

Testimony in Support of Montgomery Parks Operating Budget 2025

I moved to Montgomery County (Silver Spring) in 2000. When I retired in 2021, the number one reason I decided to stay in Montgomery County was the outstanding parks system. I not only regularly use the local parks, hiking trails, and suburban gems like Brookside Gardens, I volunteer my time and effort there. I have volunteered as a Gardener's Assistant at Brookside Gardens (e.g., expert weed puller...but someone has to do it!) since 2023, as a Level 2 Certified Weed Warrior in the Parks since 2022, and in 2025 I will additionally donate my time as a docent in Brookside Gardens Butterfly Experience.

When I am at the Gardens, I see mothers with small children, families walking together, the elderly and people with disabilities (many of whom can navigate the garden with walking aids such as canes, walkers, and wheelchairs), as well as friends just walking together to relax and socialize. It is well established that spending time in green spaces offers numerous mental health benefits, including reduced stress, improved cognitive function, and overall well-being (see [Science Direct article](#)). Yesterday I was at Brookside for my Docent training, and the Gardens was packed with families, friends, and many elderly with walking aids — on a FRIDAY, no less, just out enjoying a beautiful spring day in a beautiful relaxing place! If the Gardens was closed, open limited hours only, or — heaven forbid — turned into a fee only facility, how many of those people would still be able to enjoy and reap the benefits of its peaceful serenity? It is too much to ask, for the County to invest in our mental health and well being in this way?

Being able to walk in the peace of a natural environment, somewhat trendily being called “Forest Bathing” these days, not only relieves stress and improves mood, but also can reduce blood pressure and lower blood sugar, two significant health issues in our County population. Weed Warriors volunteer our time and effort to remove non-native invasive (NNIs) plants from County trails and parks, clearing the way to make the trails passable for everyone and not overgrown with rapidly spreading plants like the thorny Multiflora Rose, for example. We can whack at the NNIs, but the trails need constant maintenance of stream crossings, washout repair, downed tree removal, etc. Just a few days ago I was on the Muddy Branch Trail, rejoicing in the signs of spring: native spicebushes in bloom, redbuds just about ready to pop out, and clumps of blooming daffodils that had escaped from suburban gardens (stream crossings were a bit muddy but OK!). After a winter of not hiking, I was pooped at the end of the hike, but I was very relaxed and happy at the end. The Muddy Branch is ONLY ONE of the County's many outstanding streamway parks that I and many other people use regularly. We call that one “Horse Farm” since we start at the Potomac Horse Center (now Special Park). We love “355 North”, or the Seneca Creek

Greenway trail north from the Route 355 trailhead. We frequently use “Burnt Mills Dam” to do a loop of the Northwest Branch and Rachel Carson Greenway Trails. Another great hike is “Archery Range”, starting from trailhead by the archery range at Lake Needwood and going north to the Agricultural Farm Park and beyond). We use “Kengla House” at Lake Frank (until last year or so, we used to bushwhack that one from under the Muncaster Mill bridge, connecting from the Lake Frank trails, where we start at the parking lot near the Lake Frank Dam). And many more! If you hang out on those trails you will run into me and my friends multiple times over the course of hiking season. Or Weed Warriors whacking invasives. Come join us!

We live in stressful times. Investing in our valuable green spaces so that they are available to all County residents is very important to do. I’m doing the best I can, contributing my time and effort as a County volunteer, but we need funds to maintain those precious resources and to build upon and improve the outstanding parks and facilities that we now have. Let’s go forward into 2025 and beyond!

Cathleen Cooper