

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.

Meredith Wellington

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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 support Manna Food Center, their food recovery and distribution programs as well as their nutrition education initiatives. I recently volunteered with Manna on Martin Luther King Day volunteer day at the Bethesda Conference 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?

Yes, if elected, I will support funding the Food Security Plan. I applaud the creation of FoodStat. Using data to target programs, reveal hidden pockets of food insecurity, and track program impact is key to efficient and effective use of funding. Critical next steps are strengthening our local food production economy.

- 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?

¹ Feeding America

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

Local food could be bigger business in Montgomery County. Our unique Agricultural Reserve puts us in a position to increase the quantity and selection of locally produced food products, and our diverse immigrant population results in restaurants with cuisines from around the world. I applaud the efforts of the Economic Development Corporation and Office of Agriculture, and would strengthen the marketing campaign, distribution networks, and increase both incubator and commercial food production spaces to facilitate locally grown and produced food products. I would like to see more ethnically diverse foods available through mainstream retail outlets. To do that, Montgomery County needs a better infrastructure to take local chefs and cooks from incubator kitchens to food production. We lack both incubator and commercial kitchens convenient to all population centers. Food production is often a part time job, and cooks need licensed commercial kitchens in which to prepare their food products. For cooks who want to scale up production, there are virtually no facilities to accommodate that in Montgomery County.

- 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?

Yes, I support allocating resources to work toward Zero Waste, and food waste composting is an important element of that goal. I support food waste composting as a local activity, with the benefits (soil) used locally. I would urge both DEP and the Office of Agriculture to partner with both the public and private sector, specifically restaurants and grocery stores, to implement an education and facility program. I would urge the Department of Transportation right-of-way office to identify land suitable for collecting and processing compost. I would also urge the Office of Agriculture to work with churches, schools, and other institutions to provide land for community gardens that could utilize the composted soil. I served on the Montgomery County Planning Board for eight years, and understand the zoning and land use tools that could facilitate local composting activity.

- 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?

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

I believe our environment, education, and economy will all improve if people made healthier food choices. I support the County government's various nutrition education initiatives through the Office of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services, and public school system. I would also try to support organizations like Real Food for Kids, which leverages community expertise and resources to further food nutrition education, and Crossroads Community Food Network, which pioneered doubling SNAP credit when fruits and vegetables are purchased. County agencies can help identify and provide land for local community gardens, and provide training and local facilities for food waste composting, healthy meals for low-income students throughout the year including weekends, and healthy meals for all in our school cafeterias. They can also allow vegetable gardens on school property, facilitate permits for community/commercial kitchens, and fund non-profits that further all programs mentioned.

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 elected officials should support MCPS' efforts to feed low-income children year round. County officials should provide oversight and review of taxpayer-funded programs to be sure taxpayer dollars are spent efficiently and effectively.

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 support developing a food business related curriculum through Montgomery College and all of its campuses. Montgomery College can provide affordable certification and degree programs to "feed" the food industry's needs as described. I would also leverage

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

State resources to promote apprenticeship programs by partnering with private businesses. I would look at publicly owned land to see if any is available for community gardens, and support using fire station kitchens for local food businesses, following all food safety licensing and safety regulations, as permitted in the zoning code.

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?

Although I am aware of food security, nutrition, and economic development activities in the County, particularly in the Agricultural Reserve, I am not an expert in this field, but I will use the knowledge I gained during my eight years on the Planning Board to identify tools that will facilitate improving the food system. I will work with all stakeholders from farmers to commercial kitchens to institutions to feed the hungry to work to achieve the recommendations of the Montgomery County Food Council. Funding is a challenge, but I vow to be a careful steward of taxpayer dollars and look for ways to grow our food economy as well as improve its health in the context of social equity and environmental protection.