

Testimony by Françoise Carrier, Montgomery County Planning Board Chair for 4.5.11 County Council Public Budget Hearing

Good evening. For the record, I am Françoise Carrier, Chair of the Montgomery County Planning Board, and Vice Chair of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

The Montgomery County side of the MNCPPC proposed a budget that would allow us to perform the same level of services in FY12 that we have managed to do with our sharply reduced FY11 budget. This includes funding for mandatory items such as our pension fund contribution, other post-employment benefits, and contractually obligated compensation adjustments. The County Executive has recommended a significant reduction for our agency -- even below FY11 funding levels -- that will impair our ability to provide our core services and make RIFs virtually unavoidable. In FY11, the impact of severe budget cuts was reduced through a retirement incentive program -- that option is not available this year.

If the budget is adopted as proposed by the Executive, consequences for our agency would be severe. The Planning Department would see its work force reduced by 35% to 42% since FY10. (The exact number depends on the outcome of labor negotiations.) Parks work years will have decreased between 19% and 27% in the past two years, while our acreage and managed assets have grown by 11%. And our CAS staffing would be reduced approximately 24% from the FY10 level.

The resulting impacts on our work program are sobering:

The Planning Department would deliver only one master plan in 2013, and in 2014 there would be none. Our important regulatory work would have to be cut, just as we are beginning to see an increase in applications. The economic impact of our work is significant: in 2007, JBG Corp. purchased a parcel in White Flint for \$1.5 million and sold it for ten times that amount four years later. The reason for this increase: the Planning Department's vision for the White Flint Master Plan.

A cut of this magnitude would force Montgomery Parks to lower its already reduced maintenance standards. The quality of our County's natural environment would continue to deteriorate as our ability to support water quality, deer management, non-native plant removal, reforestation, and environmental review efforts would dwindle. We are quickly reaching the tipping point where closing whole parks is a real possibility. What criteria do we employ to determine which parks close and which stay open when 91% of our residents frequent and value our County's award-winning parks system?

Our cut in FY11 was greater than the cuts taken by the County government, MCPS and Montgomery College combined. The Planning Department was the only county funded agency to RIF employees. A recent OLO study showed that work years for all of the county funded agencies except MNCPPC have grown over the past decade, while ours have steadily decreased. In FY12, we are the only agency facing another reduction, while the others will begin to make the slow climb back up. There have been calls for all employees in county funded agencies to be treated the same with regard to compensation and benefits; I would argue that equitable treatment of employees begins with an equal effort to avoid RIFs in all agencies.

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While I recognize the difficulty of the decisions facing you, if Montgomery County is to stay competitive regionally and nationally, we must retain the capacity to change master plans and zoning to accommodate infill development, and we must keep intact our nationally recognized park system, widely acknowledged as one of the primary reasons residents and businesses choose Montgomery County. If the budget is adopted as proposed by the Executive, we will suffer a diminishment of our work program from which it will be hard to recover.

I urge the Council to recognize this agency's contributions to the County's long-term fiscal sustainability and restore funding to M-NCPPC proportionate to the increases proposed for the other County agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.