

Public Hearing on
Resolution to adopt a Proposed Amendment to County Charter –
Approval of the Budget and Tax Levies

before

The Honorable Andrew Friedson
Council President
Montgomery County Council

July 16, 2024

Testimony of Aaron Droller
Silver Spring, Maryland

Good afternoon members of the Montgomery County Council (“Council”). My name is Aaron Droller and I live in Silver Spring. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the Resolution to adopt a Proposed Amendment to County Charter – Approval of the Budget and Tax Levies.

I oppose the portion of the Charter amendment that proposes to lower the voting threshold from a unanimous vote to a two-thirds majority to increase the ad valorem tax. In 2008, County residents directly voted to create a unanimous requirement as an essential constraint on the power of county government. The Charter Review Commission (“Commission”) proposes to set aside the will of the voters for reasons that are misplaced and undemocratic. The Commission disingenuously declared “voters should be given the opportunity to reconsider this [unanimous vote provision] now that the Council has expanded to eleven members.” Question B, in 2008, clearly utilized the words “unanimous vote” and the intent of that vote was clear, regardless of whether the Council has nine members or eleven.

A unanimous vote ensures that a broad, county-wide consensus must be achieved to require residents pay higher property taxes. Without this requirement, Down County areas will be able to easily steamroll their policy priorities without regard for Up County areas. The Commission’s contention that lowering this threshold will promote a “stable framework for local administration and decision-making” is deeply misplaced. The easier it is to raise taxes, the more likely it is to occur. Constantly changing tax rates produces instability for residents and businesses that would be forced to adjust to the changing whims of policymakers. A unanimous threshold creates an essential guardrail that protects residents from wanton tax increases in an area that is already struggling with a cost-of-living crisis.

The language of the proposed Charter amendment is clearly designed to confuse voters. Included in the same amendment is language to alter the voting requirement on the aggregate operating and capital budgets from 7 to two-thirds. Placing language to decrease the unanimity requirement below these other changes that increase voting requirements for the budget on the same ballot is confusing to voters who may not understand that the amendment both increases and decreases voting requirements for different actions. Charter amendments that increase a voting threshold should be an entirely separate amendment from an amendment that decreases a voting threshold.

Last year, the County Executive proposed an enormous 10% property tax increase on residents during a time of intense inflation and skyrocketing mortgage rates, ostensibly to increase teacher pay and retention. The Council then approved a nearly 5% increase under the same guise. Now, County residents are forced to pay higher property taxes while not enjoying any of the promised benefits, as Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has declared that class sizes will be increasing regardless of the increase in revenues. That MCPS and the County Executive's premise for these tax increases were simply accepted at face value, without the county taking any steps to lower its own spending before placing greater burdens on residents, demonstrates the importance of a unanimous requirement. Taxes should only be raised on residents as a last resort, not as a first choice. Please reject this amendment. Thank you for your time and for your service to Montgomery County.