



MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

VALERIE ERVIN
COUNCILMEMBER
DISTRICT 5

July 30, 2010

Good afternoon,

As you know, bringing community gardens to the County has been one of my top priorities since my election to the County Council. In partnership with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission's (M-NCPPC) Department of Parks, this initiative has grown significantly. The first community garden opened in May 2009 at Sligo Mill Overlook, and now the County has five community garden sites, and several more in the works, including another in south Silver Spring.

It has been rewarding to work with down-county residents to shape these gardens based on community input and need. In addition, it has been great to see that community gardens are being opened all over the Washington Metropolitan area. In February, this became particularly apparent when the Parks Department hosted the first ever "Community Gardens Networking Day," which my staff attended.

It is easy to explain why I am such a strong advocate for community gardens. The benefits of these community gardens are clear. Community gardens enhance the lives of residents by providing hands-on food production for adults and children; promoting social interactions among neighbors; encouraging self-sufficiency; beautifying areas; and providing habitats for urban wildlife. It is important to note that the demand for these gardens has required waiting lists to be generated at each of the County's community gardens.

However, as the Chair of the Council's Education Committee, I wanted to expand the benefits of community gardens to the Montgomery County public school system. This hands-on educational tool will help students learn healthy eating habits and environmentalism. The Department of Parks and MCPS are already working together to increase student access to outdoor education.

In December 2009, I convened a joint Education and Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee meeting on the community gardens initiative. While MCPS has established guidelines for community gardens in schools, such as butterfly gardens, food growing is expressly prohibited. MCPS officials told the Committees that this prohibition is due several concerns, including student safety, security, and liability. I questioned how community gardens have worked elsewhere, requested that Parks and MCPS discuss implementing food gardens in schools further, and asked them to test the feasibility of such a program.

I applaud the latest efforts over the last six months from organizations and residents to support my initiative, namely Gordon Clark of Montgomery Victory Gardens. Mr. Clark's open letter/petition to Dr. Jerry D. Weast, Montgomery County Public Schools Superintendent, in June made the case for community gardens in schools. Since then a growing number of civic and community groups in the County have joined together to request that Montgomery County Public Schools allow vegetable garden sites on school grounds. In the down-county area that I represent, the President's Council of Silver Spring Civic Associations (Prezco) also wrote to the Superintendent and Board of Education advocating a policy that supports and facilitates public school-based vegetable gardening in those schools where administrators, faculty, students and PTSAs commit to plant and maintain the gardens.

At the Montgomery Commission on Health's June meeting, I asked the Council's representative to vote in favor of supporting the Montgomery County Master Gardener Association and Montgomery Victory Gardens in their effort to remove the MCPS ban and promote the establishment of school vegetable gardens by signing the letter to the MCPS Superintendent. This motion was consistent with Commission's standing interest in the health and nutrition of the County's students, reduction of childhood obesity, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

As of July 2010, Parks has sent MCPS an outline of how they can work together to get community gardens on school grounds, which addresses student safety/security and liability concerns. In the meantime, Parks has identified 30 elementary schools and four middle schools where community gardens could be established on adjacent M-NCPPC-owned land. Further, Parks has proposed that MCPS utilize the Master Gardeners, Junior Master Gardeners, Green Kids and other groups in curriculum development.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Department of Parks, Montgomery Victory Gardens, Montgomery County Master Gardener Association, and all of the interested County residents for their hard work and support on this issue. I look forward to continuing to work with these many collaborating organizations in the future. I know that by working together we will continue to achieve great things.

Sincerely,



Valerie Ervin
Council Vice President
Montgomery County Council - District 5