

Montgomery County 2018 County Executive 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)?**

First and foremost, I authored the bills that created our county's Food Security Strategic Plan as well as the county's forthcoming Composting/Food Waste Diversion Strategic Plan. In creating and implementing both of those plans, we will make tangible progress in addressing the "front end" of our food system in the form of food insecurity along with the "back end" of the system with how we handle our food waste.

In addition to these two plans, I have been a strong supporter of policies that strengthen the Ag Reserve, the farming industry, and our local farm markets through innovative programs like the New Farmer Pilot Program, our Food Recovery efforts, and the Kitchen Incubator.

I have also pushed for funding for our soil conservation district which supports sustainable farming practices such as the cover crop program. I have passed at least one ZTA that helped farm markets comply with zoning code and pushed for the expansion of the zoning envelope for farmers market operation.

- 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?

Working with the Food Council on this initiative was a very collaborative process and I appreciate all the hard work, dedication, and commitment to not only creating, but implementing the recommendations of this important document.

At its essence, the Food Security Plan has helped us break down the various silos between the public, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors in addressing food insecurity. The plan has led to the creation of Food Stat, which will be a great resource in educating future policymakers as well as the public on where the greatest need remains. And, most importantly, as we learned during a recent Health and Human Services Committee briefing on implementation of the plan, our investments in the plan's recommendations (which I have successfully led the efforts to appropriate the above-mentioned total) have led to a decrease of food insecure individuals in the county—from 7% of our total population to 6.3%.

¹ Feeding America

That's real progress, but we have more work to do to implement Years 2 through 5 of the plan's recommendations. That is why I recently voted in committee to approve an additional \$60,000 to expand the weekend bag program and \$30,000 for microgrants for organizations that assist in food recovery and food distribution. And if elected County Executive, I will continue to allocate the necessary dollars to ensure that we see implementation of this plan through its entirety.

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?

As a Councilmember that represents a large portion of our Ag Reserve, I know that our county's food production sector is integral to our county's economy.

That is why I have worked to secure land for farming in perpetuity through the agricultural easement program and the TDR program. I believe our county should support new farmers to meet the unique challenges they face like we did with the new farmer project pilot program, which provides business training and access to advanced farm practices.

I also support agritourism and the expansion of wineries and microbreweries in the Ag Reserve as an accessory use to farming. That means supporting innovative projects like the Poolesville grape crushing facility. And it means supporting local farm markets through zoning laws and regulatory mechanisms that help them thrive and expand.

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 implementing a food waste composting system that addresses all levels of composting by:

1. Starting an educational campaign on how to properly compost to help dispel any stigma around composting;

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

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

2. Identify and propose amending zoning requirements and restrictions that discourage activities around composting food scraps;
3. Planning, funding, and implementing a county composting facility to handle large-scale amounts of food waste;
4. Implementing a countywide curbside composting collection program that mirrors our existing recycling and trash pick-up services; and
5. Examining incentives and grants to encourage businesses and institutions to set up their own on-site composting facilities.

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 can do this in direct ways through the county's tourism office by promoting 'buy local.' I also voted for legislation to promote healthy vending machine options on machines on county properties. However, I believe we can and should look for a broader approach – one that provides greater supports for urban agriculture, kitchen incubators, community gardens, and looks into potentially incentivizing farm markets to operate in underserved areas.

We also need to look at how our zoning policies effects people's ability to access healthy food. One thing that the Food Security Plan highlighted was that while Montgomery County doesn't have traditional food deserts, there are many areas in the county where there is a high concentration of fast food restaurants. We as a government cannot control which retail establishments go where. They go where the demand is unfortunately. But I think you create that demand by zoning mixed use to produce more housing units that then create greater desire for businesses that provide more healthy food options.

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)?

As partners. There is no one agency that can tackle hunger. The state, the County, MCPS, HHS, and our nonprofits must work together if we are to move the needle. County officials

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

should be engaged in strategic planning to ensure every Montgomery County child/student's nutritional needs are met so they can be ready to learn and prosper in school.

County officials can provide funding support for programs like the weekend bag program, the summer meals program, and other effective ways to alleviate food insecurity among our youth. Partnerships between local farms and MCPS nutritional services are welcomed and encouraged; however, such policy decisions fall in the jurisdiction of the BOE.

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 closure of L'Academie was a blow after 41 years of operations as one of the top cooking schools in all of America. However, despite that loss, we have assets in MCPS, Montgomery College, and the Universities of Shady Grove.

MCPS has a career readiness program for Professional Restaurant Management. Montgomery College offers courses in Food and Beverage Management. And students at the Universities at Shady Grove can enroll in the Hospitality and Tourism Management program via the University of Maryland Eastern Shore.

I believe it is imperative that we coordinate the workforce development efforts and goals between these educational institutions, WorkSource Montgomery, the agricultural community, and food service industry

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 was proud to sponsor and/or support all initiatives you mention above. It was an honor and privilege to work with you on creating and now implementing the Food Security Plan. I am confident that the investments we have made and will continue to make in implementing the plan will move us to the more Food Secure Montgomery County that all of us want to see.

Regarding composting – this effort emerged from the Strategic Plan to Advance Composting, Compost Use, and Food Scraps Diversion, which I sponsored. Once we get the plan, implementation would be a top priority of mine. Establishing a county wide composting program will take significant investment and education but it is a critical piece of our county getting to zero waste.

I would also continue to provide the Soil Conservation District with funding from the WPC for sustainable farming practices, and the promotion and expansion of agritourism in the county.