

April 9th, 2024

Written testimony for Fiscal Year 2025 Montgomery County Operating Budget - in support of increases in funding for Climate Change, Clean water & Stormwater, Recycling, and Parks.¹

Submitted by: Denisse Guitarra, MD Conservation Advocate,
Nature Forward



Dear Montgomery County Council,

Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society) is the oldest independent environmental organization protecting nature in the DC metro region. Our mission is to inspire residents of the greater Washington, DC, region to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through outdoor experiences, education, and advocacy. In our conservation advocacy we prioritize human health & access to nature, biodiversity & habitats, fighting the climate crisis, and sustainable land use. We thank the Council for the opportunity to provide testimony for Montgomery County's FY25 Operating Budget.

Nature Forward would like to highlight that currently the Environment section only gets 2.8%² of the total operating budget. This is relatively a small amount knowing that climate change has a direct impact on all of us, all our infrastructure, and is a threat multiplier across all the other ongoing crises.

¹ FY25 MOCO Operating budget:

<https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Index.aspx>

² Montgomery County Operating Budget FY25. Available at:

<https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Index.aspx>



We have divided our testimony into two categories which are: 1) **We Support**, these are areas we support the allocated funds in the proposed budget and, 2) **We Recommend**, these are areas where we recommend more funds to be added or modified. We also provide additional comments in both the areas we support and recommend funding. We ask the Council to consider and carefully review our budget requests as presented in our testimony.

WE SUPPORT:

We support and ask Council to approve funding of the following categories.

- Nature Forward supports the County Executive’s recommendation of **allocating \$365 million toward climate change in the operating budget**.³⁴⁵⁶ These funds will help the County continue with the implementation phases of the County Climate Action Plan.⁷
- **Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)**: We support the following DEP programs to be funded at the proposed amounts as listed below and provide additional comments.
 - \$2.5 million increase in DEP Watershed Restoration projects.
 - \$275,000 increase in energy efficient improvements to comply with the Building Energy Performance Standards (BEPS) for under sourced

³ Montgomery County Executive Elrich Releases Recommended \$7.1 Billion Fiscal Year 2025 Operating Budget. Available at:

https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcgportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?Item_ID=44924

⁴ FY25_BudgetinBrief. Available at:

https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OMB/Resources/Files/omb/pdfs/fy25/psprec/FY25_BudgetinBrief.pdf

⁵ FY25 MOCO Operating budget. Climate Change.

<https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Chapter.aspx?ID=CC>

⁶ FY25 MOCO Operating budget. Environmental Protection.

<https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Department.aspx?ID=80D>

⁷ Montgomery County Climate Action Plan (2021) Available from:

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/>



building owners, nonprofits, and small businesses. The additional funds will help the county reach its climate goals.

- \$19.1 million allocated to the Montgomery County Green Bank. This will ensure more energy investment projects remain in the county and meet our climate change goals.
- \$5.7 million for the continuous planning and implementation of the countywide Flood Management study. County council should begin considering and preparing ahead the upcoming billions which will take to repair and improve our existing stormwater infrastructure and landscape to adapt to the more frequent and larger climate change driven storms. DEP's upcoming Comprehensive Flood Management Plan⁸ will give the Council the list of urgent projects that need to be completed and also a price range for these. It is critical that the County Council begins planning now before more lives continue to be lost.
- We support the addition of funding for a new position to implement DEP's Tree Montgomery program, MS4 stormwater inspections, and more solar energy research staff. By adding new capacity, DEP will expand its current programs and explore new areas pending funding.
- We support the addition of resources to enforce the county's bag fee to then increase the Clean Water Montgomery grant programs hence.
- We support that this year's budget increases funds to help low-income residents access funds from the Federal Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 and the Jobs Act of 2023.

⁸ Montgomery County Comprehensive Flood Management Plan. 2023. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/flooding/county/plan.html>



- **Racial equity and social justice:** We support the County’s initiative to increase language access by increasing interpretation and translation, buying more books in Spanish and Chinese, and to expand the Latino Health Initiative funding by \$300,000 for expansion of international health professionals.⁹ We support the continuing \$1.1 million for the county’s farm to food bank program and to continue the work of the county’s Food Resilience efforts.¹⁰

- **Department of Transportation (DOT):** In Montgomery County, the transportation sector is the largest contributor¹¹ to greenhouse gas emissions. The County must reduce its emissions by investing in transit to move people, instead of cars, around safely and efficiently. We support the following DOT programs to be funded at the proposed amounts as listed below and provide additional comments.
 - Fund to expand the upper county Great Seneca Transit Network (GSTN) which will help reduce car use and increase public transit ridership.
 - We applaud the county’s efforts to make bus ridership more appealing but increasing the number and frequency of bus stops and bus shelters.
 - Continue to purchase zero emission vehicles for county use and expand EV charging stations across the county.
 - Gain funds to accelerate tree stump removal to increase the planting of new trees.

⁹ Highlights pages 1-1 and 1-2.

https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OMB/Resources/Files/omb/pdfs/fy25/psprec/FY25_BudgetinBrief.pdf

¹⁰ Support for Individuals and Families section. PDF page 7.

https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OMB/Resources/Files/omb/pdfs/fy25/psprec/FY25_BudgetinBrief.pdf

¹¹ Montgomery County Climate Action Plan. Montgomery County Greenhouse Gas Emissions. Figure 25. Page 74. Available at:

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/Resources/Files/climate/climate-action-plan.pdf>



- Continue to expand the county's protected bike lanes, especially along the upcoming Purple Line metro stations.

WE RECOMMEND

The following are areas where we recommend the County Council to consider adding more funds to the following categories or modify these.

- **Trees** - we request these two additional funding areas to improve the health of trees in the county.
 - **Funding to be added for the removal of invasive plants on county property** - Invasive plants have quickly spread in recent years, overwhelming our parklands, roads, and neighborhoods. To control invasives on both park and non-park lands bordering our roads, Montgomery County should allocate additional funding to the county park service and DOT that is dedicated to the removal of invasive species that are killing parkland and roadside trees.
 - **Additional funding for tree stump removal** - There is a significant backlog of requests for street tree stump removal in Montgomery County. Failure to remove stumps in a timely fashion result in community blight and most importantly, prevents new street trees from being planted where existing trees once stood.
- **Parks:** The Parks Department maintains 421 parks across 37,000 acres of parkland, including community gardens, museums and historic buildings, hundreds of miles of natural and hard surface trails, nature centers, and provides programs and services that appeal to every interest and ability across county residents.¹² Montgomery Parks is currently receiving a budget cut relative to inflation. Nature Forward asks the County Council to fully fund the Parks Department FY25

¹² Montgomery Parks. Available at: <https://montgomeryparks.org/about/parks/>



Operating Budget request and add \$4M back to their budget. The CE is only asking for a 6.3% increase whereas MOCO Parks requested a 9.4% from last year's budget.

- If Parks are not funded at this rate, then there will be a freeze in community-based events, a hold would be put in place for improving environmental stewardship of natural areas, and all new acquisition development & management to expand parks schedule will not be able to continue given the budget reductions.
- The cuts will impact new parks like the Ten Mile Creek Park, and new and existing stormwater management facilities across the county, which will impact the availability for these facilities to work at their full capacity.
- These budget cuts also would result in reduction of trash removal, port-a-pot services, log jam removals, tree cutting shortages, and reduction of clean ups/stream sweeps. Therefore, it is important MOCO Parks is fully funded for FY25.
- **Stormwater:** Montgomery County has done great work meeting regulatory requirements for stormwater, but these requirements are not enough to protect our streams and watersheds. While some watersheds' health has been improving, many are still declining. What streams need is getting more complicated, too: in the summer, climate change drives more explosive storms that overwhelm the kinds of projects installed to date; and in the winter, more and more salting ahead of unpredictable snowstorms leads to toxic salinity conditions in streams. Please see the Stormwater Partners Network written testimony for more detail on our stormwater-related recommendations.
- **Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC):** Nature Forward believes that the Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC) needs to begin rising at more than the cost of baseline program delivery and keep pace with inflation, in order to increase our ambition as a county to truly return our watersheds to health. The FY25 recommended rate is designed to fund the County's current rate of ambition in meeting its relatively modest MS4 permit. This rate does not account for additional



stormwater work beyond the permit, nor does it fund the ever-growing costs of flood management.

- A possible suggestion is to calculate the WQPC as a proportion of pervious and impervious surfaces, so as not just consider the square feet of impervious areas.
- We also support the Stormwater Partners Network (SWPN) suggestion of removing the Tier 7 cap on the Water Quality Protection Charge, to more equitably collect funds to mitigate stormwater from properties with significant impervious cover.
- Please see the SWPN written testimony for more detail on our WQPC recommendations.
- **Flooding:** County council should begin considering and preparing ahead the upcoming billions which will take to repair and improve our existing stormwater infrastructure and landscape to adapt to the more frequent and larger climate change driven storms. DEP's upcoming Comprehensive Flood Management Plan¹³ will give the Council the list of urgent projects that need to be completed and also a price range for these. It is critical that the County Council begins planning now before more lives continue to be impacted like those tragically lost during the 2021 Rock Creek Woods apartments flooding.
- **Recycling:** DEP's Recycling and Resource Management Division¹⁴ helps county residents put in place better recycling practices, like ensuring every resident does have a recycling bin, but needs more resources. In particular, the Waste Reduction and Recycling Section has fewer multi-family inspectors compared to the single-family households' inspectors. Council could allocate more funds and resources to recycling inspections and outreach as the county continues to grow, especially in multi-family properties. Additionally, we need to continue funding to ensure

¹³ Montgomery County Comprehensive Flood Management Plan. 2023. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/flooding/county/plan.html>

¹⁴ MoCo DEP - Recycling and Resource Management Division Available from: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/sws/>



buildings comply and not fall behind to benchmarks set in the law. Furthermore, the county needs to continue to reduce waste by exploring alternatives to reducing waste via the “Zero Waste” program and taking it even a step further to consider other alternatives that eliminate the use of the current trash incinerator.

On behalf of Nature Forward and our 28,000 members and supporters, we recommend that the County Council support and consider our FY25 Operating Budget comments and recommendations. We believe allocating funds to these programs is important for the wellbeing of county residents, wildlife, and our waterways.

Sincerely,

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