

## 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.

Ben Shnider

www.shniderforcouncil.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 wholeheartedly support the County's Food Security Plan and would work to ensure it is fully funded and executed. I also want to see the Ag Reserve continue to flourish and new agricultural business opportunities encouraged. We must expand programs like "Close Encounters with Agriculture" that expose students to the industry, while also ensuring that the nutritional needs of our growing FARMS-dependent population in MCPS are met.

- 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 children<sup>1</sup>), 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?**

Among the greatest successes of the Plan thus far are taking stock of our full food security challenges as a community and comprehensively diagnosing the growing need that exists. Among our biggest challenges going forward are ensuring affordable, nutritious access to culturally appropriate foods. Of course, adequate funding will also continue to be a challenge and I will remain committed to prioritizing such funding.

- 3. Montgomery County's economy has a robust food production sector, with 540 total farms<sup>2</sup> (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.***

---

<sup>1</sup> Feeding America

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

**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?**

I will work to expand Close Encounters with Agriculture to ensure more students are exposed to this industry. I will also work to increase opportunities for breweries and vineyards to operate on the Ag Reserve.

**4. *Montgomery County currently incinerates approximately 23% of all residential food waste<sup>3</sup>, 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?**

Moving forward with a zero-waste model is a top priority for me. We should work toward residential curb-side pick-up for food waste compost. We should also promptly close the Dickerson Incinerator and provide incentives for locally-produced foods in all types of neighborhoods.

**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 should play an active role in educating residents about food and encouraging healthy choices. This should range from ensuring school lunches are healthy and programs exist to educate students about healthy choices to considering bans on restaurant ingredients that are found to be egregiously unhealthy.

**6. *MCPS serves an estimated 15 million meals each year<sup>4</sup>, 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)<sup>5</sup> and 39.94% of students are eligible for FARMS<sup>6</sup>. The MCPS Summer Meals Program feeds over 9,500 children each***

---

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

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

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/about/statistics.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mannafood.org/our-community/the-hunger-problem/facts-and-statistics/>

**day<sup>7</sup> when school is not in session, and schools are distribution sites for Weekend Bags serving more than 5,000<sup>8</sup> 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 exercise proactive oversight to ensure adequate and healthy meal options exist for our students. Students will not learn if they are hungry or lack energy from poor nutrition.

**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?**

We should expand vocational options in K-12 and at Montgomery College to include more direct connections with potential employers in the agricultural industry. The Ag Reserve is an under-used and under-appreciated economic resource.

**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 prioritize the expansion of composting and community farming to work toward zero waste. I would engage all stakeholders, including the Food Council, while also looking to those in other communities who have had success with this objective.

---

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/exec/Resources/Files/pdf/MoCo\\_Food-Security-Plan\\_2017.pdf](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/exec/Resources/Files/pdf/MoCo_Food-Security-Plan_2017.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> SmartSacks Program Update 4.19.17