

Why did a Columbia community center become a campaign issue?



by [Lisa Markovitz](#)

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Howard County has invested \$25 million in a community center project called The Source, at the former Columbia Flier building site on Little Patuxent Parkway. It is intended to provide youth social resources, help with food insecurity, health services, sports, and more. This is exactly the kind of investment residents want from local government. Yet, as construction moves forward, what should be a celebration of a long-planned public project has instead become the subject of political controversy.

The Source is being developed through a public-private partnership with Columbia Community Concepts, whose mission is to empower historically disadvantaged youth and families in Howard County. The executed grant from July of 2024 is available on the County's [website](#), and was created through the County's public process. The County Council approved \$20 million in funding in fiscal year 2025, followed by an additional \$5 million in fiscal year 2026. There was no contention during the almost two-year process.

The county bought the Columbia Flier building under the Ulman administration for \$2.8 million, and intended to use it for an entrepreneurship center, but environmental issues in the building meant it stayed vacant for years. The county sold it in 2024 for \$3 million. Now Columbia Community Concepts is the authorized manager of the property. The grant funds enabled the demolition of the old building and can be used also for development and construction costs and other specific purposes. A goal in the grant is to "generally, create an environment for youth to come together, engage and inspire one another." It's a great deal.

Council Member Deb Jung, currently running for County Executive, noted her concerns about financial oversight of the grant in a recent press release. Jung said that the grant the county agreed to doesn't have an enforceable scope of work and no requirement for how many square feet have to be used for community center programming.

A video clip she shared, of a budget work session a year ago, is of particular interest because County officials answered Jung's questions about The Source at the time, specifically about whether cost overruns, including from delays, would be borne by the County. The answer was no: County officials confirmed the agreements cap the County's fiscal responsibility at the \$25 million that had already been committed, that the grant amount was just a portion of what it would take to build The Source, and that the remainder and any overruns would be the responsibility of the grantee.

This information is notably absent from the public discussion surrounding Jung's press release, which occurred shortly after the May 11, 2026 budget meeting, where Jung commented off agenda about last year's budget, to bring the issue up again.

Concerns had not been raised from grant inception in 2024 until the meeting in 2025, and no further issues had been raised until now, including after a financial report was delivered in February of this year.

What has changed is the political calendar.

Media criticism of The Source appeared after the latest campaign finance reports were filed and publicized, showing contributions from Columbia Community Concepts board members to the campaign of former Delegate Vanessa Atterbeary, also running for County Executive. Atterbeary has no role in The Source project, and the County's capped total obligation is already funded. The project remains on track. Yet, suddenly, a long-planned community center has become a political flashpoint with baseless attention on irrelevant donations and inaccurate financial criticisms.

Jung also said that The Source developers had canceled a scheduled March County Council meeting; however, emails provided to this writer tell a different story. The correspondence shows shared scheduling proposals and an agreement to try to hold the meeting in May.

Brian Kim, managing member of Columbia Concepts-Flier (which established Columbia Community Concepts for the project) published a [statement](#). "We strongly condemn unwarranted personal attacks," Kim said, noting that they could "adversely impact the very people and programs that this project is intended to support."

Kim said transparency would require all the facts, "not election-year efforts to mischaracterize ... and turn a community project into a campaign issue."

Columbia Community Care, a well-known local charity providing food distribution and other benefits, is set to house its headquarters in the new center, enabling them to expand their services. When I contacted the founder and Executive Director, Erika Strauss Chavarria, about

this issue, she said, “We did not cancel a meeting. We gave an alternative time and the council never followed up until it was election time. That is not transparent, nor accountable.”

Council Chair Opel Jones told me Columbia Concepts was requested to appear at the March 2026 meeting, but no meeting was set. “It was an invitation, not a subpoena,” Jones said. “They responded, respectfully requesting a May date, to provide a key milestones report. The date was not set, so no meeting was canceled.”

The County Council has scheduled a special meeting for 10:30 a.m. June 8 with one item on the agenda: reviewing a report about The Source.

The Source represents an opportunity to deliver a lasting public asset while limiting taxpayer exposure. More profitable private redevelopment options could have been pursued for the site. The county is getting demolition, reconstruction, ongoing management and capped financial responsibility. It’s a great deal. These stakeholders chose a project focused on community service and public benefit. The Source should be judged on its merits, not used as a vehicle for unfounded election-year political attacks.