

Montgomery Countryside Alliance 2014 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Ike Leggett

City: Burtonsville

Office Sought: Montgomery County Executive

More Info: www.ikeleggett.org

If you were asked to describe the County's Agricultural Reserve to someone, what would you say?

The Ag Reserve is a unique treasure that enriches our lives by preserving farmland, teaching our children about sustainability, protecting the environment, and connecting all of our residents to our rural heritage. It is a valuable resource that provides our residents with fresh, wholesome local vegetables, fruits and other food products. The Agricultural community provides a substantial and powerful impact on our economy and is a source of many valuable jobs in our community.

What is your vision for the future of the County's Agricultural Reserve?

Preservation of the Ag Reserve will always be a high priority of my administration and for every County Executive who succeeds me. As Montgomery County becomes more urban, protecting the 2/3 of our land as open space will be more challenging and more necessary. I think the best way to preserve our Agricultural Reserve is to educate all residents of our County on its importance as our top natural resource, and as an integral industry for our County. That way, everyone will have a stake in its future success and preservation.

Under my leadership, the county expanded protected land in our Ag Reserve to over 72,000 acres in almost one-third of the county, and we protected 94 percent of our farmland under easements, the highest in the nation.

What more should the County be providing in terms of legislation and/or services to realize that vision?

We must guard against incursions into the Ag Reserve by ensuring that only agricultural and closely related uses are allowed there. Therefore we must be vigilant about potential Zoning Text Amendments that would threaten this policy.

One of my new, innovative programs to ensure the sustainability of the Ag Reserve is the new Farmer Pilot Project- a transformative experiment unlike any other small-farmer training program in the country.

The new Farmer Pilot Project provides mentoring and specialized business training for marketing and accounting, business planning and advanced sustainable farm practices. But, what makes this pilot unique is leapfrogging the physical incubator phase, and getting new farmers onto a private, long-term leased site right away.

What challenges exist to ensuring that your vision for the Reserve is realized?

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One of the greatest challenges to our Ag Reserve is visibility. Our residents cannot truly appreciate our Ag Reserve without knowing about it, how it contributes to their quality of life and it provides a rural oasis in the midst of our suburban/urban County.

It is vital that we ensure that all our residents are informed about this valuable treasure, and that they are encouraged to visit and learn more about how and where their food is produced. Our Annual Farm Tour and Harvest Sales give residents and visitors the opportunity to spend the weekend in the country petting farm animals, having lunch by a scenic pond and purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables, plants and flowers. But together with our partners at the Country side Alliance, we can further promote the Ag reserve. I believe this is the one most important way we have of preserving it for our future.

What role do the County's schools play in the support of our local food system and success of local agriculture?

An important resource in Montgomery County is the Agricultural History Farm Park, which is located along Rock Creek in Derwood. It is a 455-acre complex with a historic farm site and a modern farming activity center. The park offers visitors a unique perspective on the County's rich farming heritage. The Farm Park has a program to teach our children about farming through its 4-H Club, but creating a stronger partnership between the Farm Park and our school system would be another way to educate our children in sustainable farming.

The County has undertaken a comprehensive zoning code re-write. What are your thoughts about the County's zoning code enforcement? Does that division have adequate resources and is it properly functioning?

The County Council completed its review in January on the first proposed major changes in the County Zoning Ordinance since 1978. This comprehensive zoning re-write has streamlined 120 zones with more than 400 footnotes, many of which were confusing and contradictory. It has improved clarity and consistency, while accommodating changing markets and demographics.

The zoning code will now reflect more sustainable policy goals and provide the flexibility needed to encourage mixed used development, and create walkable livable communities.

I will continue to ensure that the Department of Permitting Services has the resources to enforce the zoning code in an aggressive and consistent manner so that incursions into the AG Reserve are prevented.

Do you support an additional Potomac bridge and highway in the Reserve or adjacent rural zones?

No.