

April 1st, 2025

Written testimony for Fiscal Year 2026 Montgomery County Operating Budget

Support of increases in funding for climate change, stormwater, environmental justice, and parks

Submitted by: Angie McCarthy, MD Conservation Advocate,
Nature Forward



To Montgomery County Council President Kate Stewart and the rest of the Honorable Council,

Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Naturalist Society) is the oldest independent environmental organization protecting nature in the DC metro region. Our mission is to inspire residents of the greater Washington, DC, region to appreciate, understand, and protect their natural environment through outdoor experiences, education, and advocacy. In our advocacy we prioritize human health and access to nature; biodiversity and habitats; fighting the climate crisis; and sustainable land use. We thank the Council for the opportunity to provide testimony for Montgomery County's FY26 Operating Budget.

Nature Forward would like to highlight that the County Executive's recommended budget only allots the Environment 3.2%¹ of the total operating budget. This is relatively small portion given that climate change has a direct impact on all communities, our infrastructure, and is a threat multiplier across all the other ongoing crises, especially for under resourced and unrepresented communities.

¹ <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Index.aspx>



We have divided our testimony into two categories which are:

- 1) **We Support**, these are areas we support the allocated funds in the proposed budget and,
- 2) **We Recommend**, these are areas where we recommend more funds to be added or modified. We also provide additional comments in both the areas we support and recommend funding. We ask the Council to consider and carefully review our budget requests as presented in our testimony.

WE SUPPORT:

We support and ask the Council to approve funding of the following categories.

- Nature Forward supports the County Executive's recommendation of **allocating \$379.2 million toward climate change in the operating budget**.² These funds will help the County continue with the implementation phases of the County Climate Action Plan.³
- **Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)**: We support the following DEP programs to be funded at the proposed amounts as listed below and provide additional comments.
 - \$3 million increase in DEP Watershed Restoration projects.
 - \$610,000 increase in energy efficient improvements to comply with the Building Energy Performance Standards (BEPS) for under sourced building owners, nonprofits, and small businesses. The additional funds will help the County reach its climate goals.

² <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/BASISOPERATING/Common/Chapter.aspx?ID=CC>

³ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/>



- \$350,000 to educate communities on the upcoming bag ban and to disperse bags to residents who may not have access to reuseable bags. We hope that DEP is able engage underrepresented communities and continue plastic reduction in an inclusive way.
- We support the ongoing funding to the continuous planning and implementation of the Countywide Flood Management study. County Council should begin preparing for the necessary billions that it will take to repair and improve our existing stormwater infrastructure and landscape to adapt to the more frequent and severe climate change driven storms. DEP's upcoming Comprehensive Flood Management Plan⁴ will give the Council the list of urgent projects that need to be completed and also a price range for these. It is critical that the County Council begins planning now before communities, lives, and properties are destroyed.
- We support the addition of funding of a paid internship program. By creating a green jobs pipeline, we can continue to grow environmental leadership within the County.
- **Racial Equity and Social Justice:** We support the County's increase of \$108,766 to the Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice, and hope they continue to create more equitable governmental practices.⁵ We support the \$300,000 enhancement to the school-based food assistance programs to ensure our youngest community members continue to thrive despite the economic instability of the region. ⁶

⁴ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/flooding/county/plan.html>

⁵ https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OMB/Resources/Files/omb/pdfs/fy25/psprec/FY25_BudgetinBrief.pdf

⁶ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OMB/Resources/Files/omb/pdfs/fy26/FY26OperatingBudgetPresentation.pdf>



- **Department of Transportation (DOT):** In Montgomery County, the transportation sector is the largest contributor⁷ to greenhouse gas emissions. The County must reduce its emissions by investing in transit to move people, instead of cars, around safely and efficiently. We support the following DOT programs to be funded at the proposed amounts as listed below and provide additional comments.
 - We applaud the County's efforts to make bus ridership more appealing by increasing the number and frequency of bus stops and bus shelters.
 - Continue to purchase zero emission vehicles for County use and expand EV charging stations across the County.
 - Gain funds to accelerate tree stump removal to increase the planting of new trees.
 - Continue to expand the County's protected bike lanes, especially along the upcoming Purple Line metro stations.

WE RECOMMEND

We recommend the County Council to consider adding additional funding to the following categories.

- **Trees** - we request these two additional funding areas to improve the health of trees in the County.
 - **Funding to be added for the removal of invasive plants on County property** - Invasive plants have quickly spread in recent years, overwhelming our parklands, roads, and neighborhoods. To control invasives on both park and non-park lands bordering our roads, Montgomery County should allocate additional funding to the County Park

⁷ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/climate/Resources/Files/climate/climate-action-plan.pdf>



service and DOT is dedicated to the removal of invasive species that are killing parkland and roadside trees.

- **Additional funding for tree stump removal** – There is a significant backlog of requests for street tree stump removal in Montgomery County. Failure to remove stumps in a timely fashion result in community blight and most importantly, prevents new street trees from being planted where existing trees once stood.
- **Parks:** The Parks Department maintains 421 parks across 37,000 acres of parkland, including community gardens, museums and historic buildings, hundreds of miles of natural and hard surface trails, nature centers, and provides programs and services that appeal to every interest and ability across County residents.⁸ Montgomery Parks is currently receiving a budget cut relative to inflation. Nature Forward asks the County Council to fully fund the Parks Department FY26 Operating Budget request as well as add back their \$2 million CIP cut.
 - If Parks are not funded at this rate, then there will be a freeze in community-based events, a hold would be put in place for improving environmental stewardship of natural areas, and all new acquisition development & management to expand parks schedule will not be able to continue given the budget reductions.
 - The \$2 million CIP cut impacts necessary stormwater mitigation into Pine Lake, and impacts a nearly 60-year-old Wheaton Regional Park.
 - These budget cuts also would result in reduction of trash removal, port-a-pot services, log jam removals, tree cutting shortages, and reduction of clean ups/stream sweeps.
 - Without funding the base for Parks, they may not be able to uphold their Union contracts. This is coming at a time when so many Montgomery County families are being impacted by federal job upheaval. Therefore, it is important MOCO Parks is fully funded for FY26.

⁸ <https://montgomeryparks.org/about/parks/>



- **Stormwater**: Montgomery County has done great work meeting regulatory requirements for stormwater, but these requirements are not enough to protect our streams and watersheds. While some watersheds' health has been improving, many are still declining. What streams need is getting more complicated, too: in the summer, climate change drives more explosive storms that overwhelm the kinds of projects installed to date; and in the winter, more and more salting ahead of unpredictable snowstorms leads to toxic salinity conditions in streams. Please see the Stormwater Partners Network written testimony for more detail on our stormwater-related recommendations.
- **Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC)**: Nature Forward believes that the Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC) needs to begin rising at more than the cost of baseline program delivery and keep pace with inflation, in order to increase our ambition as a County to truly return our watersheds to health. The FY26 recommended rate is designed to fund the County's current rate of ambition in meeting its relatively modest MS4 permit. This rate does not account for additional stormwater work beyond the permit, nor does it fund the ever-growing costs of flood management.
 - A possible suggestion is to calculate the WQPC as a proportion of pervious and impervious surfaces, so as not just consider the square feet of impervious areas.
 - We also support the Stormwater Partners Network (SWPN) suggestion of removing the Tier 7 cap on the Water Quality Protection Charge, to more equitably collect funds to mitigate stormwater from properties with significant impervious cover.
 - Please see the SWPN written testimony for more detail on our WQPC recommendations.
- **Flooding**: County council should begin considering and preparing ahead the upcoming billions which will take to repair and improve our existing stormwater infrastructure and landscape to adapt to the more frequent and larger climate



change driven storms. DEP's upcoming Comprehensive Flood Management Plan⁹ will give the Council the list of urgent projects that need to be completed and also a price range for these. It is critical that the County Council begins planning now before more lives continue to be impacted like those tragically lost during the 2021 Rock Creek Woods apartments flooding.

On behalf of Nature Forward and our 30,000 members and supporters, we recommend that the County Council support and consider our FY26 Operating Budget comments and recommendations. We believe allocating funds to these programs is important for the wellbeing of County residents, wildlife, and our waterways.

Sincerely,

Angie McCarthy

MD Conservation Advocate at Nature Forward

⁹ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/flooding/county/plan.html>