



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.

Name: **Gabe Albornoz**

Campaign Website: www.gabealbornoz.com

Candidate for: **At-Large**

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

A: I affirm my support for the Montgomery County Food 2017 Food Security Plan and the 2019 Food Security Plan Community Update.

While our county's food-security response during the pandemic has been nationally recognized as collaborative, strategic and innovative -- and I am deeply grateful to the scores of organizations and hundreds of volunteers who made it possible -- we must transition from emergency food distribution models that proved critical during the crisis and through this transitional time, to tackling the root causes of hunger and building a sustainable approach to food security.

In Montgomery County, 41,000 children are food insecure. This is a moral, health, and educational crisis. I am committed to ending childhood hunger in Montgomery County by 2025. As Council President and Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, this is a major priority of mine, which my Council colleagues, the executive branch, our state delegation, nonprofit and philanthropy partners, and other key stakeholders, including the Montgomery County Food Council and the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council, support. As proven by the enormous



support and effectiveness of the food security network in our community, we have the resources and commitment necessary to achieve this goal.

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 fully support the Food System Resiliency Council's emphasis on the importance of working towards racial equity across the food system and making certain that systems are specifically designed to create, support, and maintain social justice in the home, on the farm, and in the marketplace.

The Montgomery County Food Council's support for specific BIPOC- owned MoCo Business and Products Guide and support provided through community forums, roundtable discussions, marketing and social media campaign, will be a priority of our work.

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: I have long understood that the problem of income insufficiency and its relationship to food insecurity existed prior to the pandemic. That is why I previously worked with the Family Independence Initiative and key stakeholders to move forward an award-winning program that invested directly in low-income families to help them work individually and collectively to achieve prosperity, and to help families strengthen social networks, access resources and support each other in achieving mobility as they find pathways out of poverty.

Given this initiative did not receive adequate funding, I recently spearheaded, in partnership with Councilmember Jawando, a Guaranteed Income Pilot program that is a public-private partnership with direct, recurring cash payments to a specific, targeted group of people in Montgomery County without strings attached. The purpose is to alleviate poverty, provide a form of financial stability, and give people the ability to make their own choices to improve their economic position. Guaranteed Income is seen as one strategy to address income and wealth inequity.

I am especially excited about the pending creation, through legislation expected in the weeks ahead, of the new Office of Food System Resilience (OFSR). The County Executive is recommending \$1.06 million in the FY 23 budget to establish this office, including three new positions charged with developing a systemic and comprehensive approach to the efforts to support food security and play a convening and policy-making role in the future direction of the County's support for food insecurity.

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



A: The county government should advocate to the state and federal government to maintain funding for universal, free school meals in 2022-2023 and beyond. Policy and strategies should also include advocacy to ensure all Maryland Meals for Achievement eligible schools are on the program's waiting list; double WIC dollars for fruits and vegetables at retail locations; provide monthly stipends on a food benefit card to families with children receiving free and/or reduced meals, extending benefits to families not currently eligible for WIC/SNAP; and advocate for flexibility on WIC food choices.

Making sure we have culturally competent, extensive outreach across all communities to assist with sign-up for benefits is critical. This issue has been highlighted as a priority for our county given the low participation in public food benefit programs.

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: We are facing a climate emergency that is an existential threat to our planet. The impacts of climate change impact low-income and vulnerable families and communities first. We must be part of a regional solution to climate change and must recognize its inevitable impact on our County's at-risk people. I support legislative and budgetary action to invest in measures that will mitigate the effects of climate change on County residents, local communities, vegetation, and food security. Our vast Ag Reserve holds enormous potential to creatively and sustainably contribute to effective strategies to both protect climate and expand food supply locally.

I will fully support the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council and its work in prioritizing our local agriculture, and collaborating with small business enterprises, local schools, philanthropic, faith-based, and community partners. I will continue to work with our Montgomery County delegation to address stormwater management issues and support solar projects that will increase clean energy to greatly help our communities without compromising our Agricultural Reserve.

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

A: I will continue support for the successful county-funded Montgomery grant programs and projects, such as the Resident and Community Food Production program and the Farm To Food Bank implemented through the Food Council. The county's grantmaking capacity will be an important component within the Office of Food System Resilience.

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

A: Food waste recycling is a strategy for increasing the County's recycling rate and even exceeding its 70% diversion goal. Local recycling efforts as well as assuring prepared food donation activities



are critical to our goals. However, moving to zero-waste policy has its own challenges. Adopting such a goal will require a rigorous combination of public education on its methods and merits, an aggressive recycling pricing system, and forging well-structured public-private partnerships that include environmental organizations in order to achieve this end.

I also would like to establish a robust composting initiative in Montgomery County. Prior to the pandemic, I visited a friend in Toronto and was immensely impressed with their composting program. I would like to start a composting initiative through MCPS and then expand it to other parts of the County.

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 support The Food Council's Food Literacy Assessment Report's suggested solutions to increase language accessibility of programs; expand capacity of food-literacy programs; connect community with existing resources; offer food demos, hands-on workshops, and classes using basic food pantry ingredients at the site of food distribution; implement food-literacy programs or resource distribution at community colleges within MCPS and to residents waiting in line to receive food assistance; and conduct informal training sessions with community members.

Additionally, I co-sponsored Bill 1-22, which would (1) amend the law regarding eating and drinking establishments, and (2) require children's meals offered by food service facilities to include healthy food and beverage options, thereby instilling a lifetime of healthier behaviors.

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: As a Council member, I believe my role and that of the Council is to provide leadership, diversified funding, and create legislation and policy changes essential to implement the goals and system changes set forth by the Food Council and the new Office of Food System Resilience. The challenges are significant, but our local coordinated efforts have clearly shown we have been up to these challenges. However, the road ahead holds significant challenges given the loss of federal and state funding streams. Going forward, I will ensure full and effective implementation of the Office of Food System Resilience; continued education of all County residents regarding the need for and challenges and importance of food security; execution of our plan to end childhood hunger; provision of food assistance with dignity; assured supply of culturally relevant, healthy food choices; and the identification of food recycling and production systems that will contribute to a healthy climate.



Direct resident and stakeholder organization feedback should be solicited in multiple formats, languages, and culturally-appropriate mechanisms, including surveys and listening sessions. Direct experience with food insecurity and the delivery of services will be critical feedback. In summary, we will want to engage county government entities, food-assistance providers, youth-focused entities, hunger-focused organizations, and community organizations.

