

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)?**

I have worked to support the Agricultural Reserve, decreasing food packaging, countywide composting, free & reduced school lunches, farmers markets that bring fresh produce to areas throughout the county including food deserts, and ending health disparities related to race.

- 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?

I will support and fund the continued implementation of the Food Security Plan as County Executive. I find one of the greatest successes of the plan thus far to be its partnership with food assistance providers and the Neighborhood Opportunity Network to connect and sign up their clients for benefits they are entitled to. This is an example of working smarter and within the confines of our limited county resources. I also applaud the work the Food Council has done to assess barriers to food access, and I think that special focus on our senior population is one of the most critical next steps. Our senior population is growing rapidly which means the need there is growing rapidly too.

- 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.***

¹ Feeding America

² <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've met with farmers who say that they have a very difficult time with some of the permitting needs for their barns and that they feel the county has forgotten that agriculture is a business. We need to make sure the county changes current policies that make it difficult for them to succeed, whether that is allowing them to process their products on site or reducing regulatory requirements related to the construction of farm buildings. The National Farm to School Month can be a valuable tool to engage children with our local food options, and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program will continue to expose students to the most nutrient-rich foods out there. These actions will increase the likelihood that our youth will eat better and more local foods now and into the future.

- 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?

I strongly support allocating resources to increase food waste composting at the large, mid-scale, and backyard composting levels. This will be an important step to decreasing the waste that is currently going to the Dickerson Incinerator and that, when the Dickerson Incinerator is closed, would then need to be transported to landfills that are even further away. I also support the partnering of large foodservice operations with organizations that distribute leftover food to outlets where it can be served to food-insecure individuals.

- 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?

Just as we provide healthcare and wellness education, we should ensure that nutrition education is offered in many different venues—from senior centers to churches and recreation centers. To the extent that we can help our residents prevent diet-related disease and the subsequent fortunes spent on medications to control their disease, we should. A little bit of prevention can go a long way, and if we can do so in a way that supports the business of our local farmers then I think we're on the right track.

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

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)?

Food and nutrition professionals in school systems are under an enormous amount of pressure to provide nutritious food for pennies a serving in a way that is palatable and enticing to the most discerning customers—students. The County Executive is in a position to connect private and corporate philanthropists to the school foodservice director to support programs, such as Weekend Bags and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, that provide for food insecure students and improve the diets of all students in their care. Calorie- and nutrient-deficient students have been shown to underperform in the classroom compared to well-nourished students, so if we want a bright future for our young people and this county, then we are, again, reminded that our schools need more attention and funding. Education and schools are one of my top priority areas as a candidate for County Executive.

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?

Trade programs in our high schools are one of the main ways in which we can improve our young people's readiness for a productive and financially secure future, regardless of whether they pursue post-secondary education. I've been a strong proponent of training programs such as these for a long time. Adult trade skill programs, including those for the food industry, can be an important way for people of all backgrounds to enter into fulfilling careers earning \$40,000 a year and much more. It's a key step in the ladder for many people's journey to reaching the Self-Sufficiency Standard.

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.

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

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?

As I said in my response to the first question, I have supported the initiatives you name here. I also recognize, however, that there are many important initiatives that need funding in our county, so it is important that we step up our economic development efforts to grow and attract new businesses if we want to have the resources with which to do so. Businesses not only increase our tax base, they are involved with virtually every philanthropic event as sponsors, and I know we can partner with businesses to help support and lead critical aspects of the County's food system. Ensuring a countywide culture that is welcoming to business is one of my top priorities as County Executive.