TESTIMONY OF JACQUES GELIN
BEFORE THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY COUNCIL
July 14, 2009

Good afternoon, my name is Jacques Gelin. I have been a supporter of the country libraries for over 40 years, and I am currently president of the Friends of the Library chapter of Rockville. I appear here in support of a special appropriation to the County's FY 2010 operating budget in the amount of $147,430 for the Rockville Parking District Non Departmental Account. This funding reimburses the City for the cost of patrons' parking at the Rockville Library.

When I last testified to this Council over four years ago, in April 2005, I asked you to increase the funding of the County's library system above the amount requested by the County Executive. You granted that request. For your convenience, I attach a copy of my testimony to today's submission. Briefly, I then reviewed the critical part that libraries have played in our nation's culture since its founding. I then explained how important libraries have become to our citizens in this Age of Information. I pointed out that the nearly one-half of the County's residents owned library cards and that nearly seven million residents had visited our libraries the previous year.

Since then two major changes have occurred. First, is that we are now in the midst of the most serious economic recession since the great Depression. This has adversely impacted the finances of this County. The County's deficit will surely be substantial. I understand this problem, but would it not be unseemly for the County to provide free parking for Councilmembers and their staffs, and for the entire Executive branch, but to require library patrons to pay for their parking?

Second, the number of holders of library cards of the County's residents has risen from nearly one-half to over two-thirds, and the visitors to our libraries rose from seven million to 12.3 million. Circulation in the past year increased by 3.4 percent. Library Director Parker's FY 2008 report states that overall circulation was up 5.66 percent; increases in children's circulation was up over 11 percent; teen age use increased by 33 percent; audio book usage increased 31 percent; and large type circulation increased by 17 percent. This shows beyond doubt that libraries form an even more important role in the cultural and economic role of the County.

The reason the County – as part of the countywide policy -- should pass the special appropriation to reimburse Rockville for the cost of parking at the Rockville library is simple: the Rockville library is not a facility of the city of Rockville; it is part of the Montgomery County library system. A bedrock principle for our free public library system is that all county residents must be accorded free access to all of our libraries. That is the essence of a free public library system.

Over the years, on behalf of the Rockville Library Advisory Committee, I have testified to the Council in support of funding, not just for the Rockville library, but for all of the County's libraries. Each time I explained that I was not simply supporting the Rockville library alone, but rather the entire library system. When I sought support for library renovations and the construction of the new library, I expressly recognized that other libraries deserved renovation or construction. I believe that you have recognized my position.

In addition to the normal library collection, the Rockville library houses several special collections, most particularly the Special Needs collection that the executive moved several years ago from the Davis library in Bethesda to Rockville. The patrons of this facility deserve the same free and equal access as all other patrons. That is why your obligation to fund parking at the Rockville library cannot and should not be separated from your obligation to fund free parking for patrons the entire library system.

This Council has steadfastly recognized the critical importance of our libraries to our civic life. I urge you to continue this support by adopting the special appropriation that lies before you. Thank you.