

WUDAC testimony to Council at Public Hearing on Thursday, April 13, 2023 @ 1:30p session

Thanks for the opportunity to address you today. I am Jim Epstein and I am here today as the current Chair representing the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee (WUDAC).

Due to the limited time available today, we will summarize our comments on two items:

- Concerns about the FY24 Operating Budget for Urban Districts, and
- Support for the CIP amendments regarding the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center

We refer council members to WUDAC's previous communications and testimony including:

- Letter to CE regarding FY24 budget outlining community priorities dated March 7, and
- Letter to Education and Culture Committee dated March 24, 2023
- The full text of this testimony in written form.

Regarding the Operating Budget, we are disappointed that only one of the Urban District's requests has been funded in the proposed budget. Multiple concerns have been denied including public safety, pedestrian and vision zero improvements in the MCDOT budget, and investment in the Streebery.

In order to function more effectively and efficiently as an Arts and Entertainment District, there is a need for additional resources to provide oversight, accountability, management and publicity for events and branding. To strengthen the A&E district, it is important to develop a viable working model from the many examples in the community and elsewhere including those at Riverdale Development, Gateway Arts District, Bethesda Urban Partnership, BlackRock, Silver Spring Black Box, Glen Echo Partnership and others to promote Wheaton as a destination and home to a wide variety of traditional, ethnic, visual and performance arts.

It is also important to keep in mind Equity issues with regard to funding for Urban Districts, especially as the Council is potentially creating a fourth (4<sup>th</sup>) Urban District in the County. While we support this addition, it again raises the issue of equity and funding for the Wheaton Urban District. Unlike the other districts, Wheaton's funds are mainly from the general operating budget and therefore more directly and adversely affected by overall "across-the-board" cuts. While exploring funding models such as the current Urban District Tax vs a Commercial District Charge as proposed for Friendship Heights, it is important to remember that there needs to be a more stable, reliable and equitable mechanism to ensure that the members of our community are provided the same or equitable services as the rest of the County.

The second area is support for the two (2) pending CIP amendments regarding the proposed Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center. While we wholeheartedly appreciate and support these amendments as shown during your work session on Tuesday, it is imperative to reassess the Program of Requirements to reflect the current needs of access, pedestrian safety, and post pandemic utilization needs. It is important to remember that the existing POR was developed 5 years ago, prior to the pandemic, and was never made public. As identified in the E&C committee that endorsed these amendments and your work session this past Tuesday 4/11/23, there is an opportunity to reengage with the community and

others to include public input and create additional design elements that can help to create a viable facility. We appreciate the willingness that DGS and MHP have indicated to consider modifications during the design process.

We support the creation of an Arts Walk from the Library/Rec Center passing by the Arts and Cultural Center down to the Marian Fryer Plaza and the Metro, providing a safer, enjoyable and branding solution for Wheaton as an active A&E District. We also support the development of an “arts campus” type of environment utilizing multiple buildings including the unused space in the M-NCPPC HQ building, the unused firehouse at Grandview and Blueridge and others to house incubator, maker and studio spaces and possibly costume and other scenic design shop buildings for existing arts organizations in the County.

Thanks again for the opportunity to address these items as you consider how to balance the competing interests in the County. We truly appreciate the recent investments in Wheaton but also remind you that the nearly 12K square foot ground floor retail space in the \$180M revitalization project remains an unusable construction site and partly due to the slow recovery from the pandemic, has not yet produced the economic development promised. Now is the time to put action to the wonderful words of support that both the CE and Council members have espoused for Wheaton.

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