

EE Rivas Testimony 07 April 2025
MC County Council Proposed Budget Hearings

Good afternoon. My name is Edgar Rivas. I offer this testimony on behalf of Montgomery Parks budget request for a 7.2% increase for their budget.

I come to you as a County-trained, Master Naturalist Volunteer, and as Past Vice-Chair of the County Commission on Aging, the VP of Potomac Community Village and a member of the national Village to Village Network's Advisory Council.

Montgomery Parks requested 7.2% budget increase to maintain services. The County Executive proposed 3.2% for Parks, while proposing other departments average increases of 6.7%.

Without full funding, Parks cannot cover employee compensation, contractual obligations, nor the rising costs to maintain parks at the level that our communities want and expect. Despite growing community needs, Parks can't introduce new programs or services without adequate funding.

Part of Parks funding request is to support one FTE to work exclusively on older adult programming across the Nature Centers. This position could potentially help the Parks Adaptive Sports programs as well, given that many elders would also benefit.

According to a 2023 estimate developed by the Census Bureau (American Community Survey), our County's 60+ population makes up 29.7% of the County's total, over 314K older adults.

Our County's has over 28 aging-in-community Villages serving at least 3,600 elders, offering services & social connections in their communities. A few of the Villages offer naturalist walks, respite in the parks, birdwatching, etc. The ability to dedicate one Parks employee to enhance such programming (and support Village efforts) would offer great benefits to older adults and their caregivers throughout the County.

A 2021 NIH study found that participants in a therapeutic horticulture program maintained healthy sleep patterns and psychological health, as well as showed reduced anxiety and improved cognitive functioning after

their participation in these programs. Many other studies have documented the benefits of what originated in Japan and is known as “forest bathing.”

Parks already are programming around the importance of spending time in natural settings, planting native plants and eliminating invasive plants county-wide. Such programming benefits all Montgomery County residents, especially those living in communities that don't have access to parks due to transportation, urban environments, etc.

Some examples of good work our Nature Centers are already doing to benefit the County's special populations:

1. Brookside Nature Center offers Turtle Talks for learning about Eastern Box Turtles. I conduct some of those talks in Spanish when Latino families are present.
2. Locust Grove Nature Center offers elders the opportunity to participate in a citizen science project called Feeder Watch, identifying and counting bird species.
3. Last summer, I was part of a group of bilingual naturalists that helped Meadowside Nature Center and Parks' Adaptive Sports program conduct a day of outdoor activities for Latino families with children on the spectrum.
4. Lastly, the Nature on Wheels program travels to marginalized communities to offer nature-oriented activities to people without easy access to the parks and nature centers. This program could help not only the community at large in non-park areas, but would highly benefit individuals with disabilities (physical and/or cognitive) and older adults with limited mobility such as those living in congregate housing facilities.

Please help Montgomery Parks offer targeted services and enhanced programming in our communities by granting at least their 7.2% budget increase request.

Thank you.

At least