Wes Moore, Governor
Aruna Miller, Lt. Governor

Rebecca L. Flora, AICP, LEED ND / BD+C, Secretary
Elizabeth Hughes, MHT Director and
State Historic Preservation Officer

Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING
MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST

September 12, 2024

Ms. Rebeccah Ballo
Historic Preservation Supervisor
Montgomery County Planning Department
2425 Reedie Drive, 13th Floor
Wheaton, MD 20902

Re: Montgomery Planning Request – COMSAT Building National Register Eligibility

Dear Ms. Ballo:

Thank you for reaching out to request assistance from the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT) regarding a determination of National Register of Historic Places eligibility for the COMSAT Laboratories at 22300 Comsat Drive, Clarksburg, MD 20871, pursuant to Title 8 of the Land Use Article, §8-205(2)b. We are responding primarily based on the draft National Register nomination you provided but would be happy to evaluate any additional information as needed.

MHT has determined that the COMSAT Laboratories building in Clarksburg (M:12-59) is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C as the work of a master at the state level of significance. Designed by architect Cesar Pelli in 1967, the building is an early example of "High-Technology" design with many features that would come to characterize the style, particularly along Montgomery County's technology research corridor. The COMSAT Laboratories building features aluminum cladding (contemporaneously referred to as "metal skin") in the metal-glass based curtain walls set in a pastoral landscape, characteristics that are consistently repeated in other High-Tech designs. The building is one of four Pelli-designed buildings in the region and Pelli's only commercial design still standing in Maryland.
The building is also eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A in the areas of Science, Engineering, and Communications at the national level of significance. COMSAT Laboratories opened in 1969 as the research division of the COMSAT corporation, which was founded in February 1963, as a result of the Communications Satellite Act of 1962, to establish a commercial communications satellite system. The research undertaken at COMSAT Laboratories developed modern communication technology that was revolutionary at the time.

When the draft National Register documentation was prepared in 2005, COMSAT Laboratories held over 100 patents, with many more pending. Accomplishments by researchers at the building include the broadcast of the moon landing on television in 1969, the development of antennae that could be used for ship-to-ship communication, echo suppressor and echo cancellers that allowed for voice calls over satellite, videoconferencing, and the hydrogen-nickel oxide battery, which extended satellite battery power.

The proposed Period of Significance for the building extends from 1969 when construction on the building was completed through 1974. However, additional comparative research and documentation of the accomplishments of the COMSAT Laboratories may extend the period of significance beyond the fifty-year mark. Because of the significance of accomplishments of the COMSAT Laboratories, Criterion Consideration G will likely be met.

We hope this satisfies your request. If you have any additional questions, please contact Nell Ziehl, Chief of Planning, Education and Outreach, at nell.ziehl@maryland.gov or (410) 697-9592.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Hughes
Director

cc: Jessica French, Administrator, National Register Program