

Written Testimony of Monika Carter Laws
On behalf of Friends of Black Hill Discovery Center and Nature Programs
Montgomery County Council Public Hearing on the FY26 Operating Budget
for Montgomery County Parks
April 8, 2025

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Montgomery County Council, I am Monika Carter Laws, resident of Montgomery County, Board Member of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs and Park Advocate for Black Hill Regional Park located in Boyds, Maryland.

I have served on the Board of Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs for more than fifteen years. It is my pleasure to appear before you this afternoon on behalf of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs to testify in support of Montgomery Parks Foundation's budget request for FY 2026, which covers important funding for Black Hill Discovery Center and Nature Programs.

The County Executive's recommended budget has slashed Montgomery Parks FY26 operating budget request, failing to fund essential services or cover the cost of paying Montgomery Parks' approximately 870 career employees.

The Parks Department requested a 7.2% funding increase to maintain the current services and programs, but the Parks Department only received a 3.2% increase in this regard. Meanwhile, other county departments received an average of 6.7% just to maintain their services.

As I understand it, 80% of Parks' overall budget is personnel, so these cuts could severely impact the ability to hire new staff, keep on seasonal staff, and create any new career positions.

Specifically, the Nature Centers had put in a request for a new, full-time position to focus on expanding 55+ programming across the 5 Nature Center sites, which fits into their PROS (Parks, Recreation, and Open Space) 2022-2027 master plan and would focus on the largest growing age demographic in Montgomery County. With the current projected budget, that position would not be able to be created to coordinate programs at Black Hill Regional Park or other Parks across the county. This would be a travesty for the Black Hill Regional Park, which serves

neighborhoods in Germantown, Gaithersburg, Boyds, Clarksburg and other connected communities.

Black Hill Regional Park provides a wealth of meaningful services to our public and private school communities within Maryland and the DMV, regular and well attended pre-school programming, and programming for families, adults and our most prized senior citizen community members. Simply put, Black Hill Regional Park and the Discovery Center Nature Programs provide low-price and often no cost to attend programming to the general public and free educational programs to all Montgomery County Public Schools. In our view this is a worthwhile public service endeavor to provide exceptional nature park experiences for our global and diverse community.

If the Council does not restore Park funding here, Black Hil Regional Park and other Montgomery Parks entities will struggle to: (1) Properly maintain our parks, including new and expanded sites, (2) keep all park facilities open, (3) maintain staffing levels and (4) cover the rising costs for supplies and materials and offer the programs and services that so many residents rely on.

In addition to the cuts to Parks operating budget, the County Executive has also proposed cutting Parks Capital Improvements Program, asking for a \$2M reduction in Council- approved GO Bonds in our FY25-30 CIP, including a \$1.5M cut in FY26, which will cancel needed improvements to many deserving Parks including Black Hill Regional Park that were called for in the park's master plan.

The Black Hill Discovery Center and Nature Programs enhancements were budgeted and scheduled for FY'2026 with any carryovers to FY' 2027, so the planned FY' 2026 budget "cuts" mean that Black Hill's initiatives and requests for native plant gardens, expanded teen programming, new sustainability programs, more boat programming on Little Seneca Lake, and more are not being funded under the current FY 2026 Operating Budget. So where does this leave Black Hill Regional Park Discovery Center Nature programs in the 2026 budget?

Black Hill Discovery Center and Nature Programs provide environmental education for local schools, offer a rich diversity of natural history and recreation opportunities for all visitors to Black Hill Regional Park, as well as creating and maintaining spaces for play and educational enrichment and awareness for

people of all ages within our very diverse community. On average, the Black Hill Regional Park Discovery Center serves over 45,000 visitors annually.

Please note, Black Hill Discovery Center staff have persisted over many years now to bring a net-zero energy and water, state-of-the-art Sustainable Education Every Day (SEED) classroom to Black Hill but additional funding is still needed to improve the site and make it more useable for our forest preschool program and the Clarksburg/ Germantown community. This site also includes a community garden and storm water management initiative. The SEED Classroom is an incredible teaching tool to help meet guidelines set forth in Montgomery County's Climate Action Plan.

It is also important to note that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Hill Discovery Center staff and the Board of the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs worked tirelessly to engage and support Montgomery County residents in their pursuit and expressed need for access to fulfilling and enriching programs at Black Hill Regional Park. This tireless effort continues to this day and will continue forward into the future with the support of the Council.

The Board of Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs is an all-volunteer Board. As Board members, we dedicate considerable time out of our professional and personal lives to assist Black Hill Discovery Center staff to meet their community Park goals. Volunteer coordination is a critical part of building community and daily, Black Hill Nature Programs staff do an outstanding job in sustaining and growing the volunteer efforts associated with Black Hill Regional Park across the volunteer spectrum.

Collectively, Black Hill Discovery Center and the Friends of Black Hill Nature Programs continue to answer the call of our Montgomery County residents and other visitors to Black Hill to provide a stellar Park experience at Black Hill. We are now therefore calling on the Montgomery County Council to join us in this effort by providing full funding for Montgomery Parks in the FY' 2026 Budget as requested by the Montgomery County Parks Foundation.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please note, the Board of the Black Hill Nature Programs stands ready to work with the Montgomery County Council

and Montgomery Parks Foundation to secure adequate funding for Black Hill Regional Park programs and initiatives.