

## Testimony for Merriweather Panel

Good evening panel members and thank you for giving me to opportunity to speak tonight. I am the president and co-founder of Save Merriweather, a grassroots organization committed to the preservation of MPP as an outdoor venue for the performing arts, though tonight I am speaking for myself. I am here to urge you to recommend that Howard County purchase and preserve Merriweather Post Pavilion.

Quite simply, there is no match for Merriweather anywhere in this country. Designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry with consideration for its natural setting and place in the community, Merriweather does not feel obtrusive or artificial, appearing as though it was planted and allowed to grow into maturity like the Beech and Oak trees that cover the grounds and neighboring Symphony Woods. In this way, it embodies the original architectural goals for Columbia and captures the unique spirit of our city.

Without question, Merriweather is an integral part of the past, present and future of Columbia and Howard County, something that is true of few other pavilions. As one of the first structures built in Columbia, Merriweather ranks among our most historic of landmarks, and for a city whose history is still being written, it is vital that we preserve these reminders of our past. The site of our city's grand opening celebration, Merriweather has continued to serve the community through the years in several important ways, each time creating within us a sense tradition and civic pride. From countless graduations to the memorial service of our city's founder, its repeated role as a community resource cannot be taken lightly. Should we lose this hall of memories, the history that helps define who we are and strengthens our commitment to community will be forever elusive.

Merriweather's own history is another important justification for its preservation. Having hosted some of the greatest performances of all time, MPP serves as a monument to the artists that graced its stage and touched our lives. From popular to classical music, from ballet to modern theater, MPP is one of the few remaining venues that can accommodate—and epitomize—such character and history and class.

In addition to its historical value, MPP continues to provide Columbia with a sense of identity and a level of distinction that no other community of this kind can claim. Located in almost the exact center of Columbia, MPP is, in many ways, the heart and soul of this community. It is an integral part of our arts community, to which it lends credibility and widespread recognition. Moreover, we share with pride the stories of great performances we've attended, and it seems that whenever we tell an outsider we're from Columbia, the first words out of their mouths are, "Hey, that's where Merriweather is." In this way, MPP sets us apart from every other suburb. Columbia was founded on the premise that it would break from the norm of suburban sprawl development, and in many ways it did. But, one of the greatest differences between us and everyone else is that we have a first-rate, one-of-a-kind, Frank Gehry designed-amphitheater in the heart of our downtown.

Finally, Merriweather is a vital part of our local economy, fueling record sales for downtown businesses and providing significant revenue for our county from the 10 percent

entertainment tax levied on all tickets sold. I have heard complaints that MPP too often caters to residents outside our community, a claim that may or may not be true, but regardless, it brings hundreds of thousands of people (and their wallets) to Columbia each year that never would have come otherwise.

For these reasons, I believe Howard County must purchase Merriweather. This pavilion desperately needs an owner that is committed to its financial stability and success, as well as its role as a community asset. Public ownership of MPP will go a long way towards these goals. It will foster greater citizen participation in the management and oversight of the pavilion, thus increasing its usefulness to all residents of Howard County by allowing their voices to be heard. However, whether the county should buy Merriweather is only one question you have before you. The second and more important question is whether the pavilion should remain open-air or should be converted into an enclosed theater. Despite the hollow threats of Rouse Company officials, the answer to this question is not predetermined. Unlike other potential buyers (if there really are any), the county would actually have the power to dictate many of the specifics of the deal, particularly the stipulation that it be enclosed. It is obvious that “enclosure” is code for “demolition”, as the architecture precludes MPP from being simply “enclosed;” rather, the existing pavilion would have to be demolished and a new structure would have to be built in its place.

An enclosed theater on that site would destroy the characteristics that make MPP special. Its natural setting, the beauty of the grounds, its history and irreplaceable atmosphere would all disappear with the first blow of the wrecking ball. These attributes may be hard to quantify and thus hard to value, but there are several measurable reasons why an enclosed theater is the wrong use for this site.

The biggest reason is simple economics. Without the benefit of a team of consultants, I figure the market for MPP, in which it is the only such pavilion, contains at least 4.1 million people. I came to this number using census data for the population of Howard County, the six counties that border it, and Baltimore City. In fact, the actual market size is likely significantly higher if you include other counties in Maryland, south central Pennsylvania, and Washington DC. In talking to hundreds of concert goers at MPP this summer, I met people from as far away as Philadelphia, Ocean City, Hagerstown, and Northern Virginia, and every single one talked about how much they enjoy coming to Merriweather and how much they would be personally saddened by its closure.

Thus, while MPP serves an enormous constituency as an outdoor pavilion, its market as an enclosed theater would be significantly smaller. In the same geographic area, there are more than a dozen theaters of comparable size to what the Rouse Company is proposing, including some brand new ones, like the Hippodrome in Baltimore and Strathmore Hall in Rockville. These theaters—two of the most celebrated in the region—have had their share of struggles. For instance, with recent cost overruns, Strathmore Hall’s price tag is just shy of \$100 million, with much of that money coming from public entities. I’m not sure if this county is ready for that kind of investment. Furthermore, their success is not guaranteed. Already, the Hippodrome has canceled performances because of poor ticket sales. What’s more, as was discussed at your last meeting by Seth Hurwitz, the owner of IMP and someone whose knowledge of the entertainment market is extraordinary, the business plan for these facilities is broken. Not only do they require huge subsidies to build, public money must continue to subsidize their operations. I don’t believe

any taxpayer in Howard County wants to be burdened by the costs of maintaining and running a failing enterprise, even the most tax happy liberals. In contrast to these struggling ventures, MPP is already built and has continued to earn money. To be sure, renovations are needed, but the costs of these would pale in comparison to the costs of an enclosed facility.

While it's easy to say the county should buy MPP and keep it as it is, such sentiment means nothing if we don't have an effective plan of action. So, the question then becomes, how does this whole thing work? First, and most importantly, the county should continue to have private management of the pavilion. It takes creativity, determination and enthusiasm to maintain MPP's unique offering, and the county, despite the best of intentions, is not properly qualified to run this aspect of the operations. This is not to say the county should cede total control of the venue, just control of booking and running of large-scale performances.

In addition, MPP must host a wider-variety of performances to accommodate the tastes of everyone in the community and to expand its position as a cultural center. Although the right management company would surely seek to meet the entertainment needs of as many residents as possible, we could further this goal by creating incentives in venue management contracts to book non-mainstream performances. Despite a willingness to offset financial losses from the smaller events with profits from sell outs, we can only ask the managers to bear so much of this burden. Therefore, we can find other ways to pay for such events, and I'll discuss my thoughts on these in a minute.

In addition to hosting large productions on the main stage, we could possibly even accommodate more physical uses on the site, perhaps a restaurant, a smaller, enclosed theater like the Barn at Wolf Trap, or even setting up temporary stage on the lawn for some events. This "Merriweather Plus" plan could be accomplished in a number of ways, such as renovating some of the existing buildings or squeezing in an additional one. By varying the size and scope of the Merriweather experience, we can tremendously increase the benefits it provides the community and its usefulness year-round.

Commercial events aside, I believe MPP's role as a community resource should also be expanded. Under county ownership, it should host large concerts, as well as local community and artistic events. Having it run solely as a for-profit enterprise diminishes some of its value to the community. The market may be a terrific place to allocate traditional goods and services, but there are many things that cannot be measured in the simple calculus of supply and demand. The arts, quality of life, community, these are examples of intangible elements of our society that the market place fails to account for and thus are offered at below the socially optimum level. This is due simply to the fact that no one can effectively put a price tag on them. How do we measure the value of a child being exposed to classical music? How do we price our high school graduations and the everlasting memories they create in all of us? MPP has shown that with the right leaders at the helm it can make a financial profit, that it can sell a lot of tickets. However, with the right commitment to our community from its owners and operators, MPP can also turn social profits.

I believe Merriweather can accomplish this in several ways. For instance, it could host a series of free concerts, summer music and theater camps, performances for children, and time for community members to use it simply as a park or a meeting place. Even without music in the air and throngs of people in attendance, MPP is a beautiful place to visit and enjoy the outdoors.

These community-focused uses can have very real and positive impacts on our lives, and I'd like to share a quick story about how Merriweather affected my life.

When I was younger and had dreams of being a rock star, I had the opportunity to play at Merriweather several times. The first was at my high school graduation, where as the token musician in my class, I led a pavilion full of students, teachers, parents, and family in a spontaneous sing along to Bill Withers' Lean On Me. At my graduation from HCC, I played guitar on stage to open the ceremony. We did a rock rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner; my deepest apologies to Jimi Hendrix for that.

Twice my band performed in a concert of local and regional bands organized by a high school classmate of ours. Later, we performed as part of a Battle of the Bands concert put on by radio station WHFS, which my band won due in large part to our home field advantage. Though clearly rock stardom has eluded me, my performances at Merriweather rank among the greatest memories of my life, memories that inspired me to continue playing longer than I would have otherwise. And, my experience as a musician taught me more about life than six years of college. I learned about organization, professionalism, finances, negotiations and managing interpersonal relationships. There are hundreds of local high school kids who are doing exactly what I did, committing their lives to performing, connecting with audiences and trying to express themselves as best they can. Giving these future musicians and actors an opportunity to perform on a stage as special as Merriweather's could mean as much for them as it did for me.

Unfortunately, this might not be possible because of what I can only describe as stupidity. It seems biggest problem we face in trying to preserve the current Merriweather is parking, and that is truly a shame. Howard County is filled with some of the smartest and most creative people in the region, and to say that we can't have MPP because there isn't a parking lot immediately adjacent to it is foolish. Creative minds can develop creative solutions, no matter how seemingly insurmountable the problem may be. Let's put these minds to work. We've got thousands of surface parking spaces within easy walking distance of MPP. We've got park-n-rides throughout Columbia that are vacant during the weekends and after working hours. There are tons of options; we've just got to consider them. Anyone who has ever been to an Orioles game in Baltimore knows that you're as likely to see free, on-site parking as you are the home team in the playoffs. Why should MPP and Town Center, our urban core, be any different?

Aside from parking, the only other obstacle is money. How are we going to pay for it? While this would appear to be the most difficult solution to find, it's actually quite easy. Even if the Rouse Company doesn't do the right thing—that is, donate the pavilion to the county (a course of action recommended by the Columbia Flier)—the purchase price could easily be financed with revenue bonds. The debt service on these bonds could be paid with the rent received from the management company. Last year, IMP paid the Rouse Company \$500,000 in rent for the pavilion. If the county had the same agreement, it could use that annual fee to cover debt service on an \$8 million bond issuance, assuming biennial payments of \$250,000 over 30 years at a 4.5 percent interest rate. MPP is currently assessed at \$4.2 million.

With the purchase price sufficiently covered, there would be ongoing costs, such as operations and renovations. Renovation costs could be met with a combination of money from the venue's managers and that which is left over from the bond. As for the operational expenses,

it is customary for the private manager to cover these – and, I might add, even with these expenses IMP still made money on MPP last year.

These, however, are not the only costs. The cultural and community activities that I previously mentioned would have to be subsidized in some way, as the revenue they generate would be minimal. While a management company would be willing to subsidize these events to an extent, they can only afford to do so much. To truly expand MPP's usefulness to the community more money must be raised—and to accomplish this we must look to creative financing mechanisms. For instance, we should seek corporate sponsorship for free or low cost concerts, similar to the McDonald's Sessions at Merriweather this summer, which offered advanced tickets for only \$10. We could even consider selling the naming rights, though I'm not a big fan of that option.

Another way would be to create an MPP Foundation whose mission is to promote artistic, cultural, and educational uses of MPP. Money for this foundation could come from donations and grants. I personally know several people who are willing to raise money for MPP if it means the continued existence of the pavilion. This foundation could even be part or an extension of the Howard County Arts Council. The pavilion then gives these programs a level of credibility and notoriety that it would not have otherwise.

Moreover, we could create a structure that enables citizens to buy "shares" of MPP. If we allow a level of citizen ownership, we then create an incentive within the community to make MPP successful and a good neighbor. There are other options that I haven't suggested, but this should give you an idea of the wide-range of financing tools at our disposal to make Howard County ownership of MPP a success.

This panel has been given a truly unique and difficult charge. In seeing and reading about its deliberations to this point, I have been impressed with your recognition of the significance of this situation and how you have conducted yourselves accordingly. To many, the preservation of MPP may seem like a small problem in a world rapt with struggles. However, the importance of Merriweather to this community and to everyone you see here tonight cannot be underestimated.

Indeed, Merriweather Post, whether intentional or not, has come to embody the best of our community. It was designed and built in such a way that respected and even enhanced its natural surroundings. Also, like Columbia, it is large but never feels overwhelming, instead creating a sense of calm and peacefulness. In several ways, it serves as a conduit for community, a place where a diverse group of people can join together and put aside differences. It connects us with our past, and provides reasons to look forward to warm summer nights and good company. It is a respite from the bland, the uninspiring, the sameness and lack of originality that we see everywhere else we go. Under its grand wooden pavilion, the history of our community, our lives, mixes with the gentle breezes and music that fills our ears and lifts our spirits. It is a part of who we were, who we are, and who we will become. Should it disappear, the memories we all share may never fade, but the chance to make new ones and relive the old ones will. I urge to recommend that the county purchase and forever preserve this wonderful pavilion. It is undeniably a bold recommendation to make, but our lives and our community will be better for it.