

*Budget Testimony, April 2021, Alison Gillespie*

Thanks so much for allowing me to speak tonight. This testimony reflects my individual opinions and is not meant to represent any group or organization.

I'm here to ask that you fully fund Montgomery County Parks.

As many of you know, I'm a long time volunteer with the Parks, having worked as a bluebird trail monitor in Wheaton Regional for the last decade. I've also helped to clear trash and plant trees over the with stream stewardship groups and helped with playground refurbishment. Currently I'm serving on the Wheaton Regional Working Group to provide feedback for that park's revised master plan. I spend every hour I can hiking or biking in the county parks, too.

For years I've come here during budget season to tell you the value of our parks. I've told you how happy I am to see that my neighbors who have no yards in Forest Glen apartments can come to the park next to my house when they want to have a baby shower, birthday party, or barbeque. I love that people from every income level and background cherish these spaces equally in our county.

During COVID, parks became everyone's gym, everyone's church, everyone's preschool. When we had no where we could go, we all went outside, and our Parks system was heavily used and loved.

Parks leadership was able to greatly expand the amount of room available to people through the Open Parkways, and I will remain ever grateful for their creativity and flexibility when they made those decisions. Getting cars off of park roads helped make them feel really, truly grand. In a time of terrible sorrow and anxiety, the parks remained places full of joy, happiness, and safe socializing.

It was also amazing to have parks partner with DOT to close Newell Street to cars in order to expand the recreational potential of Acorn Park. This was a very needed amenity for South Silver Spring.

For me, the trails farther out in places like Little Bennett were a literal refuge when I had no space at home. I wish I had calculated the steps I hiked and all of the miles I have biked. But rest assured I was grateful I could do it so easily, any time I needed to clear my mind.

We've learned this year of the huge intrinsic value of our parks. Now we need to fund them to the fullest extent possible so that we can preserve and enrich them for years to come. I've been tagging all of you in social media posts from the Open Street Montgomery coalition. I hope you will remember those posts and our pictures as you make your budget choices and give the parks system as much money as possible so that they can do the best job possible.

Thanks for your time and consideration.

Alison Gillespie