



P.O. Box 4024
Rockville, MD 20849

May 3, 2021

To,
The Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

Reg: County Executive's proposed Fiscal Year 2022 Operating Budget and Capital
Improvement Program

Dear Montgomery County Council President Hucker and members of the Council,

The Sierra Club Montgomery County Group is pleased to provide our comments on the County Executive's proposed Fiscal Year 2022 Operating Budget and Capital Improvement Program.

Department of Transportation

The **Fare Free RideOn** program has been very important during the pandemic, and we appreciate that it is still in effect. We also would like to see RideOn continue the "Fare Free" program going forward. Just as every child is entitled to a free public education, every resident should have access to transit mobility. Our excellent RideOn system is a vital public service — almost half the riders have annual household incomes under \$30,000 and almost 80 percent of riders are people of color. With Fare Free, the money they save can be used for household needs and will benefit the local economy. For others, taking the bus can be a way to support climate goals. The more people we can attract to ride transit, the fewer greenhouse gas emissions we'll create. For both equity and climate reasons, we hope the Council can find a way to keep RideOn Fare Free.

"Re-imagining RideOn" is an ambitious project to redesign and optimize the current transit service to address the evolving needs of the community. Note that "Fare Free" can help here, too, by reducing dwell time -- riders will no longer stand in line to board as folks search for their pass or fare money.

We are pleased that **the first BRT system** has been launched on US-29. However, until it travels in 100 percent dedicated lanes (not just 40 percent), it won't be true BRT. We are glad that the Department of Transportation (MCDOT) is conducting another study to evaluate where to put the dedicated lanes. We are encouraged by the upcoming US-29 bus-only lane pilot that MCDOT will test out in Four Corners. And we welcome the other bus-only lanes projects they

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are piloting. Bus-only lanes speed up bus time, which can attract more riders — all this will support both equity and climate goals.

We look forward to the next BRT corridor being built out, as well as many more bus-only lanes. As drivers see more and more buses traveling freely in their own lanes, the drivers can switch from driving their own cars to being chauffeured on the bus!

The County Executive made a proposal to single-track the Purple Line through the tunnel into the Bethesda station. He believes this would save the county \$54 million needed to construct a second parallel tunnel for the Capital Crescent Trail (CCT). The Purple Line is too far along to ask for a major redesign, and single-tracking will not accommodate additional and more frequent trains. In his CIP, Elrich has deferred funding for the CCT tunnel to Fiscal Year 2027 or later.

We urge the Council to reject the Elrich-proposed CIP amendment for a single-track Purple Line tunnel and to keep the funding schedule for the separate bike tunnel in place.

Department of the Environmental Protection: Recycling and Resource Management

The Operating Budget for the Department of Environmental Protection recommends funding for a number of important programs that will reduce waste and encourage recycling. We support the proposed increases in funding to:

- Implement a pilot program for curbside collection of food scraps at approximately 1700 residences in Subdistricts A and B. We would urge the county to combine this pilot with a unit-based trash pricing scheme (also known as “Pay-as-You-Throw”) to maximize waste diversion and provide essential data on best practices for a county-wide organics diversion program;
- Encourage more residents to adopt backyard food scraps composting;
- Enforce new and existing laws to reduce single-use plastics (through a shared enforcement staff person with the water quality program);
- Complete a waste characterization study (the last one was completed in 2017) to identify the types of materials being disposed of and identify waste diversion opportunities; and
- Improve recycling in downtown urban areas such as Silver Spring, Wheaton, and Bethesda.

We also strongly support inclusion in the FY’22 Capital Budget of funding to upgrade the existing Material Recycling Center at Shady Grove. The existing equipment is outdated and cannot process the increasing amount of materials coming in from a growing population.

In recent years, the county has had to send 40-45 percent of its commingled materials out-of-state at an annual cost of approximately \$1.2 million. With these upgrades, the newly refurbished recycling center would also have the potential to be transformed into an “Eco-Park” with the capacity to accept even more recoverable materials that are currently either being incinerated or sent to out-of-county landfills.

Department of Environmental Protection: Water Restoration Division

Full Funding for Stormwater Programs that Protect Parks and Watersheds

Montgomery County is to be commended for achieving the goals of previous MS4 stormwater permits, for being a leader in the adoption of *critical* green infrastructure practices, and for its new mapping and planning tools that enable more effective consideration of equity in the selection of stormwater management projects. Therefore, we support the full stormwater management program budget requests of both DEP and the Department of Parks.

The Department of Parks needs adequate staff and resources to manage our stream valley Park System, which is critical not only for stormwater management, but for the mental and physical health of County residents, as demonstrated during the pandemic. We support the full parks budget request of \$119 million for FY22.

We also support the full DEP operating budget request for water quality protection programs, which would add \$100,000 each for watershed grants, expansion of rainscapes, an anti-litter campaign, and a new manager for enforcement. These would be covered by a 5.9 percent increase in the Water Quality Protection Charge, which we also support. The Council might also consider a further increase to include a dedicated maintenance budget for stormwater facilities, the lack of which has been a perennial challenge for DEP.

However, these budget requests are a bare minimum. As documented in previous comments to the Maryland Department of the Environment regarding the draft MS4 permit covering the next five years to which Sierra Club was a signator,¹ compliance with the anticipated final permit is

¹ Choose Clean Water Coalition Comments on Phase I MS4 Permits, submitted to MDE January 20, 2021 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14ymBgP3n1mddJU4PS90V4LAoWty4tpFo/view?usp=sharing> - signed by Sierra Club Maryland Chapter and Stormwater Partners Network comments on Montgomery County draft Stormwater Permit, submitted to MDE January 26, 2021, <https://www.stormwaterpartnersmoco.net/current-recent-campaigns/2021/1/26/stormwater-partners-network-comments-on-montgomery-county-draft-stormwater-permit>.



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not alone sufficient to achieve clean water goals, increase climate resilience, or protect streams in Montgomery County.

The anticipated permit only requires half of the implementation rate that was achieved by the County in the previous permit cycle, thereby demonstrating that the Maximum Extent Practicable, is, at a minimum, at least twice the amount required in the permit.

Therefore, the County should go above and beyond what is required by the Draft MS4 Permit, and develop a long-term strategy to invest in the higher upfront costs of critical green infrastructure in the next budget cycle.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and recommendations from the Sierra Club. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

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