



## 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 501(c)3 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: **Vicki Vergagni**  
Campaign Website: **N/A**  
Candidate for: **District 6**

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

**A:** Even though “on the average” Montgomery County may be one of the wealthiest areas in the U.S., there is a huge disparity in income that leaves many in our communities unnecessarily going to bed hungry or being malnourished. I know that there is so much to do locally, and I look to one of my “food insecurity” warriors, Senator George McGovern, for inspiration. I had the privilege of observing his commitment first-hand as a member of Foundry United Methodist Church that we both attended. Much to the admiration of so many of us, Senator McGovern worked modestly and tirelessly on the issues of agriculture, food, nutrition, and hunger until his death. His leadership in this arena is sorely missed.

I have personally volunteered at two local food hubs, in one case packing food each week for 250+ families at the tables I managed, and in the other delivering food from one of the hubs to 15 families each week in the community that I manage and in which I live. It has been distressing to see the lack of parity in the distribution of food: in one case the bags were overflowing with butter, eggs and significant amounts of fresh produce provided each week. In the second case, there has barely been half a bag of food, minimal fresh produce, and almost never butter or eggs. In the first case, the food hub was located in zip code 20832; in the second case, it was located in zip code 20906. Clearly the



individuals with the greatest need are in the second food hub. However, the County's program did nothing to bring parity to the situation. While I recognize that the food hubs are "decentralized," I think that there must be a better way of assuring a more equitable approach to the distribution. There are a number of steps that can be taken operationally to facilitate the food hubs. One is to do a better logistical job of setting up for the volunteers so that the packing goes much more smoothly and there is less breakage of the bags and loss of food. Those who administer the program need to pre-pack the bag of non-perishables so that they can determine the proper number of items and the amount of each. A list should be posted at the ends of the tables – in the order that it should be packed into the bag. The items to be packed should be pre-counted with half of the needed number placed at one end of the tables and the "repeat" of items start in the middle table and work their way to the end of the table. Individuals should be assigned to carefully cut open all of the boxes, being particularly careful to not destroy the plastic-bagged items. The items should be placed in order of packing under the tables (with first item at end of table and moving to center of table for last item, and then starting over again in the middle of the tables so that two teams can work comfortably). This also assures that the food is easy to access and people do not trip on either full or empty boxes. Bags should be placed three up on the table so that it is easy to drop items into the bags and then look inside if need be. Some volunteers should be assigned to pick up, break down, and recycle empty boxes -- again so folks do not trip.

In general, it is important to vary the items placed in the bag each week. While some cultures eat tortillas and/or rice at every meal, others do not. Canned green beans every week is a turn-off. And if we want to make a long-term impact with the program, we need to find and include in the bags healthy recipes that feature one of the items in the grocery or produce bag that week.

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: A native from a small farming community in, I have seen the eradication of the small family farmer which has been intensely troubling for me. While corporate farms provide jobs, they do not provide the lifestyle nor business opportunities that a small family-owned and operated farm offers. Montgomery County Parks had an incredible speaker who showed program attendees how to create and operate community gardens in urban/suburban areas. (Children actually learned that food does not come out of a can!) Collecting food scraps is another option that represents a win for all involved. And then there are opportunities for individuals to create and operate mulch operations that take advantage of food waste. These types of efforts are particularly helpful since they are "micro" in size and could be "neighborhood-based" which means that all County residents interested in pursuing any of the options would have the opportunity to seek a job or volunteer opportunity within walking distance of home.

I also would like to see a rigorous training program in food and agriculture, with apprenticeships in community gardens, the Ag Reserve and at the U.S. Department of Agriculture research facility in Beltsville. There also are many other traditional jobs in these areas, including food processing, food preparation, etc. Again, training and apprenticeships – possibly paid in both cases if an individual is qualified to receive assistance – could make a major positive impact.



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:** Small business is the engine of our economy. It represents 44% of all economic activity and 2/3 of all job starts. It also is the driver of innovation and competitiveness. To encourage existing businesses to expand and to attract new businesses, I believe that the County must create a subject matter stronghold. That subject matter should be the basis for recruiting new businesses and funding start-ups -- both for-profits and non-profits. The County also should fund programs to incubate small businesses that capitalize on unique trades and professions of the County's diverse population. We also need to eliminate unnecessarily burdensome regulations, and to create training pipelines for existing and anticipated job opportunities.

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

**A:** As a community manager with more than 500 residents, I see so many individuals (e.g., retirees aging in place, disabled, intergenerational and large families) who need assistance to access benefit programs. I would favor the addition of several part-time workers who reach out and travel to communities to meet privately with individuals in need so that they can navigate the application processes. Dignity of the recipient is key, and we must go to where the customers are if we want results!

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 would like to see a comprehensive evaluation of our food sources and then apply innovative solutions to assure that the "supply chain" remains healthy and is not interrupted via appropriate techniques for growing and harvesting those foods (including both the animal and plant kingdoms). I also would suggest that we identify those supply chains over which the County has little influence and then find approaches to stockpile supplies, access alternate suppliers, and find substitutes for the potentially unavailable items.

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

**A:** The Department of Environmental Protection does a tremendous job of educating residents about and supporting the installation of "green" measures. I would love to see a team led by an "Ann English, Pam Rowe or Darlene Robbins" who could infuse our communities with enthusiasm and knowledge to support community gardens. So many multi-family properties have green space that could be used for this purpose. And if the County adopted an incentive program to support these ventures, I would expect several communities to become involved.



With regard to access to affordable agricultural land, I am very concerned that unless federal, state or local government lands were set aside, this will be an incredibly difficult challenge. An additional option to secure the land would be to form a team that monitors land sales and finds pieces of land that an owner who is committed to farming might bequeath for such purposes. With competition for the land coming from real estate developers, at \$7,000+ per acre, I think we are going to be hard pressed to acquire much agricultural land.

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

**A:** We can reduce food waste by giving our “cooks” access to a website that allows them to enter the leftovers that they have in their refrigerators that then have recipes that pop up. We also need to encourage families to keep no more than one month of “perishables” at any given time. Zero waste of food will involve finding appropriate distribution sites (e.g., food pantries, homeless shelters, schools) with conveniently located facilities and accessible hours to encourage individuals and entities (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants) with unprepared food to drop it off. Laws also need to be relaxed so that restaurants donating prepared food can do so without concern of reprisal. And in the end, composting of food scraps, preferably by neighborhood, needs to be encouraged.

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:** The public schools would be a great start with formal or informal cooking classes, as well as mini-food-festivals with samples provided by food vendors. Just as Home Depot gets children involved in “nesting” activities early on, restaurants and cooking schools could offer children free classes in preparing healthy food items. Grocery stores are another great resource with various “brands” of food products doing interactive demonstrations with tastings. Churches, senior centers, and community organizations are other sources of support. (Given the high rate of diabetes and high blood pressure among Latinos, for example, Casa de Maryland could be an excellent resource for providing healthy cooking examples and food products.) The County, through its libraries, regional service centers, recreation centers, and other facilities also can offer food preparation classes. (One of the most difficult issues with which to contend is that the County has moved to “warming” kitchens in schools and recreational centers.)

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 key issue with food systems in the County is distribution. The County Council should find ways to encourage responsible parties to participate in supplying and distributing the food to those in need. It would be very helpful if there were an easy application to certify folks for receiving food – either for picking it up themselves or for having food delivered to them. All of the individuals and



organizations willing to donate and to volunteer for packing/distribution should be accorded the opportunity to do so under a “food hub” umbrella. The County should have paid staff and volunteers to accept donations at conveniently located facilities with accessible hours seven days a week to encourage individuals and entities (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants) with both prepared and unprepared food to drop it off. The donors should be encouraged to list their name or the name of their organization on the package that contains their donation.

