



Montgomery County 2022 Candidate Questionnaire - Gabe Albornoz

Personal Information:

Name Gabe Albornoz

What Office Are You Seeking in the 2022 Election? Montgomery County Council At-Large

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

You can visit my website at www.gabealbornoz.com or email my campaign at gabe@gabealbornoz.com. My social media handles on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are @GabeAlbornoz1.

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 one of the most important ways we preserve our farming heritage and Montgomery County's open spaces. It encompasses 93,000 acres of rural farmland that is protected from residential and commercial development, nearly one-third of the county, mostly on the north and west sides.

Not only does the Ag Reserve provide our community with fresh, wholesome, and unique foods, it teaches our residents and children about protecting the environment. While enhancing our overall air and water quality, it contributes to the quality of food in our homes and local restaurants. The more than 500 farms that make up the Ag Reserve contribute millions of dollars to Montgomery County's annual economy and is a source of many valuable jobs in our community.

Preserving the Ag Reserve and protecting it from commercial incursions and the pressures of development will always be a high priority for me.

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

It is vital that we protect this treasure by guarding against incursions from certain kinds of development that threaten The Ag Reserve's sustainability and core mission. We must protect against Zoning Text Amendments that threaten the agricultural nature of the reserve.

I believe the core mission of the Ag Reserve must be of first importance as we shape the County's future land-use policies. We should encourage programs that advance this mission, such as agricultural incubators, small farmer training, and new and innovative programs that will expand farming opportunities and preserve farmland.

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

Protecting our open spaces and watersheds is important to safeguarding our drinking water and preserving our natural environment. We must limit our impervious surfaces and use green infrastructure to direct the flow of rainwater. We must be diligent in restoring eroded stream valleys and ensure that new development is environmentally sensitive.

One of the County's biggest natural-resource management challenges is managing the effects of storms and floods. County is experiencing a crisis with stormwater management. This trend has meant more frequent violent weather events like the flash flooding that occurred in July 2019, when the D.C. region received a month's worth of rain in a single day. It caused streams to rise 10 feet in less than an hour, inundated vehicles, businesses, and roads, as well as closed the Metrorail system. The past decade has also been the hottest 10-year period in the region's recorded history.

I believe there needs to be an assessment of the stormwater challenges we are currently facing and how adding additional impervious surface will affect us. Out of eleven of the projects in the proposed FY23 Capital Improvements Program and Capital Budget related to the conservation of natural resources, ten directly concern flood control, drain repairs, or the repair of water management facilities. We know that climate change is partly responsible for these challenges, and that we must act proactively to address them.

Tree preservation is also critical to keep the County healthy. Trees clean the air, cool our environment, and help clean our waterways. Currently, Montgomery County has strong tree preservation and restoration laws, but I would be willing to work with the Montgomery Countryside Alliance to enhance our efforts.

Maintaining our County's parkland and open spaces is crucial to ensuring that our children can learn about the benefits of preserving and enjoying nature. They are important to the well-being of all our residents as a place to play, reflect and re-energize.

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

It is imperative that we take steps to limit the amount of development and impervious surfaces in our most sensitive environmental areas, such as our stream valleys. We must also protect the reservoirs in our County, such as Little Seneca Lake.

We also must fulfill our Municipal Separate Stormwater Systems (MS4) permit requirements. To have a MS4 system licensed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, our stormwater system must include pollution prevention measures, treatment or removal techniques, monitoring, and the use of legal authority among other methods to ensure that stormwater that the ground is unable to absorb and is discharged into our lakes and streams has minimal pollutants. We must take appropriate measures to ensure our stormwater runoff is mitigated to the greatest extent possible and what is discharged into our water supply isn't contaminated.

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

I believe that we are currently facing a climate emergency and is an existential threat to our livelihoods and survival. The past several years, especially the past few months, have been extremely challenging for families and communities across the country, especially those who sustain their livelihoods on the Agricultural Reserve. For decades, local farmers have had to adjust to the changes in our environment in order to maintain an abundant local food source, preserve food security among our most vulnerable populations, and ensure financial stability of our local economy. Their hands-on experience and lessons learned makes the agricultural reserve a key partner to help lead the County to curb the effects of climate change.

During my tenure on the County Council, I have supported a wide range of bills that address the environmental impacts on public health, animals and wildlife, implementing a local transit and County electric vehicle fleet, limiting County greenhouse gas emissions, solid waste and stormwater management and implement clean energy measures. Our work as a collective body has helped create and implement programs and initiatives that will help meet our climatic goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2035.

However, I believe that we must go further than this and implement a climate assessment of future Council bills, master plans and zoning text amendments in order to review the impact our actions will have on the environment and invest in initiatives and public-private partnerships that will safeguard our planet, public health, food sustainability, housing, transit, and ecosystem. I am proud to have co-sponsored Bill 3-22 with Councilmember Hucker and look forward to its passage before the August recess.

As these tragic and unexpected events become more frequent, I support legislative and budgetary action that invest in measures to mitigate the effects of climate change on County residents, local communities, vegetation and food security, our wildlife and endangered species. We owe it to the families who have lost so much as a result of climate change and to protect future generations from the dangerous effects of global warming.

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

We can work with our local schools and Montgomery College to teach farming as a profession, and how to grow a successful farm-to-table business. We can also encourage leasing of farmland so that residents who are interested in farming can have the opportunity to practice agriculture that they might not otherwise have if they have to purchase land outright. Additionally, we can find ways to encourage our local restaurants to buy local farm products so that the produce from our rural communities is sustainable and profitable.

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?

I do not support M83 or the Second Crossing. M83 would be costly and not produce a sufficient return on investment. There are other projects that would have a greater impact. Transit must be our highest priority if we are going to maximize the County's potential for livable, walkable communities that will attract businesses and residents alike. This includes a dedicated funding source for the Metro and a goal of extending the Red line to Germantown.

More companies and people are coming to realize the benefit of living near transit hubs. Not only does it make their commutes more convenient and affordable, but transit-oriented communities typically have many nearby amenities that add to a high quality of life. Also, transit is crucial for those who struggle economically. The ability to get to work in a comfortable, affordable way promotes economic fairness. Easy access to transit also facilitates the quality of life of elderly residents who might otherwise struggle to access amenities.

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

I am proud to live in a County that has a 70% recycling goal. I support the plan to update our Material Recycling Center, which is now over 30 years old and has to export 40-45% of the waste it receives, to increase commingled processing capacity to 200-240 tons per day. Our next move is to explore recycling food waste, which we know will require significant public education on not only why it is a good idea, but how to do it. Ultimately, we should aim to reduce our reliance on the waste-to-energy facility in Dickerson.

I also would like to establish a robust composting initiative in Montgomery County. Prior to the pandemic, I visited a friend in Toronto and was immensely impressed with their composting program. I would like to start a composting initiative through MCPS and then expand it to other parts of the County.

Moving to a zero-waste policy is a laudable ambition, but that road to get there has many challenges. Adopting such a goal will require a rigorous combination of public education, aggressive recycling pricing, and forging public-private partnerships. I would like to explore this as a goal and look forward to working closely with the environmental organizations to achieve it.

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

I support many of the principles in Thrive. Our County clearly needs to improve our mass-transit, bicycling, and pedestrian infrastructure and create transportation alternative to cars. We should focus on creating street grids in our growth centers to promote walkable communities. It is imperative that we get this master plan right, as this document will help shape growth and development here for the next 30 years.

The Council put Thrive on hold to allow for a Racial Equity and Social Justice review. At my request, our Racial Equity team has just begun its review and I am looking forward to seeing the result, which should be completed by September. I want to ensure that whatever path we take will lead to more equitable housing choices.

I also feel that the public outreach by the Planning Board fell short, and have asked the five regional center Citizen's Advisory Committees to hold listening sessions on the plan. In addition to this, the Racial Equity consultants will also be conducting more outreach to our communities of color so that we can ensure that Thrive doesn't neglect to progress racial and economic equity and affordable housing.

Specifically, I am concerned that Thrive falls short on two critical issues: the environment and affordable housing. First, while the plan calls for an increase in the supply of housing and housing types throughout the County, it does not also provide guidance on balancing this increase with the accompanying expansion of impervious surfaces, which are detrimental to our environment. Second, the plan needs to address the potential for significant gentrification of areas where the County has existing affordable housing. The final version of Thrive needs to be updated to reflect these two concerns.

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?

Yes. During my term as Council President, I frequently collaborated with our state and federal lawmakers on legislative priorities. For instance, I introduced legislation in January of last year that regulated ghost guns to the maximum extent possible under state legal limits at the time, well before there was the current level of awareness of this problem at the state and national levels. After my bill passed here in the County, I worked with my state partners to push legislation through the General Assembly to ban ghost guns across the state. This is a prime example of how local and higher-level politics can and should interact to create effective laws that increase the common good.

It is imperative that all the different levels of government work closely together to achieve shared goals. I have worked in the business and non-profit sectors, and the executive and legislative branches of the Montgomery County government. Throughout my time as a legislator, I have made bridge-building a cornerstone of my career. I will continue that effort.