

May 15, 2025

TO: Council President Stewart, Council Vice-President Jawando

CC: County Council, County Executive Marc Elrich

RE: Advice on the FY 2026 County Operating Budget

Dear Montgomery County Council Members:

We first want to commend you on preliminarily passing the county budget without increasing income taxes. We understand that this is a long and arduous process, and it is always difficult balancing the needs of such a large and diverse county. Though Council has a preliminary budget passed, we still wanted to share our thoughts for the FY26 County Operating Budget.

The Upcounty Citizens Advisory Board ("UCAB") is pleased to submit our advice on the County Executive's forthcoming FY 2026 Operating Budget Proposal. Through discussions with key leaders, council members, and staff of Montgomery County at our UCAB meetings over the past year and in conjunction with feedback from our community and business owners, we have identified four key areas of need that are of primary concern and importance to Upcounty. They include:

1. Equitable Distribution of Resources and Services
2. Infrastructure and Access to Public Services
3. On-going Funding for Crucial Projects
4. Additional Support for the Upcounty Regional Services Center

The data analysis required to create a better picture of the needs of Upcounty is a comprehensive task that requires a task force that works in partnership with the UCAB to identify and evaluate these areas of concerns in Upcounty (in no order of urgency):

- Homeless services
- Youth services and access to summer lunch programs expanded to reach all Upcounty students
- Other transportation options in addition to BRT
- Access to healthcare, recreational, and social programs and services
- Germantown Business Improvement District (BID) study
- White's Ferry
- Practicality of Master Plan updates to current conditions
- Communication holes
- Police Department staffing and the extension of the drone program
- Upcounty regional services center support

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Homeless Services - According to data from DHHS, there is an increase in homelessness throughout the County, including the Upcounty Region. There are, however, no on-site services for those coping with

homelessness north of Gaithersburg. There are no drop-in day centers or overnight shelters in the entire Region. The needs of those experiencing homelessness are being served only through community outreach efforts such as Everymind and the CORE Foundation. Infrastructure for homeless services is lacking. While we applaud the recent partnership between The CORE Foundation and BlackRock Center for the Arts in allowing CORE clients to use the Center's showers, this effort highlights the lack of services that are available in our community. It is important to have an analysis of the problem as it exists in our Region and to offer better solutions for a problem whose needs are not being currently met.

Food Security – Due to the lack of density in the Upcounty, programs that address food security need to be adapted to a rural model. Current requirements for models that effectively serve residents of denser, urban areas serve as barriers to meeting the needs of the Upcounty Residents. The Summer Lunch Program is an example of a program that works well in Downcounty as schools are open for children to have healthy lunches, but due to the lack of density, students in the more rural areas of Montgomery County must be driven several miles to Clarksburg to receive free summer lunches. Clarksburg HS only provided summer meals for 5 days last summer. Additional effort is needed to serve students in the communities in which they live.

Access to Health and Social Services – It has become abundantly clear that our more rural communities (Poolesville, Barnesville to name a few) do not have equal access to healthcare and social services as well as recreational programming. We are requesting that a task force be funded to identify partnerships within the county that can bring these much-needed services to rural areas within Upcounty as an extension of similar services offered in more populated areas within the county.

There are significant communities in Western Montgomery County which do not have access to healthcare. We strongly support the future community center planned for Poolesville because it includes a clinic. In the interim, we ask that support be continued for part time clinics to be offered as well as continued funding for the medical and dental vans which provides critical quality care once a month in the Poolesville Community

Youth Services - Many youth services are available in the lower region of Montgomery County but poor transportation between Upcounty and Downcounty does not allow youth to participate or gain access to those services. We need to continue the current funding for our youth programs but at the same time expand the reach of these services to all Upcounty youth through additional funding.

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Transportation - We acknowledge the recommendation by the Planning Board to remove M-83 from the Master Plan and that BRT is planned for construction extending into Southern Germantown. BRT is an urban solution that does not necessarily work for Upcounty due to our spread-out residents and rural road systems. Further, BRT construction in Clarksburg is still many years ahead. Transportation planning needs to take account of the Upcounty's needs, large geographic area, and suburban and rural communities that will continue to rely on personal vehicle usage, including at peak times. No data has been shared with the public that would indicate that removing M-83 from the Master Plan or pursuing BRT would result in reduced congestion given the Upcounty's unique development.

Master Plan Updates - From many planning meetings at UCAB we identified that the practicality of the Master Plan is not in line with current conditions in the Upcounty. We request funding of a task force to

identify the current conditions in partnership with UCAB to identify the needs in which to update the Master Plan for viable solutions and planning of future development.

Cell Phone Coverage - There are many gaps in cell phone coverage in Upcounty. Simple 911 calls cannot be made from major streets and highways in the event of an emergency. We require a task force to evaluate the communication holes and implement a plan to resolve these deficiencies.

ONGOING FUNDING FOR CRUCIAL PROJECTS

Germantown BID Study – Germantown BID task force is proving to be especially important for Germantown's economic development. Germantown has lost its economic identity due to the lack of employment opportunities despite the large population that resides in Upcounty. We request that BID continues to be funded to foster development in this community.

White's Ferry - We are excited to see that the County Council has taken a strong approach to settling this long dispute between landowners to reopen the Ferry for commuters. We have lost residents who commuted from Poolesville to Leesburg via the Ferry and we have lost economic trade in these surrounding areas because of its closure. We highly support the continuing efforts of the County council to see the reopening of White's Ferry.

Police Funding - In our past fiscal year of UCAB we wrote a letter to advise the County Council to make funding available to our Police departments. As mentioned in our letter, staffing is at a historic low and there has been an exodus of many tenured officers. We continue to endorse this continued funding. Additionally, we recently heard about the effectiveness of the Drone program. We highly encourage and recommend that the drone program be expanded with home landings in the Germantown, Gaithersburg, and Clarksburg areas. We believe that this will also help with the staffing shortages because officers will have additional information prior to arriving at calls.

UPCOUNTY REGIONAL SERVICES CENTER

Upcounty Regional Services Center Staffing - The Upcounty Regional Services Center serves 350,000 residents in Upcounty with only two staff members serving their needs over a larger landmass than any other regional center, with 19 distinct and unique census designated places (cities). About 20 years ago, before the development of Clarksburg and surrounding areas, there were eight staff members supporting the Upcounty population and area. We are asking that a staff to resident ratio in comparison to the East County Advisory Board who serves 110,000 residents that have three staff members to serve their residents be applied to the Upcounty Regional Services Center. We couldn't be happier with our Upcounty staff, but we know their outreach and engagement with residents and stakeholders would be more impactful for our unique communities (or census areas) if they were able to meet them "where they are at" as do other CABs in Montgomery County. With the stretch of 145 square miles in Upcounty, their actual in-person reach is not viable with only two staff members.

As members of UCAB, we are advocates of our communities' needs and understand that success comes from many hands working together to a common goal. We welcome the opportunity to work with Montgomery County leadership and encourage future conversations to address these areas.

Sincerely,

Members of the Upcounty Citizens Advisory Board