

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.

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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)?**

As senior policy advisor and deputy chief of staff for the Comptroller of Maryland, I worked on several issues at the Board of Public Works to improve the various aspects of our local food system at the state level. That work included working on contracts to approve funding and support for food hubs around the State of Maryland to address food deserts and address food access challenges. I have also been actively involved in local community based organizations and have volunteered at Manna Food and Nourish Now, Shepherd's Table, and have participated in efforts to address hunger with other local non-profits I am actively involved with like the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.

- 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?

My career in public service has focused on making government more efficient and effective with a data-driven, results-oriented approach. Without data, it isn't policy; it's ideology. That's why I am most excited about the creation of FoodStat, which will enable us to collect and analyze data to determine needs and evaluate effectiveness. As the next County Councilmember in District 1, I will support and fund continued implementation of the Food Security Plan, and look to utilize the data and my background in providing fiscal and operational oversight and holding large public agencies accountable to drive our funding and ensure that we are investing our limited taxpayer dollars in the most effective ways possible to meet the significant food security challenges we face in Montgomery County.

- 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)***

¹ Feeding America

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

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?

We are extremely well positioned in Montgomery County to meet growing consumer demand for nutritious, local food, and to sustain thriving small businesses to support it due to the Agricultural Reserve near urban centers like Bethesda, the Pike District, Rockville, Silver Spring, Wheaton and others. Few communities have our level of demand adjacent to a major city with significant agricultural communities so close, along with the type of highly educated and purpose-driven consumer base that we have. Our community sets up perfectly for the market demand if we can leverage our assets to utilize it.

County government can do a better job connecting producers with the food service industry and the industry to the consumer base. The Food and Beverage Guide and MoCo Made Initiative are important programs to promote the producer community, and I believe we can both build on those efforts and do more. I believe we can bring the producer and food industries together, along with county government and community based organizations to provide commercial kitchen space for healthy, local food start-ups and leverage local chefs to teach classes and promote the program.

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?

This is an opportunity for Montgomery County to be a leader throughout the country, as we face the dire threat and real-life effects of climate change. Zero Waste solutions such as food composting can and should be included in the County's work. I am focused on growing jobs and improving quality of life, and diverting municipal waste away from landfills and incinerators accomplishes both. As a state, we create more than 12 million tons of solid waste a year, and fail to recycle about 3 billion beverage containers a year.

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

Montgomery County should be a leader in drastically reducing those numbers, and it starts with public awareness. County government can and should work together with partners in the food industry and environmental advocacy community on a public education campaign to highlight this issue, while making it easier for residents to recycle and compost. We should establish more locally based opportunities for food waste to be collected and composted and to make it easier for residents and businesses to do it. That can start with a pilot program for providing credits to households for effectively composting, since that will ultimately save the county money, not to mention our environment. The good news is that the market is moving in this direction and will help us leverage thoughtful public investments, since we cannot move towards Zero Waste simply with public investments alone, without sufficient public awareness and support. We also have some great community based organizations we can partner with to leverage private dollars with public resources to accomplish this.

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?

We should be providing students with both the knowledge and skills to make smart food choices. Similar to my strong belief in providing young people with personal financial education so they can lead independent and financially secure lives, we need to also teach them about nutrition and healthy food choices so they can lead healthy lives. This should be about understanding the economic, environmental and health costs of food choices and the skills and available opportunities to make informed personal decisions. That can and should begin at a young age and should include our county public schools and recreational facilities leading the way in terms of providing healthy food options. I also think there are exciting opportunities to provide inter-generational classes with students, parents, and grandparents to learn about cooking, gardening, and nutrition.

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.*

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

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 Council must be a partner to engage with MCPS and the community in the provision of food to children. The two most effective ways to address our achievement/opportunity gap that is unfortunately widening is to ensure that every child has access to early childhood education and to healthy, nutritional meals each day. The only way to accomplish this is to build a partnership among MCPS, county government, PTAs, community based organizations, and others to provide these opportunities for our children and ensure that they are taking advantage of it. As Chair of the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families, I have experience bringing together multiple agencies of county government, along with the private and non-profit sectors to support the needs of our at-risk and disconnected children and youth, and have seen first-hand the significant challenges their families face. These aren't easy issues and they don't have easy solutions so they require us to be all-in as a community to address them.

- 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?

There are significant opportunities to develop pathways in the agricultural, food service and related sectors. This is an area that I believe can and should be a focus of WorkSource, but is also an area where we need to do better to provide a career and technical education track in MCPS. I am also particularly interested in leveraging public and private resources and our significant local industry talent to support and promote local businesses and create a pipeline of skilled workers with industrial kitchen space along with training and events. I would also like to promote our local craft brewery industry and provide more opportunities to connect them with local farmers to provide their ingredients, so that we have 100% MoCo Made local beers. Lastly, we need to build upon programs to support local farming to ensure that the strength of our agribusiness sector can reach its potential.

- 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?

This is why I am so excited about the implementation of FoodStat, so we have the data we need to invest our public dollars in the most effective and efficient way, and can actually evaluate results. That's what governing can and should be and it's the type of leadership I want to provide on the County Council, utilizing my background providing public accountability, transparency, and fiscal oversight. When scrutinizing billions of dollars of contracts at the Board of Public Works, reorganizing and restructuring Maryland's \$6 billion 529 College Savings Plans, and helping to launch a new statewide disability savings program, I've always made extra effort to proactively engage community stakeholders and brought together different groups to create, implement, and improve large public programs. That's the same approach I intend to bring to the County Council.

In order to fund these programs, along with all of our community needs, we need to grow the economic pie and build a stronger and more vibrant private sector economy. That's why I am running for County Council, to represent the only community I've ever called home – so we can Ease the Montgomery County Squeeze on our families, on our values, and on our county budget. It isn't good enough to have great ideas, or world-class assets, or unlimited potential. We have to utilize them in a way that attracts families and businesses, and improves people's lives. That's the Montgomery County I was raised to believe in from the time my siblings and I joined my mom each month to bring home cooked meals to local homeless shelters growing up. And it's the healthy, food secure Montgomery County we can rebuild together.