

QUESTIONNAIRES FOR COUNTY COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Responses of Becky Wagner, At-Large Democratic Candidate

Budget & Tax

1.

Do you support raising revenues through more progressive tax and fee structures to preserve County services and programs instead of focusing solely on making cuts? How specifically would you do this without unduly adding to the burden of moderate and modest income County residents?

We cannot cut our way out of this structural deficit, neither can we tax our way out of it. As the co-chair of Vote No on A,B,C in 2002, we successfully defeated the Ficker amendment . I think it is more than unfortunate that the Ficker Amendment passed in 2008. There are times when new or increased taxes are necessary to fund the services that we value. That said, the piecemeal approach of recent tax increases begs for a comprehensive review and decision regarding what we want to fund, and how we intend to do so. The recent budget increased the energy and cell phone tax, which are regressive taxes. In reality, we have to grow our revenue base in the County by increasing opportunities to bring good jobs and businesses to the County. Good jobs and thriving businesses pay for our quality of life.

2.

Do you support, at the state level, imposition of a 'millionaire's tax,' requiring upper income residents to pay higher taxes?

There is a millionaire's tax currently in place. The State projected the millionaire's tax would generate \$106M, but in 2008 the State lost \$257M from this revenue source. This tax represents a progressive theme, but backfired because of the recession, and because millionaires do not have to live in the County or Maryland. I always look for win-win situations, and this was not a win for anyone.

3.

If you believe that some cutbacks are necessary, please explain how you would prioritize cuts to the County budget, including cuts to "safety net" programs, education cuts, and other human services. What specific programs and services would you cut?

I am on the record stating that "the piggy bank is empty, and we do not have enough to pay for what we care about: education, fire and safety, libraries and parks and services to the most vulnerable." Given we have enormous deficits for the next five years, and are close to a tipping point on tax increases, we must start immediately looking at where services are duplicative. The recent back and forth about Park Police and County Police was neither thoughtful nor constructive. Should we ask the question and evaluate the data? Yes. Should we ask about the need for a parks department and a recreation department? Yes. Should we examine how the parks are working for Prince George's County as they are managed by the Park and Planning? Yes. Are there things happening in the executive branch that we need to stop doing for now? Yes. Do we need four permitting offices? We have the responsibility to consider openly where duplications exist. This does not mean programs are without merit. It simply means we have to agree what our core services are, and what we will do without until we have restored our financial house. These choices cannot be made in a vacuum, but we need to have all stakeholders at the table and included in a transparent discussion. I chaired the Safety Net Coalition for the past two years, where more than 65 nonprofits serving the vulnerable in our community agreed and advocated that the vulnerable be held harmless. Though cuts occurred, that collaboration successfully sustained funding for critical networks. For example, when the Community Vision program funding was cut by 70%, a community of nonprofits, business, congregations and neighbors objected to the cut, because the 400 homeless adults being served by that program would have had to turn back to the streets of Silver Spring. This would have resulted in cost-shifting, not cost savings.

When I make budget decisions, I build a matrix which defines impacts on 1) clients receiving services, 2) employees, 3) community partners' capacity to serve additional clients and 4) funders. This matrix is then applied to all discussions regarding building creation and implementation, and includes Program Directors (who bring front line staff feedback) and Board members. It is an inclusive process. I also believe in our model of leadership taking larger compensation cuts than front line workers.

The Council and Executive must call all of our community together and mutually agree on what kind of a County we want to be, what services we need and want government to provide, and agree on how we will pay for those services. In all budget reductions we must not bleed a program to death. We need to agree to do some things well, rather than many things poorly.

Affordable Housing

1.

What programs and policies do you support to preserve the existing stock of affordable rental housing in the County and stop its further decline? Do you have a plan for increasing the number of affordable housing units in the County? If yes, please explain.

I have a long history of fighting for affordable housing. As a long time advocate for workforce and affordable housing, my first effort was in 1981 when I successfully founded the Rainbow Shelter for Homeless Women, housed in a church in the historic West End in Rockville. The battle for housing has lasted through this year, testifying to support the development of workforce housing on Old Georgetown Road at the Christ Lutheran Church location and Victory Housing projects for fixed income seniors in Rockville. An overlooked community is fixed income seniors. Multigenerational communities are very desirable and affordable housing developments should be designed with that in mind. Master Plans need to assure livable, walkable communities which encourage aging in place.

The County has stated priorities for workforce and affordable housing but has made little progress on this front. Building is at a standstill, not only because of the recession, but because current law does not promote growth in affordable and workforce housing. Actually, the County has lost affordable housing, and recent legislation literally has reduced production of workforce housing for our teachers, nurses, firefighters and police officers to the point that they are denied the opportunity to live in the communities where they work. Working poor families have 3-4 jobs per household attempting to provide housing for their families. I have had a number of conversations with home builders. They want to be at the table to discuss how they can be part of the solution. If we want housing located near jobs and transit, we have to start here. The recently adopted White Flint sector plan shows the potential for an exciting, livable, walkable community where 1600 units of affordable housing have been incentivized. In the past, the County indicated it was willing to look at locations where housing could be built on government owned land. However, when that land is identified, we spend years in court fighting over the use of that land. This has to stop. An elected official must find a way to move forward, even at the risk of losing an election. Another opportunity is to look at the Housing Initiative Fund which has grown considerably in the last four years, and determine if it is being used to build the affordable housing stock, or for operating purposes.

2.

Do you support mandatory reporting of rents and other increases by landlords with 4 or more units? Do you support making the County's voluntary rent guidelines mandatory based on the cost-of-living, or some other method of rent stabilization with reasonable exceptions?

I do not support rent control. Properties become degraded when reasonable rent increases to pay for maintenance and repair are not available.

3. Have you read the March 2010 Tenants Work Group Report?

(http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/Content/EXEC/TWG/pdf/twg_report_3-2010.pdf) Which, if any, of the recommendations contained in the Report do you support?

I have read this document several times and applaud the effort of the work group. There are several areas that the County could implement which would have minor fiscal notes. As I have said, there can be no constructive conversations about new programming until we have our fiscal house in order and can pay for our core services.

First, we need to enforce current protections for tenants. A second critical step is to have enough community advocates to educate tenants and to monitor landlords to assure that both parties understand and fulfill their responsibilities. Eviction prevention should be the desired outcome for the tenant, community advocate, landlord and the courts. Education is key for success here. County government (DHCA in particular) must have a leadership role in monitoring tenant rights violations as well as landlord responsibilities, and be accountable for those outcomes. Training for County staff regarding consistency in responses to complaints and violations is important. Standard language in leases and an understandable Landlord-Tenant handbook are the beginning of preventing problems. We need leadership from County government in assuring that equal access to County services is part of doing every day business. I would be interested in knowing more about the retaliatory eviction legislation suggested by the Work group

3.

Do you support State enabling legislation which would allow Montgomery County to pass county-level “just cause eviction” legislation to allow evictions only for specified reasons such as non-payment of rent or on-site criminal activity? If the legislation is passed at the state level, would you support just cause eviction legislation in Montgomery County?

I need to know more about the impact of this legislation. We are currently living with the State’s Maintenance of Effort legislation for our school system which has significant unintended consequences. Lack of uniformity in legislation can have unintended consequences too.

Transportation & Infrastructure

1.

Do you support the expansion of public transit, including building the Purple Line, CCT, and Bus Rapid Transit?

Yes. I support the Purple Line, CCT and BRT. These priorities require a heavy investment of state and federal dollars. The Purple Line and CCT (and study of BRT) will require an investment that the county cannot support on its own. In fact, the BRT plan is not even in the queue on the county, state or federal transportation plans. There are creative financing options which we have not considered. We should be open to public/private partnerships and private financing to solve our transportation stalemate. We have to expect more from our State Budget and our Governor. The County Council needs to demonstrate mature and assertive support for and work with the County Executive and the State Delegation to have our needs included the State budget. The State must stop robbing the Transportation Fund to fund operations and everyone needs to be open to the possibility of an increase in the gas tax increase to restore the fund.

2.

What other ways would you expand the building and usage of public transportation in the County?

In addition to the secondary roads that need to be maintained, a safer Metro system is a must. Further, the public transit system that we have needs to be affordable and timely if we expect people to get out of their cars. We need to assure Ride-On remains affordable; the recent cuts to students “ride free” and elimination of reduced rates for seniors does not promote use of transit. Job development and housing must occur around transit, and in such a way that reverse commutes could take pressure off of the roads until mass transit is built.

3.

Do you support tax or other incentives to promote telework, vanpools, and carpools?

Yes, I think the Federal tele-commuting bill that just passed is a model for us to examine and determine how it can be applied to Montgomery County. In all of these important ideas, where we move our vision forward, we must do it in the context of not currently being able to afford core services.

Education

1.

What measures do you support to maintain the high quality of education in Montgomery County Public Schools, given the current budget situation?

As budget cuts occur, the School Board must be certain that it doesn't start in the classroom, but stops there. Council members must have assurances from the School Board on this matter. This is a challenge when we have a School Board threatening to sue the Council. Everyone I know will talk with passion about a teacher who made a difference in their life. A good teacher in a well managed classroom is a gift that translates to a love of learning and academically successful children. This is happening in our schools and needs to be said more frequently. Generally, MCPS continues to be a safe place where teachers remain engaged with children long after class time has ended.

I continue to hear from many friends in the Latino and African American communities that expectations for their children in the classroom are not as high as for Caucasian and Asian children. Whether real or a perceived, this has to be addressed. It may require more training for cultural competence, or stronger leadership on a school-by-school basis. Always a concern, especially as budget cuts increase is that the reduction of time for art, music and physical education limits the holistic development of our children. Finally, I am extremely concerned about the growing drop-out rate. Currently, only 67% of African-American male students are graduating from MCPS. All of these concerns are classroom concerns not Central Office concerns.

New Development

1.

Do you support the recent increases in school and transportation impact fees?

As a 40 year resident of the County, I would like assurance that those impact fees have been applied for their purpose, and not just dumped into the operating budget. If I were a developer, I would want assurance that the impact fees would in fact be applied to ameliorate impacts of the development, not to play catch-up for past mistakes. In all cases, both neighbors and developers have the right to expect reliability, transparency and timeliness in the process.

2.

Do you support assessments of infrastructure, service, health, environmental, human, and small business impacts prior to approval of new developments?

It is difficult to have confidence in the projections that have been provided in the past. For example, the County projected an 8% increase in revenues for more than 5 years in a row. We have too many agencies and departments weighing in on development and bringing different standards to each consideration. For me, a progressive vision for development includes all parties at the table, agreeing on a vision and all of the work that it takes to accomplish that vision. Our past has been filled with demonizing growth/no growth and that, coupled with our great recession, has left us with a weakened revenue base and no community consensus on how to move forward together.

3.

What changes in the County Master Plan do you support to promote smart, sensible, environmentally sound, and managed growth?

We must implement our smart growth plans to enable families and individuals to live, work, walk and play in our own neighborhoods. Transportation systems are needed that help move children to daycare and school, and us to work and home. This goal does not have to come at the expense of our environment. We have strong safeguards in place to protect our natural resources and they must be enforced. Our agriculture reserve serves as the green lungs for our County. With that as a priority, we must accept that our nearly one million neighbors will live and work in two-thirds of our land mass. As Master Plans are updated, they must recognize the need for density around transit centers. Once a Master Plan has been updated, I support "green-taping" for jobs and housing growth around transit hubs. White Flint will lead the way as a model for all future development in establishing urban density for jobs and housing around our transit centers. I envision parks, trails and green space which make density inviting and livable. Primary concerns require that all intersections must be assessed for safety: lighting, line of vision, timing for pedestrian walks, placement of bus stops, access to crossing and police enforcement of traffic patterns. I will work for systems and processes that invite development of walkable, affordable communities for multi-ethnic and multigenerational residents. I pledge to work with the community for systemic changes in our processes that provide reliability and fair expectations for residents and industry.

4.

How do you propose to prevent displacement in communities along the route of the Purple Line, such as Long Branch and Langley Park, if the Purple Line is built?

I believe we learned much in the re-development of Silver Spring, and part of that was that small businesses were disproportionately impacted. We must be certain that the development of the Purple Line does not result in gentrification of the area. All planning must respond to impacted communities in a fair and equitable manner.

Elections

1.

If State enabling legislation is passed, would you support campaign finance reform in Montgomery County, including publicly funded campaigns for County races? Yes.

2.

Do you support such State enabling legislation? Yes.

3.

Do you support legislation making monthly reporting of campaign contributions mandatory for candidates for County office? Yes. Whether such legislation is passed or not, will you pledge to make such monthly reports in this and future campaigns? *I will in future campaigns.*

4. Do you support issuing a publicly-financed voter guide, prepared by an independent body, with candidate statements and information that would go to all registered voters? Yes.

Immigration

1. Do you support equal access to education and other County services for all County residents regardless of immigration status? Yes

2. Do you support the policy of not asking or checking immigration status unless there is a

felony charge arrest? Yes

3. Do you support free, readily available English language classes and other education programs to help immigrants become full participants in the civic life of our County? Yes

4. Do you support legislation making Montgomery County a “sanctuary county?” (In a sanctuary county, no agent, officer or employee of the county may assist the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the investigation or arrest of any persons for violation of the U.S. immigration and nationality laws.) No.

Agricultural Reserve

1.

Do you support the protection of the County Agricultural Reserve including additional protections against development for the Reserve or do you think current restrictions are sufficient?

I do support protection of the Agriculture reserve. I believe current restrictions, if enforced, are sufficient.

Other

1. Why should an organization such as ours, which supports progressive policies and representatives, endorse you in this race?

The best idea in the world will not move forward if there are no leadership skills to build collaborative partnerships and frankly, gain 5 votes in the Council. In all of my professional, community and political work, I have a proven record of building consensus and moving a progressive vision forward in Montgomery County – whether it is was chairing the Vote No on ABC (Ficker Amendments), our Stop Slots efforts or building the Safety Net Coalition. I worked with County Executive Doug Duncan to bring the nation’s first local match for the Earned Income Tax Credit to Montgomery County. I know how to bring stakeholders to the table to develop legislation and how to achieve consensus on challenging issues. It is because of my life’s work of building partnerships and coalitions that strengthen communities, that I know we can meet the challenges of the day. Elected officials have the responsibility to model both civility and commitment to constructive problem solving. I know that when it comes to what matters, regardless of socio-economic status, race, ethnicity or educational background, we are more alike than different. We care about our families, access to opportunity, education, and safe and healthy communities. I have been working with advocates, the business community, 165 congregations, friends and neighbors, on the front line, to strengthen Montgomery County, and I will bring that asset to the County Council.