

Testimony for Montgomery County Council budget hearing

April 11, 2023 (1.30 PM) - Nithya Raghavan #34

In support of the Montgomery County Parks CIP and FY 24 operating budget

Good afternoon, my name is Nithya Raghavan. I am a Board member of the Friends of Brookside Gardens, a volunteer gardener at the Brookside Conservatory and a participant in the Wheaton Regional Master Plan work group. I am also a grateful resident of Silver Spring and an advocate of our own phenomenal Montgomery County Parks systems and the beautiful Brookside Gardens.

The pandemic, horrific gun violence, divisive politics, war, women's rights, floods and tornadoes - have all exacted a toll on our physical and mental health. Media in all forms, bombards us every minute with updates about this doom and gloom situation. Humanity is being besieged with negativity and mental health issues seem to rampant.

How can we shake off this sense of hopelessness and develop a more positive outlook on life? Nature helps us to do this. We in Montgomery County, are very lucky to have our extensive Parks System – all 421 of them including Brookside Gardens and the open parkways on Beach Dr. and Sligo Creek. These parks offer us therapy, mental health support and a low budget, safe travel destination. However, it comes at a cost - namely manpower, maintenance and money.

There has been an 80% increase in visits to Parks this past year alone and Brookside Gardens has clocked over a million visitors in 2022! Parks data indicates a phenomenal \$1,765,552 in volunteer service value in FY22 showing how invested our community is in the Parks system. What we desperately need is infrastructure support, significant budget increases and **NOT CUTS!**

In the current budget, our Parks have been shortchanged with a mere 4.2% budget increase compared to other services and it is a whopping \$4.3 million less than the Parks request! Our Parks have saved our sanity and kept us healthy. I therefore request you to **fully fund** the Parks operating budget for FY 2024.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Lady Bird Johnson who said, "*Where flowers bloom, so does hope!*" **WE NEED HOPE!!** So, please give more to our Parks and in return, our rewards from the Parks will be bountiful.

Thank you for your time.