In re: Increasing County residents awareness of Montgomery County efforts to improve water quality

Dear County Executive Leggett:

On behalf of the Water Quality Advisory Group (WQAG), we are writing to express our concerns that Montgomery County businesses and residents are not sufficiently aware of the water quality programs that currently exist, and how these programs benefit them.

The WQAG provides a formal stakeholder group for public involvement in the County's watershed protection and restoration strategies. It includes 15 resident members and 3 non-voting agency members. Our mission is to provide recommendations to the County Executive and the County Council on water quality management goals and policies, program priorities, and funding. The WQAG was established through Chapter 19, Article IV of the Water Quality Discharge Law. WQAG’s work focuses on recommending policies, programs, and priorities that protect, maintain, and/or restore the biological, chemical and physical integrity of county streams, rivers, wetlands, groundwater, lakes, and other water resources.
For your consideration, we have put together the attached working paper, with input from the Department of Environmental Protection staff, on improving communication to the public regarding water quality programs and how the citizens of the County benefit from these programs. The attached paper provides suggestions and questions to help explore potential ways to increase public awareness of the many benefits of good water quality, and the efforts of DEP to improve and safeguard it now and for future generations. We would be happy to discuss these issues with you or your staff in the future.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tracy Rouleau

Keith M. Brooks

Co-chairs of the Water Quality Advisory Group
OBJECTIVE:
To inform the County Executive about (1) the need to allocate money to effectively tell the story of how the County is improving water quality and (2) why this is important to County residents and taxpayers

PROBLEM:
Montgomery County residents and businesses are not wholly aware of the water quality programs that currently exist and why and how these programs benefit them. Current communication efforts are often geared towards audiences that are already familiar with and supportive of these programs. As a result, they sometimes use scientific jargon and describe bureaucratic metrics; thus, they don’t always tell a story that is meaningful to the broader public.

SUGGESTIONS:
• Use both budget funds (operational and capital) to engage marketing expertise to support sustained efforts in communicating the value of the water quality programs
• Use resources from operational funds for broad communications, and from capital funds for project-specific communications
• Use a contractor to accomplish objectives and to allow more flexibility
• Emphasize the purpose and potential benefits of the Water Quality Protection Charge (rain tax)

AUDIENCES:
• Montgomery County residents
• Individuals that the programs benefit (e.g., businesses, property owners)
• Individuals that have to pay some of the program’s costs (e.g. developers)

QUESTIONS:
• Can the county use budget funds to support this effort?
• To what extent do existing staff (e.g. Program Managers) have the expertise to more broadly communicate stories about why and how County water quality programs benefit the public?
• Which budget funds would be the most appropriate for telling the “stories” of the water quality programs?
• With respect to staff, what level of support can the county provide and plan for regarding this effort?
Water Quality Advisory Group (WQAG) Recommendations on Improving Communication to the Public Regarding Water Quality Programs

DESIRED OUTCOMES:

• To designate a Department of Environmental Protection staff member or contractor to produce and help distribute more effective communication materials regarding how water quality programs impact taxpayers in the county, and

• To improve and increase communication to the public regarding water quality programs; explaining how the County spends money to improve water quality, and how County residents benefit from the programs.