

News from Councilmember Steven Silverman



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Summer 2001

Dear Friends,

While many in our area know the intricate ins and outs of the federal budget process, few understand the relatively simple County budget process. Each year, the County Executive proposes a budget, and the County Council reviews it, making changes and modifications where it deems appropriate.

This year, the County Executive and the Council agreed on the vast majority of our \$2.7 billion budget. But Councilmembers still had a lot of work to do to produce a final budget that adequately funded your needs.

During my campaign, I promised to focus on "kids, cars, and communities." I'm pleased to report that this year's budget will improve our children's health and education, help us spend less time in our cars, and ensure that we can all enjoy our County's abundant parks and playgrounds.

Without tax increases, we redirected an additional \$15 million to our schools, the cornerstone of our economy and our children's future. We restored significant funding to our community's college, Montgomery College, and to our Park and Planning Commission, whose work is vital to the quality of life enjoyed by our residents. At my initiative, we funded an additional \$1 million to boost mass transit use and provide traffic congestion relief *now*, not years down the road.

What follows are some of the highlights of the Council's budget actions this year. I hope you'll contact me with your thoughts and comments.

Steve



Children First

Two years ago, when I was first elected, the Council resolved to make a four-year effort to improve the lives of children in Montgomery County. We pledged to put our 250,000 kids first, with special attention to improving their health and getting them ready for school.

Now that we are midway through this Council's term, two areas stand out: **We must better prepare poor children for kindergarten, and we must narrow the gap in infant mortality and low birth weight between white and African American babies.**

Early Childhood

Too many of our children are not "ready to learn" when they enter the school door. This spring, the Montgomery County school system released a study showing that poor children and children who are English language learners are dramatically less prepared for kindergarten than their peers.

That is why our **investments in early childhood** are so critical. As part of our budget actions, we funded key early childhood initiatives, including:

- child care subsidies so that 2,500 families each month can receive financial help for child care costs,
- Parent Resource Centers and other parent support programs,
- incentives for increased education and training for child care providers,
- hospital assessments for newborns and home-visiting services for at-risk mothers,
- a public engagement campaign on the importance of early childhood development.

Infant Mortality

Some matters that come before local governments actually are a matter of life and death. Today in Montgomery County, African American infant mortality is more than four times that of whites. This is unacceptable.

(please turn the page)

To combat this vexing disparity, the Council approved:

- additional funds for prenatal care for pregnant women,
- efforts to immediately provide medical and support services to African American mothers and newborns with risk factors such as low birth weight,
- funding for research to identify common factors contributing to the racial health gap.

Education

“The most important thing we can do to improve student achievement and close the gap is to put money in pre-K and elementary schools where the foundation is laid for academic achievement for all students.”

~ **Phil Gainous, Principal
Montgomery Blair High School**

Coming from a high school principal, this is a powerful statement. It underscores the importance of investment in the early years **my top budget priority**.

The Council approved an **additional \$15 million** over the County Executive’s recommended budget for our public schools. Our actions continue the multi-year initiative to expand all-day kindergarten and dramatically reduce class size in grades 1 and 2 in high-need schools.

Next September, students and parents will see:

- at least 28 schools with all-day kindergarten,
- 38 schools with classes averaging 17 children in grades K-2,
- fewer oversized elementary classes,
- more honors and Advanced Placement classes and fewer oversized secondary school classes,
- smaller special education classes.

These investments are critical and will reap rewards for our children and our economic future.

Housing: A Place to Call Home

Rent increases at historic highs, rental vacancy rates below 2 percent, increased demand for senior housing as Montgomery’s population ages, and the expiration of federally subsidized loans that made affordable housing more available—these are just a few of the challenges we face in Montgomery County as we strive to provide affordable housing for our citizens.

Building on last year’s efforts to tackle the problem, **the County Council more than doubled funding for the Housing Initiative Fund this spring. We approved \$15 million** to provide loans and grants to the Housing Opportunities Commission, nonprofit organizations, property owners, and for-profit developers to build, acquire, and preserve affordable housing. This action is our commitment that people who live and work in our County should have a decent, affordable place to live.



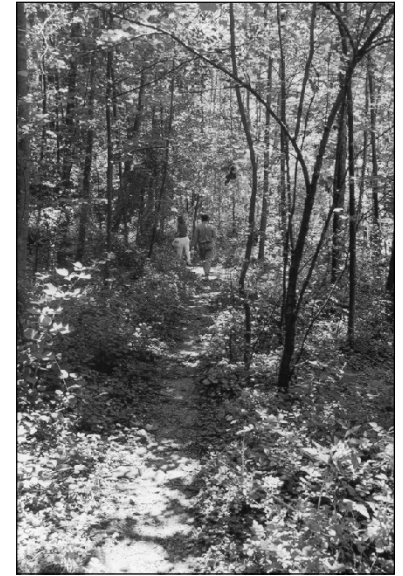
Parks

Whether it’s a hike through the woods, a picnic with family and friends, soccer games on the weekend, or a trip to the neighborhood playground, thousands of residents and visitors enjoy the beauty of the 28,000 acres of Montgomery County’s parks.

A little less visible are the hundreds of staff members who mow the grass, pick up the trash, plant and replace trees, police the parks, and delight children of all ages with nature programs.

It was a real struggle this year to find the funds to maintain the quality of our parks. And ‘maintain’ is the operative word, with **88% of the parks budget going to fund the not-so-glamorous-but-absolutely-essential activities for a top quality parks system**. By making hard choices to reduce funds in other areas, we were able to **restore \$2.6 million** in essential funds for our parks.

I am also pleased that we were able to continue our **ballfields initiative**. We made more practice fields and playfields available for kids and adults with lighting, field upgrades, and improved maintenance of school fields. We rejected a controversial user fee for ballfields. Instead, we **restored \$740,000** for ballfields, a solid double. I will continue to swing for the fences.



Transit ~ Get Montgomery Moving!

“The only way to solve the traffic problems of the country is to pass a law that only paid-for cars are allowed to use the highway.”

~ Will Rogers

With all due respect to Will Rogers, I believe we can do better than that.

While politicians and community leaders continue to debate the merits and the feasibility of the big-ticket projects like the ICC, the Purple Line, the second bridge crossing, and the Techway, the reality is that traffic congestion is turning our lives upside down *today*. I’ve heard from the mother who leaves work 40 minutes early so she can get to her son’s daycare center before it closes. And the plumber who adds a \$75 surcharge to any job in Montgomery County during rush hour. And the parent in Bethesda, who takes her daughter to a specialist in Baltimore, and has to leave at 1 p.m. for a 4 o’clock appointment. Our families, our businesses, and our communities need relief *now*, not in five or ten years.

Senior Transportation

I often hear from seniors who need more transportation options and from disabled individuals who need help getting to medical appointments, social activities, or shopping. While the County currently spends more than \$1 million on transportation services for seniors and the disabled, there are still individuals who cannot get the services they need.

This year's budget deepens our commitment to providing the wide variety of transportation services needed in our community and finding out how other communities do it. In the meantime, the Council will continue to provide funding for the community-based organizations that help meet the need, such as Allied Silver Spring Interfaith Services for Seniors Today (ASSISST), Senior Interfaith Resource Center (SIRC), and the Connect-A-Ride program of the Jewish Council for the Aging.



This spring, I gained the support of prominent groups with widely varying opinions on how to solve our congestion problems, among them the Audubon Naturalist Society, the Sierra Club, the Greater Washington Board of Trade, the Action Committee for Transit, as well as my colleagues on the Council, in dedicating an **additional \$1 million** for a series of mass transit incentives to get people out of their cars.

This million dollars will:

- replicate the successful Metrochek program for federal employees by giving local government employees \$65 per month toward Metro, carpools or buses,
- beef up the Fare Share Program in high-congestion areas, which provides public and private monies to private sector commuters who get to work without driving alone,
- explore free bus service in high-traffic congestion corridors.

"Our families, our businesses, and our communities need relief NOW, not in five or ten years."

Montgomery College

Each year Montgomery College educates and trains more than 40,000 students in degree-granting and continuing education classes. Many of its students complete a four-year program, while others concentrate on gaining the skills necessary to join our tight labor market. Montgomery College – a key provider of education, training, and workforce development – is integral to the continued health of our local economy.

The College's efforts, however, cannot be sustained if it is unable to attract and retain qualified faculty. This year, the Council worked very hard to provide the College with more than **\$3 million in additional funding** to raise faculty salaries, hire additional faculty, and support professional development for both faculty and staff.

Community Grants

Each year there are many worthy community groups that seek funding from the County but aren't included in the County Executive's proposed budget. This year, I advocated for, and the Council agreed, to provide **additional funding** for several causes I care deeply about, including:

- \$90,000 to Community Ministries to establish a Microenterprise Support Center to mentor and provide access to loans for small businesses.
- \$89,000 to provide English language instruction, computer training, and job training programs to more than 500 Korean Americans, and create a recreational day program for disabled seniors.



Steve with members of Korean-American community.

- \$25,000 to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to establish a center to promote minority-owned small business participation in procurement opportunities.
- \$32,000 for the wildlife rehabilitation, release and shelter services of Second Chance Wildlife Center.
- \$195,000 to increase security and disabled accessibility for the Jewish Social Services Agency and to renovate a group home for aging adults with developmental disabilities and chronic mental illnesses.
- \$15,000 to more than double available scholarship funds for the Girls' Technology Camp at Montgomery College, allowing an additional 36 bilingual and low-income girls to participate this year.

These community groups help the County provide services that we desperately need. I'm pleased we are able to work together.



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Check out the Channel 55 broadcast schedule on the Council Website or consult the inside back page of your Washington Post weekly TV magazine.



Could the NBA be in the near future? A light moment after approval of the County's budget.