

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.

Chris Wilhelm

<https://www.wilhelmforcouncil.com/>

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 believe it is a mistake to construct additional schools that don't have the capacity to cook fresh meals for students. I support partnering with local farmers in the agricultural reserve to provide fresh produce and other foods to MCPS students. Efforts to improve nutrition in schools have been very successful, but we can better take advantage Montgomery County's unique agricultural reserve to provide farm-to-school service.

- 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 of the plan so far include the eye-opening amount of research they have done into food insecurity in Montgomery County. Some of their findings, such as that only 45% of residents eligible for SNAP actually apply for it, are truly alarming, and show where the county can be taking steps to promote access to healthy food. I appreciate how the FSP is investigating where SNAP recipients fall on the county's self-sufficiency scale, and is thus determining how appropriate federal assumptions on poverty are in a community as wealthy as Montgomery County. I especially appreciate the Weekend Bags program, which provides food to low income students on days where there are no school meals. Next steps should include investigating how to improve participation in Federal poverty programs like SNAP, as well as providing additional resources for non-native English speaking residents. Food security is a critical issue in Montgomery County, and I will fund and support the continued implementation of the Food Security Plan if elected.

- 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***

¹ Feeding America

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

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?

As much as possible, we should support local businesses in order to help preserve wealth in the communities where we live and work. In order to keep dollars circulating locally, we should be supporting local farmers and small businesses that work in the food sector. In order to reduce food insecurity, I would like to streamline the process of starting a small business that works in the food sector, particularly for non-profits whose goal is explicitly to combat hunger and poverty. I want to work with the County's "anchor institutions" - our hospitals, institutions of higher learning, and our public school system - to create pressure to contract food services through local producers. Cleveland, Ohio has worked with its anchor institutions on local procurement, leading to millions of dollars in revenue for local businesses that had been frozen out of large contracts.

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?

The Dickerson Trash Incinerator is an environmental catastrophe, and should be closed as quickly as possible. Montgomery County prides itself on its environmental consciousness, yet we refuse to take accountability for our consumption when we dump the incinerator toxic ash refuse in poorer communities out of state. I would like to see Takoma Park's extremely successful composting program expanded county wide--it's ironic that Takoma Park's own compost has to be collected at a facility in Prince George's County. Montgomery County should open its own composting facility so that we can handle the capacity that would come with door-to-door composting pick-up. We can also reduce our solid waste by following San Francisco's lead in increasing education and enforcement of recycling rules.

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.

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

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

Health education should be expanded in both K-12 schooling as well as for residents who are no longer in school. The county should be providing resources on how to purchase and cook healthy food, but also figuring out how to make healthy eating more affordable. The biggest step the county can take to improve nutrition is by increasing the supply of fresh food in the MCPS school system. Almost half of all students in MCPS are eligible for free and reduced meals: the county must take steps to provide them with healthy, nutritious meals that their family might not be able to afford. Students should get a chance to experience how fresh food is grown, cooked, and disposed of in sustainable ways.

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)?

County officials should work closely with MCPSs to reduce food insecurity for our students. A significant amount of students rely on MCPS meals for nutritious, affordable meals. The county should be adequately funding MCPS to provide healthy meals for all of its students. However, they should also take a deeper look at why almost half of the students in our county are eligible for free and reduced meals. We won't be able to address food insecurity without addressing the racial and economic inequality that has accelerated in recent years.

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?

The agricultural reserve is one of the things that makes Montgomery County unique, so the county government should be supporting career pathways to promote agriculture and food service. We should look into offering trade classes in these fields to high schoolers in the MCPS school system, considering how much of the local economy revolves around food and agriculture.

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/>

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

⁸ SmartSacks Program Update 4.19.17

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

I would engage with community stakeholders across the county to learn what policies have been effectively implemented (Takoma Park's composting strategy, for instance), and how they can be applied elsewhere. Many of my students rely on free and reduced meals, so reducing food insecurity is one of my biggest concerns. I am not only interested in expanding access to food services, but in building a local economy where working families can afford nutritious food, rather than being forced to choose between making rent and eating healthy.