

ETHICS BALLOT QUESTIONNAIRE

County Council Primary 2026

Name/District: Linfeng Chen/ District 4

Campaign Address/Phone/Email

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Educational History

PhD from University of Virginia

Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience

English/Chinese/German

HCPSS BOE At-Large Member (2022 - 2026)

Vice Chair, HCPSS Board of Education (2025) MABE
Federal Advocacy & Legislative Committees Longtime
Adult Leader for Cub, Boy, Girl Scouts Project Leader
of Chesapeake Bay Trust Grant Community Leader in
CAPA-HC and Chinese School

1. Why are you running for this office? Non-Incumbents, please describe how your campaign is viable.

I am running for this office because Howard County must recommit to what makes our community strong: prioritizing education, enhancing public safety, supporting residents in need, and strengthening our diverse community. Among these, restoring education as our top fiscal priority is my number one focus. The data are concerning. On the capital side, in 2006 the County invested \$71.2 million in HCPSS. In 2026, that investment is \$66.7 million, less than two decades ago. During that same period, the cost to build a new high school has increased from roughly \$34 million to about \$180 million today, more than five times higher. After twenty years of inflation, aging facilities, and growing deferred maintenance, we are effectively investing far less in our school infrastructure than we did a generation ago. This trajectory is not sustainable. The operating budget tells a similar story. HCPSS's share of the County's general fund

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has declined from a historic 53% to 46.2% this year. Each percentage point represents approximately \$25 million. That gap directly affects teacher pay, staffing levels, special education services, class sizes, student support, school safety, etc.

My campaign is highly viable and built on a proven record of success, service, and community trust. In 2022, I ran for and won a county-wide race for the Howard County Board of Education, earning support from voters across every part of the county. That victory demonstrated my ability to connect with residents, communicate effectively, and execute an effective, disciplined campaign. Over the past three years, voters have seen my service firsthand and making decisions grounded in data, facts, and careful analysis, while consistently putting students, families, and residents first. That record has established both credibility and name recognition county-wide. My campaign for county council D4 is powered by the Howard County Citizens' Election Fund by residents, for residents. To date, I have received over 200 small donations and nearly \$20,000 in qualifying contributions, demonstrating broad grassroots support. I am actively working to reach out to more voters and listen to their concerns and priorities.

The plan is in place. The path is clear. My approach is simple: work hard and work smart. With proven electoral success, growing grassroots momentum, and a disciplined, data-driven strategy, my campaign is well positioned to win and to govern effectively.

2. Non-Incumbents: What qualifications do you uniquely bring to hold this office? What experience do you have with the County Council? Have you ever testified before the County Council? What positions did you take?

I bring a unique combination of education leadership, community service, analytical problem-solving skills, and hands-on experience working directly with the Howard County Council. I currently serve as an elected at-large member of the Howard County Board of Education (2022–2026) and served as Vice Chair in 2025. In this role, I have focused on data-driven decision-making, long-term facility planning, and fiscal accountability. The position requires careful review of operating and capital budgets, meaningful engagement with community input, evaluation of competing priorities, and balancing limited resources always with student outcomes and taxpayer responsibility at the center.

Beyond the Board, I have served on multiple advisory and planning bodies, including the Social Studies Advisory Committee, Science Advisory Committee, and Calendar Planning Committees from 2014 to 2022. I have served as a judge for Elementary School Simulated Congressional Hearings in 2017 and from 2023 to 2025, reflecting my long-standing commitment to civic education.

My community involvement extends beyond education. I have volunteered with the Horizon Foundation, supported youth education initiatives, and held leadership roles in Scouting, giving me direct insight into the diverse needs of all residents across Howard County.

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I have extensive experience of working with the Howard County Council. I communicate regularly with Council members on education policy, capital planning, and budget matters, and I have testified before the County Council on multiple occasions at least annually. In my testimony, I have consistently advocated for: Increased and sustainable funding for HCPSS operating and capital budgets; Long-term, data-driven school facility planning; Aging-in-place initiatives to support seniors and long-term residents.

Together, this experience equips me to contribute immediately and effectively as a County Council member and bring practical, evidence-based leadership grounded in service to the community.

3. Are you using the Citizens Election Fund (CEF)? Why or why not?

Yes. I am using the Howard County Citizens' Election Fund because I believe local elections should be powered by residents, not special interests.

My campaign is funded by residents, for residents. So far, I have received over 200 small donations and nearly \$20,000 in qualifying contributions. Grateful for the support so far, our team will continue to push forward to earn the trust and backing of even more residents across the county.

4. If you are elected, what are your top priorities for 2026? Discuss at least three areas in need of change, under the purview of the County Council, and how you would address them.

If elected, my top priorities for 2026 will focus on responsible and transparent governance, fiscal discipline, and delivering real results for residents.

A. Restore and Increase Funding for Public Education

Education must remain Howard County's top fiscal priority. Our schools face challenges in teacher recruitment, class sizes, school deferred maintenance, and student support services. I will work to return the share of county revenue dedicated to HCPSS to pre-pandemic levels, using data-driven benchmarks to ensure accountability. By collaborating with the Board of Education, I will align operating and capital budgets with real needs to support students, teachers, and families.

B. Enhance Public Safety and Support Residents in Need

Safe communities are the foundation of a strong and vibrant county. We will support first responders with the resources they need while building trust through prevention programs, neighborhood engagement, and community partnerships. A safer community lowers the cost of living and creates the stability needed for stronger economic growth and development. At the same time, I will ensure the government supports residents facing hardship, including seniors, students, and families in need. Policies will promote aging in place, diverse housing, and economic opportunities while keeping living costs manageable without raising taxes.

C. Strengthen the Local Economy and Broaden the Tax Base

Howard County must diversify its revenue beyond income and property taxes. I will promote smart, sustainable economic development, attract and retain high-quality employers, tap into the talents and global connections of our immigrant communities, and foster small business growth. A broader tax base will provide stable, long-term funding for education, public safety, and essential services.

5. What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the current County Council? How have you demonstrated your ability to work with people who have diverse positions?

The County Council plays a critical role in balancing competing priorities, maintaining fiscal stability, and delivering essential services, and I respect the seriousness with which its members approach that responsibility. At the same time, there are areas where the Council can improve. Howard County is one of the most diverse counties in Maryland, yet that diversity is not always fully reflected at the decision-making table. When leadership lacks broad cultural, professional, immigrant, and international experience, opportunities for innovation can be missed and the needs of all residents may not be fully understood. To serve today's Howard County effectively, we need leadership that better reflects our community's diversity and brings a wider range of professional and global perspectives to policymaking. Unlike the seven-member Board of Education and one student member, where decisions require broader consensus, each vote on the five-member County Council carries significant weight, making it even more important that every voice at the table brings depth, balance, and real-world experience.

I have consistently demonstrated my ability to work effectively with people who hold diverse views. As an elected School Board member, I regularly collaborate with colleagues with differing priorities, philosophies, experiences, and constituencies. I approach these discussions by listening carefully, grounding decisions in data and facts, prioritizing transparency, and finding common ground focused on positive outcomes for students and the broader community.

I have also worked closely with County Council members, county agencies, educators, parents, seniors, and community organizations. Whether advocating for increased school funding, aging-in-place initiatives, or facility investments, I have engaged respectfully, incorporated feedback, and adjusted approaches to reach practical solutions.

My leadership is rooted in active listening and data-driven decision-making. As the saying goes, the people closest to the problem are closest to the solution. I believe the best solutions for Howard County come from understanding our community's diverse perspectives and grounding decisions in facts rather than assumptions. I will bring a collaborative approach to the County Council, one that fosters interdepartmental teamwork, prioritizes transparency, and maintains open, honest, and continuous dialogue with residents across the county.

6. What are your funding priorities for the County? What changes do you believe should be made compared to past budget decisions?

My funding priorities center on aligning the County's budget with its core responsibilities and long-term sustainability.

First, restore education as the County's top funding priority.

Howard County's public school system has been underfunded in recent years, impacting teacher recruitment and retention, classroom resources, and student support services. I believe the County should return the proportion of general fund revenues dedicated to HCPSS to at least pre-pandemic levels. Future budgets should use clear and transparent benchmarks so residents can see how our stated values translate into real investments.

Second, strengthen public safety and essential services.

The County must ensure adequate funding for police, fire, rescue, and emergency services, including staffing, facilities, and response capacity. Past budgets have too often deferred critical capital and operational needs. Going forward, investments should be guided by data such as response times, service demand, and community growth patterns.

Third, prioritize support for vulnerable residents while funding sustainably.

I support targeted investments in aging-in-place programs, senior services, and emergency and social service facilities. These programs improve quality of life and reduce long-term costs by preventing crises. Compared to past budgets, we should place greater emphasis on prevention, coordination, and outcomes rather than short-term fixes.

Finally, shift toward more sustainable fiscal planning.

Past budget decisions have relied too heavily on income and property taxes. I believe future budgets should pair responsible spending with efforts to broaden the tax base through smart economic development, so we can fund priorities without continually increasing the burden on residents. Overall, I would support budgets that are more transparent, data-driven, and aligned with the long-term needs of our community, especially education, public safety, and essential services.

As we look ahead, I believe future budget decisions can benefit from a stronger focus on prioritization, affordability, and long-term value. The County has made significant capital investments in recent years, and going forward we should ensure that major projects are carefully evaluated, cost-conscious, and aligned with our most urgent needs. Large commitments such as the new Circuit Courthouse and the Ellicott City Safe and Sound project are important public investments, and there may be opportunities to

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deliver them more efficiently or at lower costs, especially as residents face rising costs and fiscal pressures. At the same time, many students continue to learn in aging school buildings, highlighting the need to continually reassess how we balance capital priorities across the county. The proposed Lakefront Library is another area where a thoughtful reassessment could be helpful. Libraries play a vital role in our community, but in a tight fiscal environment, we should explore lower-cost alternatives that still deliver strong services such as upgrading the existing Central Branch Library or utilizing shared community spaces, including partnerships at locations like Columbia Mall. What matters most is access, programming, and community impact, not the appearance or location of a building.

In summary, I would support budgets that are transparent, data-driven, and fiscally responsible, with a clear emphasis on education, public safety, and essential services. My goal is to ensure that every dollar is spent where it delivers the greatest long-term value to residents while keeping Howard County affordable and sustainable for the future.

7. Do you feel the amount of planned residential growth in the County should be increased or decreased? Include details, such as, overall versus regional goals. Explain your reasons for your positions, and include any changes you believe should occur to APFO. Be sure to include your opinions about the major areas of recommendations by the 2025 APFO Review Committee.

Howard County should pursue balanced and well-managed residential growth, not growth for growth's sake. I do not support significantly increasing overall residential growth unless it is matched by timely investments in schools, transportation, public safety, and community infrastructure.

Overall vs. Regional Growth

Countywide, residential growth should be aligned with our infrastructure capacity and fiscal realities. Regionally, growth should be more targeted and strategic, concentrated in areas with existing or planned infrastructure, transit access, and services, while protecting established neighborhoods and environmentally sensitive areas from overdevelopment. The Gateway area presents a unique opportunity to take a different approach. As a large, evolving corridor, it can serve as a testbed for new planning ideas and zoning tools, allowing us to pilot innovative, mixed-use, and transit-oriented development models. By thoughtfully experimenting in appropriate areas like Gateway, we can accommodate growth, expand housing options, and strengthen the tax base without placing undue pressure on existing communities.

Unbalanced growth places significant pressure on schools, often resulting in frequent and disruptive boundary adjustments, worsens traffic congestion, and strains public safety and emergency services. We have seen situations where residential development moves faster than school construction or road improvements, creating long-term challenges for residents.

Position on APFO and the 2025 APFO Review Committee Recommendations

I appreciate the comprehensive work of the 2025 APFO Review Committee. Their effort to align growth with school capacity, infrastructure, and community needs is critical for a county experiencing both rapid development and high demand for housing, schools, and public services.

School Capacity

I do not support fee-based mitigation models, including the proposed School Over Capacity Utilization Payment (SOUP). While fees can generate funding for school facilities, they do not solve the underlying problem of unbalanced growth, residential development can still outpace school construction, leading to overcrowding, boundary adjustments, and strained services. Instead, I support growth sequencing and development pacing tied directly to school capacity, ensuring that new housing occurs only when schools have the space and resources to accommodate students.

Key priorities: Retain the housing allocation test to pace development; Use local rated capacity and enrollment projections to guide growth; Require infrastructure and school capacity to be in place before additional development is approved; Limit reliance on discretionary fees; instead, ensure residents' and taxpayers' money is directed efficiently toward actual school construction

Affordable and Senior Housing

I strongly support the Committee's effort to clarify affordable housing definitions and apply them consistently. Howard County's median income is an appropriate benchmark, and density bonuses for additional affordable units should remain targeted, equitable, and paired with proper planning for services and infrastructure. Affordable and senior housing should be encouraged, but development must still align with real capacity constraints, not just rely on financial offsets.

Transportation and Public Safety

I support modernizing the APFO roads test into a multimodal transportation test that incorporates pedestrian safety, ADA access, and Complete Streets principles. I also agree that high-density and senior developments should be evaluated for impacts on EMS and fire services, but mitigation should be achieved through service capacity planning rather than fees.

Recommended Changes

To improve APFO, I would emphasize: Directly linking growth to infrastructure capacity, not to fee payments; Ensuring sequenced development so schools, roads, and public services are ready before occupancy; Maintaining predictable housing allocation rules; Periodic review and transparency so the system adapts to real-world conditions.

8. What is your position on locations for new multiplexes and/or ADU's? Include issues of owner occupancy and by right versus conditional use.

I support thoughtful, context-sensitive housing options that expand affordability and flexibility.

Owner occupancy should be required for both ADUs and duplexes. This ensures that the benefits go to homeowners, spreads units across neighborhoods, and supports lower rental prices.

ADUs and duplexes should be subject to conditional use approval, rather than being automatically allowed by right. Conditional use allows the County to control the number of units and address local conditions, such as parking availability, stormwater management, emergency vehicle access, and public facilities (APFO) concerns. Duplexes should be allowed in more areas than currently permitted, but separately from ADU regulations, to prevent unintended concentration of rental units and protect neighborhood character.

9. How do you think the County can best increase the supply of more affordable housing units?

Howard County can increase affordable housing by taking a multi-pronged, data-driven approach that balances supply, equity, and community needs:

Encourage Missing Middle Housing

Promote smaller-scale, walkable housing types, such as duplexes, townhomes, and small multifamily units, through targeted zoning updates. This can expand middle-income housing without overburdening infrastructure.

Support Owner-Occupied ADUs and Duplexes

Requiring that additional units be owner-occupied helps ensure that homeowners benefit, spreads affordable units across neighborhoods, and limits investor-driven rent inflation. Conditional use approval allows the County to address parking, public facilities, and safety concerns while still increasing supply.

Leverage Incentives for Affordable Housing Development

Use tools such as density bonuses, tax incentives, and targeted subsidies for developments that include units affordable to households earning 60–120% of area median income for for-sale housing, and 0–60% for rental housing. Clear standards and oversight ensure these incentives are effective and equitable.

Preserve Existing Affordable Housing

Protect current affordable units through maintenance support, preservation programs, and anti-displacement policies, ensuring that long-time residents are not priced out.

Align Growth with Infrastructure Capacity

New housing should be sequenced responsibly so that schools, transportation, and public services are in place. This prevents overcrowding and supports sustainable, long-term affordability.

10. What positions do you hold regarding the current levels of low and moderate income housing in the County? What changes to specific policies, that the Council can control, would you sponsor or support to implement your positions?

Howard County does not currently have enough low- and moderate-income housing to meet the needs of our residents. Families, essential workers, new teachers, and younger households are increasingly priced out, while rising home values and rents make it difficult to maintain socioeconomic diversity. This shortage affects not only housing stability, but also workforce retention, school enrollment, and community vibrancy.

Positions and Principles

Equitable Access: Housing policies should ensure that residents across all income levels can live and work in Howard County.

Distributed Supply: Affordable and workforce housing should be spread throughout the County, not concentrated in specific neighborhoods, to avoid segregation and promote inclusive communities.

Sustainable Growth: Housing development must align with infrastructure capacity, school availability, and public services, so affordability is not undermined by overcrowding or overstretched resources.

Policy Changes I Would Sponsor or Support

Zoning Reforms for Missing Middle Housing:

Expand allowances for duplexes, townhomes, and small multifamily units in more residential areas. Require owner-occupancy for additional units to prevent investor-driven rent inflation. Apply conditional use approvals to ensure adequate parking, emergency access, and public facilities.

Affordable Housing Incentives:

Use density bonuses or other incentives to encourage developers to include units for households earning 60–120% of area median income (for sale) or 0–60% of area median income (rental).

Preservation of Existing Affordable Housing:

Support programs that maintain and rehabilitate affordable units, including anti-displacement policies for long-term residents.

Alignment with APFO and Infrastructure Planning:

Ensure that any new housing, including affordable units, is sequenced with school capacity, transportation, and emergency services, preventing overcrowding and infrastructure strain.

Transparent Oversight and Reporting:

Require regular reporting on affordable housing production, occupancy, and utilization, so the County Council and residents can track progress and adjust policies as needed.

11. What is your position on County-funded housing trusts? Should fund usage be public, private, or both and why?

I support County-funded housing trusts as an essential tool to expand and preserve affordable housing in Howard County. These funds provide a dedicated, flexible resource that allows the County to address housing needs for lower- and moderate-income residents, support first-time homebuyers, preserve existing units, and assist vulnerable populations. The fund usage should be private. If it is for public use, usage conditions should be applied. The fund should benefit the residents at the ultimate goal.

12. How do you feel about large-scale commercial uses on Preserved Agricultural land, such as solar panels, mulching, alcohol production uses?

I believe large-scale commercial uses on Preserved Agricultural Land should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Decisions should consider environmental impact, compatibility with surrounding land, and input from local residents. Uses such as solar panels, mulching, or small-scale alcohol production can be appropriate if they support sustainable agriculture, protect natural resources, and respect community character, but each proposal should be carefully studied before approval.

13. What is your position on using PayGo funds for deferred HCPSS maintenance? What percentage would you choose to use for that purpose this year? Are there other budget areas you would prefer to see that money fund, or be added to the priority list?

I strongly support using all available PayGo funds for deferred HCPSS maintenance. Our schools are underfunded and in urgent need of major renovations including Oakland Mills High School and Centennial High School. Investing PayGo funds in deferred maintenance ensures that existing facilities remain safe, functional, and capable of supporting a world-class education.

14. What is your position on the Engineering News Record cap on the Council's ability to increase building excise taxes and moderate income housing unit fee-in-lieu rates?

I support giving the County Council full local authority and flexibility to adjust building excise taxes and moderate-income housing unit fee-in-lieu rates based on current financial conditions. The ENR cap limits the Council's ability to respond to rising costs and local needs, and I believe it should not be in place. Allowing flexibility ensures that revenue keeps pace with inflation, infrastructure demands, and affordable housing priorities.

15. Do you believe that County volunteer boards should have legal/regulatory training? What is your opinion of the current procedures of the Board of Appeals?

Yes, I believe that all County volunteer boards should receive legal and regulatory training. Clear guidance on rules, procedures, and relevant laws helps boards make consistent, fair, and transparent decisions while protecting both residents and the County.

Some procedures of the Howard County Board of Appeals can be improved to enhance transparency, fairness, and public trust:

Transparency and Training: Require regular training for Board members on procedural fairness, quasi-judicial responsibilities, and conflict-of-interest rules. Implement periodic review and reporting on appeals outcomes so the community can see trends, timelines, and how decisions are reached.

Conflict of Interest and Ethics: Adopt clear conflict-of-interest policies and ethical guidelines to prevent real or perceived bias. Require disclosures and recusal when appropriate to strengthen public confidence in the Board's decisions.