This morning, the Transportation, Economy and Environment Committee of the Martin Luther King County Council voted unanimously to forward an ordinance establishing a paid parental leave pilot program to the full Council. Chair Rod Dembowski, Joe McDermott, and Larry Phillips were the members present and voting.

Assuring all County employees with newborn or newly adopted children up to 12 weeks of fully paid parental leave is a good step forward, helping build momentum for passage of paid family and medical leave insurance in for everybody in Washington state and eventually nationally.

The 2016 pilot program will allow the County to establish use rates, costs, and other impacts. A permanent benefit will be part of negotiations with employee unions. Dustin Fredericks, co-chair of the King County Coalition of Unions, expressed support for the pilot.

My testimony in support of the ordinance is below.

Testimony of Marilyn Watkins before the Transportation, Economy and Environment Committee of the Martin Luther King County Council, November 17, 2015.

Good morning. I am Marilyn Watkins, policy director of the EOI.

I commend the King County Council, this committee, and Chair Dembowski for moving forward with a guarantee that all new parents employed by the county will be able to take 12 weeks of paid parental leave in 2016.

We know from decades of research – and many of us from personal experience – that the first weeks and months of life are wondrous times. Babies are learning so much about the world around them, especially about how to relate to other people. Brain development is amazingly rapid during that time, and the foundations of long-term social and physical health are established. Adequate time to fully bond with the parents is the cornerstone of a child’s healthy development, both for newborns and adopted children.

I do want to raise several concerns that I hope you take into account as you move from this pilot to a permanent program.

1. Paid parental leave should be in addition to paid sick leave and vacation. Those first 3 months are also a stressful and exhausting time for parents. Life happens, and kids in daycare get sick.
Requiring that most leave be exhausted prior to taking paid parental leave is the wrong approach.

2. Cost is of course a factor, but please consider the benefits to the County as an employer, as well as the direct costs. We know that health outcomes and the long term earning potential for birth mothers improve when they have sufficient paid maternity leave. And job commitment and morale increase for all parents.

3. In considering what the County should provide, standards in the private sector and among other public employers is also the wrong starting point. The lack of paid parental leave in the United States is an international embarrassment. The wellbeing of the child and our belief in the fundamental equality and worth of every human life should be at the center.

Our goal should be providing every child with the advantages of lengthy paid parental leaves. I look forward to working with you all toward paid family and medical leave for all Washingtonians and throughout the United States as we go forward.

Your actions today are a good step toward that end. Thank you.