



February 14, 2023

Montgomery County Council  
Montgomery County, MD

Re: FY24 Capital Improvements Program (CIP) Amendments: Wheaton Arts & Cultural Center

Dear Council Members:

I was unable to attend the February 9 hearing and am writing to submit **revised testimony** on behalf of the Board of Directors for Wheaton Arts Parade (WAP). I was informed yesterday that the borders of the CBD have been revised and the maps on several county web pages are no longer accurate.

WAP fully supports the \$20 million the County Executive has proposed for the Wheaton Arts & Entertainment Center. **But WAP strongly objects to the executive's decision on the location for the arts center.**

**Council should note that the site selected was never presented to the public for comment.**

#### The Location is Not What County Planning Experts Recommend

The site selected, outside Wheaton's business center, is the wrong location. A study currently underway by the **Montgomery County Department of Planning (MDOP)** shows why the county should reverse its decision. The study reinforces the conclusion of the **Wheaton Sector Plan** that **redevelopment potential is greatest with properties near the Metro station.**

#### The Location Does NOT Benefit Wheaton Businesses

County officials often talk about preserving the character of Wheaton, its small businesses and ethnic restaurants, and its diversity. Yet, with Wheaton's biggest opportunity to inject some life into Wheaton's center of business, the county has decided to abandon Wheaton's small businesses and put the arts center among residences on the edge of town.

#### The Location Does NOT Build On Previous County Investments in Wheaton's Center

The construction of the MNCPPC headquarters and county offices took the most valuable property in the heart of Wheaton with a promise of increased economic activity and more housing. When the housing project failed, Wheaton was left with a black spot on its center, the asphalt of a surface parking lot, made superfluous by an adjacent underground parking garage. Locating the arts center in the Wheaton Triangle would make it easier to lease commercial space in the business center including in the county's own building on Reedy Dr. Constructing an arts center near the Metro also gives the county the opportunity to continue its efforts to create a vibrant pedestrian environment. The Planning Department's draft study finds that businesses favor locations with a quality pedestrian environment that can help them compete for workers and customers, which for an arts center also means audiences.

### The Location Does NOT Provide What Artists Need

The new arts center calls for two performance spaces, two classrooms, and an administrative office as large as both classrooms combined. That's it! The plan doesn't include artist studio space, dance studio space, or music studio space. As for an art gallery, the county proposes to hang paintings on the walls of the theater lobby. The consultants the county hired to find out what the community wanted in an arts center found that **studio space is at the top of the list.**

### An Arts Center is NOT What Affordable Housing Residents Need

What benefits will the residents of the new affordable housing building get by placing an arts center on the ground floor of their building? They have a greater need for a child care center and space where they can hold after school programs and meetings? Or is that what the developers think they are getting with this deal? Has the county promised the arts center as a community center for the residents? Is that why there are classrooms and no studio spaces?

### The Community Needs to be Consulted BEFORE a Decision is Made

We elect council representatives to question the executive's plans and not to accept them as a "done deal," as we have been told is the case with the arts center location. How can this be a done deal when it was never presented to the public for comment? This makes a sham of our public participation laws. The most recent public comments were gathered in 2019 and it appears the county wasn't listening. The public needs to know why the county rejected sites in the center of Wheaton and the kind of facility that was possible in each location. No site is perfect and there have to be trade-offs. But being close to the Metro is worth some compromise and maybe not as much compromise as the county has made with its current selection.

The Planning Department's draft study includes a case study of the Hyattsville Arts District that shows what is possible to achieve with an arts district. It is important for the council to appreciate that **Montgomery County has no effective oversight and management of the Wheaton Arts & Entertainment District.** (See attached February 2 letter to the director of the Mid-County Regional Services Center.)

Thank you for considering our concerns as you make a decision on the amendment to the CIP. Please provide funds for the arts center, but on the condition that the location is still to be determined after further consultation with the Wheaton community.

Sincerely,



Dan Thompson  
Executive Director

#### Attachments:

Planning Department Draft Study, Hyattsville Case Study Lessons Learned  
February 2 letter to Director of the Mid-County Regional Services Center

## Attachment 1: Planning Department Draft Study: Hyattsville Case Study

### "Lessons Learned:

- The arts can be a powerful force for activating a neighborhood and helping it create a new identity.
- The shared vision and plan developed with the community provided a long-term focus for the arts community efforts and funding. That longevity helped support a program of incremental changes that built over time.
- Key arts businesses and groups helped to build and maintain the corridor's momentum.
- Private businesses supported the transformation by attracting new visitors to the corridor.
- Critical to the plan's success was the existence of a Community Development Corporation with day-to-day responsibility for advancing the corridor and flexible tools for working with organizations and small developers to build new facilities and programs.
- Programming is critical in generating activity, community organization and recognition as an arts corridor.
- Funding support from government and foundations enabled key housing investments, including artist housing."





February 2, 2023

Luisa Cardona, Director  
Mid-County Regional Services Center  
Wheaton, MD 20902

Subject: Wheaton Arts & Entertainment (A&E) District Strategic Plan

Dear Luisa, *Luisa*

As the Wheaton arts community's attention turns to the question of where to locate Wheaton's Arts and Cultural Center, I request that we not forget the work that was done to develop a Strategic Plan for the Arts & Entertainment (A&E) District.  
(<https://ctycms.com/md-wheaton/docs/strategic-plan.pdf>.)

There are a number of specific recommendations in the plan that relate to the work of your office and I am writing to request that Montgomery County report on the progress and results accomplished in implementing these recommendations. As this plan only covers the period 2016-2021, I call your attention to the need for a new five-year plan. I propose that the new plan include a summary of the results from the preceding one.

In writing this request, I am forced to recognize yet again that Montgomery County does not have any structure for overseeing the management of the A&E District. The WUDAC is supposed to act as the advisory board for the A&E District, but there is not even a membership requirement in the WUDAC statute for artists or arts organizations to be represented.

Below are some of the recommendations in the strategic plan that appear to be "low hanging fruit" that the A&E District should have been able to address. I would appreciate learning the status of these proposed actions. Having the information at hand that the Strategic Plan was supposed to generate would be extremely valuable to organizations like the Wheaton Arts Parade. Toward that end, Section 3.3 of the plan addresses accountability. If any of the following actions were taken, I would appreciate your making them known to the public:

- Provide annual report to Montgomery County and County Council on progress of the Strategic Plan
- Schedule **at least** an annual discussion with Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee about the arts in Wheaton and status of the Strategic Plan
- Renew formal strategic planning in 2021

Some of the other recommendations about which the local arts community has an interest in knowing the status:

**Section 1.3**

- Commission an ethnographic study to identify traditional art forms in the A&E District and greater Wheaton area
- Build upon research conducted by the Montgomery Traditions program (AHCMC) to identify local artists and traditional communities
- Partner with Maryland Traditions and National Council for Traditional Arts (NCTA) to explore the possibility of providing space for those organizations within the proposed Arts Center

**Section 2.1**

- Develop an artist relocation program that highlights the affordability of its housing stock, proximity to major metropolitan areas, potential tax breaks within the A&E District, and its diverse population and culture
- In partnership with AHCMC, DED/MCEDC, DGS, establish a strategy to connect non-profit arts organizations with vacant office space within the A&E District
- Partner with local and state agencies to provide information and assistance to artists and arts organizations interested in relocating.

**Section 3.1**

- Convene discussions on potential programming, tenants, and potential components of the planned Arts Center in the district

**Section 4.1**

- Provide information on tax benefits and resources to property owners, businesses, and artists in the A&E District (*I note that the county website info about this merely provides a link to MSAC*)

**Section 5.1**

- Ensure that the Wheaton A&E District logo is included in all promotional flyers and publications (*Does the A&E District have a logo?*)
- Engage a photographer to document the cultural assets within the A&E District

**Section 5.3**

- Develop a marketing plan for Heritage Tourism that spotlights Wheaton's traditional arts
- With the County, DED/MCEDC, explore possibility of attracting a hotel chain to Wheaton

**Section 6.1**

- Support Montgomery County's "We Heart Wheaton Grants" to continue to enliven the Wheaton community (*What are these?*)

**Section 6.2**

- Collaborate with The Public Arts Trust to preserve existing public art and to increase number of Montgomery County supported public art installations within the District

### Section 6.3

- Offer and promote more evening activities to extend the hours the area is used for tourism, shopping, dining, and art related activities

Interestingly, there is no specific strategic priority given to the construction of an arts and cultural center, although it is referred to in a couple recommendations. This could be because the Urban District was uncertain of funding or political will. But it retrospect it is a significant omission.

I know this kind of request is a "pain in the neck" but I think it is helpful for our elected officials to understand the degree to which the county paid attention to the Wheaton A&E District and to hold the responsible county departments accountable. If the funding was not available to implement the key recommendations of the strategic plan, it is important for the public to know if funds even were requested. Every year, WUDAC sends a letter of support for the Urban District's budget to the County Executive. It would be interesting to learn how many of these recommendations were included in the Urban District's annual requests between 2016 and 2021.

I look forward to participating in public discussions about the next A&E District Strategic Plan.

Sincerely,



Dan Thompson  
Executive Director

Cc: Councilmember Natali Fani-Gonzalez  
Jim Epstein, Chair, Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee  
Suzan E. Jenkins, CEO, Arts & Humanities Council of Montgomery County