

Ms. President, Mr. Vice-President and distinguished members of the Montgomery County Council, I am Ekaterina Bennett, resident of Montgomery County, Member of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs and Park Advocate for Black Hill Regional Park located in Boyds, Maryland. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of the Parks Department's funding request for FY2026, which covers important funding for Black Hill Nature Programs.

I am a mom of two small children and we spend most of our days at Black Hill Regional Park because it is a beautiful, welcoming and fun place to be. I want to highlight the wonderful work of the park naturalists there. For the past 10 years park naturalist Katrina Fauss has been running a drop-off forest school for children 3.5 to 6 years old called "Preschool in the Park". This program is of enormous value to my family. Dedicated and loving park naturalists and staff (Katrina Fauss, Sujata Roy, Julie McGuffin, Lynette Lenz, Christy Korzen, Katie, Rosetta) and volunteers (Margie Powell and others) teach my five year old daughter social and emotional skills, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, respect and care for nature and people. Thanks to this program, my husband and I feel like there is a village of caring adults that help us raise our kids to be kind and responsible human beings. Apart from Preschool in the park, park naturalists organize play days and hikes for parents and young children, hikes and guided tours for older children and adults, family fishing, birding, campfire events, an annual mudfest and more. In the summer, park naturalists (Tina Stachura, Sujata Roy, Katrina Fauss) organize summer camps for children and there are always many more children interested in participating than there are spaces available.

Through one of these events I met two other moms who quickly became dear friends, Kara Constantine and Daniella Chambers. Their friendship has truly been a blessing for me through highs and lows of motherhood in the past two years. This is just one of the examples of how the work of the park staff helps people connect to their community and find friends.

It would be an irreplaceable loss for our community and Montgomery Parks in general if our beloved park naturalists and staff had to look for work elsewhere because of the budget cuts.