

Montgomery County 2026 Candidate Questionnaire



Personal Information:

Name

Van Free

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2026 Election?

Montgomery 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. 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 lifelong public servant who spent 15 years as a Montgomery County Firefighter/EMT, helping residents in moments of crisis. I am also a small business owner, giving me firsthand experience with the challenges of running a business and supporting local jobs. I am raising a blended family with deep roots in this community, and I am running for County Council to bring practical leadership, transparency, and common sense solutions to local government.

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?

Montgomery County needs to make decisions in a more open and accessible way, especially when it comes to land use. Too many residents feel like decisions are made before they have a real opportunity to weigh in. I would push for earlier notice, clearer communication, and more opportunities for meaningful

input both in person and online.

I would grade current public engagement as inconsistent. There are some strong efforts, but they are not reaching enough people or building trust.

I support re-establishing the Office of the People's Counsel so residents have an independent voice in complex land use and development decisions.

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, coordination can be improved. Too often, agencies work in silos, which creates confusion and delays.

I would support regular joint work sessions between the Council, the Executive Branch, and the Planning Board on major issues like land use, infrastructure, and environmental policy. I also believe we need stronger alignment with state agencies so that transportation, environmental, and growth policies are working together instead of at odds. Better coordination will lead to more consistent and effective decisions.



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 groundwater and the Potomac River must be a priority. I support stronger safeguards against contamination, expanded monitoring of well water, and more support for farmers and rural residents to implement best practices.

We also need to plan now for a future where water is more limited. That means investing in conservation, encouraging efficient technologies, and carefully evaluating high use industries like data centers. I would prioritize regional cooperation, infrastructure improvements, and policies that balance growth with long term sustainability.

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 plays a major role in addressing climate change. It preserves open space, supports carbon storage, and reduces development pressure.

I support expanding programs that help farmers adopt climate smart practices, including improving soil health and using renewable energy where appropriate. We should also review how we structure energy taxes so that high use industries contribute fairly, with those funds reinvested into climate resilience and

conservation efforts.



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)

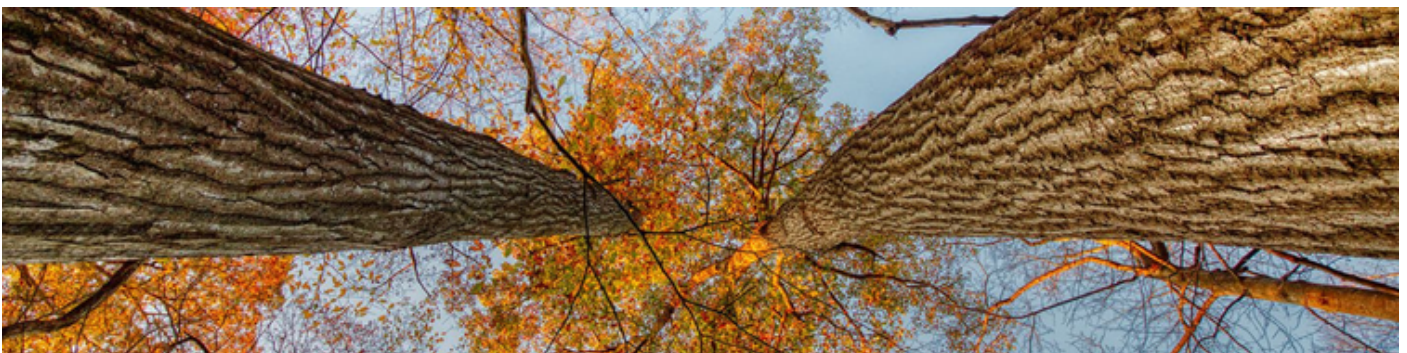
I support a responsible transition away from the incinerator, but it must be done carefully to maintain reliability and control costs.

That means building a stronger waste system first by expanding recycling, composting, and waste reduction. The goal should be a cleaner and more sustainable approach that residents can depend on.

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?

Data centers can bring economic benefits, but they also place significant demands on water, energy, and land.

If they are considered, they must be carefully located and subject to strict standards, including environmental protections and infrastructure capacity requirements. I do not believe we yet have enough information, especially on long term water and energy impacts, and I support a cautious and data driven approach before moving forward.



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)

Protecting forests is critical for clean air, water quality, and climate resilience. I support strengthening conservation laws, improving enforcement, and expanding reforestation efforts.

We also need a stronger strategy to control invasive species, including funding removal programs and giving property owners the tools and information they need to help protect native ecosystems.

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

This issue requires balancing recreation needs with environmental and health concerns. I support prioritizing natural grass fields where possible and ensuring they are properly maintained.

When synthetic turf is considered, decisions should be based on clear data about environmental impact, heat, and health concerns, with full transparency for the community.



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)

We need to make it easier for farmers to succeed. That means addressing the rising cost of land, supporting stable leasing, and helping new and diverse farmers get started.

I support expanding access to markets, investing in infrastructure like processing and distribution, and providing technical and financial support for new operations. A strong local agriculture sector strengthens our economy, improves resilience, and preserves the character of Montgomery County.