

Montgomery County 2026 Candidate Questionnaire



Personal Information:

Name Rocky Whitesell

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

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

The best way to learn about the campaign is the website: Rockywhitesell.com.

Feel free to reach out by phone or email with any questions not answered there.



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 consise.

(pictured above: One Acre Farm)

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

I am a renter who first moved to Montgomery County in 2014 to work as an intern at NIH during college, growing up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Since then I have worked primarily in the science world, first in metagenomics and biochemistry, lately in policy at NIH's Office of Research Services. I decided to run because I felt that the council was not doing nearly enough to address the increasing homelessness crisis in our county.

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?

Something I have heard over and over out doorknocking is that nearly everyone recognizes there is a housing crisis, but what little housing we have allowed in the county has been incredibly unaffordable, it has encroached on spaces and sites the community wanted to protect, and the public engagement has

indeed felt meaningless.

I want to see more affordable housing be built, but I believe that the best way to achieve that is to make each and every neighborhood feel it has a stake in this, that their concerns are being heard, and that the process by which we decide where and what changes is a representative one. If we do that, instead of dealing with years of setbacks to achieve something that pleases no one, we could proceed more quickly and arrive at something better.

One idea to help with this I would like to propose on the council is the use of sortition during community planning and project proposals. The basic idea is to randomly select members of communities to participate in planning sessions, give supports so that working people or those who struggle to get out can still attend, and clearly set out how overall decisions will affect outcomes.

I would also be open to the idea of a People's Counsel, especially if structured in a way that gave the wider community input. The key thing however is that we need to make sure we also push forward residents' land use ideas, not just hold some back.

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, certainly. The biggest issue is fragmentation of purpose and of the picture they are seeing, and it manifests in many ways. For instance, planning for schools seems to be poorly coordinated with planning for development of new housing, and this forms the crux of much of the current school boundary fights. These are not separate issues, they are intimately connected, and so the planning around them has got to be seamless.

The first perhaps most important step is to make sure that all local government agencies involved in planning have as free and clear access to each others data as possible, and moreover that they are using it. This is not something the council can necessarily push through unilaterally, but rather in coordination with Annapolis because some of the authority runs through the state, especially where MCPS is concerned. So I would push for county controlled elements to more explicitly be open to one another, and make an effort in the statehouse to achieve that more broadly.



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?

I've worked extensively in the past on water sampling both as a rural health department worker, and as a metagenomicist testing the creeks and rivers around this region for contaminants, including the Potomac post septic spill quite recently. Suffice it to say that these closely related issues are very near and dear to my heart.

With regards to the Dickerson AI data center proposal in particular, I strongly suspect they will try to use the previous thermal plant water intake right of way and a conventional evaporative cooling system, which I believe would damage the Potomac badly. For all such datacenters, I do not believe that there is any strong reason they should be sited in our county. Previous zoning allowing data centers was based around the idea of telecomms, which are critical infrastructure, not massive installations for AI usage as currently. So, to the degree possible I would move on the council to restrict their construction here, and where already permitted as at Dickerson I would move to ensure they adhere to the highest standards we possibly can for environmental protection, energy usage, and minimization of impact on residents.

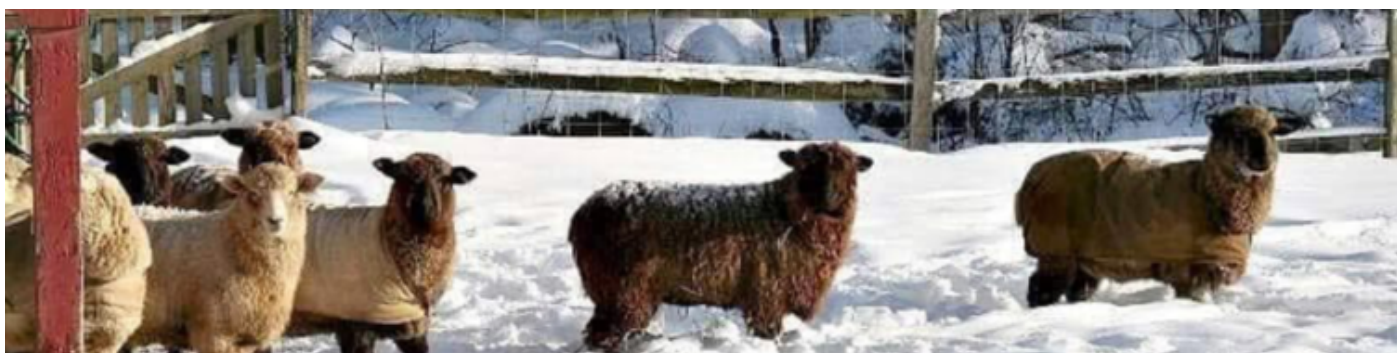
Beyond this, I will also support county efforts to identify and eliminate sources of contamination of the aquifer and open waters around the county. Much of this relates to our aging sewer and in rural areas septic infrastructure. Dealing with these before disasters strike is far cheaper than cleaning up when it does.

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?

I believe that the Ag Reserve helps with climate change in two ways. First, it acts to prevent greater suburban sprawl, with its attendant increase in commuting and road usage. However, this role crucially requires that we allow sufficient amounts of urban density closer in to transit to compensate, which frankly we have not been and must address. Second, the Ag Reserve is a classic carbon sink, much like any area with large amounts of plants.

I am certainly in favor of making more funds available wherever we can to address climate change. I think right now, in the budget crisis we find ourselves in, there are still opportunities nonetheless to support things like renewable energy with the use of carefully managed credit so long as investments are chosen which can pay back over time.

I definitely believe that data centers must pay their way on any expansion of the electric grid, they must make use of renewable and clean sources of electricity, and yes such a review is warranted.



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)

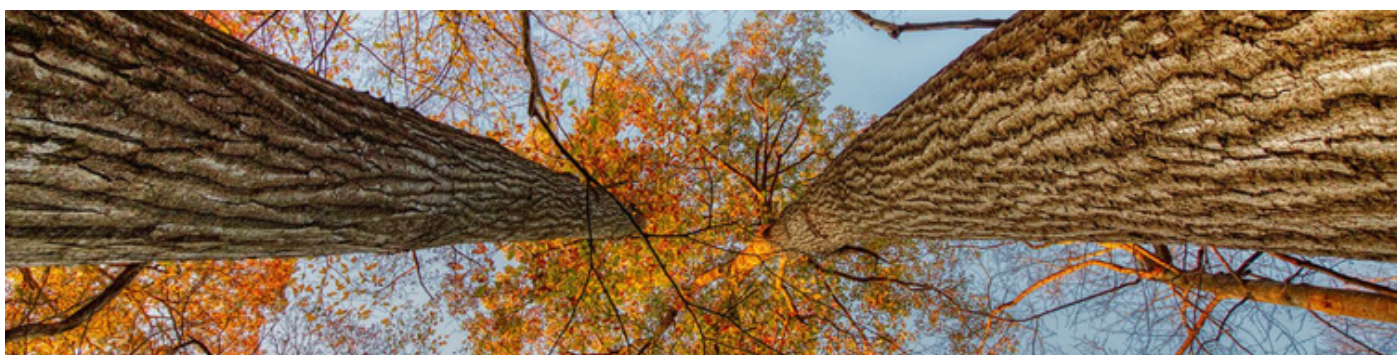
Yes. I would like to see a phased closure, while we scale up more advanced recycling step by step as funds become available.

With current technology, the end of the garbage stream is always going to be either landfill or incineration, neither of which are ideal. If we start diverting off the easiest streams of recycling first, we can keep the initial investment manageable, and set the stage for future increases in diversion. I think if we do it all at once we will just end up with everything going to landfills indefinitely, which isn't clear to me to be better for the global environment, and does come with a cost for the communities near to which it is sited as well. I think it is not fair to simply shift our own problems onto communities in other counties or Virginia.

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 favor their construction in our county, and to the degree to which I cannot prevent it I would favor stringent standards as I alluded to before.

They should not use open loop cooling (for example Potomac River intakes). They should be required to pay the full cost of any electrical grid upgrades their additional load makes necessary. They should not be allowed to use fossil fuels for power, it should be entirely renewable. If any data centers are constructed at all they should support high tariffs which go substantially towards paying for things that help average residents.



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 believe that trees are the great overlooked reason why neighborhoods feel safe, cohesive, and welcoming. I am strongly pro-housing, but at the same time I believe we need to preserve and increase the amount of forested areas in our county, and I believe we can make more housing that accommodates this. It is more costly to build densely in ways that preserve particularly older taller trees, but it can be done and experience shows that it is absolutely worth it.

I will not vote for any plan that reduces the amount of wild areas set aside in our county, that encroaches on parkland or forest even in urban areas, and I look to strengthen our standards for forest coverage where we can. I would like to strengthen county programs which make seedlings and trees available to residents. Wherever the opportunity presents itself for our county to expand our parks and acreage set aside for wild lands I will pursue that.

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

I strongly oppose using synthetic turf because the evidence suggests it may be harmful to human health and the environment. I know it is tough for schools in particular to get as much athletic use out of natural turf, but I don't believe the risk is worth it.



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)

I think the best path forward is through higher value specialty crops and encouraging more local sales of produce. A large amount of county farming remains higher volume crops like soy and corn, which while certainly important, are naturally going to be integrated more with the countrywide agricultural system. So on the council I'd look for ways to structure county policy and incentives towards smaller farming operations that can do a wider variety of produce.