

**May 14, 2024**

**TO: Montgomery County Council Members**

**CC: County Executive Marc Elrich**

**RE: Letter of advice regarding the FY 2026 Operational Budget**

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Council and County Executive Elrich:

Thank you for your and your staffs' deep and ongoing engagement with the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board (SSCAB). As the Council is finalizing the County's Fiscal Year 2025 Operating Budget, we offer you advice about spending priorities that would benefit Silver Spring and its communities in the coming year. The recommendations in this letter reflect SSCAB members' perspectives as residents, workers, parents, and leaders in Silver Spring but also the input we have heard from attendees and speakers at SSCAB's meetings in 2023 and 2024.

We ask that you prioritize and, where possible, increase funding and resources for these issues:

- Housing services: Recent Capital Improvement Budgets have seen increased investments in housing preservation and affordable housing development. Similar investments in the County's non-capital spending on housing are essential.

In particular, the County should invest more funding in services for renters, such as payment assistance and eviction prevention funds, educational resources on tenants' rights, public events, and promptly launching tools that staff from the Office of Landlord Tenant Affairs described to us recently as critical next steps in the implementation of legislation passed in recent years, in particular the online portals tenants will be able to use to see information about rents and complaints about the habitability and condition of properties.

- Support for DTSS vacant real estate and small businesses: Silver Spring continues to have a thriving nightlife, good consumer retail, and excellent dining experiences, but we are concerned about widespread office vacancies and high vacancies in older retail and mixed-use properties. Silver Spring, as one of the oldest commercial centers in Montgomery County and one of the first to be re-developed in the 21st century, is showing its age in many older, smaller commercial buildings that are not in excellent shape. These are the types of buildings that the private sector alone is least likely to rehabilitate for a new era of life - County support for this is important for Silver Spring's economic future.

Similarly, our Board members, recent speakers, and members of the public continue to share their struggles as small business owners. While the County did not cause Purple Line construction delays, its efforts to reduce the impacts on businesses struggling to

bring in customers due to never-ending construction have not been of sufficient scale. Receiving small grants once every few years does not make up for lower revenues every month nor allow owners to afford capital improvements that could help them grow revenues.

- Increase staff at the Department of Permitting Services: The Department of Permitting Services (DPS) is understaffed. Increasing the budget to hire more staff is warranted because of long delays. It takes months to get permits approved for the most straightforward jobs. DPS delays have been recognized as contributing to Montgomery County's high housing costs and lower level of new development compared to peer counties in the DC area.
- Silver Spring placemaking and events: Our community still does not have the level of programming, community events, or investments in placemaking that we did before the COVID-19 pandemic. It has hurt our quality of life. We would like to see greater commitment to such activities *in Silver Spring*.
- Homeless services: The number of people living in their cars or totally without shelter has continued to grow. Homeless residents of Silver Spring are our neighbors, and your constituents. They need increased services available here in Silver Spring.
- Mental health services: In the past several years, SSCAB has heard time and again, from different communities in our area, that people are struggling with mental health and cannot get services they need. This includes children in Montgomery County Public Schools, people with limited English proficiency or who need translation services, parents, those who lack stable housing, and those who are able to get their other health care needs met through Medicaid and community resources. Our county cannot thrive when this many of our residents are suffering.
- Youth programming: Downtown Silver Spring is a popular place for teenagers to hang out because it is accessible, close to places to get food and drinks, and a great place to spend time. It is wonderful to have a vibrant place where everyone is welcome, but more youth programming specifically within SSCAB's footprint is necessary. Our teenage neighbors should be able to be boisterous, skateboard together, laugh and holler at one another, and generally just be kids - but Veteran's Plaza is not always the right place to do it. The problem is that there are no other appropriate nearby spaces for them, nor programming to draw them into more structured activities downtown. Events like the basketball tournament hosted recently by the Silver Spring Regional Services Center and Council Member Kate Stewart are wonderful, but they take resources to produce. We hope to see more of this in FY 2025 and beyond.

Thank you once again for your ongoing work with SSCAB during FY 2024. We are also grateful for your attention to these recommendations as you complete work on next year's Operating Budget. If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Nahom Tekle ([nahom.tekle@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:nahom.tekle@montgomerycountymd.gov)).

Sincerely,

Members of the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board