



HOWARD COUNTY OFFICE OF COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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June 10, 2020

Councilwoman Deb Jung, Chair
Howard County Council, District 4
3430 Court House Drive
Ellicott City, MD 21043

Dear Chairwoman Jung,

This letter is intended to begin the process of allowing the Administration to proceed with the North Columbia Fire Station and the New Cultural Center, the two capital projects that the County Council placed in a contingency fund with the passage of the FY2021 capital budget. While the Administration appreciates your interest in moving forward with these projects in FY2021, we would like clarity on the process you are envisioning, what concerns remain, and a concrete assessment of the action items needed to remove each project from its current contingent funding status. I am providing background on each project to help inform next steps.

North Columbia Fire Station

The North Columbia Fire Station is a critically needed public safety project to ensure the adequacy, quality and timeliness of response to emergencies in our County. The proposed location for this project was determined after a detailed analysis of current service delivery and anticipated changes in demand and resource availability by our Department of Fire and Rescue Services (DFRS). With response times in North Columbia documented as slower than other parts of Columbia, further delay of this important project will exacerbate the possibility for lagging emergency response in this service area to have potentially catastrophic consequences.

Contrary to characterizations by some, the North Columbia Fire Station project has been supported by a robust and extensive public outreach process. County representatives have publicly presented on this project on at least three occasions (February 12, 2019, October 30, 2019 and March 3, 2020), and different options for locating the Fire Station were discussed with you and your staff on four (4) separate occasions in 2019. Consideration of feedback from the public and your office led to the proposed location of the Fire Station being adjusted early this year. The new proposed location was presented to the Harpers Choice Community Association on March 3rd and received favorable feedback from board members.

Further delay of the North Columbia Fire Station will have both a public safety and financial impact to the County. Progress on the North Columbia Fire Station project is a pre-requisite to the reconstruction of the Banneker Fire Station, which is deteriorating rapidly and long overdue. The delays to date to the North Columbia project will likely force capital spending into the current Banneker Station, which is a poor investment into a structure well beyond its useful lifespan. Without a clearly delineated path forward for the North Columbia Fire Station, the risk of incurring further wasted expenses to maintain the functionality of the Banneker Station is heightened and could continue to plague County finances well into the future.



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New Cultural Center

As was shared during the budget work sessions, the New Cultural Center (NCC - C0364) was envisioned as a public amenity when the Downtown Columbia Plan passed unanimously by the County Council in 2010. The Plan states the goal clearly, “This Plan envisions a dynamic and continuously increasing role for visual and performing arts in Downtown Columbia. ...Considering the popularity of Toby’s Dinner Theatre, opportunities should be explored for a new and improved facility for the theatre as well as the possibility of a new children’s theatre.”

Over the course of three administrations, it has been the desire that NCC would serve not only as an anchor for the development of Downtown and a hub for visual and performing arts, but also a place to provide 174 units of mixed income housing. Though the next few years will be fiscally challenging, I appreciate your collaboration and willingness to explore creative options to keep this project on track.

The NCC is one of the most critical steps that the County Council can take in the successful implementation of the Downtown Columbia affordable housing plan, which will require consistent engagement and visionary leadership. I urge the Council to be mindful of adhering to the existing development timeline and satisfying the conditions set to maintain the innovative funding of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit award (LIHTC).

Several entities have worked together to develop a unique financing and programming model, including Hal and Toby Ornstein, who are the current owners of the property. They remain willing to think through modifications that will address and alleviate your concerns in order to align with the proposed timeline. In addition, collaboration with a wealth of community stakeholders including but not limited to the Howard County Housing Commission, Columbia Downtown Housing Corporation, Downtown Columbia Partnership, Housing Affordability Coalition, Town Center Village Board, Association of Community Services, Department of Housing and Community Development Board, and more have been dedicated to this concept and project for over a decade and are looking forward to seeing it come to fruition.

I am hereby requesting a clear statement of the process and action items needed to move both the North Columbia Fire Station and New Cultural Center projects out of contingent funding status, so that our Administration can continue the important work of seeing these critical efforts forward to a positive conclusion. Even during these challenging fiscal times, it is my hope that we can continue to collaborate and move forward on behalf of all Howard County residents who will benefit from the completion of these project.

All my Best,

Calvin Ball
Howard County Executive



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