
Letter to the Montgomery County Council, for the Clarksburg Gateway Master Plan Hearing Record

January 19, 2026

Good afternoon, I am Mark Edwards, and I am writing to you today as a member of the Board of Directors of Montgomery Preservation, Inc. My views are presented on behalf of that county-wide nonprofit with the mission of protecting and promoting our architectural heritage and historic landscapes. I am also speaking as a historic preservation professional who previously worked for 46 years in the public sector in state agencies in Maryland and Georgia and in the private sector for AECOM, whose mission is “to act a trusted global infrastructure leader committed to delivering a better world.”

I strongly support the preservation and adaptive reuse of the historic COMSAT Laboratories building. Why?

The COMSAT Laboratories building may be the most important example of Modernism’s architectural expression in Montgomery County. This architectural style uses a design language that emphasizes form over ornament, structure and materials rather than picturesque construction, and the rational and efficient use of space. It is truly worthy of preservation as an example of our rapidly dwindling “near history.”

The COMSAT Laboratories building is the only structure in Maryland designed by internationally important architect Cesar Pelli. Pelli has been recognized as one of the most significant architects of the last six decades. Two awards are particularly notable: In 1991, Pelli was named as one of the most influential living American Architects by the American Institute of Architects (AIA). And in 1995, the AIA awarded Pelli the Gold Medal in recognition of his work that has had a lasting impact on the theory and practice of architecture, and his lifetime of distinguished achievement in architecture.

The importance of the COMSAT Laboratories building has been already validated by two historic preservation review bodies. The Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission found that COMSAT Laboratories continues to meet the designation criteria (identified by the Historic Preservation Commission in 2005) as listed in 24A-3(b) of the County Code. And in 2004, the Maryland Historical Trust, our state historic preservation office, determined that the COMSAT Laboratories building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, as the work of master architect Cesar Pelli at the state level of significance, and under Criterion C, in the areas of Science, Engineering, and Communications at the national level of significance.

If there was ever a historic property that exemplifies the term “landmark,” it is COMSAT. The definition of “landmark” says it all - ***a recognizable man-made or natural feature used as a guide (like a historic building or mountain) or, figuratively, a significant event, decision, or discovery that marks a turning point in history or development.***

COMSAT's scientific importance is also of the highest order. It is notable, I think, that Conservation Planner John Liebertz's report stated, "COMSAT Laboratories continues to be recognized as the setting for significant contributions to advancements in the fields of science, engineering, and technology at the national level, as well as its role in the development of the Interstate 270 corridor in Montgomery County." The November 2024 Planning staff report on the sector plan also stressed the role this complex had in advanced communications technology: "The United States would not have become the world leader in artificial communication satellites were it not for the work undertaken at COMSAT Laboratories. Real-time international phone communication and international, live television broadcast - aspects of global communication technology that we take for granted today - were pioneered by the scientists, researchers, and technicians at COMSAT Laboratories in the 1960s and 70s."

NASA's website (<https://www.nasa.gov/history/communications-satellites/>) includes the following description on Communication Satellites: Making the Global Village Possible:

By 1964, two TELSTARs, two RELAYs, and two SYNCOMs had operated successfully in space. This timing was fortunate because the Communications Satellite Corporation (COMSAT), formed as a result of the Communications Satellite Act of 1962, was in the process of contracting for their first satellite. COMSAT's initial capitalization of 200 million dollars was considered sufficient to build a system of dozens of medium-orbit satellites. ... They chose the 24-hour-orbit (geosynchronous) satellite offered by Hughes Aircraft Company for their first two systems and a TRW geosynchronous satellite for their third system. On April 6, 1965 COMSAT's first satellite, EARLY BIRD, was launched from Cape Canaveral. Global satellite communications had begun.

Preservation and adaptive reuse of heritage resources such as the COMSAT Laboratories building happens all over Maryland, and often is a reason why people come to live and work in Montgomery County. These resources live in harmony with other buildings, and are a touchstone to our past. In the end, they are irreplaceable.

I believe each of you, as a member of the County Council, has a responsibility to thoughtfully consider the views of all those who live in Montgomery County, and act in a way that balances various views to achieve many important public policy goals. This hearing on the Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan allows you to take decisive action to achieve two goals. I am requesting that you do two things simultaneously: approve a plan to bring new housing to Clarksburg, while also overturning the recent decision of the Planning Board, and designating the COMSAT Laboratories building and its associated 33.47-acre environmental setting in the County Master Plan for Preservation to protect one of Montgomery County's most important historic properties. I fervently believe that these dual goals can be achieved together, to attain the highest goals of our planning process and the good of our county.

The process of compromise has resulted in Montgomery County being one of the best and vibrant places to live in Maryland. Yes, the process of achieving compromise is often challenging, but this has happened in many other cases you and your predecessors have acted upon.

Cultural heritage represents the spirit and purpose of humanity, In closing, please consider this statement by John Sawhill, the former President and CEO of the Nature Conservancy in the 1950s:

In the end, our society will be defined not only by what we create, but what we refuse to destroy.

Thank you for your time in considering my request.

Mark R. Edwards