

**Testimony on Behalf of County Executive Marc Elrich
on Bill 13-23, Montgomery County Urban Districts – Friendship Heights Urban District**

My name is Ken Hartman-Espada, Director of Strategic Partnerships in the office of the County Executive. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of County Executive Marc Elrich in support of Expedited Bill 13-23.

We greatly appreciate the partnership with Councilmember Friedson on this legislation. The County Executive supports efforts to re-energize Friendship Heights through the establishment of a Friendship Heights Urban District.

Friendship Heights is a densely urbanized housing, commercial, and retail center that is shared by Maryland and the District of Columbia. Standing on Western Avenue, there is no visible distinction between the two sides.

Once a premier regional retail destination, Friendship Heights is transitioning from malls and movie theatres to more neighborhood-serving retail. That transition has been difficult.

One of the common questions the County Executive receives from concerned residents is, “what can we do about Friendship Heights.” It is a discussion Councilmember Friedson is very familiar with and, as former Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center Director, I am too.

Placemaking activities, wayfinding, sidewalk activations, promotional activities, bus, bicycle and pedestrian connections are all objectives that have been envisioned and require a cooperative effort to accomplish.

After years of conversations and planning, a cross-jurisdictional “Friendship Heights Alliance”, has been launched with support from the community. Over the last year, the Friendship Heights Alliance received grant funding from DC Government and from the County Executive’s Business District Grant Program. The Business District Grant Program, which was funded by the Council in the FY23 operating budget, is intended to support the formation of non-profit commercial district management entities.

The Friendship Heights Alliance is now forming a Business Improvement District (BID) through legislation before the DC Council and has worked with us on the legislation before you. Establishing the Friendship Heights Urban District will fund Montgomery County’s participation in the BID. The specifics of the commercial district charge in this bill will match the fee DC is considering.

If established, the new Urban District would enter into a contract with the Friendship Heights Alliance. That contract, like the agreement with the Bethesda Urban Partnership, would be monitored by the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Director and reviewed every five years for continuation.

The legislation will also create an Urban District Advisory Committee that will advise the Executive, Council, and Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Director on the services being provided.

The Executive believes this focused effort with property owners, businesses, residents, Montgomery County, DC, and other communities surrounding Friendship Heights - led by the Friendship Heights Alliance - will help knit together Friendship Heights, contribute to a community identity, and attract people and companies to call Friendship Heights home.

Thank you.