

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.

Neil Greenberger

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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)?

I am a candidate for one of the four at-large seats on the Montgomery County Council, but for the past 11 years, I also have been a county employee. For 10 of those years, I worked as the public information officer for the Council and have helped promote the activities of the Food Council since its formation. I previously worked as the public information officer for the City of Rockville and in that role, aggressively worked to market the farmers' markets the city organized (at that time, twice a week).

I am not only committed to the preservation of our Agricultural Reserve, I have a personal interest in it since I now live on the edge of the Ag Reserve—in a former farm house that was built in the 1860s. The land is still fertile and on my property, in addition to a wide garden, I maintain peach trees, pear trees, apple trees, crab apple trees. I also have blueberry bushes that have been very productive.

Caring for my personal agricultural property is a continual lesson in the importance of producing local food and why we must take steps so our farmers continue to not only maintain what they have, but have the opportunity to expand into new areas—especially those that make it economically viable for their land to continue as working farms.

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?

Accomplishing the mission of the Food Council, and its partners, is crucial. So many people—especially elected officials—talk about the need to address food insecurity. There are not enough organizations and activities that work to take of the problem.

I not only strongly believe in the Weekend Backpack program, I have been a volunteer to pack bags over the past few years. The impact of these bags is incredible. Out of the County's \$5.5 billion operating budget, adding funds for programs like this program must be done. There are few ways where our dollars are better spent.

¹ Feeding America

Implementing any new plan of impact in a county as large as Montgomery is never easy, and the Food Council had some early growing pains. But I have followed it enough to know that the program now is on solid footing and has earned the chance to prove how it can make an even larger difference by implementing steps of the Food Security Plan. I would strongly back providing additional funds to help make this plan work for county's neediest 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?

Our Agricultural Reserve continues to be a working model, but it is a great concern to me that there are only four remaining dairy farms in Montgomery County. I am also greatly concerned that some of our current farms are struggling financially, and if they do not survive, our entire Agricultural Reserve economy will be threatened. If we do not have farms, we do not have food to distribute.

And the property taxes on certain farm lands is making it hard for some farms to continue. I would use the county law, approved recently by voters, that allows one Councilmember to block an increase in property taxes above the rate of inflation. By doing this, I will GUARANTEE that property taxes throughout Montgomery County do not increase for the next four years. This would be a great help to all property owners in the Agricultural Reserve.

I would strongly support initiatives that allow farms to have more economic development opportunities so can survive. We need to pass laws that would allow places such as wineries and distilleries in the Ag Reserve to have more dates in which they can host events—and for those events to be allowed to have more participants. Our county is proud of our Ag Reserve—and we have been so far behind surrounding jurisdictions when it comes to allowing our food-producers and other farms to earn a fair living.

The Montgomery Agricultural Advisory Board that represents our farm communities—I just attended their last meeting—knows better than all others what our farmers need to be in a better position to produce more food. However, the board has received little attention from elected officials, particularly in regard to issues it is pressing to help its members. I would be an active voice to help our Agricultural Reserve farmers get more of the things they need from their local government.

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.*

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

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

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?

Promoting composting is a necessity in our county. To do this, we must do a better—and louder—job of teaching residents why this is so important, so useful—and how to do it successfully. The idea of more composting is not new—we just have done a poor job of teaching residents in a position to compost how to do it.

To reach a higher level of recycling in Montgomery, I have three strong initiatives I would pursue:

1. Single stream recycling. This works in communities around us, such as Howard County and the City of Gaithersburg. Many people do not recycle because of the effort it takes (at least in their minds) to correctly separate items. We need to allow all items to go in one bin. This would be an immediate step toward reaching our recycling goal.
2. Recycling bins in public areas and parks. Although our county has had a policy to have recycling bins in all public areas, our Department of Parks has refused to follow this policy. Some operators of public areas have also refused. This is not acceptable. I would take a strong stand on forcing our own agencies to follow our recycling policy.
3. The “Don’t Suck” Movement. Plastic straws are a terrible element for our waterways. The “Don’t Suck” movement is trying to get restaurants to use fewer plastic straws. I would work to implement a move toward only allowing paper straws and would even consider legislation to force county restaurants to only offer paper straws.
4. Changing laws that pertain to solar energy in the Ag Reserve so that farmers could take better advantage of solar opportunities.

- 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?

This needs to start young. Our public school system – after 16 years of superintendents mostly concerned with improving test scores – is starting to introduce innovative courses, including life-improvement courses, in our schools. I would actively work to have MCPS offer more elective courses not only on nutrition, but also on cooking so students would leave with a diploma—and the ability to feed themselves. If schools said they needed extra funds to fit cooking labs in schools, I would advocate for providing those funds.

- 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***

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

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)?

To get food to the students / families that need them, we need to go where those students are. The summer meals program needs to be expanded to more schools—and in more areas. It is a great program, but it is limited in locations and does not serve many parts of the county.

The Weekend Food Bag program is a wonderful program that also needs to be expanded. Some parts of the county do not even know what this is. The program works well where available. It needs to expand.

We also should work with the Wellness Centers placed in a limited number of schools to expand the reach of our food distribution for those who need it. The Wellness Centers work for both students and parents and we should take the opportunity to use it in other ways.

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?

I am very excited to know that among the new, innovative courses that will be introduced to some Upcounty schools starting in the 2018-19 school year involves the "Business of Farming." If done right, this could introduce some students who never considered farming as a work option to explore it. Unfortunately, the number of seats in these classes in 2018-19 is going to be very limited. We need to get MCPS to offer more courses like this—and to expand the number of seats at each school.

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](#).

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

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

creation and implementation of these policies? How would these initiatives be funded?

Not all of promoting food initiatives requires legislation, and the County Council of the past 10 years (my former place of employment) has had few members with active enthusiasm for promoting programs or pursuing legislation. I would sponsor legislation or zoning changes, where needed, to make our farms more economically viable. There is some legislation currently pending regarding agri-economics and agri-tourism, but the farmers say they do not go far enough. We need to do better than having “showcase” legislation. We need strong leadership to help our farmers so they can help us by producing more food.