



# THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS *of Montgomery County, MD, Inc.*

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## **Testimony on County Budget before the Montgomery County Council April 10, 2014**

The League of Women Voters of Montgomery County, along with its many public citizen education projects, studies national, state, and local issues, and then, through a consensus process, develops positions on these issues on which it can then act. Many of the areas addressed by the county budget touch on areas we have studied.

In general, we believe that government should be adequately funded. After the economic downturn several years ago, we are pleased to see that the County Executive and Council have been able to gradually add back various budget reductions.

We do wish to stress the following general points:

- (1) Whether there has been sufficient catch-up on **maintenance tasks**, which are usually the first to be cut when budgets are under stress. Is anyone keeping a score chart on this?
- (2) Whether sufficient consideration has been given to not only population growth in general, but also **the growth of specific populations** by age group (e.g., especially children and the elderly), ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
- (3) Whether revenue sources in the near future can **sustain any new generous commitments**, such as that proposed for education in FY15, which would definitively increase the maintenance-of-effort level that the state requires for Montgomery County. [There are certainly long-range predictions concerning both distribution of wealth and climate change that suggest that economic growth cannot always be sustained.]

Below we address some specific budget areas.

### **Board of Elections**

The League commends the Council and Board of Elections for the following efforts:

- (1) Establishing a Right to Vote Task Force,
- (2) Revamping the Board of Election website,
- (3) Participating, with the goals of polling-place judge recruitment and voter registration and education, in events that reach a broad spectrum of our county population,
- (4) Engaging middle and high school students and family in the "Future Vote" programs,
- (5) Arranging community meetings to highlight new early voting centers, and
- (6) Buying targeted advertising beyond the current FY line item to achieve the broadest reach for the most economical amount.

The League suggests that the Council recognize the need for the Board to have adequate staffing at a full-time, professional level. Some related steps include rewriting positions commensurate with the responsibilities expected and establishing new positions for



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permanent liaisons to our county's cultural communities. We also suggest that the FY15 budget anticipate the costs involved in procuring a new voting system in FY16 by planning to allot sufficient staff time for training and coordination of new technical tasks, reviewing and updating of established processes, providing significant outreach to the voters on usage. The cost of acquiring additional storage must also be allocated.

### **Health Services**

In general, this part of the County budget reflects a concern for the underserved in our county and a resolve to maintain a sound safety net. We are pleased to see increases in funding for children's services [also discussed further below], at-risk youth programs, homeless families and individuals, and improved services to the elderly.

We also are gratified by the following:

- (1) Staffing was added for the expansion of the Kennedy Cluster project to the Watkins Mill Cluster to enhance early childhood services.
- (2) A new Linkages to Learning site was opened in Lakewood Elementary School.
- (3) The increase in rates of contract psychiatric services will help attract skilled psychiatrists to provide behavioral services.
- (4) Two new high school Wellness Centers opened in 2014.

We note with regret that Respite Services support remains flat: we urge that it be increased to fill an important gap.

Coordination of services within HHS and with other county agencies is critical for meeting the needs of Montgomery County's residents. The Positive Youth Development program is an admirable effort for bringing together, under a common mission and vision, a number of county agencies and other community service providers to reach out and deliver programs that promote the health and well-being of youth and prevent youth violence and gang activity. The inclusion of community organizations in this network recognizes their value in providing flexible, culturally appropriate services to at-risk youth, in addition to augmenting county services. We appreciate that, in its second year, this initiative received a generous financial boost for fulfilling its mission.

### **Children and Family Services (+ Child Care)**

While some increases for children's services were cited above, we note that other relevant budget line items are basically flat when compared with the FY14 budget. Since the county's population of children is increasing, the county needs to give some thought to also increasing the funds in its budget designated for children, including for day care. In addition, in light of an increasing population of Spanish speakers and other immigrant residents, are there enough special programs targeted to the unique needs of these populations?

One question is whether the county's Working Parents Assistance (WPA), which helps families who earn too much for the State subsidy, might also need to help those for whom the State subsidy does not meet the entire need.



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## **Environmental Programs**

The League appreciates that the Department of Environmental Protection has been allotted an additional position to help in the implementation of the two new tree laws that just went into effect.

## **Transportation**

Before asking some questions, the League wishes to applaud the following:

- (1) Continuation of funding for the bike-share transit system,
- (2) Funding to upgrade street lights to LED, and
- (3) Installation of solar panels on parking garages.

Sidewalks: Recent studies show that building sidewalks near transit hubs is more effective in increasing activity in transit nodes than are parking lots. Our Parking District Budget Services budget is to increase by more than 10%. Did the budget for sidewalk creation and maintenance increase accordingly? Are we doing all we can for increasing sidewalks and their usage?

Ride-On. Why did ridership decrease between FY12 and FY13? How certain are we of the current projected revenue increase of 12.8%? Why is it anticipated that riders, many of whom have low incomes or are renters, will have to pay more due to a fare increase while a drop in the county's "mass transit tax", a component of the real estate tax, will disproportionately benefit the county's wealthier homeowners?

[Relevant figures here include that the cost of Ride-On is due to go up \$3.5 million (from \$98M to \$101.6M), that the county will receive \$7M in new revenues (double the cost increase), that \$5M in state aid will come from the gas tax increase passed last year, and that fares will rise \$2M.]

## **Education**

Clearly, when more than 50% of the County's budget is allocated to the costs of public schools, there is strong support for an excellent education system here. The positions that the League has taken over many years reflect this effort by supporting adequate teacher salaries, small class size, counselors in all levels of schools, robust ESOL services, and many other programs that enhance the excellence of MCPS. Therefore, we support funding the schools at a level where these goals can be achieved. Given the ever-increasing number of children enrolling in the schools, the increasing diversity of these children and the increasing number of children with limited economic resources the education costs must increase. But, as we stated at the beginning of this testimony, the Council must weigh the all the needs in the county as it carefully considers the school budget.

Linna Barnes, President  
League of Women Voters of Montgomery County