

To: Council President Friedson and Council Members

From: Marion Edey, representing the Montgomery County Group of Sierra Club

Date: April 9, 2024

Regarding: FY 2025 County Budget

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the FY 2025 operating budget. My testimony here concerns only the budget for stormwater management. Some of my colleagues at the Sierra Club may be testifying on other parts of the budget.

We urge the County to make a modest shift in the Department of Environmental Protection's budget and priorities. We should spend more money on upland controls to retain stormwater before it reaches our streams, and less on the engineering work done to repair damage inside stream valleys.

There is an old saying that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." But the County's Watershed Restoration budget does not reflect this. We know of three programs within DEP which deal with prevention: Tree Montgomery, with a 2024 budget of about \$1.5 million and 4 full-time employees; RainScapes (or Conservation Landscapes), which gets about \$1.3 million and has 6 full time employees; and Green Streets, which has 2.5 employees. Green Streets also spends \$350,000 on maintenance, but is no longer doing any new projects.

This adds up to a little over 3 million and 12.5 employees invested in prevention – out of a total of \$35 million and over 100 full time employees in the Watershed Restoration Program's operating budget in 2024. The other \$32 million will be spent mostly on administration, maintaining stream restorations and other work done inside stream valleys. This figure does not include money in DEP's 2024 Capital budget, which includes 11 new stream restoration projects, slated to cost \$370 million over the next six years. The County Executive's 2025 proposed capital budget raises this to \$439 million. The discrepancy between our spending on cure versus prevention is far greater than ten to one.

We believe that DEP's priorities and budget are out of balance, and need to be adjusted. We recognize that it takes more people to manage stormwater using upland controls, which are by nature more decentralized than a few large stream

restoration projects. We also recognize that the DEP has faced some challenges implementing its Green Streets program. Therefore we recommend the following:

- 1) We urge you to add at least two more full time employees to the RainScapes program, along with an increase in the operating budget of at least \$3million. This will help us expand outreach and provide technical assistance to homeowners and neighborhood associations for rain gardens, conservation landscapes and other measures to alleviate flooding and the impact it has on downslope neighbors. Citizens need more education on the importance of reducing our polluted runoff into the Chesapeake Bay, which cannot be overstated.
- 2) Add \$500K to the Department of Transportation's budget, for regenerative stormwater conveyances and/or Green Streets Roadway and Landscaping designs. Demonstration projects and outreach to neighborhoods can help create more public support and prepare for the revival of the important Green Streets program.
- 3) Earmark funds in DEP's administrative budget for at least two additional full time employees to work with developers on better environmental site designs, and the use of upland controls to earn MS4 permits.

Money for these enhancements can be provided without adding to the total Watershed Protection budget, including, as needed, shifting funds from the stream restoration budget. We also strongly endorse suggestions made by the Climate Coalition and others, to raise additional revenue for stormwater controls in two ways:

- 1) Remove the cap on the Water Quality Protection Charge for large Tier 7 properties with over 6,215 square feet of impervious surface. This could raise over \$2 million. It might also create an incentive for some property owners to pave less, or at least use pervious materials as has been done successfully in other counties.
- 2) More aggressively enforce the Bag Tax, which is dedicated to the Water Quality Protection Fund, and could generate about \$8 million in revenue.

We recognize that vast areas of Montgomery County are already paved, and that some stream restoration projects are necessary. However, such projects come with high environmental costs, including the loss of thousands of trees and the

destruction of native ecosystems in stream valleys. We are also experiencing rapid growth. We must work pro-actively to insist on strong requirements for environmental site designs for all new developments, to absorb water before it enters the streams. To sum up, we need a shift in emphasis, to work on the prevention of damage to our streams, to reduce the need to “cure” them. Stream restorations should be our last resort, not our first resort.

Finally, we urge the Department of Environment to become more transparent, by publishing on line an itemized budget showing the costs of its different programs. This information is not readily available today. Taxpayers have the right to know how their money is being spent.

Sincerely, The Montgomery County Group of the Sierra Club

Darian Unger, Chair Marion Edey, Issue Lead for Stormwater