



August 16, 2023

The Honorable Marc Elrich
Montgomery County Executive
Office of the County Executive
101 Monroe Street 2nd Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear County Executive Elrich:

As you know, the Fair Access Committee for Western Montgomery County was established to put a spotlight on the lack of equity in county investments in programming, services, and facilities in our area. In this our fifth year of advocacy, we would like to acknowledge the partnership that has been forged between our committee and its members, and the county's leaders. The ongoing reconstruction and modernization of our aged high school is testament to the fact that county leaders have recognized the lack of equity regarding its budget and policy decisions involving the Western County. We would like to thank you for your part in helping change this dynamic. There remains much work to do to ensure equity for our citizens and this letter outlines key next steps in that process.

Explanation of Budget Requests

We know funding proposals for the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 two-year CIP budget and Fiscal Year 2024-2029 Capital Improvements Program (CIP) are now being reviewed internally by county departments and agencies. That process will result in your submission of a proposed two-year CIP budget and the revised six-year CIP program in January of 2024 to the County Council. We are submitting this letter to help guide your administration in considering proposals that will affect the Western County.

Given the decades long lack of equity in county investment in the Western County that we believe the county government now recognizes, *we firmly believe that the budget requests we are making are not new spending but instead represent catch up spending, funds that, in the name of equity, should have been spent years ago but never were.* To put our area on par

with most other parts of the county, we believe it is only fair and equitable that these funding proposals be approved.

Background

As you recall, when the Fair Access Committee was launched in August of 2018, we released a [white paper](#) that outlined in detail the lack of equity in how the county (and frankly the state as well) has treated the Western County and Poolesville in its funding and policy decisions regarding programs, services and facilities that are widely available to most county citizens. The paper noted that the Western County, which encompasses the bulk of the Ag Reserve, represents almost a third of the land area of the county but contains only about 15,000 people in a county which has over one million residents. The lower two thirds of the county is largely urban/suburban in nature with policy and budget problems that are often related to dense populations. The metrics used by the county to make decisions simply do not work for the rural, open spaces of the lightly populated Western County.

There are a range of equity issues in our county. In the Western County, the biggest equity issues relate to **Distance, Isolation, Hidden Need, and Lack of Population**. Most Western County residents are between 10 and 20 miles from a community center or senior center. Approximately 2500 seniors (people over 60) live in the Western County. Many live alone, are indigent and have no means of transportation. A large, mostly hidden Hispanic population lives on farms and horse farms in the area. Public transportation in the Western County is not geared to the needs of people who must visit specialists or other medical professionals who often have offices in Germantown or along Shady Grove Road. While Poolesville High School will have a Wellness Center once its reconstruction is complete, unlike some high schools the center will not include facilities or staff who can provide medical and health care support. Students in our area have no close by facilities where after school programs, recreation programs, mentoring and related services can be offered.

The Fair Access Committee will soon be releasing a new white paper that builds on the one published five years ago. The new white paper makes the case that the Western County has many assets including a wide array of historic sites, outdoor recreation opportunities including swimming, boating, and hiking, and entertainment events ranging from those sponsored by the Town on its “Whalen Commons” green to those offered by Calleva, Locals, and Riverworks Art Center. Nearby breweries and wineries, including the just opened Crossvines grape crush facility and restaurant and events facility, offer even more opportunities for visitors to come, visit and explore.

The paper notes that Poolesville is the only major commercial site in the Western County with restaurants, stores of various kinds, and convenience store. It serves as a “hub” for the many “spokes” or sites of interest around and in the town that attract visitors. The more that can be done to strengthen Poolesville’s ability to not only serve Western County residents but also visitors, the healthier the area will be economically and socially. The paper will explain this

“hub and spoke” concept and make a series of recommendations for improvements and investments that the county should make to encourage more visitors to come enjoy and explore the many wonders of the Western County. In the coming CIP budget and plan, we believe there are three initiatives that should be funded. We outline each of those projects below.

CIP Budget Requests

Funding for a Community Center

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it is the importance of socialization and helping kids learn how to interact with others successfully and productively. Community centers provide the space for kids to have productive interactions with their peers, provide a safe space for after school relaxation and enjoyment, as well as a place to wind down from a tough day at school. They also allow them to participate in after-school programs, organized sports programs, provide time to play games on their own, offer space for mentoring programs, art and music projects and other mental health programs.

We have a large senior population in our area as noted. At the same time, we have a very active and engaged senior community led by the Poolesville Area Seniors Committee. They have established a very successful series of programs to engage seniors, everything from Pickle Ball to online lectures and educational seminars to movie and game nights. They do not have dedicated space to offer art programs for example and they do not have facilities for seniors to help them stay in shape with exercise equipment, mats and related equipment.

The Town of Poolesville has built a wonderful park system and offers summer camps for kids as well. Local non-profit sports groups sponsor camps for kids in sports such as basketball and baseball. Again, these groups do not have dedicated facilities they can use on a routine basis. The county’s recreation department offers almost no programming in the Western County and **has acknowledged that this is due in large part to the lack of dedicated facilities.**

The success we have had in securing funding for the reconstruction and modernization of the high school leads us to shift our focus to the second priority we discussed in our original white paper - **the construction of the community center with clinic space.** We originally proposed that the center be collocated with the high school. MCPS has supported this initiative and has dedicated space for the facility on the Poolesville High School grounds. Because of the lack of nearby health care services, our local charitable services organization WUMCO has sponsored a series of clinics of various kinds, but it has no dedicated facilities with equipment that could help make the services provided even more widely available. The proposed collocated community center with clinic space would be unique in the county but as noted earlier the needs in the Western County do not fit the typical metrics used by the County. Our proposal is appropriate and fits the needs of our citizens.

We know you supported funding for a "Program of Requirements" or POR for a community center in Poolesville. We have been working with representatives from the Recreation Department and the facilities planning staff in the county on what a community center would look like for our area. We very much appreciate the support of your staff in this work and expect that in the next few weeks that the POR will be released, setting the stage for funding to build the facility.

Budget Request

We request that in the FY2024-25 two-year CIP budget proposal, full funding for the design and construction of Poolesville's community center be included in the list of "Candidate Projects". We are not certain of the funding required to make this project a reality and ask that the OMB work with the appropriate agencies to develop the project's scope and funding requirements.

Funding for a Year-Round Swimming Pool and for the Design and Construction of a Performing Arts Center

As noted, over the last few years, we have continued to focus on strengthening the "hub" of Poolesville with needed county services and programs as well as improving the county's focus and support for the many attractions in the "spokes" or venues that exist in Poolesville and all around the Western County. While the community center project is a priority, we know that the partnership we have forged with the county and the increased attention being paid to the needs of the Western County is an opportunity we should not ignore. This leads us to request funding for a year-round enclosure for the swimming pool as well as securing funding to complete the design and construction of a performing arts center in the "Historic West End" of Poolesville.

Year-Round Pool

We are very grateful that the county constructed an outdoor swimming pool for our area some years ago. We have a very active and successful swim team and, as noted, also have a large and growing aging population. In addition, we have a large population of young families with children. All these groups would benefit tremendously if the pool could be covered so that it can be used year-round. As it is, this wonderful facility is only available about three months out of the year, and it is such a waste to have it remain idle for much of the year. Further, the programs that the Poolesville Area Seniors Committee offers, and those of our very successful swim club, could be enhanced significantly if the facility could be used all year long. An all-year swimming pool would also dovetail nicely with the new community center, expanding recreational, physical education and injury recovery programs of all kinds to enhance the lives of Western County residents.

Budget Request

We request that in the FY2024-25 two-year CIP budget proposal, full funding for the design and construction of a cover and associated infrastructure be included to transform our pool into an all-year facility. We are not certain of the funding required to make this project a reality and ask that the OMB work with the appropriate agencies to develop the project's scope and funding requirements.

Performing Arts Center

Riverworks Art Center, Inc., a local non-profit dedicated to providing meaningful, fulfilling, and healing community engagement through the arts by making the town of Poolesville a hub for art classes, performances, exhibitions, and cultural programs. Riverworks currently holds free or low-cost art events, storytelling, festivals, and concerts, offers visual art, music, writing, and theater classes, hosts rotating art exhibitions, and brings together local musicians of all ages for weekly jam sessions. By design, Riverworks' programming includes entry points for those who have felt left out of other art centers, whether because of the price or because making art simply felt intimidating.

To expand the many forms of art presentation and learning it can support, the group recently worked with the Town of Poolesville to purchase the "Old Methodist Church", an early 1800's structure which has served many purposes over the years. Since the purchase, Riverworks has been working to raise funding to transform the old building into both a venue for the performing arts and a center for the teaching of the arts. It has secured some state funding and has raised significant funding from local supporters. The proposed center would be a smaller counterpart to other art and performing arts centers in the county like the Blackrock Center for the Arts. Blackrock initially received significant state funding and matching county funds to support the design and construction of its facilities.

Budget Request

We request that in the FY2024-25 two-year CIP budget proposal at least \$1 million of the \$3 million that is needed to fully fund the construction of the proposed facility be included. We use the phrase "at least" because Riverworks and our community are working to raise funding from the state and private sources. We are trying very hard to make this approach work but candidly the more county funding we can procure, the better the prospects for the project. In other words, \$1 million is a bottom-line figure but we hope more can be obtained from the county.

We are very appreciative of your willingness to consider these matters. Our committee and residents stand ready to help move these projects forward.

Sincerely,

Original Signed

Link Hoewing
Chair
Fair Access Committee for Western Montgomery County

On Behalf of the Committee:
Sarah Paksima, Member and Commissioner of Poolesville
Ed Reed, Member and Vice President of the Commissioners of Poolesville
Kevin Schramm, Member
Maria McGuire, Member
Adam Sroka, Member

cc:
Montgomery County Council
Montgomery County Board of Education
Superintendent of Schools for Montgomery County
Commissioners of Poolesville
Greg Ossont, Department of General Services
Greg Wims, Regional Director, Montgomery County Government
Dale Tibbitts, Special Assistant to the County Executive