



Montgomery County Council

For Immediate Release

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Remarks by Council President Steve Silverman On Assuming Office

December 2, 2003 Rockville, Maryland

I want to begin by thanking my colleague Mike Subin for his leadership of the Council over the past year.

The truth is, if I was in a tight spot, there's no one I'd rather have sharing my foxhole than Mike Subin. Now, of course, he may well be the reason why we're both in the foxhole in the first place --- but never mind...

I also want to voice my appreciation to my colleagues on the Council for your support. Together we are going to face tough challenges this spring and beyond and together we will work our way through them. I want to make sure that foxhole is big enough for all of us because we are all in this together.

It won't be easy. Our school needs are growing. Frustration with our transportation system is rising. Housing prices are in the stratosphere and too many families find that a home in Montgomery County is no longer affordable.

Let me suggest some nitty gritty priorities for the coming year:

First, transportation. A year ago the Council approved a 10-year, \$7 billion blueprint for Montgomery County. Last spring we made a significant down payment on traffic congestion relief. Now is not soon enough to put more buses on the road, pour concrete for road improvements, and implement more "smart growth" around Metro stations. We must find the resources to make these things happen.

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Just as we've built on our successes in promoting smaller class size and all-day kindergarten in the schools, so too we must steadily advance our agenda to relieve traffic congestion.

Despite their frustrations, County residents are realists. They know that a decade of underfunding transportation and political gridlock can't be erased in a single year – or two – or four. Still, progress toward that goal is essential.

It's about more than the big projects – such as the ICC or the Purple Line or Corridor Cities. It's also about Nebel Street Extended in North Bethesda and Father Hurley Boulevard in Germantown.

As a recent *Washington Post* series points out, there are a host of bread and butter projects that we can do in the here and now to give traffic congestion relief. The pie chart in one of the articles tells an important story: yes, the major cause of congestion is insufficient road capacity. But a whopping 25% of congestion is due to crashes and disabled vehicles. So, let's put a traffic SWAT team on our roads to get the breakdowns off the road and onto the shoulders so the rest of the traffic can move.

The chart also shows that poor signal timing accounts for 5% of congestion. So, let's continue to make progress in synchronizing our traffic signals, especially between our neighboring jurisdictions. And, finally, let's make sure we keep up the pressure to get more people actually out of their cars and into transit with key efforts like Fare Share commuting incentives.

Just like traffic congestion, classroom congestion threatens our children's quality of life, and we are committed to finding solutions. In September, the County Council increased spending affordability guidelines by almost \$250 million over the next six years to ensure that sufficient bond funding will be available to fund needed capital projects. We also approved a school impact tax on new residential housing to provide nearly \$25 million each year in additional school construction funding.

But, there is more work to be done. The size and scope of providing quality educational facilities is immense. Not only do we need more schools and permanent classrooms, but also there are aging facilities to be modernized, gyms to be added, and core facilities to be upgraded. The recent recommendations by the Superintendent and Board of Education help us begin the task of bringing our schools back from the brink of congestive building failure.

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However, the current limited level of state aid will not permit us to meet our challenges. We need more than three times the amount of state aid than currently obligated under the state's minimum standards. We are sending to the state a list of \$59.9 million for eligible school construction projects.

Closer to home, we need to ensure that protecting the infrastructure of our schools remains a priority in our own County budget. The school system should receive a substantial portion of the recently approved increase in the bond funding targets. Otherwise, we can expect only continued delays in the effort to reopen schools, build new schools, and provide additional classrooms throughout the County.

I know that I'm sounding like a broken record – or I guess a skipping CD would be more up to date technologically – but we've got to move off the dime in promoting affordable housing. We all acknowledge there's an affordable housing crisis – we ought to start acting like it. It's taken a couple years just to get a good list of eight potential County-owned sites suitable for affordable and special needs housing. Maybe Rome wasn't built in a day, but probably a heckuva lot of it could have been built in the two years it took to get us this report.

Here's a goal of mine over the next year: I want to move at least one of these eight off the drawing board and into reality in a public-private partnership.

Finally, I want to lay down a challenge to our entire County to engage in an effort with profound practical – and moral – implications.

We have made great progress over last few years in making fundamental changes to help close the achievement gap in our schools -- with full day kindergarten and dramatically smaller class sizes in early grades in high need schools, retooled curriculum, and beefed up professional development.

Even as I speak, Superintendent Weast is outlining results of a study that shows significant progress by kindergarteners and second graders in reading, oral fluency, and comprehension – up from 39 percent to 70 percent over the last three years. The gains are especially strong among African American and Hispanic students in full-day kindergarten.

Now, we need to take the next step to mobilize community forces in this County to help make sure every child learns. In talking with Superintendent Weast, Board of Education member Gabe Romero, community leaders like Roscoe Nix and Ruby Rubens and others, all have agreed that to help a child learn inside the classroom, we have got to mobilize the community outside the classroom.

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A quick glance at the County's web site for volunteering and a look at the want ads for tutors and people to work with kids will show there are dozens of organizations, like the Gapbusters program of the Boys and Girls Club, the Church of the Ascension Tutoring program, the George B. Thomas Learning Academy; there are dozens of schools like Burnt Mills, Flower Hill, and Maryvale elementary schools, all calling for help for our kids;

And there are people who have answered the call. Beverly Valdez, Tom Bell, and a dozen other employees of Social and Scientific Systems in downtown Silver Spring tutor Woodlin Elementary school children who live in the Georgian Towers apartments. Their work is part of the Passion for Learning Initiative of the Business Roundtable for Education and helps children whose families come from all over the world. There is Eileen Lavine from Bethesda, who has been a Grandreader for years at Rolling Terrace Elementary school as part of an Interages initiative.

Let's mobilize our county's greatest natural resource, our people, to help all of our children learn.

Let's mobilize our only increasing natural resource, our older adults. Interages, an organization that fosters connections between the generations, has 150 older adults like Eileen Lavine who work with children and youth in 20 different schools. Let's recruit a "Closing the Gap" Corps of 1500 more adults for them and the scores of community organizations who are already working to help our children.

With Mike Subin, our Education Committee Chair, I intend to convene a summit of community, business, and government leaders who are involved in helping our children learn to figure out the best way to get the job done. They are already charter members of the "Closing the Gap" Corps and our challenge is to get them additional recruits. I know we are all up to the job. Our children need us.

Again, thanks for the honor of serving as your President for the coming year. Together, let's move the ball forward for Montgomery County's families.

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