

Good evening, Chair Rigby, Vice Chair Jung, and members Dr. Jones, Ms. Walsh, and Mr. Yungmann. My name is Dan Berland, and I am vice-president of Howard Progressive Project and a nearly life-long resident of District 4 in Columbia. HPP is a grassroots community organization committed to improving the lives of Howard County residents through the promotion of policies that lift up our entire community and ensure that everybody has the opportunity to access the great benefits of living in Howard County. I've lived in Howard County my whole life (with the exception of a few years around college). I know that this is part of our character, our identity—being a place where we strive to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive. But this doesn't just happen; it takes sustained commitment. I want to touch on three areas where we need to redouble that commitment.

I want to echo Kelly's appreciation to County Executive Ball for including funding for a disparity study in the budget. This study is a crucial tool to help Howard County ensure we are offering equal economic opportunity for local businesses owned by our neighbors who are minorities, women, people with disabilities, and veterans. This is a case where we're falling behind our neighbors. Montgomery County, Anne Arundel County, Harford County, PG County, Baltimore County, Frederick City, and Baltimore City all have done or are doing disparity studies to protect their business communities and creating targets and programs to address disparities in government contracting. This is a key source of economic activity in our county and one which we have the tools and a special obligation to make sure is equally accessible to all—that's why the African American Coalition of Howard County has led the charge for a disparity study for years and we are proud to join with them in urging the Council to fully fund the project.

Kelly already testified to our concerns regarding the HCPSS budget request, so I won't repeat the point except to say that our schools are another source of pride to the county, in part because they offer outstanding educational opportunities to every child in the county—but this, too, is the case because we have made it a priority for our community. As education—and Howard County—evolve, we have to make sure we invest what is necessary to ensure that our schools continue to offer every child the foundation they need for a healthy, successful life. That's why HPP urges the Council to prioritize the needs of the school system.

Housing is another key area of focus for our county to remain the diverse and welcoming place it has always been. With housing prices continuing to skyrocket, people who live and work here are struggling to stay housed. We must invest in housing stability for our county's workforce, students, elders, and all who live here. That's why we strongly support fully funding the budget request of \$27.6 mil for the Department of Housing and Community Development to support programs that will increase availability and affordability of housing units for low and moderate income households. This number includes a sorely needed \$10 million dollar investment in the Housing Opportunities Trust Fund. While this is much appreciated, it is a transfer from reserves--we urge the council to find sustainable sources of funding for the trust fund ongoing. This is one reason why we support exploring the proposed library project--the affordable housing connected with it.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Howard Progressive Project. We look forward to working with all of you to make sure all Howard Countians have the opportunity to thrive.