



CITY OF LAUREL

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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Mayor

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Laurel City Council President Brencis D. Smith
Laurel City Councilmembers
8103 Sandy Spring Road
Laurel, Maryland 20707

Dear President Smith and Councilmembers,

As I present to you my final budget message and City of Laurel General Operating and Capital Improvement Program (CIP), I am happy to report, since my proposed FY2009 budget, the property tax rate has remained the same. This year is no different **no property tax rate increase with the FY2024 proposed budget**. I ask for your consideration on this important document.

The largest priority of the FY2024 Budget is the continuation of services our residents deserve and expect. This requires the complete dedication of Laurel residents tax dollars to fund the essential expenditures, compensation, employee insurance, property insurance, the Pension Fund contribution, debt service and the CIP, as well as contractual and legislative obligations, and to prepare for the reduction of customary revenue resources at a level no one can positively identify at this time. While we are no longer in the grips of the Worldwide Public Health Emergency, we are now dealing with the economic and social fallout resulting from the shut down and recovery.

With the return to more normal operations, the Administration and City Staff continue to adapt to the many changes resulting from the pandemic. Recruiting, hiring, and retaining the City workforce continues to be a challenge as we face growing compensation budgets and adjust policies and procedures as a result in changes to Federal, State and Local codes, policies, and laws. The Administration and City Staff continue to ensure that City operations thrive despite growing costs, as well as challenges posed by delays and shortages of some goods and services.

For FY2024, the City of Laurel Proposed Budget is presented without a tax rate increase, maintaining the City's real property tax rate at \$.71 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation. The Personal Property tax rate will remain \$1.69 per \$100 of assessed value. The tax rate for the Special Taxing District is \$.03 per \$100 of the full cash value assessment. The proposed budget continues all City services at FY2023 service levels.

I am happy to report, within my proposed budget a new salary plan is fully funded for all employees: this has been over an eight-month process working with staff to achieve this salary plan. With the State's acceleration of the five (5) year plan to incrementally raise the minimum wage to \$15.00 per hour effective FY2024, the Department of Budget and Personnel Services examined all City staff positions and adjusted the City's pay scale to provide equity throughout.

The FY2024 proposed budget includes funding in accordance with the fourth Collective Bargaining Agreement between the City and the Laurel Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 11. Furthermore, the City will be conducting a compensation study to analyze city positions and how pay compares throughout the region, which will be forwarded to the City Council once completed.

During my tenure as Mayor, I have worked to be able to provide a COLA for Laurel retirees, even with the **additional \$3,900,000.00 over what was recommended by the actuary**, I have not been able to provide the COLA without placing the Employee Pension Fund in jeopardy and underfunded. Accordingly, this is why the City's Pension Board of Trustees are not able to make a recommendation for a COLA either. As you know, over the years we have been able to increase the monthly health care benefit, and with this budget I have fully funded a thirteen paycheck for all Laurel City retirees. I understand it is not a COLA, but this action allows the City to show we have not forgotten our retirees and allows future Mayors and Councils to use this from time to time until such a time a COLA can be funded without putting the Employee Pension Fund in jeopardy.

The Administration, the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and the City-appointed ARPA committee continued to distribute the City's second and final \$12.6 million receipt of Federal funds from the American Rescue and Recovery Plan Act (ARPA).

Approximately \$4 million has been distributed directly into the community, with the remaining funding for City Government's lost revenue and community projects. In FY2023, \$736,500 was awarded by the Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD) in subgrants to eighteen small businesses and non-profits in the City. Funding was awarded to LARS to support fifty-three households for rental and utility assistance. WSSC was provided with payments to cover water bills for fifty-one households and CASA used funds to assist twenty households with rent. An additional \$2,897,566 was spent on various community projects. The second round of funding will allow the City to continue to provide support to the business community and non-profit agencies such as LARS, Elizabeth House and CASA. Additionally, a significant amount of funding will support improvements to the City's infrastructure through various CIP projects and will support the development of the first of its kind, City of Laurel Multiservice Center (LMSC), that will help and support those that need a helping hand.

The Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD) continued to administer many grant programs for the business community. The Department procured grant funding totaling \$100,000 for Business District & Neighborhood Safety and Main Street Improvements. The funding will provide enhancements around the business district.

The City of Laurel was happy to work with the Laurel Board of Trade (BOT) to bring back the Main Street Festival after several years on hold due to COVID and poor weather conditions. The festival was successfully held on a beautiful October day but will return in May this year. Additionally, ECD, working with BOT, brought back its in-person business mixer, farmers market and round table event, dormant since the COVID shut down. The meeting was such an overwhelming success, hosting many new businesses in Laurel, that the BOT is looking to expand the meeting schedule to at least twice a year.

The City was also happy to provide citizens and business owners in the 300 block of Main Street with some much-needed parking relief with the opening of the second Community Redevelopment Authority parking lot. With efforts by ECD, Department of Public Works and the

Environmental Program Manager, the long-awaited parking lot, available to the public, also hosts two electric car charging stations that can charge up to 4 EV vehicles, permeable surfacing and solar lighting. With business and residential growth continuing within the City, the Department of Fire Marshal and Permit Services (FMPS) continues to be busy with permitting, building inspections and code enforcement. The Department has expanded its code enforcement staffing to provide more hours of coverage on evenings and weekends and the addition of the Housing and Rental Enforcement Specialist will help improve operations and reduce wait times.

As the City continues to expand and grow the City's curbside Organics Recycling and Composting Program, the Department of Public Works met a major goal this year with its roll out of the "One and Done" one day a week pick up of residential refuse, recycling and composting. While not without its challenges, the Department worked hard to personally address concerns from residents and make accommodation where necessary. They held meetings with Homeowner Associations to assist them in changing their procedures and amending covenants to allow for compliance and will continue to educate the community on the need to separate trash from recycling as to lower the City's tipping charges and reduce harmful materials from entering the landfill. As of this writing, the Administration has placed legislation before you to provide long term planning of the composting, which we believe is a way to save funds for the City, due to the high tipping fee the City pays at the dump, making composting mandatory effective July 1, 2025.

After years in the planning and the investigating, as well as review of City alleys by Former City Administrator William F. Goddard, III, the Mayor and City Council adopted Resolution 9-21. The Department of Public Works is moving forward with the first alley upgrade and repair of Alley Number 8 (Alley Street). We anticipate that this would be the first of the alleys to be addressed by following the City's Alley Policy.

Additionally, with the Comprehensive City-wide Traffic and Parking Analysis completed, the Department of Public Works has completed upgrades to several pedestrian crosswalks, enhanced stop signs and rolled out the installation of speed humps and/or raised crosswalks to address some of the areas highlighted in the analysis. Efforts will continue with a new Administrative Policy to help identify and make improvements to areas of concern around the City as identified by citizens. The Department has also completed its installation of the Brine Application System, an environmentally sound practice that will be used during the ice and snow season to reduce the need for the use of chemicals to treat roads.

The Department of Parks and Recreation continues its progress on the many projects to benefit the citizens. Outdoor adult fitness stations have been installed at both the Cypress Street Athletic Complex and the Roland B. Sweitzer Park. The playground at McCullough Field Athletic Complex has been replaced with new accessible and inclusive play features. A multipurpose turf field, security lighting and cameras have been installed at Discovery Park, completing the park's renovations. Additionally, the City has provided funding for several Homeowner Associations and Apartment Complexes to upgrade their outdated play structures by using some of the ARPA funds.

Also, the Department completed an assessment of the Historic Dam Ruins after years of abuse by continued environmental conditions that has led to deterioration of the structure causing safety concerns. The City is on track to secure \$1.2 million in State funding this year to begin renovations to this feature that holds great historical significance to our City. Thanks to

Laurel's Annapolis Delegation for collaborating with us on this and working to secure State funding.

I want to acknowledge the Office of Emergency Management for developing the City's first Laurel Citizen's University program. Over the course of seven weeks, participants from the Laurel community were engaged in lectures, activities and enrichment with every Department of the City to gain in-depth knowledge of how the government operates. Participation feedback was tremendous, and the City looks forward to expanding the program. Additionally, when approached by Laurel Elementary to assist with the school's Brighter Bites Nutritional Program, OEM took action to coordinate with City Departments to organize the food distribution location and schedule volunteers to unload, repackage and distribute bags to over one hundred members of the school community. Distribution took place from October through March. The Office of Emergency Management's Canteen and members of the Canteen Committee could also be seen at many City-sponsored events throughout the year to include, Trick or Treat on Main Street, Armory Holiday Illumination, Main Street Festival, July 4th Celebration and National Night Out. The office continues to actively participate in many efforts through the state and county to improve the City's floodplain management and resiliency. I want to thank City Council members for adopting the Administration's recommendation to create the Department of Community Resources and Emergency Management, this will only assist with better coordination and communications to keep our residents and businesses safe and prepared for any type of incident that may occur.

The Special Assistant to the City Administrator works closely every month with all City Departments to coordinate information to place in the *Laurel Ledger*, the four-page community outreach, paid by the City, which is inserted in the new community newspaper, "*The Laurel Independent*." The new publication, mailed to every residence in the City of Laurel, and available online, provides vital information that has been missing since the loss of the other community newspapers. We have been able to cut costs by saving funds from other mailouts, while getting out Laurel's message. You will again see funding to continue this particularly important paper to the community.

The Office of the City Administrator, along with the Environmental Programs Manager, continued its effort to promote sustainability and "Green Living." Its monthly calendar of events, printed in the *Laurel Ledger*, remains one of the most popular posts. The Environmental Program Manager has been busy working with the Environmental Affairs Committee and other volunteer groups in the City to provide education and outreach programs to help the City meet its sustainability goals. Over the year, the Environmental Program Manager helped obtain the City's first Bee City recognition, held the first Sustainable Saturday outreach event, and working with ECD, will be bringing back the Laurel Farmer's Market to Main Street. Along with the Environmental Affairs Committee, the Mayor and City Council City passed Resolution No. 2-2023 establishing its first "No Mow April," a campaign to encourage residents not to mow their lawns, which will help feed emerging native bees. With Laurel helping to lead the way for other municipalities in Maryland to be **Green**, the City was proud to work with Lieutenant Governor Aruna Miller on the many projects, policies and practices that make Laurel an environmentally friendly City: we will be hosting her in Laurel sometime after the General Assembly recess.

As the City continues its recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, I am pleased to say several significant accomplishments occurred in FY2023, including:

- Presented the Operating Budget to the City Council with no tax rate increase and continued the same level of service to the community.
- Our new community program “Laurel University” was presented with an MML Achievement Award.
- Secured an additional \$1.5 million in State of Maryland funding with the City's new Multiservice Center for both phases 1 and 2 that are underway.
- Secured a 1.2 million dollars from the State of Maryland to support City efforts to stabilize the Old Dam Ruins.
- The newly appointed Clerk to the Council worked with the Board of Election Supervisors and the Administration to pass Ordinance No. 2000 to increase the members of the Board of Election Supervisors from three (3) to five (5) members with the intent of increasing efficiency of elections and enhance voter experience and participation.
- Worked with the Board of Election Supervisors to provide for two (2) Early Voting locations for the 2023 General City of Laurel Election.
- Continuing with the City's digitization project to digitize important paper records within FMPS and the Laurel Police Department.
- Received Department of Justice Byrne Justice Assistant Grant via Senator Chris Van Hollen for \$200,000.00 for Laurel Police Department Radios.
- The newly formed Juneteenth and Pride Day Committees sponsored festivals celebrating Laurel history, cultural diversity, and inclusion. The Mayor and City Council established the City's first official Pride Day.
- Adopted legislation to establish a No Kill Animal Shelter.
- The City successfully negotiated a three-year contract with the Laurel Police FOP.
- A Charter Resolution allowing DPW to Unionize will be adopted Soon.

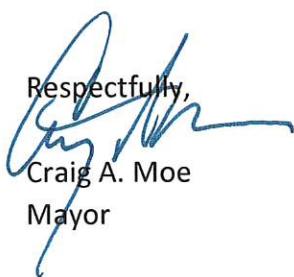
The Department of Communications produced programming and TV coverage for over 85 stories for Laurel TV, covered more than 78 government meetings, reinstated 11 programs on hiatus from the COVID shutdown, provided live coverage for many community events such as Memorial Day at Ivy Hill, Main Street Festival, Laurel 4th of July, Holiday Parade and Illumination and Wreaths Across America, provided outreach for the National Mayor's Water Challenge, and provided for an entire months' worth of programming and coverage for Black History Month. The Department will unveil its long-awaited podcast room by the end of the summer. Residents can take advantage of this opportunity to produce their own content as the room will offer a variety of membership packages.

As the City continues to move forward on making the Laurel Multiservice Center, located at 204 Ft. Meade Road, a reality, with the approval by the City Council, both phase 1 and phase 2 of the project are underway. The City was again able to secure \$2.5 million from the State of Maryland for the project. Additionally, ARPA funds will be used to support the project. With the building renovations well underway, focus has been placed on establishing the operations of the center. A Board of Directors has been appointed, along with their own Legal Counsel, and are now meeting monthly to put the internal structure in place to move forward with operations. Administration of the Laurel Multiservice Center will move from its current home under the Department of Parks and Recreation to the newly created Department of Community Resources and Emergency Management.

I would like to take this opportunity to make each of you, and the general public, aware that with the hard work of the Budget Committee, Ms. Michele Saylor, Director, Budget and Personnel Services, Ms. Ana Navarro, CMC, Executive Assistant to the Mayor, Mrs. Lisa Woods, Deputy Director, Department of Budget and Personnel Services, Melissa Klinger, Human Resources Officer, and under the direction of Ms. Joanne Barr, Deputy City Administrator, the Administration has proposed a complete and balanced FY2024 Budget, and CIP.

Thank you to members of the City Council for your continued support and dedication to our residents and businesses over the past year. A sincere thanks to the resolute City employees and the leadership of City Administrator Christian L. Pulley, CPM and Deputy City Administrator Joanne Barr.

Continuing with sustainable practices and minimizing the use of paper, Councilmembers will again be able to access the proposed budget for review on a City-issued device for the eighth consecutive year. I look forward to your review and adoption of the FY2024 Budget and CIP document.


Respectfully,
Craig A. Moe
Mayor