

Montgomery County 2026 Candidate Questionnaire



Personal Information:

Name Debbie Spielberg

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2026 Election? County Council, District 1

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

Website: <https://www.debbiespielberg.org/>

Contact: info@debbiespielberg.org



Please Answer the Following Questions- responses will posted in their entirety and will not be edited. There are no word limits but please try to be concise.

(pictured above: One Acre Farm)

Please share 3 sentences that help us to know you better:

I have worked for more than 17 years at the Council and Executive branch where I am now as Special Assistant to County Executive Marc Elrich. Earlier in my career, I served as Legislative Director for Congressman John Lewis, where I helped draft the first version of his Environmental Justice legislation, and served as volunteer chair for the State Senate campaign of Jamie Raskin. I am proud to be endorsed by Sierra Club, am a strong supporter of protecting the Agricultural Reserve, care deeply about preserving Montgomery County's environment, protecting working families, and ensuring that residents are meaningfully involved in planning decisions that shape their communities.

When we recently surveyed residents throughout the County, they shared that their top priority was a lack of government transparency - How can Montgomery County ensure transparency in their legislative and land use decision making? How would you grade current public engagement? Do you support re-establishing the Office of the People's Counsel?

Government transparency and meaningful public engagement are essential. Too often, legislative and land use decisions do not reflect and incorporate feedback from residents. Simply holding meetings (even

many of them) is insufficient; as a Councilmember I would ask what information was gained from the meetings; what changed or did not change as a result of community engagement and why. Land use plans - sector and master plans - need advisory committees like existed before that include residents, businesses and environmental and other organizations. When proposing and voting on legislation, as a Councilmember, I would ensure that we knew what the intentions and goals were and what the tradeoffs were in the legislation.

I believe current public engagement is inconsistent and generally insufficient. While there are dedicated staff, residents still feel unheard and their concerns are too often not addressed. As a Councilmember, I will advocate a return to a comprehensive planning process via the master/sector plan process that evaluates transportation, school capacity, stormwater management, tree canopy, infrastructure, and environmental impacts. Ultimately, we get a much better outcome if we work with residents and other stakeholders.

Yes, I support funding and re-establishing the Office of the People's Counsel; it gives stakeholders official access when crucial decisions are made.

Do you believe that the way that local government branches (executive, legislative and planning), and state entities currently interact can be improved? If so, what steps would you take to bring better collaboration?

Yes. We need stronger coordination between the County Council, Executive Branch, Planning Department, state agencies, Pepco, and WSSC, so that decisions and operations are efficient, responsive and comprehensive.

Specifically, the approval process has too much duplication between Planning and the executive agencies. It is a frustrating, expensive process that does not produce a good outcome. As a Councilmember, I would work with the agencies and stakeholders to improve the process.

Because I have worked in both the legislative and executive branches for more than 17 years, I understand how these systems interact and where communication often breaks down. As someone who has worked with communities all over district 1 and throughout the county, I would work to improve coordination and transparency for better outcomes.



Source water protection is a priority for County residents. Rural residents are served by wells drawn from a federally designated Sole Source Aquifer. What specific actions will you take to protect groundwater quality and ensure a sustainable supply of drinking water for residents, farms and businesses? And what do you propose with regard to protecting the Potomac River, a drinking water supply for more than 5 Million people in the Washington DC metropolitan area. Given increasing drought conditions, growing data center water consumption, and projections that the Potomac River may not meet future demand, how will you plan for a water-constrained future? What policies or investments would you prioritize during your term?

Protecting our drinking water must be one of Montgomery County's highest priorities. The sole source aquifer that serves the Agricultural Reserve and surrounding rural areas, some of which are in District 1, must be protected, especially given that residents and farmers rely on it to survive and work. We need strong protections to prevent excessive impervious surfaces, runoff and sources of pollution that threaten the sole source aquifer and the Potomac River.

I believe we must approach future water demand with far more caution and long-term planning, especially as drought conditions worsen and large-scale energy and water users such as data centers seek to expand. Before approving major projects with significant water demands, the county must require detailed

analysis of water consumption, discharge, and long-term sustainability impacts. We also need stronger stormwater management requirements, expanded stream restoration, protection of forested areas, and investments in water conservation and reuse technologies.

Regarding the Potomac River specifically, Montgomery County should work closely with regional partners and state agencies to develop a coordinated long-term water sustainability strategy.

What role can the Ag Reserve play in helping our County address Climate Change? Do you have plans to bolster the county's funds to address climate change, i.e. expanded grant making, review of energy tax structure for high energy consumers such as data centers?

The Agricultural Reserve is one of Montgomery County's greatest environmental achievements and is essential to addressing climate change. The Reserve protects forests, open space, farmland, watersheds, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration capacity. It also strengthens local food security and reduces development pressure on environmentally sensitive land.

We should continue investing in climate resilience efforts, including expanded tree planting, stream restoration, regenerative agriculture, and clean energy programs that do not undermine agricultural land. I also believe the county must carefully review the energy tax structure and broader fiscal impacts associated with extremely high-energy users such as hyperscale data centers.



Do you support the long planned closure of the trash incinerator in Dickerson? Please provide some details as to why or why not. (pictured above: Shepherd's hey Farm)

Yes. I support the planned closure of the trash incinerator in Dickerson for many good reasons. The incinerator will have to be substantially improved in the next five years when the last contract extension ends in 2031. Those changes will cost \$100s of millions (at least \$350 million and likely more) and those are fixed costs that will not change if we reduce the amount of trash we generate. In contrast, closing the incinerator gives us the financial capacity to implement innovative technology, including advanced waste processing, that helps reduce the amount of trash. We will need to landfill trash; however, because landfill charges are per ton, there is a strong incentive to reduce the amount of trash we generate, and we will have more financial resources to pursue those strategies (because the money won't be tied up in the fixed costs of the incinerator).

Closing the incinerator will also enable the County to implement countywide food scraps composting at the existing composting facility in Dickerson, which is the most efficient way for the county to implement the policy since a leaf composting facility is already there.

Closing the incinerator also gives the County incentive and ability to focus on diversion of construction and demolition waste. Much of that waste is already landfilled; we need better policies to incentivize and require recycling.

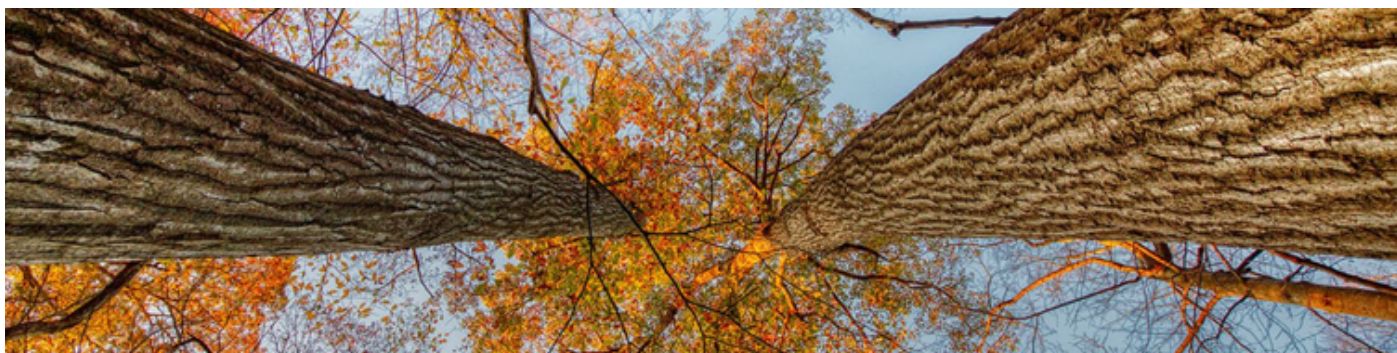
In my current role, I have been working to close the incinerator, reduce the amount of waste generated and increase recycling. As a Councilmember for District 1, I will use my deep understanding of these issues to help Montgomery County become a model for reducing waste and recycling as much as possible.

Should Montgomery County host hyperscale Data Centers? If so, what zoning standards and regulations should be established? Have we gathered all the necessary information to make an informed decision at this time?

Hyperscale data centers raise significant concerns related to energy consumption, water use, noise, air emissions, land use, and transmission infrastructure. Montgomery County should move cautiously and deliberately rather than treating data center expansion as inevitable.

These data centers should only be allowed on industrially zoned land and must have strict environmental and siting standards. These include protecting the water supply, noise limits, and setback requirements. They also must require the production of clean, new energy. There must also be meaningful public engagement (not just a bunch of meetings) and transparency around projected resource demands and infrastructure impacts.

I am not sure that we have all the information we need. I do know that we must take the time to make sure we get this right. And if we do, we can be a model for the rest of the country.



Forests are a key tool for climate protection and protecting public health. How would forest protection and control of non-native plant species factor into your administration's goals? (Picture above - Wib Middleton)

Forest protection and tree canopy are a major priority for me. Trees are essential for reducing heat, improving air quality, preventing flooding, protecting streams, and helping Montgomery County meet its climate goals. I support strengthening tree preservation requirements, increasing replanting standards, and expanding the county's tree canopy, especially in neighborhoods with less canopy coverage and greater heat vulnerability.

I also support stronger efforts to control invasive and non-native plant species that damage native ecosystems and reduce biodiversity. The county should continue partnering with environmental organizations, parks staff, and community volunteers to restore native habitats and improve long-term ecological health.

Where do you stand on synthetic turf playing fields for school and community use?

I have consistently opposed the use of synthetic turf fields for more than 15 years. We need to work with national experts to install well designed natural grass fields, and we need to ensure that they are well maintained. Artificial turf contributes to heat island effects, adds plastics and synthetic materials into the environment, and raises concerns about long-term environmental and public health impacts. Montgomery County should become a national leader in sustainable, high-quality, high-use natural grass field management rather than continuing to expand synthetic turf.



Challenges to current and future farmers are increasing. The average age of County producers is 59. The cost of leasing farm acreage (60% of farms are leasing) is skyrocketing while a diverse new crop of farmers struggle to afford farmland. Have you got any plans for how the County can help keep the industry healthy and promote expansion– with an understanding that resilience depends on local food and fiber production? (Pictured above: Afrithrive Farm)

Supporting agriculture and keeping farming viable are critical to preserving the Agricultural Reserve and strengthening local resilience. We need to make sure that we're providing the right incentives and requirements that help farmers survive.

We need to explore whether the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program needs updates. We need to invest in partnerships that connect farmers to local, reliable markets. We also need to assist beginning farmers, including support, expansion or modification of the Land Link program, as well as other programs that help new and diverse farmers access affordable land and resources.

We must also support regenerative and sustainable agricultural practices that improve soil health, strengthen climate resilience, and protect water quality. The Agricultural Reserve is not only an environmental asset – it is also an economic and food security asset that must be protected for future generations. This work must be done in conjunction with the Montgomery Countryside Alliance, Sugarloaf Citizens Association and others committed to the long-term vitality of the Agricultural Reserve.