

## 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)?**

Personally I have supported local farmers markets and the TPSS Co op for locally sourced items required for my family. Through my nonprofit I have often referred clients to local food pantries to access food in times of need.

- 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?**

The greatest successes of the plan are ensuring that the solution for food insecurity include culturally appropriate food selections. I will support continued implementation of the plan, and work to expand in the Northeastern sections of Montgomery County due to the lack of grocery options available.

- 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.***

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<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 would support a "Buy Local" campaign to identify locally sourced foods for sale at farmers markets, groceries, and opportunities to buy directly at farms. To increase production and distribution I would work with our Economic Development Corp to aggressively identify additional local businesses to assist with carrying the crops in their store fronts, local restaurants, food trucks, and possibly the hotel industry of Montgomery County. Distribution challenges provide an opportunity for entrepreneurs in the County to step up and resolve a need that benefits the environment and the economy.

- 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?**

I do support allocating resources to increase food waste composting. To pursue zero waste strategies I encourage the County to begin dialogue with apartment communities to educate new tenants and work with existing tenants to begin shaping habits by creating community composting programs of their own. This approach helps include communities that produce the largest amount of food waste. I also believe that as a County we can leverage public and private partnerships with businesses interest in sustainability, and lowering costs of the nutrient rich compost.

- 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?**

I believe the County should act as ambassadors to making healthy sustainable food choices. That is part of the expectation of Montgomery County, is that leaders are examples for the entire community.

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

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 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)?**

It is my belief that some of the policies and projects that the County has accepted has increased the population of food insecurity. Given that increase in housing expenses the families food insecurity would also increase, so it is my opinion that the Council should engage in policies and services that introduce families to food insecurity. The county should be engaging in developing low cost, efficient and diverse modes of transportation opening up opportunities for adult residents to access better job opportunities. Other ways that elected officials should engage the provision of food to children is through providing the information through County agencies, promoting through Council resources, and working to find partners that will help with supporting the program.

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 programs that educate youth, foreign born residents, and exchange students a pathway to employment in agriculture and other related sectors. As a Congolese born immigrant, I am aware that agronomics in foreign countries is a viable study, and finding graduates with such degrees residing in Montgomery County would be a benefit that we have yet to fully explore. There are many foreign born residents with such degrees and experience that are unaware of the opportunities in the agricultural sector in Montgomery County. It would be worthwhile to have me in the Council role to fully explore and engage the community for the purpose of creating a pathway.

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<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/>

<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

- 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 have experienced, witnessed, and read about the impact that inadequate public transit has on vulnerable communities in my nonprofit work, and volunteerism at elementary schools in Silver Spring. As stated in the Food Council's reported findings, and recommendations; inadequate transportation is a problem. I would seek to reduce the amount of time that it takes to get to food centers by increasing transit options in a strategic manner. The funding for using existing transit like Ride-On, would come through reviewing and finding cost saving opportunities in master plans, while identifying private partners. Given the growth of ride-share platforms, I believe there is also an opportunity to utilize ride-share platforms to provide transportation options for families to access food centers. I am critical of the lack of community engagement of current council leadership. The lack of engagement has led to poorly executed programs that are costly but are or will take decades before they are effective and helpful to the community. To change this, I would engage the Montgomery County Food Council, as well as seek input from residents while they are already out and about in the community. This would save time, and address concerns, and find additional questions to consider in the decision-making process. It would be worthwhile to request feedback at locations like Manna distribution centers, local groceries, and through the school system. Large community forums could serve double duty by acting as a distribution events for food security organizations, but also provide an opportunity for a captive audience to share their feedback.