



2022 County Executive 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: **Marc Elrich**

Campaign Website: www.marcelrich.org

Candidate for: **County Executive**

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

A: I have been involved in a number of food system issues, from years of support for protecting the Agricultural Reserve to urban/suburban farming to food production to food distribution. Covid highlighted and deepened major food insecurity issues. One of the most valuable actions we took during the pandemic was partnering with local organizations throughout the County to serve as service consolidation hubs to make sure we reach as many people as possible with vital services. Food distribution was one of those vital services the county provided. In order to continue funding these efforts, my budget provides \$5.6 million in funds to continue our support for these Hubs, and \$250,000 to support another non-profit food provider - Nourishing Bethesda. I'm currently working with Heather Bruskin at the Food Council and Delegate Lorig Charkoudian on a food aggregator project to be located in East County, and my staff is working to install a large refrigerated external storage project also in East County, which will help the local nonprofit providers to receive and distribute more donated foods. We're providing funds to CKC Farming (the previous Koiner Farm) and helping them expand to additional sites. We're working with the Sugarloaf Citizen Association on a regenerative farming project. We're setting up a pilot agrovoltaic project in the Ag Reserve to determine which crops can be successfully grown under elevated solar panels, and we recently broke ground on a wine making facility that will provide equipment and storage to help farm wineries to



start-up by letting them begin by growing grapes and then using our facility to make and bottle the actual wine until their mature enough to set up their own processing.

The most recent budget that I sent to the County Council and which will be approved very soon includes a new Office of Food System Resilience; this is part of my effort to coordinate efforts around the many aspects of food with community partners, government agencies and regional partners.

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 believe the Landlink program run by Montgomery Countryside Alliance is an important program, and is giving opportunity to farmers who don't own land; I would like to do more to support their efforts. That is also true of the food aggregator project that we are looking at with the Food Council and Delegate Charkoudian. This would help connect small businesses to regular, predictable purchasers. I am also supportive of CKC Farming's effort to expand to other parts of the county with large minority populations and their work to educate young people about farming, food and agriculture. Our grants program has provided support to Crossroads Community Food Network to help with building local food businesses. In the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, I have re-launched the Bakery program to support workforce development and provide inmates with an opportunity to earn a food service certificate and gain practical food preparation skills, and based on input from the community and other stakeholders and as part of our equity review, I have eliminated the fees for this program so that it is accessible to those who want it.

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 was the author and lead sponsor of the two minimum wage bills that passed when I was on the County Council; the second bill raised the minimum wage to \$15 and indexed it for inflation, which has never been done at the federal level and is one of the major problems with the minimum wage. I will work with the next Council to start moving the minimum wage toward a living wage - there is a difference. I'm a supporter of rent stabilization and no net loss of housing policies that can preserve and protect our dwindling supply of affordable housing, and I have already launched 4 projects using county owned land to preserve and produce more affordable housing and more deeply affordable. We now are inviting bids on 18 county owned properties to attract and provide more affordable housing development. All of these are efforts to reduce what families spend on housing so that they can better afford food and other necessities. We have matched the state's expansion of the Earned Income Tax program, which provides income supplements for the working poor. We're also beginning a pilot that would provide families with guaranteed monthly income supplements as a test of how a guaranteed minimum income could work.

In the course of the pandemic we moved toward a hub model that allowed greater community participation and input into our efforts to address disparities in the community and much of it is



around food. Because this model worked, we have retained it in the budget and envision that this closer work with hubs will be a permanent part of the budget. We are now looking at directly buying food, diverse food, that we can provide to the hubs for distribution instead of relying only on their capacity to fund-raise and receive charitable gifts.

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

A: We need to make sure that residents are aware of eligibility for federal programs and help them as we are able. Since Covid, we have been using our Regional Services Center more robustly on outreach and with the hub outreach model that we created during Covid and with our nonprofit partners, we have a good start on extending our outreach deep into the communities that are vulnerable and in need. We also need to improve our data collection to assess trends and identify challenges and barriers to better inform decision making. Additionally, we need to continue to work with our state and federal partners on ways to improve and adjust the processes and programs. And as I mentioned above, we are piloting and will continue our work to increase economic stability for our low-income residents - easier access to programs is one part of this effort as is the pilot guaranteed income program. I have also funded efforts to allow matches to federal benefits at farmers markets, giving low-income individuals more access to local, fresh food. All of this is part of a multi-pronged strategy to address poverty and food insecurity.

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 have been working on a variety of efforts to increase local food production and distribution, but we understand that we need a coordinated effort, which is why my recommended FY23 budget, which will soon be approved by the County Council, includes the establishment of an Office of Food System Resilience, which will be located in the office of the County Executive and will coordinate efforts - within county government, including the offices of agriculture and community engagement, and in partnership with nonprofits, state and regional entities. We also continue to support the efforts of the Food Council (\$200,000 in FY23), which has been integral to identifying and coordinating needs and responses. Additionally, we are funding the farm to food program (\$350,000) and market money grants that allow farmers markets to match Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program funding for individuals (\$125,000). I also continue to support funding for community gardens and local resilience grants. (\$50,000) The Farm to Food Bank program, a partnership between the Montgomery County Food Security Task Force, the Department of Health and Human Services, Manna Food Center, the Montgomery County Food Council, the Office Agriculture and the Greater Washington Community Foundation - has collectively invested and committed over \$630,000 to support a sustained and resilient local food supply and provide more nutritious and culturally diverse produce to residents who experience hunger.

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



A: As I've discussed in previous answers, I would continue and expand some of the successful programs from the county and our partners. Those programs include the Farm to Food program, the Land Link program run by the Montgomery Countryside Alliance and efforts to increase urban farming. The Land link program includes about 600 acres, and we want to expand this and develop more opportunities for new farmers along with the training needed to be successful. In addition to the Office of Food System Resilience, which I discuss above, we will have two new positions within the Office of Agriculture (thanks to the first healthy budget in many years) - this will help with efforts on education, training and identifying opportunities for producing new farmers, and identifying markets, along with providing grants. I also want to develop a way of linking farmers to markets in restaurants and grocery stores, and we need to work with MCPS to open itself up to alternative ways of providing food for our children including the use of locally produced foods.

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

A: Under my leadership, the County has begun commercial and residential composting programs with the intent to scale up quickly. We're developing a path to close the incinerator and reduce our waste. Even after we burn our trash at the incinerator, we still landfill 30% of the original waste. At least some of that 30% is toxic ash, and we can definitely do better. I have initiated a Request for Information (RFI) about innovative ways to deal with the county's waste, and those responses are currently being reviewed. We have received bids to replace our aging Solid Waste Facility with equipment that should increase recycling dramatically, including food composting - possibly digestion- that could create green energy to power our vehicles. We're also launching a save-as-you-throw program to reduce trash. All of these efforts will support closing the incinerator, which is the largest single point source of pollution in 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: This is probably the perfect space for us to work with non-profit partners. The county has lots of spaces to deliver programming but not the staff to do it - senior centers, rec centers and schools (which we don't actually control) could be locations. We can also work with the schools to provide nutritional education and to improve what they feed their students, but that's only going to happen with a greater push from the community to ask schools to change. The county can use its messaging to reach more people including programming on county cable - we have lots of stories to tell and we can facilitate that. We could film some of the classes that Manna provides and run them on TV. And non-profits could put on programming at all of the centers to reach into communities - which the county could help support. Additionally, we should continue programming at the urban farms and elsewhere in the community.

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 Executive in addressing them? How should community stakeholders be engaged in that work?



A: It's tough to define the biggest food challenge that is also a challenge that the county can take on. Affordability is a big deal - it drives food choices in the direction of low nutritional/high calorie food choices. But with systemic poverty that persists over generations, food decisions are often embedded in how people were raised. So changing food choices requires changing people's knowledge of food, and having the income to access better food. The income piece is why I've supported increasing wages and limiting rent increases. That's one level of the challenge.

There is a more fundamental level related to the food that's produced locally.

I'm very pro the use of stakeholders - I think the authentic voices of people who do the work and have a passion for what they do will be more effective in reaching people than if we try to create county programs. I see the county as a funder, facilitator, coordinator - particularly with our new Office of Food System Resilience, which as I mentioned earlier will be within the executive's office - it will serve to empower the work that our partners do in the community.

