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Testimony from the Oakland Mills Community Association, Jonathan Edelson, Board Member

Presented to the Howard County School System Board of Education

Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Howard County Public School System's capital budget and capital improvement plan. I would like to start by thanking you for your continued support of the new Talbott Springs Elementary School. This has been a journey which will culminate in a new beginning for the Talbott Springs Elementary School students, staff, administrators, and the entire community. It's exciting to see construction progress on the new school, and we can't wait to fill the halls with young students who will experience the amazing opportunity to engage in learning in a safe, new, state-of-the-art school environment! Thank you for supporting this effort.

Now, I have to move on to a less happy topic. HCPSS is constantly behind in funding deferred maintenance to the point that long-overdue projects basically fall off the charts with tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars of necessary health and safety maintenance projects being neglected. Talbott Springs was neglected so long that it became more cost-effective to demolish it rather than renovate and expand it. We are very concerned that both Oakland Mills High School and Oakland Mills Middle School are headed down the same path.

Oakland Mills High School has nearly \$111,000,000 in deferred maintenance costs, according to data obtained from school system leadership. This unfathomable number equates to health and safety repairs—including replacing an HVAC system that the school system concluded could no longer support an environment conducive to learning. This number also equates to more than the cost of some entirely new school buildings. Currently, Oakland Mills High is NOT EVEN in the HCPSS ten-year capital improvement plan. The community finds this unconscionable. All HCPSS school buildings must provide a safe and healthy learning environment. The combination of deferred maintenance at Oakland Mills High School and Oakland Mills Middle School equals twenty percent of the overall deferred maintenance costs for all HCPSS Schools. I will skip the details, but please refer to the addenda we are providing with our testimony. While I know

you face a huge deferred maintenance bill of \$800 million, I am asking you why these buildings continue to be neglected while newer buildings receive upgrades and renovations, and why two buildings not just in one cluster, but in one community, represent 20 percent of all this deferred maintenance.

These schools serve a diverse population of students, including much higher-than-average proportions of students from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds, who like all other students in the County deserve a healthy and safe school. For many students, the school is their “safe place,” but sadly the infrastructure can no longer provide an equitable environment. During Board of Education redistricting deliberations in 2019, a member commented that the new High School #13 should not open with 45 percent of its students receiving free and reduced meals. A higher proportion of students receive free and reduced meals at Oakland Mills High and Oakland Mills Middle. Are we saying that Howard County prioritizes its nicest and newest facilities for only students from select backgrounds?

This is a serious issue that needs serious attention and commitment to stop deferring renovations to facilities that need it most. We have heard many times before that capacity needs drive capital investment. The Oakland Mills schools share boundaries with schools that are overcrowded. Past boards of education have chosen not to use that capacity, and as a result, our buildings are neglected. Inferior buildings cannot handle more capacity; thus we are stuck in a vicious cycle. It is your responsibility to ensure that ALL schools meet the same health and safety standards and provide modern amenities to students regardless of their backgrounds. Do not defer Oakland Mills Middle School any longer, and put Oakland Mills High School back in the plan with a commitment to seeking appropriate funding on time.

Given what I’ve just shared, I cannot come up with a rational reason why these schools are not at the top of the capital improvement list. Fix them and fill them.