

Subject: Inspections
Related Department: CPHD

FY 2027 Proposed Budget
Budget Work Session Follow-up

4/14/2026

The following information is provided in response to a request made by Ms. Cunningham via email on *April 3, 2026*, regarding the following question:

What would be potential cost savings or service level improvements of allowing third party inspections? How do we evaluate that?

The potential cost savings or service-level improvements of using a third-party consultant would not outweigh the benefits for building safety inspections provided by in-house trained County personnel.

Our experience with a third-party contractor for inspections is related to the elevator program, and the use of the contractor to perform all elevator inspections. These services have been outsourced since FY 2015. Prior to that time, elevator inspections were conducted in-house by County staff. Following staff retirements and changes in industry demand for qualified elevator inspectors, CPHD elected to procure inspection services through a competitive Request for Proposals (RFP) process.

From a construction safety and enforcement perspective, there are numerous factors to consider for the use of third-party inspectors. While often promoted as a cost-saving option, third-party inspections are profit-driven. When inspectors are hired directly by contractors, this can create pressure to prioritize speed over full code compliance. Also, costs associated with third-party inspections (both monetary and administrative) can be underestimated and increase if complaints or appeals arise.

County inspectors, by contrast, have a single mission: enforcing the building code and protecting life safety. They typically undergo three to five years of training to develop required comprehensive technical expertise. This experience is especially critical in Arlington County, where projects are complex, frequently involve high-rise construction, and require careful coordination and judgment. Third-party inspections should also be distinguished from special inspections already permitted under the building code, which are narrowly focused, tightly regulated, and performed by highly qualified specialists such as the expertise involved in elevator inspections.

County inspectors follow standardized procedures and possess strong knowledge of local conditions. Third-party inspectors can vary widely in training, experience, and interpretation of code requirements, leading to inconsistent enforcement and potential

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safety gaps. Even when acting appropriately, they may be perceived as less impartial, which can erode public trust.

Most jurisdictions in the District-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) region do not fully contract out code enforcement or construction inspections. Primarily, they rely on a hybrid model of in-house staff with targeted third-party, on-call, or overflow contracting authorized under law. Specifically, outsourcing only for volume surges or specialized expertise inspections.

In summary, replacing county inspectors with third-party inspectors does not provide the same consistency, accountability, or institutional knowledge. Any short-term savings must be weighed against long-term risks, including rework, liability, reduced compliance, and, most importantly, public safety. A County run inspection program remains the most reliable means of ensuring life safety and code compliance.