

# Montgomery County 2026 Candidate Questionnaire



## Personal Information:

**Name** Paula Bienenfeld

**What Office Are You Seeking in the 2026 Election?** District 4 County Council seat

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

My website is [www.paulaformoco.com](http://www.paulaformoco.com). Also please read the League of Women Voters guide at <https://www.lwvmocomd.org/> To contact my campaign please go to the website.



**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:

Paula has lived in Montgomery County for 35 years, and currently lives in Silver Spring's Seven Oaks neighborhood. She holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology, specializing in Archaeology, and her professional career was as an environmental and historic preservation consultant working with various federal, state and local agencies, and private sector clients nationwide. She has been a volunteer activist for many years, with a decades-long successful experience as a community advocate for better schools, safer streets, and government transparency and accountability.

**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?**

1. There are several steps that the county government and, more specifically the Planning Department and Planning Board, can do. First, as is common in other localities, they can hold their planning board meetings on the weekend so more citizens can attend. Having meetings on weekdays is fine for

developers and their paid lobbyists but is challenging for the interested resident. Other localities do this, and we can too. Second the county executive, county council members and planning department and planning board can make their work calendars and meeting logs public. I have been asking for this for years. When I am elected, I will make my work calendar and my meeting log public. Then, for land use decision making, the planning department must reach out to every affected resident with postcards or other effective outreach at the very start of a new plan and follow up to make sure residents are aware of the implications of a proposed plan. The pattern has been for years that residents are not told about a new plan, or new zoning, until it is too late to make changes. There is no reason why this should happen and no reason for the Planning Department to maintain its autocratic practices. Finally, the members of the Planning Board are supposed to be 'citizen planners.' That is no longer the case. Councilmembers appoint the planning board members, and I will work to make sure appointees are from the public, not the professional planning or development community. Selecting Board members who represent the developer point of view is not appropriate.

2. I would give an F to the county council, county executive, Planning Board and Planning Department, and MCPS, regarding public engagement. Repeatedly we see that plans and changes come down from the planning department with no long-term input from residents. A common concern is that by the time residents see the plans it is too late to make changes. In addition, residents are not made aware of meetings planners are having with real estate developers, their planners, and their attorneys. I would push to require that these government agencies make their visitor logs public. Another important concern is that all of these organizations repeatedly put out public 'surveys' requesting input. However the survey results are nothing more than anecdotes and mean little. I would require true statistical surveys with meaningful results.

3. Finally, I strongly support re-establishing and funding the Office of the People's Counsel.

**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, the local government branches and state entities' interactions can be improved. Regular meetings, available to the public, either in person or via zoom can be held, with actionable programs and metrics on efficacy. I think that interactions and decisions that take place 'behind-the-scenes' do not help our residents. I would push for meetings that are announced publicly to residents and held in public.



**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?**

This is an issue that needs a long-term actionable planning. One part of this solution is to protect our water sources. This would mean restricting density near these waterways, and encouraging maintenance and expansion of trees and vegetation to reduce runoff.

Aging infrastructure needs to be repaired and modernized as well. The Potomac Interceptor break is an example of what happens when county government ignores the real need for constant oversight of the utilities on which we depend. We need to make sure WSSC is conducting regular maintenance and repairs, and replacing aging water mains that are subject to leaks and catastrophic breaks, as we saw on River Road in 2008, and recently with the Potomac Interceptor.

Regarding increases in drought in our area, I would push to work with our county farmers to identify drought-resistant crops; encourage the use of gray water/wastewater recycling where applicable; and implement newly-introduced AI and sensor technology. Other programs available include computerized micro and drip irrigation. In addition, we need to work with WSSC to identify and stop leaks.

**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 Ag Reserve already helps address climate change by providing 93,000 acres of green space. A second possibility is to plant more trees which provide shade, reduce runoff, and absorb carbon dioxide. I would review the energy tax structure so high energy consumers have increased taxes.

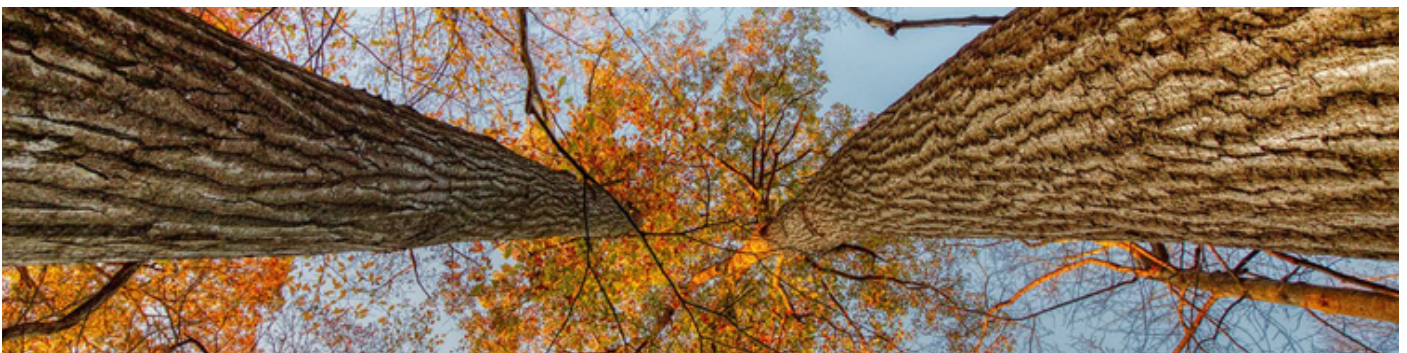


**Do you support the long planned closure of the trash incinerator in Dickerson? Please provide some details as to why or why not. (pictured above: Shepherd's hey Farm)**

I do support the planned closure. This is an issue that has been going on for decades. The closure should be combined with working with the development community and MCPS to reduce construction and demolition waste material, and increasing our county recycling and reuse efforts if we are serious about reducing trash and debris. In addition, we need to develop an actionable plan as to where county waste will go. Simply shifting it to other communities is not the answer.

**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?**

I do not support hyperscale Data Centers. Loudoun County has more data centers than are found anywhere in the country. We in Montgomery County can use their experience and results as a pilot case to see what effects these data centers have on residents' electric bills and usage, water use, as well as on streams, rivers, groundwater, and noise levels.



**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)**

I would strengthen the forest conservation laws. I would push to implement a local version of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act so that tree removals and demolitions of structures where nests have been identified do not take place during nesting season. The federal government does this and we can too. I would change the forest conservation and mitigation law so that when trees are removed the removal must be mitigated by replacement within the neighborhood where the trees were removed.

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

I am opposed to synthetic turf playing fields, for environmental, health, and economic reasons. As a member of the Parents' Coalition of Montgomery County I researched and wrote numerous blog posts about the environmental dangers of these playing fields. They are heat islands that are visible from space. Here in the county temperatures of up to 164 degrees Fahrenheit have been recorded at the high school playing fields. The used automobile and commercial truck tire granules and the plastic 'blades' wash into our streams. There are injuries to players, like MRSA, due to abrasions caused by the plastic turf. Economically I found that the artificial turf is manufactured in refurbished carpet mills in places like Calhoun, Georgia. I have written, and testified to the county council, that it would be better if our tax dollars went to our ag reserve sod farmers, to keep our money in the county and support our rural neighbors.



**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)**

There are at least a few reasons why costs are increasing. These include pressures on land, especially here in the county, where land is at a premium; and cost increases for fuel, and livestock medicines. Startup costs, especially for younger farmers, include deer fencing, equipment, soil development, structures, municipalities (access to water/ electricity /sanitation), amendments, and of course, the first round of crops and/or livestock. Being able to make revenue is key to keeping farmland. I will work with our farmers, the Countryside Alliance, and state and county agencies to maintain and grow our farms. I suggest increasing local county procurement including for MCPS schools, senior nutrition programs, and other public institutions. Right now, it appears there are roadblocks, these need to be looked at. It may be possible to encourage our processing and distribution capacity, possibly by working with farmers to create a farmers' cooperative, as is common throughout the country.