

March 10, 2025

TO: Montgomery County Council Members

CC: County Executive Marc Elrich

RE: Advice on the FY 2026 County Operating Budget

Dear County Council Members:

The Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board (SSCAB) is pleased to submit our advice on the County Executive's forthcoming Fiscal Year 2026 Operating Budget proposal. These recommendations broadly reflect what we have discussed with CE Elrich's administration leaders and staff throughout the past year. They are based on what SSCAB members have learned from our meetings and what we have heard from residents, business owners, and workers in the SSCAB footprint, which includes Silver Spring south of the Beltway, South Four Corners, Takoma Park, and Long Branch.

Silver Spring is the vibrant core of Montgomery County. It's known for its **cultural diversity, thriving arts scene, and strong community engagement**. It serves as a major **economic and transportation hub**, with a walkable downtown, bustling local businesses, and key transit connections that make it a gateway to the region. Its **historic charm, vibrant nightlife, rich art scene, and commitment to innovation and sustainability** further solidify its role as a focal point of the county's growth and energy. For all these reasons, we make the recommendations below for the county's operating budget to ensure continued investment in Silver Spring's success.

Given Maryland's significant budget shortfall and upcoming reductions in state funding that will impact Montgomery County residents, we urge the County Executive and Council Members to **prioritize maintaining funding for County programs and ensuring that the quality of services provided is maintained at a high level**. This is essential to support the County's economically vulnerable residents, thousands of whom live in the neighborhoods covered by SSCAB. Please note that the issues covered below are *not* listed in order of importance. They include:

- Housing
- Resources for homeless residents
- Silver Spring Urban District, Regional Services Center, and community building activities
- Commercial space and economic development
- Support for businesses impacted by Purple Line construction
- Public safety
- Vision Zero
- Accessibility
- Children and youth services
- Food security

Housing: Recent Capital Improvement Budgets have seen much-needed 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 prioritize and protect funding for (1) payment assistance and eviction prevention funds and (2) the prompt launch of 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. The online portals tenants will be able to use to see information about rents and complaints about the habitability and condition of properties will provide critical information and help even the playing field between landlords and renters.
- Housing support services can help reduce the need for homeless services by providing stable housing, financial assistance, and case management, preventing individuals and families from falling into homelessness – an increasing issue in Silver Spring discussed below.

Resources for homeless residents: Homeless residents of Silver Spring are our neighbors and your constituents. They need increased services here in Silver Spring, where the majority of Montgomery County's homeless population lives. According to the County's most recent annual Point in Time Count, the number of people living totally without shelter continued to grow in 2024; the County's shelters are often full; and, anecdotally, the number of residents living in their cars has also grown. One member of the Progress Place community recently shared that the number of people seeking meals has increased dramatically, indicating a rising need for help. Finally, Progress Place community members have also shared that there is a growing and unmet need for free mental health services.

Silver Spring Urban District, Regional Services Center, and community building activities: 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 from County leaders. At minimum, this requires continued funding levels for the Silver Spring Urban District, the Regional Services Center, and the Silver Spring Arts and Entertainment District, as well as ongoing robust support to businesses along Purple Line construction areas (see page 3 for details on this issue).

- For several years, the Silver Spring Urban District and Regional Services Center did not have adequate staffing to fully serve the community; now that these offices are fully staffed, residents and business owners notice and appreciate the improvements. We strongly urge the County Executive and Council to maintain this progress.
- Residents and business owners have expressed interest in events such as Buy Local days and pop-up markets to help connect us and support local small businesses.

Commercial space and economic development: Silver Spring continues to have thriving nightlife, good consumer retail, and excellent dining experiences, but we are concerned about high vacancy rates in office space and 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 and should be an economic development priority.
- We recommend that the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation focus on matching budding small businesses with vacant commercial spaces within the SSCAB footprint and explore other opportunities to help new businesses launch in our area with less upfront capital, such as through pop-ups that take advantage of vacant spaces.

Support for businesses impacted by Purple Line Construction: 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.

- Businesses impacted by Purple Line construction require more significant grant support. Especially in the current economic and public funding environment, loans are less affordable and less useful.
- We recommend that various agencies that offer grants, loans, and programming to support small businesses be more flexible in assisting Silver Spring-based businesses impacted by Purple Line construction. For example, local business owners who have operated continuously in Silver Spring for required amounts of time, but not at the same address, should not be ineligible.

Maintain recent improvements in public safety: In recent years, the SSCAB has been deeply involved in local public safety debates and efforts to address crime in our area. We hosted multiple community conversations on local public safety challenges and solutions. We heard and, as individuals, have a variety of opinions, but most agree that recent investments in late-night police presence in downtown Silver Spring, the new late-night business regulations, and the Drone as First Responder (DFR) program have been successful and should be continued.

- We recommend increasing investment in the DFR program because it has successfully diverted hundreds of officer responses, both protecting the community from unnecessary interventions and saving money. We would like to see the DFR program provide regular reports about the data they collect to provide transparency and accountability, as well as help the public understand the program's value.

- We reiterate our support for adding video cameras to public parking lots to deter crime and help address public safety threats that do arise in those locations.

Vision Zero: Efforts to reduce fatalities on roads and sidewalks in Montgomery County have made little progress over the past several years. Much of the problem stems from lack of capital funding but the operational budget could do much more to advance Vision Zero milestones and its ultimate goal.

- First, we urge the County Executive and Council to pursue opportunities to increase revenue through greater use of automated traffic enforcement tools. In addition to helping at the margin to address budget challenges, this is a proven strategy to reduce traffic fatalities.
- Secondly, Vision Zero needs more funding for community events, driver education, and work to envision further improvements to the safety of our built environment.

Accessibility: Disabled SSCAB members and people living with disabilities in Silver Spring have recently reported increasing delays in County employees resolving – or even responding to – reports about accessibility problems. People should not have to elevate every issue to the Regional Services director or to elected officials, but that is what it usually requires to get results.

- The problem has been most notable with 311 contacts and in cases when accessibility problems relate to Purple Line construction. One wheelchair user living in DTSS notes that construction crews often seem to forget to accommodate people using wheelchairs or fail to do so in a way that actually works or that fails when it rains or snows.
- Services for disabled residents require greater investment through community programming and outreach. Such services are notably lacking for adults who are too old to access educational resources and too young to access resources for elders.

Children and youth services:

- In the face of federal funding cuts, we are concerned about the loss of resources that support Silver Spring's children. This includes enrichment activities that are federally funded through local schools. We urge the County Executive and Council to devote as many resources as possible to fill the gaps.
- On 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 FY2026 and beyond.

- The new Aquatic Center is a fantastic resource for the community that County agencies should leverage in serving children and youth.

Food security: Hunger is a growing problem county-wide that requires additional funding from the County to address. Although this will be a difficult budget environment, and few programs will receive greater funding than they currently have, it is essential to invest more in ending food insecurity. This is a particular concern amidst federal budget cuts and the state budget shortfall.

- Children may face higher levels of food insecurity as federal funding for school meals is slashed, and the County should prioritize filling these resource gaps.
- SSCAB members and local residents are interested in using community gardening as one of the strategies to address rising hunger, but we need guidance and support from County leaders.

Thank you once again for your ongoing work with SSCAB during FY 2025. We are also grateful for your attention to these recommendations as you complete work on FY 2026 Operating Budget. If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Nahom Tekle (nahom.tekle@montgomerycountymd.gov).

Sincerely,

Members of the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board