

Calling in Backup

Council members pledge to renovate community centers in Scotland and three other historically black communities.

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By Aaron Stern/The Almanac

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After what residents say has been years of neglect, four county community centers in historically black neighborhoods may soon be getting long-desired attention.

In front of more than a thousand people gathered at the University of Maryland's Shady Grove campus on Wednesday, April 2 four members of the County Council publicly committed to amend the county's Capital Improvements Program to include the Scotland, Plum Gar, Good Hope and Ross Boddy community centers for renovation. The CIP is a five-year projection for the county's construction projects and is revised every two years. The County Executive proposes the CIP to the County Council who then can amend it before approving it.

The commitments from the council members came at an event organized by Action in Montgomery, a faith-based organization that has led an effort over the past two years to have the four centers renovated.

Though the county is facing a looming deficit that will require the County Council to make difficult spending decisions as it finalizes the fiscal year 2009 budget, funds for the centers will be found, the four Council members agreed.

"We can find the resources necessary [for renovation]," said County Council President Mike Knapp (D-2). "More importantly ... I'm committed to making sure we will find the resources."

In addition to Knapp, County Council members Roger Berliner (D-1), Valerie Ervin (D-5), George Leventhal (D-At large) attended Wednesday's gathering and pledged their support to the four communities. A fifth councilmember, Marc Elrich (D-At large), has also committed to funding the centers' renovations, though he did not attend Wednesday's gathering. As with all motions before the County Council, a majority of the nine-member panel must vote to approve the CIP that will be voted on in May.

THOUGH ALL FOUR communities have lobbied for the renovation of their community

centers in recent years Leggett sent a proposed CIP to the County Council in late December that included no renovations for the centers but planning and design funds for Plum Gar in 2009 and 2010. In doing so, Leggett cited the fiscal restraints of trying to balance a budget with a projected \$400 million shortfall. Seven community centers including these four would share \$1.3 million for upkeep and maintenance in Leggett's proposal.

The Scotland Community Center was built in 1978 and has not been renovated since. Residents complain that the center is too small to hold more than one activity at a time and the gym is below regulation size with no room for spectators.

Declining the \$30 million necessary to renovate all four centers was unfair and makes no sense when the county spends more than that amount to build new centers in new developments, said Larry Froehlich of AIM.

"You would think that a county with [resources] like this one can fix up community centers in black neighborhoods," said Brandi Swales, a Scotland resident and Winston Churchill High School senior.

ODELIA DOVE COOPER was born and raised in Scotland and remembers when the area bridged the gap between Falls Road and Bradley Boulevard and the local swimming hole was created whenever boys stopped up a creek on a hot day. Today Scotland is a 10-acre development with far fewer inhabitants than it once had. Those who remain though, young and old, use the Scotland Community Center regularly as a place to learn, study and play. Many of those who have left Scotland over the years come back for family gatherings, Cooper said.

"The community center is important because it provides activities for young people and senior citizens but it's also important because this is where we have our homecoming events," Cooper said. "This is how we keep our community connected."

"I know first hand the need to renovate these facilities," Berliner said. "These facilities — they are not adequate. They can not do the job."

The key to having the four facilities added to the CIP will be to allocate funds both for the design as well as the construction in 2009 and 2010 before the CIP is revisited, said Froehlich.

"We demand that public officials who make promises to us keep those promises," Froehlich said, at which point his microphone cut out, so he began to shout. "If you're frustrated at what has happened, if you're indignant, if you're tired of broken promises, its time to let the County Council know what's in your hearts," Froehlich yelled, drawing applause and chants of "No more waiting" from the capacity crowd.