

January 21, 2026

The Honorable Natali Fani Gonzalez
President, Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

SUBJECT: Comsat Property in Clarksburg

Dear Council President and Councilmembers:

I regret having to disagree strongly with my previous agency, the Montgomery County Planning Department, on the fate of the Comsat Property in Clarksburg. This is a property that should be preserved and integrated into a new first-class development. It should not be lost.

I know that others will provide information about the history of this important building and the scientific breakthroughs that happened in it, but I want to focus on its architectural importance as one of our few truly nationally significant County landmarks.

When I was the County Planning Director, I emphasized design excellence – not for esoteric reasons, but for economic development reasons. Montgomery County needs to stand out from the other very attractive suburban counties that surround it by focusing on the best design and the most unique community centers that are possible. The Comsat building is an example of an earlier generation of County leaders who believed in this goal. The building was designed by a world-class architect, Cesar Pelli, and located prominently along I-270 to show the world that Montgomery County's High Tech Corridor was of national significance and a place to be reckoned with. It has major symbolic significance and was actually featured in books on the history of the County as exemplifying the future.

Cesar Pelli is one of the most important and influential 20th century architects. In addition to Comsat, he designed Reagan National Airport, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur (the world's tallest twin skyscrapers), and the World Financial Center in Battery Park in New York City. When we discussed the Comsat building in the early 2000's, Mr. Pelli came to Montgomery County and offered free design advice about integrating it into a new community development. He stated that it was one of his most important early

designs. No wonder that architects like Frank Gehry and Robert A.M. Stern (both recently deceased) wrote strong letters in the early 2000's pleading with Montgomery County to save the Comsat building.

I am not convinced that it is impossible to save this building and integrate it into a new development. In addition to the suggestions offered by Mr. Pelli, I personally connected the current owners with the company that saved the National Park Seminary in Forest Glen (which was in worse condition and much quirkier/difficult to retrofit). The head of that company – the Alexander Company – gave the current owners ideas about how the build could be retrofitted as housing and even affordable housing. However, the owners did not pursue any of these ideas.

I also, while Planning Director, agreed to recommend undertaking an amendment to the Clarksburg Master Plan specifically so that the Comsat property could explore zoning options that would add value to the property (which had old zoning that made the 200 acres essentially undevelopable and useless) with the goal that this added value would make the retrofitting of the original portion of the Comsat building viable. Clearly, this win-win situation was not pursued.

I hope the County Council will be open to looking for a solution to this property that thinks outside the box and does not result in simply another pleasant Upcounty townhouse community. There's nothing wrong with townhouse communities, except when they completely replace a world-class piece of architecture and a symbol of Montgomery County's high tech aspirations.

During my time in Montgomery County, I heard many times about what a mistake it had been to tear down the historic Rockville town center and replace it with a failed shopping mall. People said again and again "What were they thinking?" I truly hope that in a few years – if the Comsat building is destroyed – we will not be hearing our residents and others say "What were they thinking?"

Sincerely,

Gwen Marcus Wright

Retired Montgomery County Planning Director

Current Member, Washington DC Zoning Commission