenner, a retired state employee, Silver Spring resident for the past 27 years. My wife and I are two of the lead volunteers with the "Montgomery Explorers" program, a walking program for people over 50 years old, run by the Parks Department.

One paid Parks staffer handles the logistics, weekly communications, and on-line/registration responsibilities of the Montgomery Explorers. We've had between 30 to 50 people walking outdoors each time, all over the county, in all 4 seasons.

Starting in early April, 2021, in the middle of COVID, we've been leading outdoor walks each week, all over the county, mostly on county parks property and trails. At first, some of our walkers were barely able to walk for 30 minutes. Now they have no trouble covering the 4 miles that we do on most of our walks. Many friendships have been made.

This being an appropriations hearing, my plea is to give the Parks Dept. whatever they asked for in their initial budget request. As a career state employee, in multiple states, I've worked with and managed a lot of volunteers, but I've never seen anything like what these folks have been able to do during a very trying COVID time.

Here's an example of what I mean. This past Monday was a miserable day to be outside — 35 degrees, a mix of rain and sleet — yet we still had 3 first-time walkers join 22 of our regulars.

One of these new walkers was an Army veteran, who had been wounded in Afghanistan, and rehabbed at Walter Reed. Another was a new resident who had just moved from Michigan to Silver Spring to be closer to two of her sons, one of whom insisted that she had to get out and meet some people. So he drove her to our meeting point near the Rock Creek Trail. During the walk these two discovered that they had both been stationed in Germany at the same time, and by the end of the walk, cold and wet, these two women, one black, one white, both in the midst of some major life changes, drove off together to the library, pretty happy with the programs and amenities in Montgomery County.

And that was just from this week...I've got a lot of other stories like that from throughout the past COVID year.

I'm not sure how you quantify, or monetize that, but without the budget for the staff at the Parks Department, and the quality of the county parks and trails, it wouldn't have happened.

Please remember that as you contemplate any potential cuts to the Parks Department budget.