

Written Testimony on Municipal Solid Waste Budget, to Montgomery County Council

April 8, 2026

Against the Proposal

Kit Gage, as an individual, living in Montgomery County for about 45 years

A few months ago, I followed the recommendation of some others, vocal in their opinions, and opposed use of incinerators. When I suggested to some respected scientists in the field that my environmental group take that same position, I was told to check the science. So I did. We didn't endorsement closing the RRF (Resource Recovery Facility, the accurate name of the incinerator).

Working with Professor Vivian Thomson, I looked at DEP data, at the air quality data which as far we know, the DEP relies on from the county RRF. Also, we had information gleaned from the county and others run thru an EPA-respected model – MSW GST to compare the impacts of landfilling vs. the RRF. Finally, we looked at the data that was missing. Now, while we are not straight-out endorsing the RRF, we are saying that more data is required to make a science-based decision.

First the data missing or not being counted:

- If the county goes to landfilling and shuts down the RRF, not only do we need to buy out the contract for \$7 million, but we need to decommission it and clean the land it occupied. The county doesn't know what that will cost. That's a critical number.
- What's the cost of diesel for trucking to landfill – this will be more than initially anticipated.
- The county has the data for lost revenue from sale of electricity and metals recycling if you close the RRF – that needs to be included in comparisons.
- Why are Arlington County and the City of Alexandria continuing to use their RRF that is older than ours instead of landfilling?
- If the county decides to renovate the RRF, clarify the cost, and can the expense be amortized to make it more budget-friendly?

Let me also focus on two key priorities for the County:

Environmental Costs:

According to the data DEP relies upon, the toxins routinely emitted by the RRF are generally not measurable above the background levels from an aggregate of combustion sources. Obviously when there is a leak, they are a bit higher but again not massively in comparison to background. If the county retrofits the RRF, that should limit any future leaks as no longer would we functionally be using duct tape to repair it temporarily.

The RRF produces CO2 from the combustion, a greenhouse gas. It's now established that landfills emit methane (way more than we thought). This methane must be singled out as it is a major greenhouse gas much more potent in the short term than CO2.

Also, all landfills produce large amounts of liquid leachate that contains bacterial and other toxins that must be treated. Ash monofills (which are the recommended form of disposal of RRF ash), have no biological toxins or methane/CO2 production. They are relatively inert.

Now we use rail to take garbage to the RRF and from there to landfill mixed in with garbage (remember a solo ash monofil is preferred). The proposal is to use diesel trucks to haul a much greater amount of garbage a longer distance. Truck traffic is a worse environmental choice than train.

Environmental Justice:

We now rail our garbage goes within Montgomery County to a majority White and well to do area. Then rail the ash (much smaller quantity than raw garbage) to a minority community near Richmond where the ash is dumped in landfill. The Elrich proposal is to send a much greater volume of wet garbage by truck to a massive landfill in Virginia or Pennsylvania to what almost certainly a lower income community. The alternative is to keep the RRF renovated but running in its current site and send the resulting ash to an ash monofill – there is one in Fairfax County – would further improve on the current environmental impact. The Fairfax site is of less concern not only from a pollution standpoint, but also from an environmental justice lens as not as poor a community and not majority minority as many regular landfills in the area.

Reduce the Waste:

All parties want to reduce our total waste – use less, compost more, recycle more. The argument has been made that using the RRF means we cannot reduce our waste. This is a straw man. If the county uses less waste, other jurisdictions could pay the county to take and burn some of their waste.

The desire to create a much more efficient trash separation facility is well intentioned. It has no price tag, would be massive, and has no obvious equal in the US. This makes it less likely to be available any time soon. We can continue to investigate this option knowing it's not a near term fix.

In the meantime, we have decisions to make. Let's get the data to do it correctly.