

FY '25 BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING
MONIQUE SANFUENTES ORAL TESTIMONY
GREATER BETHESDA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

April 8, 2024 1:30pm

Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave, Third Floor Hearing Room

President Friedson, Vice President Stewart and members of the County Council, good afternoon.

I'm Monique Sanfuentes, here today as Chair of the Greater Bethesda Chamber of Commerce, to comment on the proposed FY'25 Operating Budget.

The Chamber has formed a workgroup to study the budget. We'll be taking a closer look in the coming weeks. At this point, we want to share our initial thoughts and concerns.

Regarding MCPS

- We strongly request continued funding for workforce development and the Construction, Automotive, IT and Hospitality Foundation programs, which help our students prepare for careers in those fields.
- It's time for increased transparency at MCPS. And not just for fiscal issues; but also related to the treatment of staff, as well as the safety of students.

Regarding public safety

- We support full funding of the Police budget. You'll receive a more detailed letter about our position shortly.

Looking at the Bethesda/Chevy Chase area

- We support full funding of the Bethesda Urban Partnership, the Pike District Partnership and the Friendship Heights Urban District as important tools for making those areas even more attractive to business, residents, shoppers and visitors.

Regarding the FY'25 budget

- We believe that it is not sustainable, and may require tax increases as soon as one year from now. One-time revenues should be limited to one-time expenditures.
- Even though the County Executive has said that the budget doesn't include tax increases, we've uncovered a number of "hidden fees." Here are some examples, and we are still finding more.
 - The "Multi-family Rental Housing Licensing Fee" is doubling, from \$50 per-unit to \$100 per-unit, increasing costs by more than \$3.8M.
 - The "Short-term Rental Licensing Fee" is seeing a 233% increase, going from the current \$150 per-unit to \$500 per-unit.
 - And the "Solid Waste Disposal Charge" is increasing by more than \$8 million.

Our primary focus is on the best use of funds for Economic Development. It's the best way to build our tax base and better the lives of County residents.

- We're greatly concerned about the huge cut to the MCEDC budget. By cutting its FY'24 budget by almost \$2 million, the MCEDC will face its lowest funding level in at least five years.
- We have yet to fully understand the reason for the reduction. But it seems likely that MCEDC may be forced to reduce staff and scale back its critical business recruitment, expansion and retention initiatives.
- We need to learn more about whether the Executive's new economic development initiatives will bear fruit. In the meantime, we respectfully encourage the Council to consider the wisdom of pulling much-needed funding from an organization with an economic development mission to fund other projects whose results are unknown.

We've painted broad brush strokes today. We'll be taking a closer look at all of these issues over the coming weeks and look forward to continuing our conversations with the Council as the budget cycle proceeds.

Thank you for considering our testimony today and for all you do for Montgomery County.