



Montgomery County 2022 Candidate Questionnaire - Paul Geller

Personal Information:

Name Paul Geller

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2022 Election? District 7, Montgomery County Council

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

You can learn more about me, my background as a long-time Montgomery County resident and PTA leader at the local and county levels; as well as volunteer with us or make a contribution to the campaign on our website at VoteGeller.com .

Also, keep up on the latest news regarding the campaign on Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/YouTube at [VoteGeller](http://VoteGeller.com) .

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?

Our Agricultural Reserve is one of Montgomery County's most cherished natural resources. It is a gem. Comprising nearly one-third of the entire county, the Agricultural Reserve is comprised of 540 farms and an impressive 93,000 acres of pastoral beauty...all situated less than an hour away from Washington, D.C. From pick-your-own farms like my favorite, Butler's Orchard, to magnificent, farmed land stretching out as far as the eye can see, this truly is a remarkable place.

This land is important because it partially feed us – both directly in the form of the berries, grapes, apples, and other vegetables and fruits grown here; and indirectly through the corn and other crops grown to feed livestock, as well as the livestock itself. The Agricultural Reserve also reminds us of our agrarian roots. It gives Montgomery County residents an opportunity to step back from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and find peace and tranquility in nature. And, most important of all, it provides us with good, wholesome food that need not be trucked in from afar. It comes right from our county. Produced by dedicated, hard working farmers.

The Agricultural Reserve is also the green space in Montgomery County that helps clean the air, put rainwater and snow melt to good use by recharging groundwater supplies, and as a tremendous educational hub for us all. As a city and suburb dweller growing up, all trips made to farms stand out in my mind for being different, eyeopening, and unique. I saw the same thing when my kids visited local farms. Their eyes widened, they learned so much, and for a brief few moments had a chance to better understand how their farming grandparents, great-grandparents and others worked very hard in the Midwest to earn a living and a better life here in America.

Thus, the Agricultural Reserve feeds us, directly and indirectly, protects our environment, educates us, and allows us to better understand the farming life many of our fore bearers practiced for hundreds of years before us.

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

My vision for Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve is simple. As your District 7 Councilmember, I will be seeking the input, advice, and counsel of Agricultural Reserve residents, farmers, and farm businesses every step of the way. I will be accomplishing this by doing something nearly identical to what I have been doing for MCPS schools for a decade: making site visits to farms and residents in the area, at their invitation, to learn first hand what some of the successes and challenges are that are unique to them. I would then aggregate this information, just as I did as a very successful advocate for our public schools, and work with my County Council colleagues, as well as those in the Montgomery County Delegation to the Maryland General Assembly and our Congressional Delegation, to figure out how to improve or maintain policies that are benefiting the Agricultural Reserve, what new ways we can come up with to reduce or eliminate challenges, and how we can best serve the greater good of all those who live and work in this area.

I will also work with other interested organizations such as the Montgomery County Farm Bureau and see to it that we have at least two gatherings during my first term in office that promote Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve both within our county and outside of it to all who are interested. I attended a similar agricultural forum offered by Councilmember Craig Rice a few years ago and learned so much about the unique qualities that make the Agricultural Reserve so special.

We need to preserve the Agricultural Reserve, and make it even better: cleaner, larger, more pastoral, and whenever practical, encouraging natural pest and insect control with minimal use of pesticides and fertilizers.

My interest in encouraging, and not legislating, the most minimal use of pesticides and fertilizers is to challenge our farmers, extension agents, soil scientists, and others to get more creative about ways to enrich the soil and reduce the amount of pests using natural methods. This would in turn benefit the entire community with less polluting runoff, improved soil and ground water quality, more organic produce, and a healthier lifestyle for those who farm. We could offer incentives to participating farms and allow them to use a special Montgomery County Environmental Hero seal we would develop to reward such good environmental stewardship. The idea is always to work with the farmers and experts in the field and challenge everyone to try to do better...not legislate it if we can avoid it.

What are your priorities regarding stewardship of the County's natural resources (water, forests, open spaces) and parkland?

We must protect and preserve our natural resources for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

Regarding water quality, I am the only candidate in this race who both attended and testified at the Dickerson Coal Plant hearing on September 27, 2017 in favor of shutting it down. As a Montgomery County resident and someone who cares deeply for the environment, I testified we must encourage the Maryland Department of the Environment to maintain stringent water and air quality standards and not revert to pre-1980s levels. The amount of pollutants we allowed to be dumped into the Potomac River at the time, our main source of drinking water in Montgomery County, was staggering...as was the additional damage caused by releasing heated water into the river. I could not stand idly by, and took the appropriate action to get the Dickerson Coal Plant shut down. I am proud to say we won.

As for forests, open spaces, and parkland, we need to keep these areas of the Agricultural Reserve as they were in 1980, if not better. We should be acquiring more land through direct purchasing and encouraging donations to expand these green spaces for the enjoyment of our residents. This is part of the reason why our county is so unique – we value our Agricultural Reserve, our excellent schools, our close proximity to Washington, D.C. and several other major cities, as well as our wonderful diversity. On my watch we will not be harming the Agricultural Reserve...we will only be improving and expanding it.

What role will you play with regard to ensure that we safeguard our drinking water supply both

surface and groundwater?

As mentioned previously, I am the only candidate in the District 7 field who successfully fought to shut down the pollution belching Dickerson Coal Plant in September 2017. Moreover, I will continue the fight for keeping our drinking water clean by engaging with my Councilmember colleagues and other elected officials at all levels, and across state lines, to make sure our main drinking water supply, the Potomac River, is kept as pristine as possible. This will certainly mean teaming up with various agencies and jurisdictions to stop the polluting of the Potomac.

As for protecting the drinking water supply of both surface and groundwater, my office will work with both farmers, agribusinesses, nurseries, and all interested parties, in bringing them together with state agricultural agents, soil experts, pest managers, and other leaders in the field to see what changes can be made to reduce or eliminate the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers that do not readily breakdown in a reasonable amount of time. For example, as someone who struggled with lawn grubs a few years ago, I was introduced to the concept of using nematodes to take care of the pests. To get rid of ants, we were shown how effective diatomaceous earth is. If the "natural" remedy to the issue costs the same as a chemical alternative, the very least we can do is inform our farming/growing community of this and ask if they would be willing to make the change. If so, I think we should offer them incentives or rewards for doing so. A special Montgomery County Environmental Hero or "Montgomery County Green Seal of Approval" prestige rating could be given to show purchasers of these products this was grown using environmentally friendly methods and is extra worthy of your consideration.

We also need to make sure we are not inadvertently dumping or releasing toxic chemicals into the Chesapeake Bay and area watersheds. To do this we need to work with WSSC and other agencies to advertise the importance of recycling motor oil, as well as all other toxic fluids, in a safe and appropriate manner. We also need to make sure storm drains that feed into the Chesapeake Bay once again are painted with reminders that this is where the runoff ultimately ends up. We also need to strictly penalize polluters.

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

First, one of my main goals is to work with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to make sure we purchase (not lease) and install solar panels atop all schools wherever practical. Currently, only 17 schools have or are slated to get solar power systems. I have been a relentless advocate for this project for years now. As District 7 Councilmember, I will work closely with my Council colleagues and my friends at MCPS to get this done quickly. The cost of adding solar to a building is roughly equal to the cost of energy used by that building for approximately 4-6 years. However, solar panels generate energy for 20+ years. Thus for a minimal upfront cost, something we could use the energy tax revenues for or work to issue a special set of bonds for, we will have free energy for 14-16+ years. Millions of dollars in Operating Budget savings would be realized. These savings can then be used to hire more school counselors, more teachers, for pay raises,... Solar power systems also provide an excellent opportunity for students to learn more about energy usage and conservation...something I have seen put into practice at Discovery Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia. This is what we need at MCPS.

We also need to build only Net Zero school buildings. MCPS has a raze and rebuild mindset that is completely impractical. Whenever new buildings are absolutely required, they should be Net Zero. This means they generate all of the energy they need onsite through solar and geothermal systems, are highly energy efficient, utilize water saving devices, as well as the use of items such as solar tubes for providing natural sunlight indoors.

In addition, we must preserve the Agricultural Reserve. I have heard all sorts of ideas for adding solar panels to this area. This really goes against the entire purpose of creating the Agricultural Reserve in the first place. Instead, I propose offering incentives to all building owners elsewhere in the county such as mass market retailers, grocery stores, shops and the like, as well as building owners, to add

solar panels to their huge rooftops just as long as the community input is positive and part of the generating capability goes toward providing energy for lower income families.

The Agricultural Reserve will play a key role in mitigating the effects of climate change in our county by serving as a learning opportunity for our MCPS and private school students. We have a very sparsely advertised countywide science fair, as well as a very highly regarded 4H program. We should be encouraging both to get their students to think about better ways to remove carbon dioxide from the air, better methods for growing crops naturally, as well as a million other ideas. These students could work with residents and farms in the Agricultural Reserve to experiment on their hypotheses, and come up with incredible solutions that will help our planet now and in the future.

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

The top priority for me as Councilmember for District 7 will be to listen to my constituents. I will ask them what they could use to help their local farm business grow, and help our rural communities maintain their wonderful quality of life.

On the business side, our Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation needs to have a focus on how our farm businesses are marketed and promoted. Almost incredibly, a search of either the word "farm" or "agriculture" on their website thinkmoco.com yields no results. Zero. This needs to change. Economic development certainly includes our Montgomery County farms. On my watch as Councilmember for District 7, this will change.

Another concept would be to either work with the newer Montgomery County Small Business Association to exchange ideas for supporting our local farm businesses, as well as encouraging the continued work of the Montgomery County Farm Bureau, which is a member of the Maryland Farm Bureau. This is a wellspring for the exchange of ideas and concepts

As mentioned in a prior answer, would also build upon the agricultural forum offered by Councilmember Craig Rice a few years ago and host at least two of these in partnership with other interested organizations in my first term.

Having a close working relationship with MCPS, I would encourage our Division of Food & Nutrition Services to buy more locally grown food whenever possible. I would also encourage the expansion of our farmer's markets countywide through improved marketing to residents and our restaurants to make sure they all know about the great fruits and vegetables grown here, as well as meat raised in our county.

To better support our rural communities, I would continue my tradition of visiting these communities, talking to the residents, and finding out what their needs are. As the past president and vice president of programs of the 40,000+ member Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA), I made a point of visiting more than 135 schools all across the county. And I have expanded upon that tradition having visited Poolesville, Beallsville, Damascus, and numerous other communities. I enjoy listening to what folks have to say. Having done that for years as a community and PTA leader, as well as a candidate for office, it led to much advocacy success. I like to get the practical and important things done by going to the source, learning as much as I can, and working with my colleagues to get the needed improvements made.

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?

My goal is to make Montgomery County a better place to live, work and learn in. Transportation priorities are in the live and work categories of my goal.

In order to reduce traffic and congestion on our roads, I will work to create high paying jobs right here utilizing the 10,000,000+ square feet of vacant office space available right now across Montgomery County. This will be done by working with existing Montgomery County businesses, the Montgomery

County Chamber of Commerce and local Chambers of Commerce and encouraging our existing businesses to expand; creating an ideal environment for entrepreneurs to establish new businesses; and pursuing world class companies to move here, open offices here, or move their headquarters here.

As your District 7 Councilmember, I will take action to resolve traffic issues by leading the charge with my colleagues for intelligent, coordinated traffic signals. Many of us have experienced the mind numbing stop and go traffic of driving along any of our major roads such as 97, 355, Shady Grove Road, Connecticut Avenue,... With intelligent signaling, we can have traffic moving along at a safe rate of speed, and allow for longer, more frequent green lights, as well as the ability to sense when there is no traffic from cross streets allowing main arteries to keep moving.

I do not support an additional Potomac bridge crossing and/or outer beltway through the Reserve or adjacent rural zones. Period.

As for M83, we need to have additional community input about this project. What would the impact be on our communities? What would the impact be on development pressures in the Ag Reserve? What communities would be affected? What will the impact be on the environment?

How should our County manage its solid waste? What role should incineration, composting and recycling play?

We need to focus on reducing the amount of solid waste we generate in this county by recycling and composting more. Incineration should only be used as a last resort. We need to better educate our residents and businesses about the importance of reducing the generation of solid waste through a series of infographics, posters, and advertisements that drive home the importance of being more sensitive to our environmental footprint. For example, burning a plastic bottle will generate harmful air pollution. I was shocked to learn that nearly 10-15% of the materials burned in the Dickerson Incinerator are recyclable. We need to do a better job of getting these materials recycled. We also need to do a better job of educating our students in private and public schools about the importance of recycling and composting so they develop good habits early on.

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

First of all, the creators of "Thrive 2050" need to go back and get input from all communities in our county. This is a criticism/concern I constantly hear expressed by our residents. Outreach to communities of color and lower income communities could have been significantly better and must be corrected. All voices must be heard from in order for "Thrive 2050" to truly be a document we can use as a possible road map to the future.

Second, "Thrive 2050" needs to be revised overall to include the new realities of a (hopefully soon) post-pandemic world. More people are working from home now, and this trend is likely to continue. So too is the current trend of some of our residents to remain closer to home for stay-cations that could include visits to Montgomery County farms and agricultural businesses for a day away. These fundamental shifts in behavior need to be accounted for in this document.

Third, an environmental section must be included with detailed suggestions for how we can preserve and improve water quality, solar power generation, soil conservation, pest management, and much more. Considering climate change is a global issue, it is of paramount importance to include it in "Thrive 2050."

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?

Communication and interaction between local government branches, state entities, and the public can always be improved. Here are some of my ideas for how we can accomplish this:

- 1) Local and state entities need to work together and be on the same page when it comes to projects and initiatives.
- 2) Websites such as that offered by Montgomery County need to be streamlined, updated more frequently, and also more easily searchable. Sometimes finding needed information is needlessly complicated by searches turning up far too many citations for unnecessary webpages. This is a major issue that needs to be addressed in the interest of better public service.
- 3) We need to continue and expand the use of online communication services such as Zoom to allow residents to interact with their elected officials and government agencies. This is a great equalizer and allows more people to be at the table.
- 4) Cable TV Montgomery is a great service, both on cable and the internet. We need to also make sure all past County Council broadcasts are archived and available on demand on YouTube. A recent search for some footage was made all too complicated by upgrades to the County Council website that eliminated a tremendous amount of prior meeting coverage that had previously been made available.
- 5) It is also worth mentioning the good work of the Maryland Association of Counties. They do a great job of exchanging information about what is going on statewide. Having benefited from their information and training for several years now, I think they are the gold standard in how all others can disseminate information in a timely, concise manner.

Finally, thank you Montgomery Countryside Alliance for your support of the Agricultural Reserve. All of us owe you our gratitude for your advocacy in keeping this wonderful gem of land in fine shape for future generations to enjoy. All the best! With much admiration, Paul Geller, District 7 Candidate for your Montgomery County Council. District 7 includes Damascus, Goshen, Montgomery Village, Laytonsville, Derwood, Olney, Brookeville, Brighton, Norbeck, Sandy Spring, Ashton, and parts of Gaithersburg, Cedar Grove, Clarksburg, Mt. Airy and Woodbine.