

# At Long Last

Approved County budget to fund renovation for the Scotland Community Center.

[By Aaron Stern/The Almanac](#)  
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After nearly a decade of continued efforts, the renovation of the Scotland Community Center is on its way to becoming a reality. The County Council on May 15 approved the addition of \$29.7 million to the county's Capital Improvement Program budget for the renovation of Scotland and three other community centers in historically black neighborhoods in the county. A vote to finalize the budget and CIP was scheduled for Thursday, May 22.

"It feels wonderful," said Bette Thompson, who grew up in Scotland and who has helped lead the fight to get the 30-year-old facility renovated since the late 1990s.

The decision by the County Council was part of the adoption process of a \$4.3 billion operating budget for the 2009 fiscal year during which they also finalized the County's construction budget between 2009 and 2014. In addition to approving \$9.7 million for the design and planning phases of the renovations, the Council set aside \$20 million in a protected fund for the construction of the new facilities.

"I'm very pleased that the Council has honored its commitment to Scotland and the other four historically underserved communities," said County Councilman Roger Berliner (D-1). Berliner met with Scotland residents on multiple occasions in recent months and helped to lead the effort on the County Council to renovate the Scotland, Good Hope, Plum Gar and Ross Boddy community centers.

THE BATTLE to get the aging Scotland Community Center renovated began in the late 1990s and followed a consistent pattern. Every couple of years residents would push, county officials would listen and sometimes go so far as to make assurances, but when it came time to appropriate funds those assurances would dissolve, sending Scotland residents back to the drawing board.

Scotland residents have long complained that their community center is too small to hold more than one activity at a time and the ever-popular indoor basketball court — a popular place for Scotland's children to play — was less than regulation size and, sheltered in an aluminum add-on to the original facility, has no room for spectators. Built in 1978, the center has been maintained but has not had any facility upgrades over the years.

When County Executive Ike Leggett released his proposed 2009-2014 Capital Improvement Program in late December of last year, Thompson was left speechless. Thompson had been involved in several attempts to get the undersized Scotland Community Center renovated since the late 1990s, and two years ago the effort began anew. After numerous meetings with County officials — and after receiving what she says were assurances from the County Executive's office that it would be — she got a phone call bearing bad news: once again, the Scotland Community Center would not be slated for renovation.

"When they told us that we [weren't] in the funding I couldn't talk," Thompson said. "I couldn't say a word. I was so hurt."

When she got that call last December she didn't know how to break the bad news to her friends and neighbors.

"What was I going to tell these [people]? I just couldn't tell them. I couldn't tell them because I would have cried, and I didn't want them to see me cry," Thompson said.

AT THAT POINT many in Scotland believed that the battle was over, that once again they had been led to believe one thing before being given another.

"I really don't even know how to react anymore," said Latisha Gasaway at the time. Gasaway grew up in Potomac and remains involved in the community center's operations. "I don't know what else to do anymore ... We fight, fight, fight and I don't know," she said at the time.

Ultimately it was help from outside of Scotland — and Good Hope, and Plum Gar, and Ross Boddy — that reversed fortunes.

Action in Montgomery (AIM), a non-profit, non-denominational, faith-based advocacy organization had worked with the four communities for much of the last two years in their renovation efforts. Members of congregations affiliated with AIM showed up at meetings at Scotland and the three other centers in increasing numbers in the last two years. After Leggett's proposal came out in December the group stepped up its efforts, culminating in an April 2 rally at the University of Maryland-Shady Grove Campus that drew over 1,000 supporters as well as Berliner and fellow council members George Leventhal (D-At large) and Valerie Ervin (D-5) and Council president Mike Knapp (D-2), each of whom publicly voiced their intention to slate the four centers for renovation. "This campaign showed local congregations ... [that] we stand behind our members and we'll make sure that campaigns will come to fruition," said Alisa Glassman of AIM.

THOMPSON WAS AT HOME during last week's Council vote because of an illness in her family, and it was there that once again her phone rang. Unlike the December call, this one bore good news: renovation. And this time she wasn't left without words.

"I said, 'Oh, good, good, good,'" she said. Years of effort have paid off, she said, and it has been worth the struggle.

"Oh, I just stuck with it," Thompson said. "I just said, 'This can't be.' They promised us this stuff, now how can they say no? But we just stuck with it."

"With this expansion ... it [will] attract more of the kids to come there and it won't feel so crowded," said Stephanie Hood who used to work at the community center and who lived in Scotland from 2000 to 2005. Her son Christian goes to Bells Mill Elementary and takes part in the tutoring program at the school. He also takes karate lessons there. "It's been a long fight. Mrs. Bette's been there from the very beginning ... she's still standing in there and standing strong," Hood said.

The renovation is a step in the right direction, but not the entire solution to the woes at the Scotland Community Center, said Jay Dove, who was born and raised in Scotland, one of a long line of descendants of ex-slaves who settled in the community near the intersection of Seven Locks Road and Democracy Boulevard. The center has not had a full-time director since Elizabeth Ortega was reassigned by the county's Recreation Department last spring, and has lacked consistent direction and programming for several years, he said. The center is currently overseen by Billie Wilson, a regional services director for the Department of Recreation.

In addition to a full-time director, the center needs full-time, trained staffing, not the part-time staffers that help to run the facility now, Dove said.

"It's a good thing that it happened, but that's just scratching the surface of what's needed there," Dove said.

As first steps go, Glassman said last week's Council vote was huge.

"It was really a moment as the world should be," she said.