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LAW SOCIETY OF HOWARD COUNTY

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Howard County Council
George Howard Building
3430 Court House Drive
Ellicott City, Maryland 21043

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HOWARD COUNTY COUNCIL
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Dear County Council Members:

For years, Howard County has proudly adopted the challenge reflected in the mantra to "Choose Civility." This campaign has transcended bumper stickers to hearts. Hearts are touched by the call to appreciate diversity and to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect among residents. The Howard County Circuit Court is the place where we seek equality, equity, protection, mercy and, at times, the wisdom of Solomon. The Waring-Mitchell Law Society is dedicated to Howard County's commitment to civility and fair and equal justice before the law. Unfortunately, the current Circuit Court location and design fails to meet the community's needs.

Circuit Court proceedings vary from intensely emotional domestic issues such as divorce, custody and child welfare to the very grave issue of freedom versus imprisonment. Parties, family members, victims and witnesses require accommodations outside of the individual courtrooms that allow for confidentiality, security and privacy. The current structure fails to meet those needs.

The courthouse was originally built in 1843. In spite of renovations and additions over the years, it remains woefully inadequate to serve the county. The primary parking lot is too small to accommodate the public and the overflow lot sits on a hill which presents a physical challenge for many. The one room library in the courthouse has a marginal

number of computers, journals and books. The library is located in an area just beyond the entrance to the building and lacks a door to obstruct hallway noise, making it so that researchers do not have a quiet environment to read material. The courthouse also lacks adequate space for attorneys to privately consult with their clients.

The current courthouse structure not only fails to serve litigants and legal professionals, it also miserably fails to serve the general public. The courthouse should be a place that welcomes those who sacrifice their time to perform their civic duty as jurors, yet there are inadequate accommodations for jury selection. Furthermore, there is no cafeteria available in the building to save time for users between proceedings.

The courthouse also provides a poor waiting area for citizens seeking a civil ceremony. Couples enter the courthouse daily to get married. Their family and friends join them with hope and promise for the future only to stand in front of the civil clerk counter to await their special moment. Howard County should provide a better setting for these citizens than a few seats in front of a busy counter.

The Howard County Office of Land Records is located miles away from the courthouse. Litigants and court personnel cannot research property disputes, access deeds and liens in the same building in which they litigate property matters.

Previous courthouse renovations provided mere cosmetic changes. The Howard County Circuit Court needs major structural changes and expansion. The County population requires at least six judges on the bench, yet the courthouse can only accommodate five judges. The County needlessly wastes money renting office and storage space in multiple locations when it should have one centralized facility to house offices for the multiple agencies that regularly interact with the court such as the Department of Social Services, the Offices of the State's Attorney and the Public Defender just to name a few.

Finally, as the State of Maryland implements electronic filing, the courthouse needs to be wired to accommodate new technological and electronic security requirements.

The Waring-Mitchell Law Society encourages the Howard County Council to facilitate our choice of civility and construct a state-of-the-art structure that will benefit legal professionals, court employees, law enforcement officers, and everyone doing business in, serving and seeking relief from the Howard County Circuit Court.

Respectfully,



Carol Ann Smith, Esq.
President