



April 9, 2025

**Written Testimony for Montgomery County's Fiscal Year 2026 Operating Budget
Submitted by Rock Creek Conservancy**

Dear Montgomery County Council,

Rock Creek Conservancy (Conservancy) is a nonprofit watershed organization protecting Rock Creek and the philanthropic and stewardship partner to the entirety of Rock Creek (National) Park. Our mission is to restore Rock Creek and its parklands as a natural oasis for all people to appreciate and protect. Rock Creek meanders 33 miles through Montgomery County and Washington, DC, crossing federal lands as well as District, city, county, and state boundaries. The Rock Creek watershed is home to over 500,000 residents, and as the majority of the watershed is located in Montgomery County, the Conservancy appreciates the County's investments that protect Rock Creek and its parklands. We thank the Council for the opportunity to provide testimony for Montgomery County's FY26 Operating Budget. Our feedback and recommendations are detailed below.

For the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP):

The Conservancy is overall pleased and supportive of the proposed DEP budget, and we support the entirety of the proposed Watershed Restoration budget.

Montgomery County has done great work meeting regulatory requirements for stormwater, but these requirements are not enough to protect our streams and watersheds. While some watersheds' health has been improving, many are still declining. What streams need is getting more complicated, too: in the summer, climate change drives more explosive storms that overwhelm the kinds of projects installed to date; and in the winter, more and more salting ahead of unpredictable snowstorms leads to toxic salinity conditions in streams.

DEP, its staff, and its contractors have demonstrated that they are capable of doing more than the MS4 permit requires, and the increases in the proposed FY26 budget demonstrate some of the ambition we would like to see even more of. Council should direct the Department and provide the requisite funds to go above and beyond the minimum MS4 permit requirements, even though the state requires only a minimum level of effort (half that of the prior MS4 permit).

One of the ways to go beyond the permit's minimal requirement is to identify additional sources of revenue that can be directed to stormwater management, such as the Water Quality Protection Charge (WQPC). We support the recommended rate increase to \$147/Equivalent Residential Unit. This charge needs to keep pace with inflation and increase above the cost of baseline program delivery in order to truly return our watersheds to health. Spread across 368,000 ERUs, the proposed rate is designed to fund the County's current rate of ambition in meeting its relatively modest MS4 permit. This rate does not account for additional stormwater

work or planning beyond the permit, nor does it fund the ever-growing costs of flood management, nor does it fully fund major structural repairs as facilities age and deteriorate.

We also recommend removing the Tier 7 cap on the WQPC to more equitably collect funds to mitigate stormwater from properties with significant impervious cover. Properties with large amounts of impervious cover create water quality and flooding problems yet they pay less per square foot than everyone else. The Council should work with the Department of Environmental Protection to revise the tier structure as soon as possible. This will have the added benefit of helping to pay for the increasing costs associated with aging infrastructure and changing rainfall patterns.

Federal funds are less reliable than they used to be (both appropriated funds and competitive grants), so local revenue sources are important.

For the Parks Department:

The Conservancy asks the Council to fully fund the Parks Department FY26 Operating Budget request. The Parks Department requested a 7.2% increase to provide the current service level and account for inflation. Unfortunately, this proposed budget only provides our parks a 3.2% adjustment to provide the same services. This seems unconscionable given that other county departments received on average an increase of 6.7%.

The Parks Department maintains 421 parks across 37,000 acres of parkland and provides valuable programs and services to all County residents. Without adequate funding, the Parks will not have sufficient staff and resources to effectively manage our parks and conduct essential services. For example, this would negatively impact the Parks efforts to remove litter and trash from our parks and manage invasive plants. Invasive plants are a major issue in this region and beyond, threatening the health of our forests and the benefits our communities receive from a healthy forest such as clean air, clean water, and cooler temperatures. The Parks has made great progress thus far in invasive management, but there is still more work to be done to restore our forests. It is important that all jurisdictions in the region continue to move this work forward to leverage each other's efforts and to continue to build on the collective impact as invasive species are not bound by jurisdictional boundaries.

Parks drive our quality of life, and in challenging economic times, they offer affordable recreational opportunities that are critical to the well-being of our community members.

We recommend that the County Council support and consider our FY26 Operating Budget comments and recommendations. The continued and increased support of our Department of Environmental Protection and Parks Department are vital investments in climate change mitigation and preparation, environmental protection, stormwater management, and forests that we must make to ensure Montgomery County remains a thriving and healthy place for all its residents.