



## 2022 County Council Candidate Questionnaire

The Food Council invited all County Council candidates to complete a 9-item questionnaire, which was developed in collaboration with our community partners. Our goal is to provide information on local candidate's food system priorities and commitments. As a 501c3 nonprofit organization, we do not endorse candidates.

For more information, please contact Heather Bruskin, Executive Director at [hbruskin@mocofoodcouncil.org](mailto:hbruskin@mocofoodcouncil.org).

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Name: **Omar Lazo**

Campaign Website: [www.omarlazo.com](http://www.omarlazo.com)

Candidate for: **District 6**

I. Please describe your personal and/or professional engagement in any local food systems initiatives, policies, and programs.

**A:** During the pandemic I received a call from Grace Rivera-Oven who was searching for food for Covid positive families and families that had transportation issue to get food. Through my restaurant I started to donate food to this effort. We needed culturally appropriate food as the majority of the people in need with latino. On a weekly basis I donated corn flour, beans, rice, oil and eventually diapers and other necessities. This grew into what now is the Upcounty Hub which serve over 1500 families a week and is the model for many other hubs here regionally. I volunteered then and now with my family and have made food deliveries and I have advocated for donations and funding.

I am also president of the Montgomery County Latino Restaurant Association. I partnered up with different non profits to donate or provide hot meals to people in our area. I promoted the partnership where nonprofits would pay struggling businesses for hot meals to distribute to people facing food insecurity. I worked with local schools and PTAs to recognize those families that were Covid positive and could not leave their homes. We delivered thousands of meals. I worked with Nourish Now, Manna, and many other partners to make sure that we tackled the vital issue of food insecurity.



I also have a very close relationship with Pastor Diana from Hughes United Methodist Church that is also a food hub here in my district. They provide food service and I also partnered up to provide vaccination clinics.

I am the only candidate running that was worked on food insecurity before, during, and after the pandemic.

2. Please describe any plans you have for creating economic opportunities for individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx/Latino, and/or a person of color, particularly in food and agriculture?

**A:** I am small business owner and as a son of immigrants who started a very successful restaurant 33 years ago. I know what the struggle of being a person of color trying to better themselves. I am on the Board of Montgomery County Workforce Development, on the Board of Trustees for Montgomery College, and on the Black and Brown Coalition for Education Equity and Excellence. These three entities need to work together to make sure that all our residents have access to the training needed to make sure that our people of color have the same opportunities as everyone.

One of the biggest barriers we face is the the lack of access to capital for women, minorities, and veterans. Many don't have the generational wealth to use to receive loans to start businesses. As we come out of the pandemic there are many people that are reanalyzing their lives and careers. We need to invest in our residents who have the skills, knowledge and experience in starting their own businesses. There is an opportunity for the county to invest in its own people and grow the tax base. We need to look out how we can guarantee loans to people that want to create jobs here in our county.

3. Please describe your position on addressing income insufficiency, which is a major contributor to food insecurity in our County. Please describe any positions or initiatives in your platform that focus on food security.

**A:** My of my priorities on Workforce Development and Montgomery College is to make sure that we give same access to training for all residents to obtain higher paying jobs. Many of our workforce development efforts in the past have excluded those residents most in need. As people leave their jobs and are looking for new ones, we must make sure that we as a county are there to provide the training needed. Having a trained and educated workforce will also draw large companies to our county and increase economic development. I also believe that we must have a pipeline for all our students to have the training and skills to get a high paying job right out of high school. There are many jobs that are in high demand that pay 6 figure salaries that only require a certification that can be obtained in high school. For our older residents we need to focus on up-skilling and training them for the jobs of tomorrow.

4. What role should the County government have in improving resident access to federal benefit programs, such as SNAP and WIC.

**A:** I have worked closely with the Upcounty Hub that has one social worker that helps people fill out SNAP and WIC forms. There are applications that are easily over 20 pages long and many of our



systems require access to a computer. We must remove these barriers to access to food. We must also provide more services that help people apply for these benefits. We make it way to difficult for people to receive the benefits that they are entitled to.

5. It is likely that the impacts of climate change, national and global politics, and future disasters will further disrupt food production, supply chains, and food security networks. Please describe any policies and programs that you will propose or support to address local food system resilience?

**A: I think that we need to provide incentives to local businesses to buy local. Many restaurateurs that I know would much prefer to work with a local provider. There have been many advancements in the hydroponic and vertical farming and I believe we should really take a good look at other ways to provide food for our residents. This is connected to my commitment to supporting local residents to start their own businesses here in Montgomery County. Too often we give incentives to outside companies and investors. We need to focus on our local residents who spend their money here, buy their homes here, pay income taxes here, pay property taxes here, and are a vital part of our community. I think we need to look at our agricultural reserve and support the farmers that we have and also motivate others to grow locally.**

6. Please describe any initiatives or policies you would propose to increase local food production and access to affordable agricultural land.

**A: I believe we need to expand our relationships with the farm to food bank initiatives. Healthy food should not be only for the well off. I think we need to provide access to capital for farms on the ag reserve and make sure that we are buying locally and sourcing locally as a county. We also need to work with local restaurants to form coalitions that will commit to buying large quantities. We need to advocate more for the agricultural reserve and local farmers and to teach families the opportunity to grow local products and make it more affordable and accessible.**

7. Please describe any initiatives or policies you will propose to reduce food waste and advance zero-waste strategies.

**A: I actually worked closely with the previous Director of Environment Protection Adam Ortiz on roll out of the straw ban in Montgomery County. As President of the Montgomery County Latino Restaurant Association I use my connection to see how our local restaurants can work for the better of the community. One thing that I am currently working on is looking into the possibility of creating a partnership with local food businesses to compost our food waste. Restaurants would collect their food scraps in a separate container and the county would expand their composting program to accommodate. This is also a way to educate an industry that deals in food be more aware of their impact. There is also a pilot for residents that is being worked on which I think we should expand. An education campaign is very much needed though which should also include information on recycling. I have been to the recycling plant and know the difficulties they face.**

8. Where do you see opportunities for the County government to support food education? How can the County support residents in making healthy and sustainable food choices easier?



**A: I think food education should definitely start with our children. If we can create good habits at an early age, they will carry on. Having compost bins at the schools and teaching kids the importance of being good stewards would go a long way. I believe the county needs to focus on an education campaign that would involve children and adults.**

9. What do you see as the biggest food system challenges in the County and what do you believe is the role of the County Council in addressing them? How should community stakeholders be engaged in that work?

**A: The biggest food system challenge is actually getting the food to those in need. We had a huge challenge during Covid where people could not leave their houses if they had a covid positive test. There was no way for them to get food even if they could afford it. If they didn't work they didn't eat. There are also challenges with older people and disabled people. Many people still don't have access to public transportation as well. What we saw worked during the pandemic is that we went to the community leaders and organizations to be our ears on the ground. We must continue to nurture these relationships and partnerships to make sure that no one is left behind. Just like the issues we had with vaccines in the black and brown communities in the beginning, we were able to get them vaccinated once we gave the vaccines to our local nonprofits and clinics that were serving those underserved populations.**

