

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.

Hoan Dang

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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)?**

For the past 20 years, I have served as a board member of the Association of Vietnamese Americans (avaus.org), an organization based in Silver Spring that provides culturally-competent and language-appropriate services to individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). These direct services include referring low-income LEP individuals with low food security to local area food banks such as Manna Food Center.

- 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 strength of the Food Security Plan is in its construction based on a careful assessment of the needs of County residents and modeling the program through partnerships that are closest to those who will receive the services. The two-year planning period, which included the development of FoodStat, provides an empirical and rational base for designing the program. Although the implementation is in its first years, the goal is aggressive but appropriate by 2020.

As a life-long community organizer, I appreciate the groundwork done to create this program based on community needs; listening to those who need the services will assist in reaching the goal. By involving Montgomery County government, Americorps volunteers, and private partners for support will make it possible to adjust as needs change. The Plan does include an assumption that the program has the ability to adjust as needs change, but it is critical that enough data are regularly collected and analyzed to recognize where and when these changes need to occur, and how quickly.

The critical next steps will be in bringing more partners into the Plan to broaden the program to communities that may not have previously been identified. Many of those with food insecurity are not easily identified because of their reluctance to admit that they need help. This is especially true in more middle class families that may be having temporary hardships. Another critical point is having a clear understanding of how the potentially negative impact of

¹ Feeding America

the Federal Tax Reform may reduce the level of County funding or the amount of charity giving by residents and businesses if the economy slows.

As a Councilmember, I will support the continued implementation of the Food Security Plan but will assess the level of funding based on progress toward your goals. I look forward to working with you to meet this problem that remains out of the consciousness of most County residents.

- 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 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?

Montgomery County has a thriving Agricultural Reserve that includes many of the small farms that provide locally-grown produce and beverages for local sale. As a frequent visitor to local farmers markets, I recognize the value they serve for residents during our growing season. As a Councilmember, I will support legislation to expand the number of local growers through possible tax breaks for small farms to enter the locally-grown economy. These small farms do not have the capacity to feed residents year round, but we should be encouraging the expansion in the number of farms participating in this movement.

A review of County regulations regarding farmers markets also is needed, both to make it easier for local growers to participate as well as to ensure that food safety is paramount if we are to expand access to these markets. County residents are increasingly visiting farmers markets, and as volume grows both in numbers of farmers participating and numbers of residents visiting, we must assure the safety of the foods and beverages purchased.

- 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?

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

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

Montgomery County has one of the most comprehensive recycling programs of all large counties in the nation. Expanding recycling to waste composting would be a significant step in meeting a zero waste goal. However, composting food waste has significant challenges beyond those of paper and container recycling because of the handling and storage of food waste between pickups, if the food compost is not to be used by the resident. In addition, all food waste is not appropriate for composting. For example, fish, meat and bones, and citrus peels are not recommended for composting; this means that residents and businesses would have to be educated before beginning a food composting regimen.

For a global food waste recycling effort, I believe we should begin with institutions that daily serve large amounts of food, such as schools, health care facilities, hotels, and other large facilities. At the same time, programs to encourage individual food waste composting should begin with educational programs and provision of food waste containers.

As a Councilmember, I would support pilot programs in both the large institutional and residential sector to determine if the public can support these efforts. In small towns and communities there has been some success in encouraging food waste recycling, but it will take planning and coordination with County services to maintain an expanded program.

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 government should play a significant role in providing food education, both through the schools and to the population at large. As a practical matter, a healthier populace reduces the need for significant amount of health care costs and other social services provided by the County.

Legislative efforts can be explored to encourage or mandate specific goals regarding healthy food choices, although legislation should not be implemented without community input to avert the impression that the government has become too involved in personal decisions. For example, legislation to address the types of foods purchased through government food programs is appropriate, but requiring the types of foods available at privately-owned restaurants could seem like government overreach to some. However, the example of the ban on trans fatty acids had the singular goal of protecting public health and was a response to overwhelming public support for such legislation. If there are examples such as this to legislate broadly, I would consider such legislation.

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*

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

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)?

The County government and MCPS are too often viewed as autonomous parts of the government, except during budgetary decisions. I believe the Council should work with MCPS to engage in discussions about food programs provided by MCPS. This opportunity needs to be ongoing throughout the year to support MCPS's food choice decisions. This can only occur if the Council and MCPS have a working relationship and have the same goals. I believe I have the ability to work with MCPS to promote the goal of providing healthier food choices in each of the programs mentioned above.

Healthier food choices generally have budgetary consequences (higher cost in most cases). I will work with MCPS to show them that the Council supports healthier food choices by working to include additional funds in the MCPS budget if they agree to implement this program. I do think MCPS has attempted to provide healthier meals in our schools over the years, but student selection has made some of these initiatives not as successful as I would like. This means that educating children is critical to this effort. With such a diverse school population, this will be a challenge, but no greater a challenge than improving test scores.

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?

Although the public schools could have these employment opportunities as part of their vocational lessons to create awareness among students, I would focus more on programs at the community college level to create a pool of students who have already become interested in these fields. In addition, classes could be offered by the Parks and Recreation Department to raise awareness and interest. Community gardens are present in some communities and these could be expanded with support from the County for tilling and providing fencing and basic supplies and equipment for engaging communities in these activities.

Creating pathways to employment depends on a multifaceted approach, but will depend on supporting the agricultural sector that can provide jobs for those with an interest. Supporting the expansion of our farm-to-market economy will open up the jobs that we cultivate through education and community programs.

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.

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 fully support the Food Security Plan through its implementation and review how to expand both the FoodStat data collection and revisions proposed by the Food Council. I will work with the Food Council to broaden the partnership base and expand outreach efforts to bring in more participants, either through community outreach or public announcements.