

Montgomery County 2018 County Council Elections: Food Council Candidate Questionnaire

The Montgomery County Food Council (MCFC) is the primary connection point for all community partners engaged in cultivating a sustainable, equitable, and robust local food system. Our 25 Council Members are selected volunteer business and nonprofit leaders, government officials, educators, and community members who lead our four Working Groups, which convene an additional 100+ community partners on a monthly basis to identify local food system challenges and develop collaborative, feasible strategies to address these issues:

- The **Environmental Impact Working Group** protects and improves the local resources of the County related to agriculture and food, such as soil, water, and biodiversity, through promoting composting and sustainable practices.
- The **Food Economy Working Group** develops and sustains an economically viable local food system that supports producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers.
- The **Food Literacy Working Group** improves the eating habits of County residents through promoting access to educational resources on nutrition, gardening, cooking skills, food safety and food marketing.
- The **Food Recovery and Access Working Group** increases access to locally produced, culturally appropriate, nutritious food among all County residents, especially in communities with low food security.

Cherri Branson

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Questions

- 1. What local food initiatives, policies and programs have you personally and professionally supported, and in what capacities, to improve the various aspects of our local food system (such as those outlined above)?**

Personally, I have supported programs and policies designed to address food insecurity, through organizations such as Capitol Area Food Bank and Shepherd's table. Professionally, as an interim District 5 Council Member in 2014, participated in US VegWeek to draw attention to the benefits of a vegetarian diet on environmental sustainability. I continue to go "meatless" for more than half of my meals.

- 2. *The Food Council partnered with the County government to convene 300 community stakeholders in the creation of a five-year Food Security Plan (FSP), released in January 2017. The plan identifies the food insecurity rate in the county (6.3%, of which 13.3% are children¹), and the populations and geographic locations most at risk for hunger. In its first year, FSP successes have included creating FoodStat, a County-based platform for collecting and analyzing available local food access data, expanding existing programs such as the Weekend Bag food assistance program, and strengthening the network of food assistance agencies. Over \$500,000 in county funds were appropriated in FY18 to finance these initiatives and program expansions.***

What do you find to be the greatest successes of the plan thus far, and what do you see as the most critical next steps? Will you support and fund the continued implementation of the Food Security Plan if you are elected?

The greatest successes are both on a systemic level and an individual level. The program to provide weekend backpacks of food to school children is an important way to address hunger in the county on an individual level. On an institutional level, FoodStat provides data on the network of non-profits that provide food assistance. The critical next step is to provide a system that links these providers in a way that increases their effectiveness and conduct increased outreach and informational efforts about these resources to people who may be food insecure. I will support and fund continued implementation of the Food Security Plan.

- 3. *Montgomery County's economy has a robust food production sector, with 540 total farms² (over 200 of which produce vegetables, fruit, dairy, and/or meat) that employ 836 agricultural workers, 20 farmers markets (more than any other county in Maryland). Our 93,000 acre agricultural reserve is a nationally recognized model for effective land preservation for farming. In addition, over***

¹ Feeding America

² <http://mdfoodsystemmap.org/data-summaries/>

70 non-farm food and beverage producers are based here. In order to highlight the diversity of this producer Community, the Food Council launched the Food and Beverage Guide in 2016 and the MoCo Made initiative in 2017 in partnership with the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation.

What programs and policies would you champion to increase local food production and distribution to support these farmers and businesses to meet a growing regional consumer demand for nutritious, local food?

I will continue efforts to preserve farm land and support efforts to expand programs to buy and consume locally produced foods and encourage institutional purchasers (government and private) to "buy local".

4. Montgomery County currently incinerates approximately 23% of all residential food waste³, a valuable resource that could be recycled and actually count towards the County's goal of 70% recycling by 2020. The County Department of Environmental Protection will be releasing a Composting and Compost Use Strategic Plan this spring. Additional resources will be needed to develop infrastructure to compost and to educate the public about the need to compost and how to use compost.

Do you support allocating resources to increase food waste composting at the large, mid-scale, and backyard composting levels? What suggestions do you have for the County to pursue zero waste strategies, such as establishing more locally based opportunities for food waste to be collected and composted and to promoting the use of compost locally?

i support food composting efforts. But we must also, reduce food waste, encourage food recovery programs, and explore the use composted food waste into usable products. The County should consider distribution of composting bins to every household--in the same way recycling bins are distributed.

5. A healthy diet is key to good overall health, and access to food education (such as nutrition education, cooking classes, and gardening) is a key component of a resident's or family's ability to grow, choose, safely prepare, and consume nutritious foods.

What role do you believe the county government should play in providing food education and encouraging residents to make healthy and sustainable food choices?

The county currently has "healthy" snack and drink vending machines in government facilities and provides incentives for county employees to engage in "wellness" activities, including exercise and healthy eating. The county should focus food education and "farmers market" outreach efforts in areas that are food deserts with the fewest healthy food options. Additionally, healthy eating educational materials could be made available to daycare centers and childcare providers at a minimal cost. Teaching young children to "eat healthy" helps establish good nutrition as a part of a regular routine.

³ <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/sws/resources/files/studies/waste-composition-study-130726.pdf>

6. ***MCPS serves an estimated 15 million meals each year⁴, and is a critical source of nutrition for our County's food insecure children. 33.2% of MCPS students receive Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS)⁵ and 39.94% of students are eligible for FARMS⁶. The MCPS Summer Meals Program feeds over 9,500 children each day⁷ when school is not in session, and schools are distribution sites for Weekend Bags serving more than 5,000⁸ students and Family Markets serving over 800 County families.***

In what ways do you think county elected officials should engage in MCPS' provision of food to children (including pre-k, after-school, weekend, and summer programs)?

In addition to assuring funding for these efforts, elected officials can use their "bully pulpit" to promote these efforts and encourage private sector participation and support.

7. ***The food system offers tremendous opportunities for employment, from farming to food service to social enterprise. However, new entrants to farming face challenges such as securing long-term access to land and, despite the booming hospitality industry in Montgomery County, local food service employers report a shortage of trained line cooks. The recent closure of L'Academie de Cuisine has resulted in even fewer local food-skill workforce development resources.***

What types of programs would you establish or support to develop pathways to employment in the agricultural, food service and other related sectors?

As to food service, I will support the expansion of Community Kitchens to encourage individual entrepreneurs as well as explore opportunities for expanded programs in MCPS and Montgomery College. Additionally, the county appears to have many privately-run cosmetology schools. I will ask the Office of Legislative Oversight to determine whether this model could be adapted to the food service industry and how the county could pursue the development of a pilot program. As to agriculture, the challenge of land acquisition through lease or purchase and capital costs are major barriers for new entrants. However, the continued viability of the agricultural reserve depends on removal of these barriers. I will work with the state legislative delegation to address these issues.

8. ***In recent years, the Food Council has actively supported county legislative initiatives directing the creation of food security and food waste composting strategic plans, zoning text amendments increasing opportunities for on-farm composting and agritourism, establishing healthy vending requirements and an urban agricultural tax credit, and Council proclamations recognizing World Food Day and the contributions of farmers markets.***

⁴ <http://news.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uncategorized/five-food-service-workers-recognized-for-dedication-and-hard-work/>

⁵ <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/about/statistics.aspx>

⁶ <https://www.mannafood.org/our-community/the-hunger-problem/facts-and-statistics/>

⁷ http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/exec/Resources/Files/pdf/MoCo_Food-Security-Plan_2017.pdf

⁸ SmartSacks Program Update 4.19.17

What policies or legislation would you establish to improve critical aspects of the County's food system? How would you engage community stakeholders in the creation and implementation of these policies? How would these initiatives be funded?

I will support the current efforts to increase food security, reduce food waste and encourage "buy local" efforts. Additionally, I will examine new efforts to increase profitability of the agricultural reserve (such as wine production). I would engage community stakeholders through outreach and education efforts--such as an Agricultural Summits held in upcounty and downcounty.