



April 6, 2021

Montgomery County Council President  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, MD 20850

## **MONTGOMERY COUNTY FOOD COUNCIL TESTIMONY: COUNTY COUNCIL FY22 BUDGET**

On behalf of the Montgomery County Food Council, I would like to thank Council President Huckler and the County Council Members for considering community perspectives in the County Council annual budgetary approval process.

The Food Council urges the County Council to maintain the significant progress of the County's COVID-19 Food Security Response Strategy by allocating sufficient funding to the many critical food system-related organizations in Montgomery County, including the Food Council, and to support the continued work of the COVID-19 Food Security Task Force. Specifically, we recommend that County Council allocate funds to bolster existing food security programs and initiatives, to expand food systems focused staffing and research within County government, to foster equitable access to local food and beverage production and agriculture opportunities, to enhance local composting infrastructure and food system sustainability, and to support the ongoing efforts of the not-for-profit sector.

The Food Council stands ready and eager to continue serving in a leadership capacity for our County, as we have done over the past year, by providing coordination oversight to the COVID-19 Food Security Task Force, managing various grants processes, offering relationship building opportunities and educational resources to the 100+ active food assistance organizations on a biweekly basis, supporting Service Consolidation Hubs to facilitate regional partnership building, and convening more than 2,000 community members and stakeholders through regular meetings, trainings, and events. Continued support from County Council will be integral to build upon this work in 2021.

### **Support for New and Existing Food Security Programs**

Since 2017, the County has continually expanded investments in food security initiatives to allow more residents to have access to safe, sufficient, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, this funding has been critical to allow providers to expand and address gaps in services in a data-driven way, to establish partnerships in an inclusive community of practice, and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their programs. It has also supported initiatives such as the County Farm to Food Bank program, which distributed close to 60,000 pounds of locally grown produce to 24 food assistance provider organizations throughout 2020, and the Resident and Community Food Production Gardening Grant Program, which allocated funding to 12 partners who are bolstering the local food supply and fostering food sovereignty through gardening education, resource distribution, and the establishment of local victory gardens. It is essential that funding for current food security programs is sustained, alongside support for new and innovative strategies. The success of the COVID-19 response efforts has also underscored the need for a stable, well-resourced public-private partnership to steward sector-specific County initiatives, including grantmaking, data



collection, and community engagement and coordination, all of which will be essential beyond the pandemic as we establish recovery and resilience plans for our local food system.

As the impacts of the pandemic have progressed in our community, we've witnessed a sustained increase in the number of County residents seeking food assistance, nearly three to five times the demand for services pre-COVID. Consequently, food assistance providers and food security partner organizations remain in need of increased funding to provide this critical support to our communities during this emergency. The County government's continued support will be crucial in addressing ongoing food security challenges, as we anticipate that the number of residents experiencing food insecurity will remain elevated for months to come.

In addition to supporting organizations that provide direct food assistance to residents, we also recommend that the County Council invest in benefits outreach programs, including Maryland Market Money, which was able to simultaneously offer economic opportunities to local farmers and food businesses selling at County farmers markets while offering a dignified, independent shopping experience to residents utilizing SNAP and WIC benefits. Programs such as these, that foster greater access to nutritious and affordable culturally appropriate foods, should continue to be supported and expanded in an effort to build equity in our local food system and keep dollars in our local economy.

### **Food Systems Focused Staff Support within County Government**

Amongst the lessons learned from the emergency response to the pandemic crisis, is the need for dedicated County staffing for food systems planning, as has been implemented in neighboring jurisdictions like Baltimore City and Washington, DC. It is absolutely critical that the County prioritize the establishment of a centralized, food systems focused staffing within County government. These County employees would coordinate the efforts of County agencies internally, and work with community-based nonprofits such as the Food Council, to establish and implement the County's priorities and ensure that food systems issues such as food security, food production, sustainability, and economic opportunity, are addressed cohesively. Additionally, funding to support data collection and analysis, and County staffing to conduct data mapping and research, will help to identify gaps in service, expand SNAP access points, and inform all food security programs. This has already been indicated as a priority in the preliminary Thrive 2050 draft plans. Taking these steps will be crucial in order to maximize participation in benefits programs, and to create alternative pathways towards addressing and ending the hunger crisis in our community.

### **Investment in the Local Food and Beverage and Agricultural Community**

Local food and beverage businesses and farms have pivoted right alongside food assistance organizations to support the growing need in our community. Dozens of MoCo Made food and beverage businesses have received relief funds through the Restaurant & Retail Relief Grant, but we have also seen a handful of MoCo Made partners close down their operations entirely due to the financial challenges of COVID-19. Continued funding to support local small businesses throughout the economic recovery period is necessary to help businesses bounce back and continue serving the community. The Food Council's Licensing Subcommittee has identified recommendations to reduce the financial and logistical barriers that food entrepreneurs and businesses face in meeting licensing and regulatory requirements. Implementing these strategies and establishing more business-friendly County processes will serve to bolster economic growth and stability beyond COVID-19.

Additionally, support for the agricultural community must continue in FY22 if we hope to restore our thriving local economy. As of April 2nd, 22 food producing farms have committed to providing produce, meat, or eggs to the



innovative Farm to Food Bank program in 2021. However, the County must ensure that these farmers, who serve as the cornerstone of our local food system, have equitable access to the land, infrastructure, and resources that they need to keep their businesses afloat. The supply chain challenges caused by COVID-19 have further demonstrated the need for in-County infrastructure, such as a meat processing facility, cut-and-wash facility, and kitchen incubator, to ensure that we can effectively leverage the local food supply in future crises and maintain our progress toward a robust, sustainable and equitable food economy.

### **Enhancing Food System Sustainability**

The recent passage of ZTA 20-04 has opened the door to expand on-farm composting, as a mechanism to bolster a decentralized network of food waste composting facilities that can help the County to reach its Aiming for Zero Waste Goals. We also applaud the inclusion of funding to support community-level and backyard composting initiatives in the County Executive's proposed budget. However, without the proper training, education, or long term land access, farmers, residents, and businesses will not be able to fully take advantage of these opportunities. Likewise, with the recent passage of ZTA 20-01, farmers will need training and resources to explore and implement innovative agrivoltaic farming and grazing strategies. Increased funding for the Office of Agriculture to have additional staff capacity to promote farmer training and land-lease or lease-to-own programs is critical to support the development of a more resilient local food system, just as funding for community partners that are supporting education and outreach related to food waste reduction and composting will be essential to promote a sustainable local food system.

### **Support for the Not-for-Profit Sector**

As the County finalizes the budget for FY 22, the essential role of strong nonprofits in the COVID-19 response efforts, and otherwise in our community, cannot be overlooked. The Food Council supports the recommendations within the County Executive's FY 22 Operating Budget to maintain the Community Grants and programs moved to base budget contracts, and maintain the recommended 1.5% increase for nonprofit contracts with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Additionally, as a member of Nonprofit Montgomery, we join our voices with other leaders in the not-for-profit sector to urge the County to add an additional 1.5% increase to nonprofit contracts in DHHS for a total increase of 3%, the minimum amount needed to keep up with cost increases and compensate staff fairly. Lastly, we encourage the County to provide a 3% increase for nonprofit base budget contracts in all other County Departments (including Recreation, DHCA, etc.), which have not typically received increases that would recognize the increased costs of doing business. This funding is critical to ensure a continuation of efforts within the nonprofit community to work in areas of the County where residents have been most impacted by the pandemic, by poverty, disability, racial inequities and other social determinants of health.

By investing in the Food Council and in our partner organizations and businesses, the County will invest in a more self sufficient local food system, maximizing the capacity of direct service provider programs, addressing hunger and financial barriers amongst County residents, and connecting federal and state resources to local efforts.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and for your leadership and support of a more resilient, sustainable, robust, and equitable food system in Montgomery County.

Sincerely,

  
Heather Bruskin

Executive Director, Montgomery County Food Council

