



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: **Natali Fani-Gonzalez**

Campaign Website: <https://www.nataliforcouncil.com>

Candidate for: **District 6**

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

A: When I worked for the immigrant rights group CASA of Maryland as their lobbyist, one of my main duties was fighting food insecurity among low income residents, particularly immigrants. Even after leaving my job at CASA, I continued to be a member of the organization, participating on lobby days and actions related to access to basic services like healthy food, health care, and housing.

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 strongly support initiatives that address structural racism and inequities in food access and participation in food production. As a Latina and immigrant, I understand the obstacles facing my community. I'm focused on ensuring we support access to healthy foods, particularly among low income communities. I would also like to work on creating a renewed, post-pandemic strategy to uplift low income communities, including in creating new ways of delivering healthy foods.



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: One of the major problems we have: people don't make enough money to live in Montgomery County. I even wrote an OpEd for the Washington Post on this issue, please review: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/local-opinions/montgomery-county-housing-costs/2021/03/04/646dc52e-6bbe-11eb-ba56-d7e2c8defa31_story.html

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

A: I personally know of the many challenges people have when trying to access SNAP: language and technology barriers, overcoming misconceptions about immigration status, and an application process that is difficult to navigate. When I was undocumented with my mom and were struggling to make ends meet, my mom refused to accept SNAP/WIC because of fear of affecting our application to obtain a green card. There is so much work to do to modernize the enrollment process for these services and I'm more than ready to work with you to meet that challenge.

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: When I was on the Planning Board, I strongly advocated to increase the number of community gardens and urged MCPS to work with Montgomery Parks to use local schools for community gardens. It is part of my goals to find ways of increasing local community gardens, with cooperation among county agencies, MCPS, community college, the non profit and business community. Growing healthy foods in our communities must be a goal for everyone!

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

A: I am a strong advocate for the Ag Reserve and creating ways to connect it with the rest of our county. As the former Vice Chair of the Montgomery County Planning Board, I worked on the Agritourism Study that examines issues raised by farmers, entrepreneurs, community members, planners and regulators. As a Councilwoman, I would LOVE to increase awareness of the Agricultural Reserve's assets through education of agricultural practices and better wayfinding while providing inclusive and equitable access to the Agricultural Reserve.

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



A: Let me start by saying that the incinerator in Dickerson should be shut down. Now, how can we make Montgomery County a zero waste community, knowing that this a County where we still allow the use of plastic bags instead of banning them. I think we need measurable goals towards zero waste – this is clearly part of the climate emergency work. San Francisco and Toronto are places to look as role models; they collect food scraps!

There are communities using Pay-As-You-Throw (PAYT) programs where residents/businesses are charged a fee for each bag or garbage-can of waste they generate. Basically, the less individuals throw away, the less they pay, which is a strong incentive to reduce waste.

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: Opportunities are literally everywhere. From educating community members in a culturally-sounded way that it is possible to embrace our culture without eating meat every day or white-flour, for example. It upsets me when I see data showing that my Latino community has inequities in accessing healthy foods and higher rates of diet related chronic diseases. The importance of eating healthy must be seen as a business issue, an education issue, an environmental issue, as an economic issue in general. When we have a healthy kids, they learn better, when we have a healthy workforce, their productivity increases, when we have a health population, our economy is stronger

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: Access to affordable healthy foods. It is still cheaper to get french fries and soda, than buying avocados with wheat-toast. We live in communities that were designed for cars, so you drive everywhere, instead of walking/biking. We have so much work to do to overcome food system challenges: which are not only about affordable healthy foods, but HOW to access them in a way that keeps our community active by walking, biking and rolling.

