



Fair Access Committee for the Western County FY 2027 Budget Proposal

Overview

This budget proposal requests a total of **\$95,000** for the work of the Fair Access Committee. This is the same as the budget we have requested for the past three years. We need these resources for the reasons outlined below.

Supporting Rationale – County Investments in Our Area

Looking back, Fair Access started in 2018 with a budget of **\$80,000**. If you consider the return on investment as an indicator of impact, just using the high school modernization as the example, the committee has been able to return to the community **\$240 for every dollar spent over the last eight years**. This does not even account for other major accomplishments that have helped our community such as:

- **\$230,000** included in the annual county budget to support WUMCO's health care programs;
- **\$15 million** (and likely much more when it is all said and done) for future spending on construction of the new community center. This does not include **future operating budget spending for staff, programs, and services in the center**, nor **health care improvements that will benefit our community** annually as the new clinic within the center becomes operational; and
- **\$3 million** reserved in the state and county budgets to support a White's Ferry solution (the money would likely be used to support a solution to the landing problem)
- **Hundreds of thousands of dollars** in bond bills for the Arts and Performing Arts Center (we were a partner with the Town and Riverworks to get this money)

Supporting Rationale – Budget Challenges and Increasing Competition in the Policy and Political Process

- The coming year will likely be among those intense in terms of budget resources in recent memory. The fight for dollars will be stiffer than ever before, and we need to remain heavily engaged to get our messages across. We can't afford to lower our profile.
- Our success in the policy and political process has spawned efforts to mimic our model of engagement. We know that in Damascus and Clarksburg, among other areas, advocacy groups are forming and growing to increase the visibility of the issues affecting

their communities. We understand this but it means we cannot afford to let down our guard. It will only get harder to make our voice heard. This not only means we need to continue the many activities we have pursued in the past, we need to “up our game” by participating in new ways, particularly via social media like Instagram. While many leaders are older and not as engaged with such media, their younger staff often are.

- The coming year, while daunting for the reasons just mentioned, also contains opportunities, including the fact that it is an election year. Those running for office want to know our issues and if we engage them now as they running for office, once they win their election, we will already have a step up on others because we were talking to them when they were candidates.
- This coming year, if we are successful in our two major projects – Community Center and Pool Bubble – will require us to begin to lay the groundwork for a relatively new phase in our work – pushing for staffing and budget resources to manage and operate the new facilities. This is new territory for us, and it will require lots of work for us to come up with the rationale, framework and messaging. **We also need to help the community groups we support – such as WUMCO and Poolesville Seniors – to ensure they are supported by the County to provide the services and programs our residents need in our area that are not offered by the County as they are in other areas.**

Supporting Rationale – Other County Policy Changes Helping Our Residents

We also had a number of significant accomplishments beyond those we have been pushing in the past. At our annual Poolesville Day Breakfast, we sponsored a panel on inequities in our area. Among the inequities we highlighted that we are continuing to push are the following:

Improving Public Transportation

For example, the bus transportation system for our area (Ride On Bus 76), provides wonderful service to for our students who attend Poolesville High School and we need that service to remain. But it is abysmal in providing service to those who need to get to doctors down county or grocery shopping for example.

We proposed a novel solution we call “reverse Flex” which would use an existing County model designed for down county communities and revise it to fit the Western County. It would provide for a virtually “on call” service to pick people up from throughout the Western County and drop them off in Poolesville so they could get on Bus 76 and get to needed appointments down county.

We also proposed significant improvements in the routes for Bus 76 that would take buses by the many doctors and specialists who are located along Route 118 and Shady Grove Road. The Ride On office has largely accepted our proposals and while funding has not yet been identified, we have already taken a major first step in improving our very poor bus service so it really serves the needs of all of our citizens.

We are seeing quite a bit of evidence that the county is seriously considering our proposal.

Summer School Lunches

At our annual Poolesville Day Breakfast, we sponsored a panel on inequities in our area. One of the issues we highlighted was the lack of a local site for parents to come in the summer to get free lunches for their kids. The county has dozens of such locations elsewhere but the closest one for our area is in Clarksburg. Since parents have to stay with their kids at the location where the lunches are provided, simply can't easily break away from work to do so. We are pushing along with WUMCO to get the County to establish a location for summer lunches in our area.

Turf Field for the High School

While the Commissioners have been in the lead on this issue, we have supported their work by testifying before the Board of Education and using our relationships to set up briefings and answer questions with key leaders at the BOE.

Key Objectives for FY2027

The budget lays out what the committee's main tasks will be for the coming Fiscal Year. **Our primary objectives this year are:**

1. **Ensure that construction of a new community center with clinic space is moved up to begin this coming year;**
2. **Ensure funding is included in both the capital budget and the operating budget for the county to get the pool bubble installed and operational no later than 18 months from now;**
3. **Continue the push to end the White's Ferry impasse;**
4. **Ensure the \$230,000 line item in the county's budget for WUMCO's health care programs remains as a line item in HHS's budget.**

We may need to shift focus as the year goes forward and as developments occur in the council and in other policy-making bodies we influence. This happened in 2024 as White's Ferry once again emerged and grew in prominence and it happened in the fall of 2023 as we partnered with Delegate Lily Qi and a number of Council members to focus on a white paper and conference about the "hub and spoke" economy of the Western County. That is the nature of the policy process, but our committee will, as always, keep the Commission informed of new developments and of needed changes in budget priorities to reflect any proposed or new initiatives.

Keys to Success

Among the keys to the success of the Committee have been:

1. **Community engagement and continually being a presence in major county and state policy and budget activities.** We have gotten notice and influence by regularly participating in the policy process with thoughtful input and testimony.
2. **We also have established a reputation and have gotten support on key issues like Whites Ferry due to our continuing presence on social media and in the general media. As you can see in our attached summary report, the amount of press we generated on Whites Ferry and many other issues is significant given our small town.** We are engaging more and more on social media which is important to council staff in particular. Our partnership with Fovndry is fundamental to our success with the media and on social media. We are doing a great deal more on Instagram and TikTok including nine 30 second videos that we are now distributing highlighting our key priorities and the inequities we are facing.
3. **We generate policy papers and reports that are influential because we take the time to do the research and get the facts that can help shape the debate.** Our launch in 2018 was followed shortly by the release of a major white paper that explained why the Western County is different from the rest of the county and how this has resulted in inequitable treatment by both the county and the state with regard to our community. We also made the case for rebuilding and modernize our “oldest in the county” high school. We coupled that proposal with a proposal for a co-located community center which also explained why the community needed such a center. This paper was well received and got lots of media attention. After three more years of fighting in the budget and policy process we were able to secure funding for the new high school. While the committee alone can certainly not take all of the credit for this result - especially since we rely so heavily on the community to back us up with contacts and emails when we need to convince the Council in particular to act - the reality is the community have been trying for almost 30 years both to protect the high school and keep it from being closed and get it modernized. With the support of the community and the commissioners, the committee was able to get the funding for the high school secured in just over three years.
4. **We have heard over and over again from policy leaders that they appreciate the fact that we provide well supported and rational arguments for our positions and don't just complain but also come up with solutions that make sense, are efficient and effective and fit our area.**
5. **In terms of influencing the political process, it's also important to point out that when we started, we only had to influence nine members of the Council. Now we have eleven members that we have to work with, so it makes the job more complex than it was.** Six new members of the Council were elected two years ago and other than Marilyn Balcombe, we did not know any of them well. We have spent a lot of time

getting to know them and they us. It is fair to say we have solid relationships with virtually all of the Council and the County Executive and his staff.

6. **We are using the coming year – an election year – as an opportunity to again connect early with candidates, some of whom will be elected officials by November.** We are doing this by sponsoring debates in March and April of this for At Large candidates and County Executive candidates.
7. **We must importantly also continue to engage the Western County community in promoting the needs of our area** by effective communication, supporting informative events, outreach to local community groups and most importantly listening,

Budget Programs – Total Expenditure Proposed \$95,000

- **Political Outreach Programs**
 - ***Poolsville Day Breakfast and Booth Support*** – Funds to purchase reserve space, cater the event, print signs, prepare printed signs/literature, award “Champion of the Western County - **\$15,000**
 - **\$6,000** - Catering
 - **\$6,000** - Video and Media Editing and Production
 - **\$3,000** - Purchase of Awards, Give Aways, and Video Recording/Editing
 - ***Muster Email Outreach Program*** – Funds to continue supporting the Muster Email program which enhances the political impact of residents from our area and strengthens our voice with political leaders - **\$4,000**
 - ***Annual Holiday Social*** - **\$2,500**
- **Ongoing Media/Communications Support - Fovndry Consulting Contract**
 - Monthly meeting attendance and minutes support, drafting and posting monthly social media content development, ongoing news media writing and outreach and interview/story coordination and placement on current topics, paid media placement coordination (digital-Facebook, Plenty magazine and social media such as Instagram and Tik Tok), Muster email campaign content writing and support, strategic communication counsel/idea sharing, media monitoring (billed by the hour) - **\$66,000**
 - Website support, digital and marketing/graphic design/printing projects (as needed) – billed by the hour - **\$7,500** (does not include out of pocket costs)

**Annual Media/Activity Report – Fair Access Committee
January, 2025 to December, 2025**

Testimony

Testimony Before County Council Supporting Community Center and Clinic, Arts, Covered Swimming Pool

- Link Hoewing, February, 2024
- Ethan Lee, Poolesville Swim Team

Testimony Before County Council Supporting WUMCO Health Care Funding and Clinic in Community Center

- Link Hoewing, April, 2024
- Maria Briancon, Poolesville Seniors
- Melissa Widenhofer, WUMCO

Presentation Supporting Fair Access Initiatives, particularly White’s Ferry and Community Center Before UpCounty Advisory Committee

- Link Hoewing, Jim Brown, November, 2025

Appearance/Questions from Jim Brown/Link Hoewing About Community Center/Pool Bubble at Listening Session Sponsored by Marc Elrich

- Jim Brown, Link Hoewing, November, 2025

Board of Education Testimony, October, 2025

- Link Hoewing, Turf Field
- Alan Hobbs, Town Commission

Muster Email Campaigns

February, 2025, 300 emails to Council

April, 2025, 230 emails to Council

Letters to Key Leaders

Letter to Marc Elrich, August, 2025, Key Budget Issues for Fair Access

Letter to Council/County Executive, January, 2025, Budget Priorities for Fair Access

Letter to County Council and County Executive Reemphasizing Our Priorities and Expressing Disappointment in Council Votes Without Our Priorities, May, 2025

Meetings with Key Leaders

Meeting with County Andew Friedson, President of County County, Breakfast, July, 2024

Meeting with Gabe Albornoz, New Parks Director, to Discuss Pool Bubble – November, 2025

Ongoing contacts with all members of Council on a regular basis to keep them up to date on Fair Access Committee concerns. Conservatively estimating that we have contacted all Council members at least 20 times and shared updates on Friday on the Commons Events, Press statements such as on Whites Ferry, media coverage of events, invitations, letters sent to officials. Also, along with various Commissioners, have attended political events for Friedson, Sayles, Glass, Luedtke, Ashman, and others.

Events

Poolesville Day Breakfast, September, 2025 with 90 Attendees

Holiday Event at Locals, December, 2025 with 50 Guests

Rosenwald School Event, November, 2025, in cooperation with HMD, Town of Poolesville, Montgomery County – 100 Attendees with County Executive

Whites Ferry Rally, December 30, 2025 – 100 Attendees, Several County Leaders

Media and Social Media

See Link to Slides Prepared by Fovndry