



Montgomery County 2022 Candidate Questionnaire - Ben Winkner

Personal Information:

Name

Ben Wikner

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2022 Election?

County Council District 7

Where Can Voters Learn More About Your Positions Or Contact Your Campaign?

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Please Answer the Following Questions- responses will posted in their entirety and will not be edited.

Someone new to Montgomery County may ask, "What's the Ag Reserve and why is it important?" What's your answer?

The Ag Reserve is one of the pride and joys of Montgomery County and one of the most significant and forward-thinking land conservation projects in the nation. The Ag Reserve has been hailed as "one of the best, most emulated and most studied farmland protection programs in United States history" (Washington Post) and contains 93K acres of land set aside for farming, green space, and agri-business. The more than 550 farms on the Ag Reserve produces nearly \$300 Million in annual revenue. Additionally, one can enjoy horse-back riding, beer and wine tasting, and nature walks, all of which make the Ag Reserve a key part of the culture, economy, and lifestyle that we have come to enjoy in Montgomery County and makes this place so special.

What is your vision for the future of the County's Agricultural Reserve? Briefly, how would you achieve that vision?

Maintaining the original vision of the Ag Reserve is a top priority as it is an integral part of our County's land-use, conservation, and culture. We must strengthen County policy that supports sustainable farms and the ecology of the AR. My vision for the AR includes growing and supporting the agri-business that operates in the AR so they can increase the part they play in supporting the food needs and growing the economy of Montgomery County. The Ag Reserve should also be a key part of the reforestation effort of the county as well as a smart source of renewable energy, so long as it maintains the aesthetic beauty of the land. Finally, we need to utilize appropriate technology to limit soil erosion and eliminate nutrient runoff into the water shed.

What are your top priorities to help the County address climate change? What role will the Ag Reserve play?

I believe we can be the green-tech, environmentally-sound leader of America. Through strong leadership from our County Executive and Council, we can simultaneously reduce greenhouse gases that harm the environment AND strengthen the local economy by attracting and developing the green-tech business sector. We need to invest in the necessary infrastructure so we can become the leading Electric Vehicle consumer as well as producer of EV parts and technology. We need to make EVs available for all, not just the wealthy. My transportation priorities is interconnected with my environment and equity

commitments.

What more can be done to support our local farm businesses and rural communities?

The county can and should invest in the grow and buy local movement. In addition, we can strengthen the food conservation program that already exists to support local agri-business, improve environmental conservation, as well as help feed the struggling and food insecure in the county; this includes the farm-to-table and farm-to-store efforts. As the Director of the Equity Center, I have led the effort to help feed more than 10,000 people in the county the past two years by coordinating the effort to rescue more than 2 Million pounds of food to support the food insecure throughout the pandemic.

What are your regional transportation priorities? Do you support M83 and an additional Potomac bridge and outer beltway through the Reserve or adjacent rural zones?

We need to make sure our transportation plans are connected to our environment and equity commitments (see above answer on environment). I support strengthening our public transport system, the BRT plans according to the cities and corridor vision, as well as exploring and investing in technology such as Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) and electric vehicle accessibility for all. I do NOT support the extending of M83/Midcounty Hwy, which would destroy critical park and green space, including Seneca Park. I do believe we need to find a means of alleviating the bottleneck that is the Lincoln Bridge river crossing, but in such a way that does not impinge upon the Ag Reserve or transgress the environmental commitments we have already made. I look forward to being able to offer the necessary vision and leadership to move these thing forward in a smart and sustainable way.

What are your views on the general plan update "Thrive 2050," both the process and the draft now before the Council?

While I think the overall vision of Thrive 2050 is commendable, specifically to focus development and growth in the cities and corridors, and to do so with equity and environment as a priority, I also believe this document, as well as the process in which it was created, is another example of the County leadership's failure to truly listen and be connected to the people of the county and their interests and concerns. There are some suggestions in the present version that reveal a level of leadership arrogance and tone-deafness that puts into question the entire document. But we can and should build off of what has been accomplished, in order to come to a more satisfying plan for the interests of all of the parts of the county.

Do you believe that the way that local government branches, state entities, and the public currently interact can be improved? If so, what steps would you take?

Most definitely. Simply put, we need to have county leadership that can work with and partner with state, local, and community leaders.

Additionally, one of the primary reasons I decided to run for County Council is on account of a disconnect I have experienced between county government and the people. We can and must do better in connecting local government to the people who vote, generate the revenue, and are impacted by all of the decisions.

I will create a People's Committee for District 7 that will allow me to be deeply connected to the interests and concerns of the people and will set the tone for engaged leadership with the public. I will also encourage and help every other Council member to do the same. I will work hard to simplify and shrink government bureaucracy that makes it so time-consuming and even impossible for the average resident to access government services. I will also bring fresh leadership and energy to improve outreach, communication, and service from the county staff that intersects with the public.