



Montgomery Housing Alliance County Executive Candidate Questionnaire

Montgomery Housing Alliance (MHA) is a coalition of organizations focused on increasing the rate of preservation and development of affordable housing in Montgomery County. Our members include non profit developers, organizations that serve people in need of affordable housing, and other groups who count affordable housing as one of their policy goals.

MHA has put together the following questionnaire to survey candidates for the office of County Executive on what they would do to address affordable housing in Montgomery County. We look forward to reading and hearing about your responses.

Please submit responses by July 1. MHA will publish all responses received online and share via social media. If you do not submit responses, the post will include a Did Not Respond statement. Please limit each response to 250 words.

Candidate's Name: Hans Riemer

1. Where does housing rank among your priorities for your administration?

RESPONSE

At the top. I am running for County Executive because I am concerned that our young people and retirees, our most vulnerable residents and our middle class, are getting priced out of Montgomery County due to our housing shortage. I know that our County needs leadership to tackle this problem with innovative solutions and true commitment. We have not had that. Our County Executive has opposed our regional housing strategy and opposed numerous implementations of that strategy here at the County level. By contrast, housing is a top priority for me and will be for my administration, just as it has been a top priority for me as a County Councilmember. I will ensure successful delivery of housing policy, inspections, financing, disposition of land, and other crucial operational issues, while using my political leadership to bring the community through challenging conversations about how to meet our housing needs through creative solutions in land-use policy.

2. What do you see as the top 3 major housing concerns for residents of Montgomery County?

RESPONSE

- 1. Creating enough housing to address our shortage and promote affordability, to protect vulnerable residents who get squeezed out from the shortage, so that young families can get a foothold here and empty nesters can retire comfortably, to choose a few examples*
- 2. Promoting long term affordability in parts of the County that will otherwise become very expensive over time, particularly near transit and job centers, through creative partnerships between the public and private or nonprofit sectors*
- 3. Providing housing opportunities for people who have challenging needs, such as those at risk of homelessness, behavioral health challenges, developmental disabilities, through partnerships*

Housing Initiative Fund

The Housing Initiative Fund (HIF) was established in 1988 to provide local dollars to support acquisition, development, and renovation of affordable housing. Currently, the only dedicated funding to the HIF is through recordation tax premiums (which support the County's rental assistance program), and loan repayments. Previously, the County Council passed a resolution calling for 2.5% of general fund revenue to be allocated to the HIF.

3. What level of funding do you envision for the Housing Initiative Fund to keep pace with the future needs of county residents? How do you plan to achieve this?

RESPONSE

As chair of the Council's PHED committee, I have lead the Council to adopt historic increases in our affordable housing funds, taking our HIF to over \$70 million per year, creating a \$100M production fund for HOC, creating a \$40M preservation fund with a goal of bringing that up to \$100M for the Purple Line corridor, and more. We should assess the 2.5% revenue strategy now as it may be within reach!

In order for Montgomery County to meet its approved housing targets (based on Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments estimates), we need to produce approximately 2,300 units per year until 2030. Further compounding the challenge: the Planning Department estimates that 11,000 units of naturally occurring affordable housing are at risk of being lost by 2030.

4. How will you measure your Administration's success in meeting housing targets? What baseline will you use to quantify progress?

RESPONSE

As you say, Montgomery County needs to create about 2,300 affordable units per year, which can only be created through affordable funding and requirements (HIF, HPF, MPDU). I fully embrace the COG goals -- working to meet our production goals, and measuring our progress on that basis. I will also measure success based on progress towards preserving naturally occurring affordable housing. Of particular interest to me is the Purple Line Corridor plan, which calls for preserving an additional 5-6,000 units there. I will achieve that plan. I will also expand the model to other areas of the County such as in transit walksheds near the Red Line. We'll create a combined dashboard to provide accountability and transparency for the plan.

5. What steps would you take to ensure Montgomery County is on track to meet targets?

RESPONSE

Key steps I will take to make housing more abundant and affordable:

- 1. Champion 40,000 new housing units by 2030, an increase of 10,000 over our trend line, to combat a housing shortage*
- 2. Allow duplexes more widely, especially near transit; and townhouses and small apartment buildings along our major roads*
- 3. Create \$100 million Purple Line Housing fund to buy and build affordable housing communities in the Purple Line Innovation Corridor*

4. *Create \$100 million Social Housing fund for the Housing Opportunities Commission to build social housing communities county wide*
5. *Ensure non-profit housing providers get adequate support including through tax incentives, grants and loans; taking the Housing Initiative Fund to \$100M annually*
6. *Help homeowners build accessory dwelling units by streamlining permits and providing low cost loans*
7. *Make bigger changes to our permit and development process, which Marc Elrich pledged to do and has not done*

Affordable and Equitable Home Ownership

In Montgomery County, as throughout the United States, a legacy of racially biased policies and practices like redlining, steering, and housing covenants, has resulted in a racial wealth gap and de facto segregation in many neighborhoods. For example, we face a 32% gap between the rate of white households who own their homes and Black and African American households who own their homes, and a 26% gap between Latinx households who own their homes.

6. What would you do to make homeownership more attainable?

RESPONSE

Our housing shortage and the high costs that it creates make purchasing a house more difficult for residents, especially people of color who are impacted by the lack of opportunity for generational wealth building. I believe that housing abundance is the real solution to the lack of affordability. In addition, there are many ways that the County can provide support for residents to become homeowners. For example, last year the Council supported my motion to add \$1 million in funding for down payment assistance programs. But this year the County Executive proposed reducing that fund by \$1 million. The Council, fortunately, agreed with my proposal to restore those funds that the Executive wanted to cut.

7. How would you approach closing the gap between white households who own their homes and households of color who own their homes?

RESPONSE

Big picture, housing needs to be more affordable so that people of color can more readily purchase a home here in Montgomery County; my housing agenda is intended to move us in that direction. Zooming in, we need to ensure our homeownership assistance programs are properly promoted and adequately funded. As noted above, this year I blocked the County Executive's plan to cut \$1 million from the fund that we have established to help residents through downpayment assistance. Now we have \$2 million per year for down payment assistance, which can be transformative over the long term in promoting homeowners and closing the gap between households of color and white households.

Zoning and Land Use

Over the past several years, Montgomery County has been going through a process to develop an updated general plan, Thrive 2050, which will serve as a blueprint for the County for the next 30 years.

8. How should housing affordability and equity goals be incorporated into an updated general plan?

RESPONSE

Housing affordability and equity is an important goal of Thrive 2050. Thrive is an approach that seeks to harmonize goals for smart growth or sustainability (rejection of sprawl) with housing

availability. The Council is presently working with a racial equity policy team to conduct additional community outreach about Thrive's goals with historically excluded groups, and to strengthen the equity agenda in the document. I look forward to finishing it.

9. How would you use land use and zoning tools to help address current and future housing affordability and demand?

RESPONSE

Vigorously! The cost of land is the most problematic factor in the cost of housing. The cost of land is why housing is so expensive in Montgomery County but so affordable in communities that are far away from job centers. Land use and zoning tools should recognize this trend and apply new solutions to promote affordability. Without those tools, Montgomery County will continue to become more and more exclusionary, undermining our progressive values. What good is it to want to be an inclusive community if the price of living in that community is so high that only affluent people can afford it? That is where we already are in many parts of the County. We need stronger action on housing and Marc Elrich will only continue to resist taking that action. He has already opposed the COG housing goals and opposed measures to reach those goals, such as lifting housing moratoriums, passing zoning changes, legalizing accessory dwelling units, and providing public land for housing, such as the Chevy Chase library.

Transparency and Accountability

10. What transparency and accountability measures would you implement with regard to progress toward meeting housing targets and spending (i.e. use of HIF funds?)

RESPONSE

Transparency in public resources available for housing providers is a critical policy strategy to increase our affordable housing production. That is why I was proud to introduce and pass the legislation allowing for an automatic property tax abatement (PILOT) for affordable projects -- enabling providers to have a concrete sense of what funds are available for certain projects and as a result better leverage public funds in their financing. I'll work with MHA to create a public dashboard for our housing goals and keep that front and center during our housing deliberations. I am concerned that DHCA is not successfully moving ahead with financing initiatives under Elrich's leadership.

Homelessness and Cost Burden

The 2022 Point-in-Time Count found 581 people experiencing homelessness in Montgomery County, a slight increase from 2021, after several consecutive years of decreases.

11. In what ways will you accelerate resources, services, and access to housing for those facing or at risk of homelessness today?

RESPONSE

I fully embrace our "Housing for All" strategic plan and will continue adding resources to that strategy year by year as we build capacity to end homelessness in Montgomery County. That is a coordinated strategy that relies on Housing First but of course also involves support that people need to remain housed and return to productive lives, such as behavioral health services and employment assistance.

12. In what ways will your approach take into consideration the disproportionate impact on persons of color facing homelessness?

RESPONSE

The disproportionality of homelessness among people of color and particularly African Americans is a vivid example of the destructive legacy of racial exclusion in our country. We must devote the resources to solving this problem, which is first and foremost about providing housing and second about providing services to people experiencing homelessness.

Montgomery County currently has over 20,000 households who pay more than half of their income toward rent. These households are severely cost burdened; every day they are forced to make impossible choices between paying rent and paying for other critical priorities like education, health care, and reliable transportation.

13. In addition to the responses provided above, would you propose any further ways to address the issue of cost burden (paying more than 30% of income toward housing) and severe cost burden (paying more than 50% of income toward housing) directly?

RESPONSE

A person's ability to afford housing is not just a matter of how high the cost of that housing might be; its a matter of what the income of the buyer or renter is. Severe housing cost burdens can also be ameliorated through initiatives that I have championed such as raising the County's match to the EITC, raising the minimum wage, reducing the cost of bus service, providing free pre-k, and affordable higher education. All of these initiatives can help offset the cost of housing here.

