



Montgomery County 2022 Candidate Questionnaire - Vicki Vergagni

Personal Information:

Name Vicki Vergagni

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2022 Election? County Council District 6

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

Email me: vickivergagni@gmail.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?

The Ag Reserve is the physical embodiment of a nationally acclaimed land use policy. Located in northwest Montgomery County, it is composed of land that has been set aside for small farms and the rural lifestyle. It is a best practices approach to land use and a model for other jurisdictions.

The Ag Reserve's diversity of agricultural undertakings is environmentally important. In addition to its farms providing local farm-to-table produce that can be self-picked from spring to fall, it is home to wineries and breweries....and farm animals.

There are real basic reasons to protect farm lands: first and foremost, FOOD! Farming also builds food-related businesses (e.g., processing, distribution, consumption and disposal), is a source of jobs, and builds main street businesses. And farming builds character – learning, doing, earning and living. Farming is a lifestyle – caring for and living in concert with the land.

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

My vision for the Ag Reserve runs parallel to that of the Amish and Mennonite working family farms I have visited – only modernized. As a youngster growing up in a small town in Iowa, I visited my cousins on their farm and helped with various chores: collecting eggs, milking cows (while simultaneously feeding the cats), and birthing piglets and lambs – but never wringing chicken necks. I also rode the lone donkey. And we helped prepare the tables laden with food for the harvest crews. These are memories of a lifetime.

My fond memories aside, I am a strong proponent of the family-owned and operated farm (as opposed to the ever-increasing monopoly of corporate farms). Farming is one of the most complex and difficult to manage enterprises in the world. Its chief executive officer usually is its chief operating officer as well. The hours are more erratic than those of a doctor, the odds riskier than those of a poker player. The subject matter that must be mastered ranges from accounting, animal husbandry, chemicals, and crop rotation to farm equipment, money management, weather — and everything in between.

My vision is primarily one of "educational tourism". In addition to farmers' markets and a limited number of special events, I would encourage the offering of "family farm camp" – for families or just

for kids – as well as other “cultural” offerings (e.g., water color painting, quilting, cooking). Farms also can be functional laboratories.

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

In my role as a community manager for a 15-acre property with only 5 acres of footprint, I have made it our community's business to focus on greening activities. Our community has invested more than \$200,000 in these activities that include:

- Installed 14 cisterns to date (with another 14 now on site to install) so we can capture and release rainwater according to anticipated weather pattern; currently using a new satellite technology that monitors the water in the cisterns, anticipates rainfall so that water is released to prepare for filling up again or gradually releases water during periods of drought;
 - Planted in excess of 200 native and exotic trees which are nature's greatest environmental asset since they eat carbon monoxide, prevent erosion, provide habitat for all kinds of wildlife, save energy by shading homes from sunlight and blocking northwest winds, and provide unending beauty of leaves, branch structure year-round.
 - Built conservation landscapes with native plants that address erosion of a property that drops 55 feet in less than three city blocks.
- These are just some of the approaches that I would entertain to preserve the water, forests and open spaces.

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

Due to the rare algae in it, Lake Okoboji (in Iowa) is one of the three blue-water lakes of the world, and due to the lake's popularity in the summertime as a vacation spot, the lake swelled the town's population ten-fold with visitors. (Yes, I did work for the Iowa Great Lakes Chamber of Commerce that brought tens of thousands of visitors to our shores each summer.)

Early in the 1900s, the City Council decided that it had to protect its greatest asset. Named after a small native American tribe, Lake Okoboji was one of the first bodies of water in the U.S. to have its “health” monitored continuously. This meant that infiltration from septic tanks for what were then vacation homes was closely monitored. Over the years (and now with the installation of a sewer system), the lake has maintained its same quality of purity as when the Lakeside Laboratory was first founded. This experience definitely taught me the value of environmental protection.

Some of the most important steps we can take is to capture and properly release rainwater, plant trees and other native plants to prevent erosion and increase wildlife habitat, and assure through ongoing monitoring that there are no sources of pollution entering our above-ground or underground streams.

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

The County needs to get serious about equity related to environmental justice. There are organizations that can conduct surveys through “air quality gathering posts” and other mechanisms to identify areas of need related to land and water as well. These issues must be remediated and continue to be monitored intermittently to assure the quality of our environment.

The County needs to get serious about inclusion related to incentives for environmental programming. “Commercial” entities that have limits equivalent to two years of payments into the Water Quality Protection Fund are not on a par with “residential” entities that have limits equivalent to 200 years of their payments into the Water Quality Protection Fund. The County also needs to use its bully pulpit to insist that the State of Maryland make it as easy for multi-family dwellings to participate in solar panel and electric vehicle projects as it does traditional family dwellings.

The Ag Reserve plays a critical role just by being what it is. That role can be expanded by employing in its homes, businesses and public spaces new technology as it emerges, so long as it does not interfere with the “farmland” image.

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

The County is great about identifying areas such as the dangers of opioid use and creating campaigns to get the message to the public. It could raise the profile for the Ag Reserve as well by:

- encouraging folks to visit and spend both time and money there;
- designing education programs (including Family Farm Camp);
- focus on the farm-to-table option;
- encouraging a limited number of special events at the wineries and breweries; and
- being a land use ambassador by bringing others from our shores and overseas to see what can be done.

We also must get the “city kids” away from their flat screens and back into nature. Otherwise, there will be minimal appreciation for nature in the long run. After all, it is nature that saves us day in and day out.

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 regional transportation priority is equitable access to transportation: individuals should have reliable means to get to where they want to go at an affordable price. In short, equitable access, mobility and choice.

With regard to M83, there is a serious integrity issue here for the County and the promise that it made to those who chose to purchase homes and locate businesses in the area that was to be served by M83. Tens of thousands of dollars were collected in impact taxes from those who purchased homes. In return, they have received nothing related to transportation. Sometimes we make mistakes, but we have an obligation to fulfill our obligations – and then find alternatives to address the negative impact of that to which we have committed.

Thus, I would support M83 – with modifications.

First of all, we might be able to do more with M83 by providing “less” with regard to car-centric options. The modifications should reflect the multi-modal options offered by various special interest groups. Here are a few thoughts.

- Instead of 6 lanes, 4 lanes? Skinnier?
- Can M83 be shorter?
- Add BRT?
- Add bike and pedestrian options?

While making the forementioned changes will add addition expense, the options of choice will be in place and it will not be necessary to re-engineer in 20 years. Hopefully we can build it right the first time. Will add money but choice options now not come back 20 years later and wide M83.

With regard to the additional Potomac bridge and outer beltway through the Ag Reserve and/or adjacent rural zones, I do not see a level of justification for either at this point that would persuade me to favor either or both of these options. We should not be building a massive highway if there is not one there now. Transit must be the centerpiece in such a circumstance. Since BRT most financially efficient and operationally effective way to deliver reliable transit, that would be a great starting point. Not only does it provide the least expensive option for the dollar, it is flexible, has dedicated lanes, and signal times can be managed as appropriate. Bicycle and pedestrian options can be a forethought instead of an afterthought.

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

recycling play?

The County provides little meaningful support (i.e., participatory education) to residents to manage solid waste. Their focus is primarily on enforcement related to waste or debris on the ground instead of reaching out neighborhood by neighborhood to train and support leaders who can create the needed change.

Some of the solutions to solid waste that the County has adopted make it absolutely unpleasant to eat carry-out food. For example, carry-out containers that allow food to soak into them and become difficult to manage are unappetizing. Solutions should work on both sides of the counter! And to spend as much time and money as we have on discouraging the use of plastic drinking straws is a phenomenal waste.

Although it reduces emissions from landfills and offsets the emissions associated with transporting and burning waste, incineration is not an acceptable approach in the long run. Not only does it contribute to air pollution, it releases particulate matter, metals, acid gases, oxides of nitrogen, sulfur, and other substances of unknown toxicity. This is an environmental justice issue, particularly since it is a threat to public health and the environment, and it most typically impacts populations of lower socio-economic levels.

Composting is a very hopeful option. Montgomery County Parks recently had an incredible speaker who showed program attendees how to create and operate community gardens in urban/suburban areas. (Children actually learned that food does not come out of a can!) Collecting food scraps is another option that represents a win for all involved. And then there are opportunities for individuals to create and operate mulch operations that take advantage of food waste. These types of efforts are particularly helpful since they are "micro" in size and could be "neighborhood-based" which means that all County residents interested in pursuing any of the options would have the opportunity to seek a job or volunteer opportunity within walking distance of home.

Recycling is a huge hope for the future – if we make it efficient and effective. As a condominium community manager, I see that the small containers for recycling take up an inordinate amount of room in a unit because three containers are required (trash, paper, commingle); thus, many of our residents do not separate items. If a family does use those containers, they have to be emptied frequently at a collection site – which is another chore. And then the County requires that not a single item overflow the collection containers (even during the pandemic when everyone was home and using everything every day in their homes), and that no items could be on the ground. And if that happened, out comes the citation book at \$500 a crack – as if a community has the ability to monitor the collections sites 24/7, including items left on private property by outsiders.

Recycling needs to be made easy with the County taking a lead role with regard to monitoring dumpsters, paper totes and commingle totes. If the County reached out to those responsible for improperly disposing of items with first a warning and then progressively larger "tickets," progress could be made.

The County also needs to set up some type of weekly pick-up service so that furniture, electronics, clothing and bedding, and other larger/more voluminous items can be taken to recycling sites a specific day of the week for each area. This service should include multi-family homes as well as traditional ones.

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

To produce this document that required extensive public and professional input during COVID was unwise. Unfortunately, public input was disparate with regard to the various socio-economic groups that will be impacted by this overarching public policy. Further, there was no significant input from professionals in the public and private sectors who have significant knowledge and experience related

to affordable owned housing in particular. The severity of the document's flaws mandates that it be sent back to the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission for further study. The following are examples of serious issues that have received inadequate attention:

- There seems to be no differentiation between total housing units needed to address population growth and the percentage of additional building permits needed for "affordable" and "attainable" housing.* (See Figure 47.) Note: "Attainable" is not adequately defined, especially with regard to how it differs from "affordable".
- There is no attempt to identify the kinds of housing permits granted/ needed. A permit to build a condominium with 300 units is seemingly treated the same as a permit to build a single-family unit. (See Figure 59.) This is especially troubling given the statement in Thrive Montgomery 2050 that "by 2045, people of color are forecast to make up 73 percent of the county's population with a significant percentage earning less than \$50,000 a year".
- The additional permits needed as shown in Figure 47 seem low compared to the prognostications of the Urban Institute in its most recent report that looked at regional needs.
- When addressing the disparity between racial and ethnic disparities, the emphasis is on single-family housing and the number of new units that are "over-housed". (See Figures 53 & 55.)
- The report concludes that half of the new dwellings needed will have to be rentals and one-quarter to be individually-owned units in multi-family buildings, including condominiums. There was no attempt to look at the connection between viability and the number of condominium units. Statistics generated by the Montgomery County Distressed Communities Task Force have shown that any structure under 50 units will have serious issues to be financially sustainable. One wonders, therefore, what rationale underlies the statement that "... an increase in the availability of smaller, less expensive housing..." is desirable. Thus, amending zoning laws to allow a multi-family building with fewer than ten units to be built on a lot in Chevy Chase will not address the affordable housing issue. Moreover, units in Chevy Chase will sell at market rates, even in multi-family structures, which won't be deemed affordable – or even attainable - in anyone's lexicon.
- In the past, the County has relied on private developers to add to the housing stock by allowing them to decide on the type of housing to be built. As a result, newly built units with descriptors of "luxury" this-and-that have catered almost exclusively to those in the higher-income range. Thrive Montgomery 2050 changes this approach only at the margin by suggesting "financial incentives such as payment in lieu of taxes to boost housing production for market rate and affordable housing..." Seemingly, there has been no attempt to significantly involve local government in the process as does the Miami Affordable Housing Master Plan. Miami's approach calls for the creation of the Miami Affordable Housing Finance Corporation, an independent city development organization that will oversee the city's Housing Innovation Fund comprised of \$85-million of City Forever bonds that will be used to leverage, over ten years, a pool of \$1-billion in state and Federal incentives and tax credits. The balance of funding will be provided via private financing, including low-interest loans from area banks, real estate investment trust funding, Opportunity Zone funds, shared equity investment programs, Florida Housing Finance and Economic Development loans, grants, and philanthropic donations.
- There appears to have been no attempt to involve institutions that have insight into and a significant record of success addressing affordable housing issues (e.g., Enterprise, Brookings, Urban Institute) as illustrated by the following articles and white papers.
- Lessons from the financial crisis: the central importance of a sustainable, affordable and inclusive housing market. (Brookings)
- Proven local strategies for expanding the supply of affordable homes and addressing cost challenges. (Enterprise)

- Financing and development: capital on a mission. (Enterprise)

I believe it is incumbent that

- the Council provide specific instruction on what needs further study and attention; and that
- the Planning Commission be instructed to include representatives of institutions with specialized knowledge that will make this a more comprehensive tool that government can use to make changes that will support more creative and inclusive planning by the public and private sectors.

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?

There is always room for improvement in this regard. I think that the greatest challenge lies within the area of "collaboration". Having served as

- a Commissioner and Vice Chair of Montgomery County's Commission on Common Ownership Communities,
- the Co-Chair of the County's Distressed Communities Task Force,
- the lead volunteer on the application of condominiums for COVID relief monies, and
- the lead volunteer on the application of residents of master-metered condominiums for the reimbursement of utilities,

I saw how one's efforts can get buried in bureaucracies with workers who do not understand the logistical environment of those they are to serve.

For example, after spending countless hours bringing the financial plight related to delinquent assessments of condominium associations during COVID to the attention of County officials, a workable process that our committee had designed was re-designed by government folks without consulting with those of us who had key knowledge – and condominiums were given only two weeks to apply for funding while in the midst of doing a mandatory report for the same agency that was offering the funding. Although an extra week for applying ultimately was added, the \$2 million of funding that had been set aside was awarded as follows: \$50K to the DC consulting firm that oversaw the promotion of the program to condominium associations and the evaluation of 9 applications that resulted in awards of \$35K. The rest of the money was re-purposed to provide food while condominium associations that were in need remained upside down.

A second example involved affordable condominiums in which working class families live and that are master-metered for utilities that have been left out of receiving financial support for electricity, gas and water/sewer because they do not have individual utility bills. After spending an inordinate amount of time with a State energy official, a State legislator, and several County energy program managers developing a workable application process and personally preparing the promotional brochure, the materials to reimburse for heat expenses were handed over to Washington Gas (and also PEPCO ????) personnel who had not a clue as to how to get the materials to those in need in master-metered condominium communities. In spite of outlining for these folks how to do that efficiently and effectively, they continued to drive around with piles of brochures in their vehicles and then attempted to deliver the materials door-to-door. If a person in financial need somehow got possession of one of the applications, the Montgomery County Office of Home Energy Programs promptly mis-processed the forms. Of the seven families in my community that should have received assistance, only two got through the process.

The result of this type of disenfranchisement after working tirelessly as a volunteer to see your work product go up in flames by a well-meaning paid government employee who is lacking in knowledge and/or supervision is beyond disheartening. It turns off a very valuable resource that government does not have, but needs, to assure success.

The solution is simple. Be respectful of volunteers. All of a project's/program's stakeholders should be involved from start to finish to assure that there are no glitches.