



HOWARD COUNTY AUTISM SOCIETY

May 25, 2020

Dear Members of the Howard County Council:

Thank you for all you are doing to ensure the health and safety of our residents during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your concern and actions on behalf of the community are greatly appreciated.

I am writing today on behalf of the Howard County Autism Society to express concerns regarding some of the proposed cuts to both the Capital and Operating FY21 Budgets. While there are many competing needs and desires here in the County, our focus is on the following three areas and we ask that you:

1.) Approve FY21 Capital Budget funding for Columbia's New Cultural Center (NCC) and Affordable Housing Project. Delaying the project would threaten millions of dollars in Federal funding already secured for affordable housing - dollars that must be used next year or lost forever.

This project will bring together a rich blend of affordable, accessible arts experiences for residents of all ages and walks of life right here in Howard County. The value of the arts to those with autism and other disabilities in our community cannot be understated.

At the same time, the multi-purpose facility will add 87 residential units that will assist the County in closing its affordable housing gap. As mentioned above, the Federal dollars have been secured but must be expended in the upcoming budget cycle. Failure to approve the remainder of the capital budget would threaten development of four additional multi-use projects that are to include almost half of the 900 affordable units the County committed to develop in the 2016 Downtown Development Plan.

We understand that there is no certainty about when and how the country's and our county's economy will rebound from the current economic crisis. There is certainty, however, that low and moderate-income renters will need housing now more than ever. Should the NCC project not advance in FY21, low and moderate wage earners, seniors on fixed incomes, and persons with disabilities with limited or no earning capacity will continue to be denied the opportunity to live in Columbia. And our community will be denied the opportunity to experience the vibrancy of disparate communities.

2. Fund the ADA Ramps Upgrade Program, a program that will upgrade sidewalk ramps and curb cuts in compliance with Federal American with Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA) requirements. These improvements are mandated by governmental laws to provide equal access to all members of our community. The County currently has 6,800 ramps that do not meet ADA requirements. Progress on these upgrades must continue.

3. Maintain \$2.2 million in funding to support Howard County Recreation and Parks. We are particularly concerned about the impact this cut would have on HCRP's Therapeutic Recreation Program. Many local families we serve who have a child with autism as well as autistic adults rely heavily on the expansive programming provided by HCRP for after school, respite, fitness, and social opportunities. The result would be a loss of three positions if these cuts move forward, strongly impacting their ability to provide services and programs to individuals with disabilities in the coming year.

We strongly urge you to maintain this funding in the FY21 Howard County budget. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Melissa Rosenberg, Executive Director

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