Chairman Bulova and Supervisors, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you. I am Sarah Munroe, President of all-volunteer Friends of Green Spring, or FROGS. Though sited in Vice Chairman Gross’ Mason District, Green Spring Gardens serves a much broader community—about 90,000 visitors last year. Of our nearly 1,500 FROGS members—several of whom are here this afternoon—72% live beyond a 5-mile radius from the gardens; the farthest flung in Hawaii!

First, thank you for all you do to balance quality of life with the economic expansion needed to serve our growing population. Thank you, Chairman Bulova, for signing on to the national mayors’ 10-minute Walk Campaign to make parks accessible to every resident. Your Park Authority has you 90% of the way there already.

Research proves that parks deliver a triple bottom line. Parks contribute to community building, beautification, and health and well-being, and environmental improvements to air and water quality, biodiversity, and ecological awareness. Just walk a trail or observe how well a forest handles a big rain storm. Economics bolster arguments for parks further.

Each dollar invested in parks reaps an economic return that’s hard to ignore: increased property values (i.e. tax base), reduced medical costs and crime, and valuable ecosystem services. Beyond these, a GMU analysis calculated a $108 million economic stimulus in 2015 from Park Authority spending alone. That’s a 465% return on a $23.2 million parks investment that year looking at only one of several economic returns.

So investment in parks beyond the 0.62% proposed allocation for FY2020 is prudent. Your Park Authority spends wisely: their Strategic Plan notes they’ve flipped the tax to revenue support ratio from nearly 2/3 tax support in 1988 to just shy of 2/3 revenue
support in 2018. And adjusted for inflation, they’re working today with a smaller allocation than in 1988.

Parks need more funding just to address maintenance backlogs and sustain existing infrastructure. Evolving parks to meet needs forecast by growth, demographic shifts and climate change add to the challenge of sustaining the high-quality parks residents expect.

Doing our part, FROGS celebrated our 25th year in 2018 topping $2 million in cumulative contributions to Green Spring Gardens. Last year, we funded over 11% of the garden’s $1 million operating budget. We subsidized 2,313 Title I school kids’ field trips to Green Spring, over $20,000 of plants and materials, and we replenished our tree care fund by over $25,000. This year’s annual appeal proceeds will buy two sorely needed replacement utility vehicles, and FROGS will support almost 15% of Green Spring’s operating budget. Capitalizing on the American Public Gardens Association annual conference DC venue this June, we funded Green Spring’s partner garden sponsorship. Tours and conference sessions will bring Green Spring national exposure with the premier professional organization for public gardens. Thanks to a park site donation account, the just-restored historic driveway will enhance guests’ experience of Beatrix Farrand’s legacy landscape to be celebrated in a conference panel session.

I volunteer for FROGS because I want to help reconnect people with nature and I believe public gardens are uniquely positioned and obligated to do that. Numbers and projects don’t begin to describe the wonder in a kid’s eyes when she first discovers that carrots are actually plant roots, or a little later when she begins to grasp how subterranean roots, soil, critters and huge trees, meadows and oceans are all part of one amazingly interdependent machine. That awareness and the care it instills are priceless. A public garden like Green Spring does so much but can do so much more if funded to grow into its potential. FROGS commits to continued support that Green Spring relies upon. But we can’t fund the 2016 Master Plan vision or expand educational capacity to meet pent-up demand.

Isn’t a park system so committed to our rich park portfolio and advancing its economic sustainability worth more than 0.62% of the County budget?

Thank you for all you do to manage competing priorities. Please remember that investments in parks yield returns critical to a vibrant and prosperous county. And thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you today.