

Howard County Council
Operating Budget Public Hearing – April 26, 2010
Operating Budget FY 2011

**Testimony in Support of Request by Howard County Recreation and Parks for Staffing of
Robinson Nature Center**

Jeff Agnor, Advisory Board Chair, The James and Anne Robinson Foundation, Inc.

My name is Jeff Agnor. I live at 5728 Whistling Winds Walk, Clarksville, Maryland. I am here in my role as Chair of the Advisory Board of The James and Anne Robinson Foundation. I am speaking on behalf of the Trustees and the Advisory Board members, as well as a growing group known as the Friends of the Robinson Nature Center. Several members of the Advisory Board and the Friends group are in the audience. I will ask them to stand now to show their support of this testimony.

I am testifying in support of the request by the Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks for staff funding for The James and Anne Robinson Nature Center.

As you know, the Robinson Nature Center, which is currently under construction, will be a world class, state-of-the-art facility located adjacent to the thousand acre Middle Patuxent Environmental Area (the MPEA). The building will be of LEED platinum design, construction and operation – the highest LEED certification possible. The Center will feature innovative interactive exhibits, meeting and classrooms, a nature dome theatre, an auditorium and nature trails. These exhibits will not be two-dimensional science fair tri-folds. They will be of the same quality you would find in the Science Center or the National Aquarium. They will knock your socks off, I promise.

The Robinson Nature Center will also be the first nature center owned and operated by Howard County. I should note that our neighboring Counties already have nature centers, and some counties have more than one center.

In order for the community to have full access to the facility when it opens, there must be adequate personnel for operations and maintenance. Staff is needed to manage the front desk, to develop and conduct exhibits and programs, to give lectures and tours, and to coordinate volunteers. Others can articulate better than I the specific staffing requirements for the Center. I am here to urge the Council to give as much deference as possible to the Department of Recreation and Parks' staffing request.

We know all too well that local governments, including Howard County, are facing a crushing budget crisis. The County, however, has invested millions of taxpayer dollars in the design and construction of the Center. In our view, this was a wise capital investment, and we commend you for your courage and foresight in approving it. We now have a responsibility to ensure that this was a worthwhile investment, that when the doors of the Center are opened, it will be fully operational and that its extraordinary exhibits and programs will be available to the community. This can only happen if the Center is adequately staffed.

The Center will pay dividends long after we are gone. It will allow our children to receive a modern environmental education, which they deserve and which they will need in an innovation economy in which green industry is prominent. The Center will provide one more reason for folks to live in Howard County and for businesses to headquarter here. It will attract tourism, and we believe it will even enhance economic development. You in government, and

we in the business community, aspire for this County to become a Silicon Valley of green industry. Having a fully operational, state-of-the-art nature center (as neighboring counties do) will go a long way toward demonstrating that this community welcomes green sector businesses and values sustainability. Doing less could send the opposite message.

The Robinson Foundation is in the process of organizing a group known as the Friends of the Robinson Nature Center. In doing so, we've witnessed a growing groundswell of community support for this amazing facility. Almost without exception, as folks learn more about the Center, their enthusiasm is overwhelming. Most Howard County residents are still only vaguely aware that a nature center is coming. Few realize how extraordinary this facility will be. But all of that is going to change over the coming months as word gets out and the Friends group expands.

Having this nature Center in Howard County will be like having a miniature science center, with an environmental theme, right here in our backyards. The quality will be that good. The opening of the Center will be a major public event. County residents will be watching, and we believe the vast majority of them will regard the Center as a local treasure. When that day comes, we cannot afford for the Center to be half-opened or half-operational. The Center must be opened with a shout, not a whisper. We respectfully urge the Council to provide the Department of Recreation and Parks with the staffing and resources that will make this possible.

Many thanks for your time.

Marianne Pettis, Interim Director, The James and Anne Robinson Foundation, Inc.

Hello, my name is Marianne Pettis and I am the Interim Director of the James and Anne Robinson Foundation. I am writing to support the Department of Recreation and Parks request for funding for staff for the James and Anne Robinson Nature Center.

Howard County is in the process of constructing what will be a world-class nature center, The James and Anne Robinson Nature Center. With incredible innovative exhibits, meeting and classrooms, a nature dome theatre, an auditorium, interpretive historical and nature trails, and LEED platinum design, construction and operations, this will be an absolute jewel in our community. But in order for the community to have access to this facility, it is imperative that the Center be staffed with sufficient personnel for operations and maintenance. Having invested considerable taxpayer money in the design and construction of the Center, the County has a responsibility to make it available to its citizenry. I support the Department of Parks and Recreation's staffing request so that when the doors of the Center are opened, it will be fully operational and can be truly enjoyed by all.

Abel Folarin, Volunteer, HoLLIE

As a fifteen-year resident of Howard County, I am testifying that I am aware that the County is in the process of constructing what will be a world class nature center, The James and Anne Robinson Nature Center. My testimony is in full support for the Center and its needs for successful operation from the County. I submit this email to support the Department of Recreation and Parks' request for funding for staff for the James and Anne Robinson Nature Center.

With incredible innovative exhibits, meeting and classrooms, a nature dome theater, an auditorium, interpretive historical and nature trails, and LEED platinum design, construction and

operations, this will be an absolute jewel in our community. But in order for the community to have access to this facility, it is imperative that the Center be staffed with sufficient personnel for operations and maintenance. Having invested considerable taxpayer money in the design and construction of the Center, the County has a responsibility to make it available to its citizenry. I support the Department of Parks and Recreation's staffing request so that when the doors of the Center are opened, it will be fully operational and can be truly enjoyed by all.

Alan Pflugrad, Volunteer, HoLLIE

My name is Alan Pflugrad and I live in the Dickenson Neighborhood, Kings Contrivance Village, Columbia Maryland. I have been a resident of Howard County for 38 years.

The new Robinson Nature Center (RNC) has been in various stages of planning, review, and construction for many years with substantial community input and support. The initial funding was based on the donation of land and money by long time Howard County residents James and Annie Robinson through their foundation. That foundation is committed to supporting the RNC and growing a strong base of friends.

The RNC will be a window through which county residents of all ages and interests will be exposed to many vital environmental education, stewardship and sustainability practices. While difficult to quantify the benefits, I believe that county residents exposed to this nature center will more effectively sustain their homes and the county's at risk and dwindling natural resources.

Through my volunteer work to date, I had the opportunity to survey nature centers and associated Friends groups that belonged to other nearby Maryland and Virginia counties. I was somewhat chagrined to learn that only Howard County did not have a county owned and operated nature center! All of our neighboring counties have successfully implemented nature center(s) and report significant community support and associated benefits.

The value of the RNC will only be obtained if it is properly staffed.

Please ensure adequate funding for startup and set the stage for its substantial positive impact on our county.