

**Testimony of Montgomery Preservation, Inc.(MPI) Re: COMSAT Laboratories, Clarksburg
Montgomery County Council Public Hearing on Clarksburg Gateway Master Plan, January 21, 2026**

Eileen McGuckian, president of Montgomery Preservation, Inc. speaking for MPI's mission to protect and promote our rich architectural heritage and historic landscapes. I also speak as a historian and preservation professional who helped to write Montgomery County's ordinance and served as the first HPC chair 45 years ago.

If this were 250 years ago, we would be oriented to the Great Road, the Main Road, winding from the port of George Town past Hungerford's Tavern and Dowden's Ordinary and headed north into the Frederick County frontier. Only a few cherished landmarks remain from that time and the two centuries that followed.

Some of you were here in the 1960s, a decade of road-building and suburban population explosion. When our interstate (first known as U.S. Route 240) opened in 1957 to connect the towns of Washington, Rockville, Gaithersburg, Clarksburg, and Frederick, it cut through large dairy farms. The road soon was dotted with Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Standards and Atomic Energy Commission, followed by bursts of residential subdivisions and new commercial centers nearby. It is no accident that entrepreneurs purchased property visible from the new highway to announce their unique, ground-breaking presence at COMSAT.

Designated on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation are three Clarksburg sites. Clarksburg Historic District, Clarksburg Schoolhouse, and Dowden's Ordinary are locally important, but none match the national and international significance of COMSAT.

How can you ignore this? For the past 20 years, COMSAT has been identified by citizens, historians, architects, researchers for Maryland Historical Trust survey of Modernism, the National Register of Historic Places, twice by unanimous HPCs, and currently by more citizens and professionals connected with this site.

Almost 50 years ago the County Council enacted a law to identify the best of every era of our history. The process to designate sites on our Master Plan for Historic Preservation has been tested and generally found to be sound.

It is important to note that Owner Approval is NOT a criterion for historic designation, nor should it be, and nor has it ever been. Designation doesn't totally guarantee survival. But failing to officially recognize such a unique structure is never the best option for County Officials.

COMSAT is truly extraordinary. When it opened in 1969, it followed a remarkable decade, after Sputnik and Voyager, and the beginnings of satellite communication in a partnership chartered by Congress of the private company COMSAT and the quasi-public company Intelstat.

The design of the COMSAT building was as modern as the nature of the business, and as promising as the dawn of a global communication industry. It was designed by Cesar Pelli, who would become one of the most prominent architects of his time and who remained proud of COMSAT for the rest of his career and life.

In the 20th century, COMSAT continued the growth of Montgomery County as the venue for new industries. Our technology corridor began with atomic energy, then satellite communication, and then biosciences. At COMSAT Labs were conducted the research, design, and implementation of innovations such as real-time international voice communication, live international broadcast television, and videoconferencing.

Montgomery County is fortunate to have COMSAT here, still in its original setting. It meets the majority of criteria available to judge significance in our code. The Council plays the final role here, as intended by the creators of our preservation program. Your attention to the criteria outlined in our County Code is required in the designation process.

It is not difficult to imagine this extraordinary building moving on to its next phase, with new life in one or more creative uses. This has been done with special buildings everywhere in the United States, everywhere in the world, even in the Washington Metro area. Yes, this requires support from a variety of sources, but the result will be spectacular and you will not regret deciding to save COMSAT.

Its survival will be enhanced by designation and financial incentives at County, State, and National levels. The owner need not reuse the entire building. Save only the iconic Cesar Pelli section and build around it; adapt it for a new use -- how about a library? incorporate its history into the experience of new residents, workers, and visitors. This is an opportunity, not an impediment.

MPI urges the Council to designate COMSAT Laboratories on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Once significance of the building is established, next steps are for the owner, neighbors, interested users, and public officials to together plan a future for this iconic property and some land around it. Keep in mind the Silver Theatre & Shopping center, National Park Seminary at Forest Glen, Greusendorf Log House in Germantown, and the Rockville Academy; each property was designated over the objection of their owner, and each of these now anchor community success stories vital to our heritage today.

Please unanimously keep COMSAT as a special site in the Clarksburg Plan.

COMSAT is the single-most important property in Montgomery County to represent our national role in the advancement of science, engineering, and technology and our local place in Modernist Architecture. Two full decades after its initial recognition, the building is more venerable, an Alumni group of COMSAT employees has kept its presence alive, and an excellent study of *Montgomery Modern* was conducted and published by M-NCPPC.

I know that you don't want to be on the wrong side of history, especially in this Semiquincentennial Year of our country and our county.

Thank you for listening and acting positively.

Eileen McGuckian, President
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Attached:

Brief history of COMSAT's nomination for the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation

Brief history of COMSAT's nomination, from Montgomery Preservation, Inc.:

In November 2004, the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission received a nomination for designation of the COMSAT Laboratories Building from University of Maryland professors Isabelle Gournay and Mary Corbin Sies, as part of their research project initiated by the Maryland Historical Trust to document the best of Modernist architecture throughout the state. The HPC reviewed this nomination at three meetings in early 2005 and unanimously recommended that the COMSAT building and its environmental setting be designated on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation as it meets criteria 1a, 1d, 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2e.

This recommendation was presented to the Planning Board in May 2005. Acclaimed architects Frank Gehry, Robert Stern, and Hugh Newell Johnson and architecture critic Benjamin Forgey of *The Washington Post* urged historic designation, but in July the Planning Board refused to forward it to the County Council.

This property was the topic of a 2006 charette attended by its proud architect, and numerous planners and preservationists from the Washington Metropolitan Area and beyond. In June 2006, MPI organized three days of sessions at Montgomery College in Rockville. They were attended by architects, architectural historians, local citizens and historical groups, planners, former COMSAT employees, and by the architect Cesar Pelli himself. Mr. Pelli talked about the impact of this building on his internationally renowned body of work and the work of other architects. Charette attendees clearly demonstrated that the then-owner's plans for development could easily share the site with the historic building. COMSAT was identified as an opportunity, not an impediment.

COMSAT rises to the level of Statewide and even National importance. Professors Gournay and Sies identified it as the only Maryland structure designed by Cesar Pelli in their ground-breaking study, and Director of MHT and State Historic Preservation Officer Elizabeth Hughes determined COMSAT to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, which opens doors to funding not available to lesser properties.