

Testimony to Montgomery County Council

Montgomery County Operating Budget, FY 2025

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My name is Bobby Pestronk. I have lived in both Montgomery County and the Village of Friendship Heights since 2008. While I currently am Chairman of the Council for the Village of Friendship Heights, today I am speaking not as an elected official but as an individual and District 1 resident.

As the County Council knows, both the Planning Department's and County Executive's proposed FY25 Operating Budgets request funds and a proposed work program item to support an update of the Friendship Heights Sector Plan. The Friendship Heights Sector Plan was last updated in 1998. If the budget and work program request is approved, the Planning Department and Board will then prepare a draft plan in a multi-year, multi-step process, and the Council will review, revise, and, if it wishes, approve the plan.

A Sector Plan update is not an abstract exercise. It establishes a vision for a neighborhood. As was the case in the past, an updated Friendship Heights Sector Plan would influence the quality of life for me and others who live in the Village. Developers and entrepreneurs as well as the County itself, would use its recommendations and guidelines to advance, be bound by, and shape our future. Therefore, I offer the following thoughts as the Council decides on whether to enable an update of the current Friendship Heights Sector Plan.

I focus on four themes

- 1) Density vs Open Space: I'm aware of County Council's priorities to increase affordability of housing, for missing middle housing, and for increased density focused especially within areas near Metro stations and public transportation. The Village of Friendship Heights is already one of the densest areas of population in the County. The 1400 additional high-rise apartments now under, or approved for, construction in surrounding areas will further increase population density. A revised FH Sector Plan Update should balance Council's objectives while also preserving and expanding open space, open sky views, and other informal and formal amenities cherished by residents.

The recently adopted plans for the District of Columbia's Friendship Heights neighborhood along Wisconsin Avenue from its intersection with Western Avenue to south of Tenleytown will further increase population density. Very little attention has been given in the DC Plan to the need for open space for humans and pets along that corridor.

The recently completed Friendship Heights Urban Design Study recognizes, among other things, the uniqueness of the Friendship Heights Central Business District. It is a study in contrast to the other Districts of the County. It is bounded by green space around its edges. Preserve this green space and

enhance it. For example, the GEICO property could be used in part for a dog park at the corner of Friendship Boulevard and Western Avenue; for ball fields or open space.

2) Economic Opportunities

Create economic opportunities that would serve county and local needs.

A County Opportunity: GEICO is an unusual asset. It is a constellation of notable mid-century buildings in a campus setting; adjacent to a Metro stop and hub bus depot; a block from DC, and easily accessible to both the nation and county capital. The campus and buildings could be adaptively repurposed, in service, e.g., to the County's high-priority bio-tech industry, or for an academic campus if GEICO no longer wishes to operate there.

These uses would advance County priorities and economics, while also preserving the open, beautifully maintained and landscaped areas which open the Village to surrounding neighborhoods. They would increase the walkability of the Sector for residents and allow fresh air and cooling breezes to bathe the area in the hottest parts of the summer. Additional construction, in keeping with the mid-century architecture, could be considered.

A Local Opportunity: A revised Sector Plan should incentivize the return of neighborhood-serving retail. The last sector plan upzoned the area around the FH Metro, allowing for high rise offices with ground floor retail, but, in part because the construction was expensive, the ground floor rents were too expensive to allow neighborhood serving retail to rent the space. Ironically, the upzoning made the neighborhood less rather than more walkable because residents then had to leave the neighborhood to find what they needed. During the recent Friendship Heights Urban Design Study presentation of findings to the Planning Board, Planning Board members evidenced high interest in a new Sector Plan to address findings and livability concerns. Some of the concerns were of a past Planning Board's own making.

3) County Pedestrian Master Plan and River Road study highlights

The County Planning Department's praised Pedestrian Master Plan offers specific recommendations for opening the Village to surrounding neighborhoods and County amenities. River Road is an integral part of the Friendship Heights neighborhood for those living in the area covered by the proposed Sector Plan. Findings from both should be referenced, incorporated, and expanded into any new Sector Plan to include changes like bike lanes and wider pedestrian sidewalks comparable to those built at Westbard Avenue and River Road. At the intersection of River Road and Willard Avenue, traffic light timing and reconfiguration is needed to protect elementary school children who cross River Road to attend school. The "goat trail" from Brookdale Neighborhood to Willard Avenue Neighborhood Park should be formalized to enable safe pedestrian use and walkability.

4. Environmental impacts of development

The County now requires an environmental assessment as part of any Sector Plan.

Any revised plan should address the regular pollution of Little Falls Creek from excessive salt and chemicals entering the watershed from surrounding areas, including the Metro bus garage and Red Line tunnel drainage, and from an apparent cross connection from past development in Bethesda, and street and property run-off from open space, roof tops, sidewalks and parking lots.

The process of Sector Plan development should consider the environmental costs of tearing current buildings down and the expense and design considerations of new construction.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts this afternoon.