



## Testimony on favor of the FY27 Solid Waste Management Budget

April 8, 2026

Madame President and Members of the County Council,

My name is Lauren Greenberger and I am speaking on behalf of Zero Waste Montgomery County in support of the County Executive's solid waste management budget proposal for FY27.

As I prepared for this testimony, I kept thinking about how leadership in our country has gone so far astray. Although never perfect, as a country we have prided ourselves on doing what's best for our people. Helping those who are vulnerable with a safety net, Medicare, Medicaid, HeadStart, the Clean Air Act, a pathway to citizenship for new immigrants, a lottery system to bring in immigrants from all over the world, a Department of Justice that could be relied on to be fair and faithful to the law and strive to bring justice to all.

And now we have a government that seems to be hell bent on dismantling every one of these programs. At every turn this administration is putting vulnerable populations at further risk, defunding Medicaid and hospitals. Taking money out of public education and research into cures for diseases. Gutting the Clean Air Act.

Montgomery County is a microcosm of this. We are one of the most diverse counties in the nation and we have thrived because of it. We have welcomed new immigrants and protect those who are here seeking a better and safer life. We have shelters and programs for people who are unhoused and places like CASA that help people find work, learn a new language and get legal assistance. We are one of the first counties in the country to pass a resolution to reduce our climate impact. In 1980 a visionary planning department created the Agricultural Reserve which now allows a vibrant agricultural economy to exist next to a major metropolitan area and produce fresh food for us all. Our Department of

Environmental Protection has worked hard to keep our water clean, pollutants out of our yards and air and manage our trash in a safe and environmentally sound way.

It is in this context that I am distressed to see our County Council mirroring the current federal administration and resisting a plan that would transform our solid waste disposal method from one that harms both our community and a low income minority community in Virginia to one that does the least harm to our families, to our environment and to our pocketbooks.

In the past year the Executive Branch and its Department of Environmental Protection has made a major shift in their thinking about the best way to manage our waste. A year ago, after hiring the very costly consulting group, Arcadis, to help them determine the best and safest strategy for the County they presented a report from Arcadis that turned out to be incredibly convoluted and, ultimately, cost prohibitive. It only later became clear later that this group is a major supporter of the incinerator industry and is working hard to build more burners in Florida. They were given a mandate by Montgomery County to develop a waste management scheme that did not involve incineration but could not find a way to get beyond their incinerator bias.

After getting this very biased advice, the DEP regrouped and did some very deep digging themselves to come up with a vastly superior plan to handle our trash that would do far less harm to our residents and the residents of the community that receives our incinerator ash.

All this analysis, however, was done pretty much behind closed doors and the County Council was not involved in that work. So it is understandable that when they brought this new plan to the Council President, she asked to see the plan laid out in black and white with a timeline, a cost analysis of the strategy they wanted to pursue compared to continuing to incinerate, an operational plan and a health, safety and environmental justice analysis.

The County Executive presented this information to the Council President and, furthermore, held open houses at both ends of the county and a virtual open house to explain the plan to the public and allow for public discussion and questions.

It turns out that the DEP has done extraordinarily rigorous work and come up with a very elegant plan that will dramatically reduce our risk of both environmental damage as well as damage to human health and at no greater cost -- actually lower cost overtime than incinerating our trash. Based on actual contractors who have submitted bids through an RFP process, they have prepared a detailed cost analysis of three different strategies. They have carefully vetted the landfills that the contractors they are considering have proposed

in their bids. All landfills have met rigorous environmental justice criteria. These landfills are in remote locations, have low rainfall and are not located in any minority communities. Because the contracts are still being negotiated, they have not disclosed the names of those landfill locations, but they have carefully vetted them and presented those results to the Council President. They have shown a logistics plan that brings 80 trucks in and out of Shady Grove in a very efficient way moving quickly and efficiently to an on-ramp on the highway. Over the next year, with C&D waste being moved off site, there will be approximately 40 fewer trucks in the mix, reducing even further the number of additional trucks on site. In addition, about half of the trucks would be moving before any traffic even got on the roads. There are no residential neighborhoods near the trucking route so no residents would be impacted.

This brings us to the very disturbing position we find ourselves in right now. The DEP has answered all the essential questions that the Council President asked and yet she has refused to allow the Council to have a full discussion of this topic with the DEP publicly. She has refused to meet one-on-one with the DEP and she did not respond to a request from the Solid Waste Advisory Committee to attend an informational session to answer any further questions she might have.

In other words, it feels like she is holding her whole council hostage for a reason that is hard for us to understand.

Here we have a solution that will prevent heart disease, cancer and respiratory infection. We will do less harm to a community in Virginia that is getting our toxic ash. We will produce half the greenhouse gases we are currently producing and, over time, it will cost us less because we can implement waste reduction strategies that will produce less landfill material.

The Council President says she still wants multiple community meetings on this topic. Why is this necessary? If the DEP were changing the bins that were picked up at curbside or the type of material being picked up or the days of the week or the cost of that, then people would want to have a discussion of that in their neighborhoods. But this is not something that impacts people's daily routine. Citizens want to know that they are being kept safe and protected by their government. Just like having building standards for construction or pollution controls for industry, the public wants to be kept safe but, as with in the building industry they don't need to see the engineering plans for new construction. The only thing holding more public meetings will do will be to put more people at risk for longer and increase our costs by continuing to incinerate in a failing facility when there is a safer option on the table.

The Council President has also said she wants to have a Solid Waste Management Plan passed through the MDE before we move forward here in Montgomery County. The DEP contacted the MDE directly and asked if this was necessary for us to change our method of trash disposal. The MDE told them in no uncertain terms that it is not necessary and that it can be incorporated into the next report when the new system is in place. Again, using this as an excuse for not moving forward with a contract that is ready to go seems like a stalling tactic.

Finally, she has said that she does not have enough information on the proposed Advanced Waste Processing plan. This would be a legitimate concern if an Advanced Waste Processing plant were in the FY27 budget, but it is not. Whether or not the County invests in Advanced Waste Processing to further extract recyclables and stabilize organics from our residual trash is not a question on the table for this budget cycle. The Council and the DEP will have the next couple of years to review that process and look at proposals that may come in through an RFP process that the DEP is currently developing. With or without Advanced Waste Processing, the strategy that the County Executive has put in his budget is far superior to continuing to invest in our dangerous and aging incinerator.

You as our elected officials have a fiduciary duty to act in our interest to protect us and to cause us the very least harm you can. It would be a dereliction of your duty not to move forward with this budget. If you do not, we will lose the contracts that have come in through the RFP process that started in November. We will lose all the time that has been put into vetting them and choosing the best candidate. If, in a few months, we must go through that whole process again, there is no doubt that the contracts that come in will be more costly than what we are looking at now. And it will be on your hands and your consciences if there is yet another tear in the metal housing inside of the incinerator that will produce further toxic emissions that contribute to increasing health risks including cancer, heart disease and respiratory illness.

You all live here. You have families. Some of you have new babies. Some of you have aging parents. Why would you delay a decision to do something that makes so much sense in favor of something that is so much more hazardous?

Please do the right thing. Pass this budget.

On behalf of the Zero Waste Montgomery County board, I thank you for your consideration.