Conservation Montgomery

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND ENVIRONMENTAL MILESTONES

Montgomery County has a rich history of progressive and pioneering environmental stewardship. The milestones listed are not a complete list but touch on some of the highlights of our collective efforts to maintain our quality of life in sustainable communities.

1927 - Establishment of the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). The agency began acquiring vast corridors of land along major streams (like Rock Creek and Sligo Creek), laying the groundwork for the county's renowned Stream Valley Park system.

1954 – Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote a letter that appeared in the January 19, 1954 edition of the Washington Post. It was the first step toward the eventual establishment of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park. The editors of the Washington Post accepted his challenge in the letter to hike the entire length of the canal. The hike and its aftermath made headlines and history. In 1971, the passage of The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park Act proved that one man can make a difference.

1959– Begins the decade when regional parks take shape in the county, such as Wheaton Regional Park (acquiring over 300 acres by 1959) and the opening of Brookside Gardens in 1969. Today, the Montgomery County Parks System manages 419 parks spanning more than 37,912 acres of the county's total land.



Rachel Carson

1962 – Silver Spring resident Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, helped launch the modern environmental movement and led to the creation of the EPA. In 1964, Montgomery County began acquiring land for the later-dedicated *Rachel Carson Conservation Park* shortly after Carson died, with initial preservation starting in 1964 and additional land parcels added to the park through 1990.

1963 -- The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Outdoor Environmental Education Program was founded by educator and Silver Spring resident Joe Howard**,** launching with its first group of students from Four Corners Elementary School.

1964 — The Wedges and Corridors General Plan: This landmark land-use plan focused development along specific transit corridors while preserving the "wedges" of agricultural

land and open green spaces. It utilized stream valleys as natural buffers to protect water resources from surrounding suburban expansion.

1967 — First Erosion Controls: Recognizing that intense post-World War II construction was washing massive amounts of dirt into local waters, the county authorized its first mandatory erosion and sediment control requirements.

1967 – The framework of agricultural and conservation land preservation in Montgomery County, Maryland, is supported by a foundational timeline of state and local program establishments that began in 1967. The Maryland Environmental Trust (MET) was established in 1967 by the Maryland General Assembly to protect scenic open areas, historic sites, and natural resources through voluntary conservation easements. Following this are other programs that supported conservation in Montgomery County:

- Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF): Established in 1977 to permanently restrict development on prime farmland and woodland via easement purchases.
- Rural Legacy Program (RLP): Enacted statewide in 1997 as part of Maryland's Smart Growth initiative to protect large, contiguous blocks of resource-rich rural lands.

1969 – Gilbert Gude (R), U.S. representative for Maryland's 8th congressional district (from 1967 to 1977) led efforts to stop planned highway construction along the Potomac River (intended to run alongside the C&O Canal) by introducing legislation. His legislative push directly led to the permanent protection of the corridor through the creation of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, which was officially signed into law in 1971.



Far right: Rep. Gilbert Gude and (inset) his legacy

1969 -- Adoption of the 10-year Water & Sewerage Plan—requiring identification of areas with no service and staging areas, which became a major tool for protection of the Ag Reserve, other areas, and preventing premature development. The first Comprehensive Ten-Year Water Supply and Sewerage Systems Plan for Montgomery County, Maryland, was adopted on December 30, 1969, via Resolution No. 6-2563.

1969 – Montgomery County Council adopted the revised Wedges and Corridors General Plan, which gave it official status and made the County the only jurisdiction run the region to make Wedges and Corridors official development policy.

1970–1971 — Local Onsite Water Regulation Mandates Begin: The Maryland General Assembly passed a statewide sediment control law in 1970. The following year, the

Montgomery County Soil Conservation District (MSCD) took the progressive step of mandating onsite SWM structures for every single new development plan.



1972 – Environmental Education expands. Montgomery County Public Schools, in partnership with Montgomery Parks, started construction of the Lathrop E. Smith Environmental Education Center physical facility on a site adjacent to Meadowside Nature Center in Rock Creek Regional Park. When first acquired, the 10-acre plot was largely a bare field; Howard and staff actively planted trees across the land over subsequent decades turning the bare field into an arboretum with nearly 100 different species of trees. At left, Joe Howard with Smith Center supervisors.

1974 -- Construction of the permanent Lathrop E. Smith Environmental Education Center was completed, establishing a dedicated space for day trips and sixth-grade residential overnight programs for Montgomery County Schools students.

1974 -- Montgomery County removed the western leg of the Outer Beltway from its Master Plan of Highways in 1974, following intense local opposition from residents in the Potomac area and shifting regional planning priorities toward environmental protection and the Metrorail system.

1977 – A Master Plan was developed for Little Seneca Lake. Planning for the lake goes back to the 1960s when the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) started buying up land around streams in Montgomery County to protect the watersheds and manage the resources of the county. Beginning in 1968, with the help of the Soil Conservation Service, the county surveyed the creeks and streams and developed a plan. The Seneca Creek watershed, and especially Ten Mile Creek were identified as particularly sensitive areas. A 1974 study of Ten Mile Creek showed that its species diversity was one of the highest of small steams in the county.

1978 -- The planning framework that established distinct plans for all 12 Metrorail stations in Montgomery County, Maryland, was formally adopted. This deliberate concentration of density directly supported the county's famous 1964 "Wedges and Corridors" General Plan**.** By confining intensive development to narrow transit corridors, it left massive "wedges" of open space intact, paving the way for the creation of the internationally recognized 93,000-acre Agricultural Reserve in 1980. By encouraging high-density, transit-oriented development directly around these 12 urban hubs (such as Bethesda, Silver Spring, and Wheaton), planners successfully absorbed the county's rapid post-war population growth into compact, walkable footprints.

1979 -- Montgomery County, Maryland adopted its Historic Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 24A of the County Code) and the Master Plan for Historic Preservation in 1979, establishing the nine-member Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to oversee historic sites, districts, and their surrounding environmental setting.



A view of the Agricultural Reserve

1980-1981: Conceived by Planning Board Chair Royce Hanson and former Planning Director Richard Tustian, the County Council approved the *Functional Master Plan for the Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space* in 1981 (following 1980 landmark policy decisions such as Transferable Development Rights (TDRs). The Agricultural Reserve was officially established in 1980 when the Montgomery County Council and planning leaders adopted a master plan to protect nearly one-third of the county's total land from suburban sprawl. TDRs were established locally in 1980 under the landmark *Functional Master Plan for the Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space*, designating the 93,000-acre Agricultural Reserve. Today there are more than 500 working farms in the Agricultural Reserve.

1981-- The Eastern Montgomery County Master Plan placed major emphasis on protecting the Paint Branch Watershed, featuring down-zoning and imperviousness limits to safeguard natural trout habitat. Later there was establishment of 8% impervious surface limits (the model for what was later done in 10-mile Creek watershed).

1984 -- Little Seneca Reservoir (Little Seneca Lake) in Montgomery County, Maryland, was built and completed. Located in Boyds, it acts as a 4-to-4.5-billion-gallon emergency raw-water and drought reserve for the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (managed jointly by WSSC Water, Washington Aqueduct, and Fairfax Water), while also offering public recreation.

1989 – the Montgomery County Forestry Board begins to keep a Register of Champion Trees, modeled after the State Big Tree Program, which started in 1925. Today, the county Forestry Board keeps track of and measures more than 300 large and significant trees.

Montgomery County is home to many Big Tree Champions of Maryland. There are several National Champion Trees in Montgomery County.

1992 -- Montgomery County adopts the Forest Conservation Law (FCL), sponsored by then Councilmembers Berlage, Krahnke, Dacek, Adams, Hanna, Ewing and Leggett. Mr. Leggett was at that time Chairman of the Transportation and Environment Committee. After opposition from the business community – complaining of the potential impact of the FCL on development -- the bill is finally passed, with a proposed tree commission deleted from the original legislation. The FCL created a position for a County Arborist and framework for tree preservation. The legislation is modeled on the State Forest Conservation Act passed in 1991.

1997 — The Stream Protection Strategy (SPS): The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) released a groundbreaking report analyzing over 200 sub watersheds. It explicitly tied stream valley degradation—such as severe bank erosion and habitat loss—to older, down county urban areas built before stormwater rules existed. This triggered the development of Special Protection Areas (SPAs), which strictly limit impervious surfaces (sometimes as low as 6%) in ultra-sensitive watersheds.



Photo: Montgomery Parks

1999 – The Montgomery Parks Legacy Open Space Program was approved by the Montgomery County Planning Board in 1999, and the official Legacy Open Space Functional Master Plan was adopted by the Montgomery County Council in July 2001.

2004 -- Former Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder made national headlines by illegally cutting down more than 130 mature trees on federally protected land to improve the Potomac River view from his Potomac, Maryland, estate. The case caused local outrage. In 2005, Snyder agreed to pay $37,000 toward forest conservation projects elsewhere in Montgomery County. He was required to replant trees and place several acres of his property into a permanent conservation easement**.** In response to the public outcry and jurisdictional gaps revealed by the incident, U.S. Representative Chris Van Hollen (now Sen. Van Hollen) convened a local task force to push for tighter coordination between federal and local park authorities and stronger local forest conservation enforcement.

2007 — The Stormwater Management Act & "ESD": This sweeping state legislation completely shifted the land development philosophy. Instead of collecting water in huge, centralized ponds, the law mandated Environmental Site Design (ESD) to the "Maximum Extent Practicable (MEP)". ESD requires developers to use micro-scale, decentralized

green infrastructure—like rain gardens, bioretention cells, and green roofs—to mimic the natural hydrology of the land before it was developed.

2009 -- The *Maryland No Net Loss of Forest Task Force Report* is released, with recommendations that counties and municipalities throughout the state adopt urban forestry or urban canopy goals. The Maryland Sustainable Forestry Act of 2009 is introduced in the State Legislature by Sen. Dyson. The bill is adopted in that session. The bill places emphasis on retention of forested land in the Chesapeake Bay watershed for water quality, air quality and climate impact mitigation purposes and encourages local governments to adopt their own programs for urban forest protection. Due to efforts led by Montgomery County resident Arlene Bruhn, Maryland Senate Bill 581 is signed into law as an amendment to the State Roadside Tree Law. The bill authorizes counties and municipalities in Maryland to adopt laws more stringent than state law to protect trees in the right of way.

2010s–2020s — The MS4 Permits & Consent Decrees: Under federal Clean Water Act regulations, the state issues Montgomery County aggressive NPDES MS4 (Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System) Permits. When the county faced strict pollution reduction timelines, it achieved massive milestones—such as meeting a major Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) consent decree ahead of schedule by restoring over 30 miles of degraded streams and retrofitting thousands of older properties.



Above: A Tree Montgomery planting project.

2013 -- The Trees Matter coalition was formed as an advocacy initiative spearheaded by the local non-profit organization Conservation Montgomery. The primary push of the Trees Matter Coalition culminated when it successfully advocated for the passage of two landmark environmental bills by the Montgomery County Council:

- The Roadside Tree Law: Aimed at protecting and replacing trees in public rights-of-way.
- The Tree Canopy Law: Established a mechanism to protect and expand the overall canopy on private development sites. Lasting Impact: The legislation championed by the Trees Matter coalition directly funded and established Tree Montgomery, a successful, free shade tree planting program operated by the county's Department of Environmental Protection.

2014 -- By capping hard, paved surfaces at 6% in the most sensitive parts of Ten Mile Creek, the conservation community gained ground for watershed protection. The Montgomery County Council approved the Ten Mile Creek Limited Master Plan Amendment that limits development in the watershed. The Save Ten Mile Creek Coalition consisted of 30 groups including lead organization Audubon Naturalist Society,

Montgomery Countryside Alliance, Conservation Montgomery, UFCW local 1994-MCGEO, Montgomery County Young Democrats, Latino Environmental Awareness and Direction, and faith-based organizations.

2015 – The Safe Grow Montgomery (SGM) coalition that was instrumental in passage of historic Council Bill 52-14. The bill aims to protect the health of people, kids, workers, pets and the environment from constant exposure to toxic lawn chemicals.

2016 – The Montgomery County Green Energy Bank was launched, authorized by county legislation (Bill 18-15). The Green Bank has mobilized more than $380 million in clean energy investment, expanding access to equitable and sustainable financing solutions.

2021 -- Climate Action Plan Development and Implementation. The County Executive's office worked with community members to develop and adopt the landmark Climate Action Plan as a roadmap to meet the County's climate change goals of reducing Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions by 80% by 2027 and 100% by 2035, while becoming climate resilient and advancing racial equity and social justice.

2022 – Montgomery County launched several food scraps and diversion programs to try to get to zero waste. The new programs aim to reduce food waste, divert surplus food to donation, and recycle inedible food into compost. These programs include: "Food is too Good to Waste" food waste reduction campaign (launched in 2022); commercial food scraps recycling partnership program (launched in 2020); curbside food scraps collection pilots (launched in 2021 and expanded in 2023); and food scraps drop-off program (launched in 2023 and expanded in 2026 to seven locations).



2023 -- After extensive collaboration and hearings at the Planning Board and County Council, the Council passed Bill 25-22 , strengthening our Forest Conservation Law (FCL).

2023 – Montgomery County joined the Chesapeake Bay Trust Pooled Monitoring Program, expanding our knowledge about water quality restoration and improving our water quality outcomes.

2024 -- The Montgomery County Forest Coalition, including Conservation Montgomery, worked with the County Council to introduce and unanimously pass Bill 40-23 in January. The legislation, *Tree Canopy and Roadside Tree Requirements - Fee Revisions,* adjusted

the fee structure for trees removed in the County's right of way to ensure the fees matched the cost of new tree replacement. It also adjusted the fee that sediment control permittees pay to the County's Tree Canopy Conservation Account to reflect planting and maintenance costs under the Tree Montgomery Program.

2025 – Out of 85 actions, 80 had been initiated in the county Climate Action Plan, with 63 actions either completed, institutionalized, or showing significant progress.

2025 – Montgomery County became the first local government in Maryland to be recognized with a SolSmart Platinum designation for encouraging the growth of affordable solar energy options at the local level including launching the new eSolar program for residential rooftops. Through the Switch Together group-buying program, over 1,026 households have gone solar, making clean energy more accessible and affordable for residents.

2025 – Through the Gas Powered Leaf Blower Ban and Rebate Program and Bill 18-22, Montgomery County banned the use and sale of polluting gas-powered leaf blowers.

2025 -- The County Council passed the "bring your own bag bill." Conservation Montgomery testified in support of this legislation. The bill effectively bans single-use plastic carryout bags. It also requires a ten cents fee for the use of each paper bag to incentivize customers to shop with reusable bags. Five cents of the ten cents charge will go to support water quality protection.



2024-2026 -- The county rolled out rigid new data tracking mandates for sediment control permits, while MDE rolled out sweeping regulatory updates through 2026 to enhance urban flood resiliency via climate-forward design.

2026 -- Expanded Charging Network for electric vehicle charging at places where we gather, work, and live, like libraries, community centers and parks, apartment buildings, and parking garages. These investments are supported through grants and public-private partnerships. The number of publicly accessible EV charging ports in Montgomery County rose from 160 in 2019 to 967 in 2026.

2026 – The Planning Department is considering additional amendments to improve the Forest Conservation Law and is working with the Montgomery Forest Coalition to gain their input.

PLEASE NOTE: This document will continue to be updated and revised.