

## ETHICS BALLOT QUESTIONNAIRE

### County Council Primary 2026

Name/District: James Handley/District One County Council

Campaign Address/Phone/Email – 4335 Centennial Lane, Ellicott City, MD 21042

410-603-5670 handleyforhoward@gmail.com

#### Educational History

University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law - Juris Doctor

Indiana University - Bachelor of Arts – History; Bachelor of Arts – Political Science

#### Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience

See answers to questions 1 and 2.

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

I am running for County Council for two reasons. First, our democracy is in steep decline, and the only positive reforms we can hope to make in the coming years will be at the state and local level. Second, I'm running because Howard County is a special place and a great place to raise a family. This is not some accident of history but a culmination of smart investments from our leaders in decades past. In this upcoming election, a majority of the council seats will be open, with only one incumbent staying on, and it's time for a new generation of leaders to step up. I'm ready to be a part of that next cohort of leaders and fighters for our values that keeps Howard special.

My candidacy is viable because I am the exact candidate Democratic primary voters are looking for in an elected official. The Democratic primary voters I speak to every day are furious at the situation nationally, and they want leaders, even at the local level, who share their values and will fight for them.

Every day I fight for Marylanders as an assistant attorney at the state Attorney General's office, defending them in consumer protection actions, gun violence prevention matters, and pushing back against the Trump administrations' illegal and unethical actions. I even personally filed the lawsuit against the administration's illegal firing of probationary federal employees.

# The People's Voice, LLC

## Ethics Ballot <sup>TM</sup>

8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

My time and experience as a lawyer, will make me a much more effective council member as the County Council is a legal job, with both writing and understanding laws and legal doctrines as essential parts of the role. I am the only attorney running for the District One Council seat.

Prior to law school and becoming a lawyer, I was a soldier. To serve my country and put myself through college, I joined Army ROTC and commissioned as cavalry officer upon graduation. Less than a year later I was in Iraq serving as a platoon leader for twenty soldiers, tasked with protecting the local population and securing pivotal national elections.

After returning to the states, I learned that my unit would again deploy, this time to Afghanistan, the same month as my discharge from my four years of active duty. I had the choice either to take an honorable discharge or to add an additional year to my service for this second combat deployment. I could not stomach the idea of letting my soldiers and friends go into harm's way without me. So, despite protests of family and friends, I deployed to Afghanistan.

Thankfully, my squadron of nearly 500 soldiers had the correct combination of skill and good fortune necessary to bring everyone back from both deployments. I will be proud of my part in this rare feat for the rest of my life.

Today I'm ready to serve again. When speaking to voters I focus on three core issues: 1) fully funding our great public schools; 2) tackling affordability issues; and 3) protecting green and historic spaces like Old Ellicott City and Lawyers Hill. In most conversations I have with voters, these three issues resonate, and based on one conversation alone they often let me know they will be supporting my campaign.

In addition to having a compelling story and core issues, practically, we are campaign that is set up to win as well. We have raised over \$20,000 and have qualified for the CEF match funds. Once the distribution of those funds occur, in the coming days, we will have more than \$40,000 cash on hand. Additionally, I've hired a seasoned campaign manager, Musa Jafri, who has won in tough local races in previous election cycles. And I have already knocked on over 2,000 doors, and had hundreds of conversations with District One Democratic voters. Finally, because of my activism in the community over the last eight or so years, we have a core group of dozens of volunteers ready to assist our campaign in canvassing, fundraising, and electioneering.

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?

As noted above, I believe my experience both as a leader in the United States Army and training as an attorney are unique qualifications to be on the County Council. As an officer in the US Army I was tasked with significant responsibilities for personnel and resources, and was regularly required to make

# The People's Voice, LLC

## Ethics Ballot <sup>TM</sup>

8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

quick, often life and death, decisions in a high stress environment. Further, I am no stranger to making the tough but right decision, instead of the easy wrong one. Given the fraught budget issues and federal climate, and the likely difficult fights and decisions related to re-zoning, the next four years on the Council will require someone who has demonstrated a spine as the District One Councilmember.

Additionally, drafting, amending, and debating legislation is a legal job. I am the only attorney running for this position. While lawyers have often (rightly) been maligned, especially in the Trump era, candidates without a legal background will be at a significant disadvantage on the Council. I draft legal pleadings, conduct negotiations, and review legislation on a near daily basis. This fall I defended the constitutionality of new state law before the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Virginia. No one else in this race has any comparable experience.

I have testified before the County Council on a number of occasions, including being part of a coalition that successfully advocated for an increased minimum wage in Howard County. This advocacy led to more money in the pockets of working-class Howard County residents. Additionally, I have provided testimony before other committees included the APFO Review Committee, advocating against ending the APFO Schools Question. This is a significant point that will differentiate my campaign with others, as some in this race have staunchly advocated for a weakening of APFO and other pro-developer reforms.

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

Yes, my campaign is using the CEF, and we have reached our 125 donations of \$10,000 threshold to receive matching funds. I expect our matching funds to be distributed within the next few days.

With both this current federal administration and a political system awash in money given terrible legal decision from our Supreme Court like Citizens United, public financing is critical. Closer to home, CEF was put in place in large measure to avoid candidates needing to cave to developer interests in order to be viable. Not only will

CEF lead to better candidates and outcomes, but it will help voters to again have faith in our democratic system. As this is only the second election cycle where CEF has been an option, I wanted to demonstrate that a nonincumbent could use the public financing system and win.

Unfortunately, I have heard several non-CEF candidates cast dispersions on CEF, claiming that it takes funding away from other County priorities. To me, that gets things backwards. By being a CEF candidate and by not owing your financial viability to any one interest group (again, often developers) or big pocketed donor, Council Members or a County Executive is able to make better choices about all things in the local government, including smart decisions related to funding priorities and budget issues.

# The People's Voice, LLC

## Ethics Ballot™

8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

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.

When elected, I will focus on the three priorities areas I discuss with the hundreds of voters I have already connected with: 1) fully funding public schools; 2) tackling affordability challenges; and 3) preserving our green and historic spaces.

Fully funding our Howard County Public School System is my number one legislative priority. When discussing the local issues facing voters, this is their most important topic by a health margin. As a proud Maryland public schools graduate, I know the far-reaching benefits of a public-school education, and as the husband to a former Maryland public schools teacher, I know how difficult the job can be even in the best of environments. Unfortunately, during discussions with HCPSS teachers and staff, I'm regularly told about a noticeable decline in support in recent years, through increased class sizes, position cuts, and deferred maintenance, among other issues.

Since many of the newly elected Council Members and the County Executive will likely similarly make fully funding HCPSS a top priority, I intend on spearheading a majority of the Council to make our voices heard from the onset of the budget cycle that fully funding HCPSS is a make-or-break issue in supporting the County Executive's budget. Personally, my vote on the County Executive's budget will be based on whether we return school funding to its historic level of funding.

At this moment of generational change over on the Council and the County Executive, it is a unique opportunity for the County to look across the board at new ways of delivering County services and raising revenues. Given the unfortunate chaos at the federal level over the next three years and budget concerns in Annapolis, we are going to need County specific solutions and should focus on trying to expand our County's economy by leveraging our highly educated population, close proximity to two large metro areas, and great public schools.

To me, part of fully funding public schools is also ensuring there is sufficient infrastructure that permits safe travel to our schools. Every day I see students walking on the shoulders of busy main roads getting to school. Given the danger this creates, and our resources as a County, this practice is unacceptable, and I will work with a majority on the Council and the new County Executive to prioritize pedestrian infrastructure near our schools.

Related to affordability, again, this new set of leaders has a chance to conduct a thorough review of County services and raising revenues. We should again look at whether our minimum wage should be increased, whether there needs to be actions taken against the creation of energy sapping AI data centers in the County, seeking more affordable housing options, among other reforms. Much of what the Council and Executive should do will depend on the state of the economy, which right now, is not looking great. However, voters want relief from the constant increases in costs, and we need to deliver.

Finally, related to the preservation of our green and historic spaces I would make sure that during the upcoming comprehensive re-zoning both green and historic spaces are protected. District One is home to great state and local parks, which is essential green space that must be preserved. It appears that developer interests will advocate for all sorts of re-zoning, while claiming to be solving affordability in housing, and the Council Member from District One must be someone who, continuing Liz Walsh's legacy, asks critical follow up questions and drills down on the actual rationale for any changes. I will not support re-zoning that endangers our green and historic spaces.

Additionally, if there is any remaining work to be complete on the County's Safe and Sound program, I will strongly advocate for District One and for the completion of any work in the budget cycle once in office. Given the history of flooding in OEC, the District One Council role demands attention to climate change issues and historic preservation.

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 biggest strength of the current County Council is the passage of several high-profile bills that have made life more affordable in Howard and promoted good governance. Related to affordability, Council passed an increase to the minimum wage, correctly recognizing that it is much more expensive to live and work here in Howard than say Washington or Wicomico Counties. While by no means a living wage level, this put more money in the pockets of working people and families.

While the most obvious cracks in our democracy have been at the federal level, trust in government and the erosion of fact-based media has hurt government at all levels. The current Council took a great step towards better government when it created the office of the Inspector General, which will be able to independently root out fraud, waste, and abuse. As the party of government, Democrats have to ensure government works, does so above board, and delivers its services well and on time.

Unfortunately, a large weakness of the current Council is the level of infighting that has become worse over the course of the last seven or so years. I believe this failure to work together has negatively impacted the County. The blame for this does not fall at the feet of any individual member, but the current coalitions on the Council have made it so that the sole Republican has significantly more power than he would otherwise have.

I have significant experience working with individuals with diverse views and political persuasions. During my five years on active-duty service (and to a similar extent with my four years as a cadet in Army ROTC in college), I worked with many individuals with a much more conservative viewpoint on the world than I myself held. Indeed, a majority of the people I served with and under were not aligned on many issues. Despite this, and my own well-known more liberal politics, I worked well with everyone to solve challenges and complete our mission. I would do the same on the Council, where, it

appears likely that there will be diverse opinions on the right role for development, land use, and other issues of public importance.

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

As noted above, restoring funding to Howard County Public Schools is my number one legislative priority. The County should have, in decades past when growth was at its height, put in school fees in line with other jurisdiction which would have permitted us the necessary budgets to pay for many of the school related gaps concerns we now face, but we of course, cannot turn back the clock. The trend of our County funding of schools is heading in the wrong direction. We have had two straight years of more than 100 staff layoffs and are making insufficient progress towards addressing deferred maintenance. On the Council I will advocate for additional annual funding and the use of Pay-Go funds to be put towards the top priority deferred maintenance projects at our schools.

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.

The County should try to find a balance between continued residential growth while not stressing our infrastructure needs. I grew up on the Eastern Shore and I have spent considerable time in Counties that have little to no growth, and we clearly should avoid that situation. However, we cannot keep growing at the same breakneck speeds of the last several decades and not expect significant impacts on our quality of life. As the Councilmember from District One, I intend on advocating against attempts to allow unrestricted growth here, due to the District's unique characteristics, including the importance of storm water management concerns and the already stressed infrastructure, most noticeably exemplified by school overcrowding.

As mentioned before, one area of the APFO Review Committee recommendations that I disagree with is the ending of the APFO Schools Question. I sent in testimony before the Committee that this was a mistake, as it would lead to additional overcrowding, and increase disruptive school redistricting. I know the committee and many others expect school enrollment to be flat County-wide for the next decade or so, however, that County level number is little consolation to District One parents who are sending their kids to overcrowded elementary, middle, and high schools. However, if ending the schools question and replacing it with the SOUP recommendation is something that a majority of the Council supports, I



8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

would strongly recommend that the fees that developers pay, paid instead of the wait time, be significantly increased to actually be enough to pay for school related budget needs.

One of the APFO Review Committee's better recommendations is increasing the Transfer Tax to establish additional sources of revenue for school capital projects and deferred school maintenance for home sales above \$750,000. Likewise, I was happy to learn that after years of using questionable data, the committee agreed use a more accurate measure of new student yields from new construction.

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.

Actions at the state level related to multiplexes and ADU, along with other reforms have been focused on increasing the amount of housing in the state, in hopes of lowering the cost of housing. These are noble goals, but especially in District One, attempts to create more density and increase housing must be weighed with the history of our developer caused floods, and the need to not over stress infrastructure. Specifically, new multiplexes or ADUs should require owner occupancy to ensure this does not become an out-of-control market attempting to backdoor density in a place like Ellicott City or Elkrigde. I would further support having these types of additions being as conditional use, because without it, I have concerns about our ability to control for all sorts of infrastructure needs. Again, the District One representative needs to have storm water and climate issues top of mind, and in office, I will, and I see these, and other land use issues, through this lens.

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

Howard County can best increase the supply of more affordable housing units by ensuring that more low- and moderate-income housing is built. Simply increasing the supply of market rate housing may have some small impact of prices, but that will not actually increase the supply of more affordable housing units that are needed in Howard County. On how we create more of that type of housing, see my answer to Question 10

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 should look to provide additional middle and low-income housing. As noted above, simply installing more market-rate housing will not solve our affordability problems. One way the County Council will be able to ensure these types of housing are available going forward is by making necessary changes during the next comprehensive re-zoning. Ensuring that middle- and low-income housing is able to be built will go a long way in making that happen. Additionally, on the Council I would hesitate to support a reduction in fee-in-lieu efforts by developers and instead advocate for increasing the requirement to include certain percentages of lower-income and middle-income units for any development.

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

I would be open to the creation of County-funded housing trust as a means to make housing more affordable in the County. I know that numerous jurisdictions throughout the country have used these successfully to expand housing options. I would want to ensure that any potential trust actually focused on providing access to low and moderate-income housing as discussed above. These funds provide jurisdictions with a fair amount of flexibility, allowing each to provide a range of activities designed to meet a community's specific housing needs. As a result, I would prefer fund usage to be public in order to allow for the County to have better control over its use and implementation.

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

Howard County was smart and forward thinking to preserve tens of thousands of acres of farmland in the western portions of the County. In general, preservation means that this land should be kept to agricultural purposes, not large-scale commercial uses. However, given the strong need for Maryland to produce more energy, which would preferably be from green sources, not fossil fuels, I would be willing to support some use of this agricultural land for solar energy production. Especially given the potential volatility for farmers with tariffs, solar energy production could be a supplemental income that could keep farmers from needing more direct government assistance.

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 support using PayGo funds for deferred HCPSS maintenance. I do not have a specific percentage that I would use for that purpose each year, because I would want to make sure that we are balancing current



8815 Centre Park Drive, Suite 245, Columbia, MD 21045

economic realities with the need to have sufficient rainy-day funds, but I would be willing to use a substantial portion of the PayGo funds to do much more than our current wholly inadequate level of deferred HCPSS maintenance. Given that we have nearly half of our schools that are at or more than 45 years old, I believe that priority must be given to the HCPSS deferred maintenance before using PayGo funds to other budget priorities.

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?

The use of the Engineering New Record cap on the ability of the Council to increase building excise taxes and moderate-income unit fee-in-lieu rates is likely not the best index, as it takes into account the entire Baltimore Region, while ignoring the specific needs of Howard County. While there are some similarities between ourselves and other counties in the region, no county has experienced the astronomical growth that we have experienced in the last forty years.

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?

I believe that County volunteer boards, which make legal decisions, should have a sufficient background in the law or, depending on the nature of the board, be required to at least have extensive training to ensure that proper decisions are rendered.

Specifically, the Board of Appeals, given its broad and far-reaching powers, should have members with legal training as a requirement. Further, as decisions of the Board of Appeals can eventually make it to the Circuit Court and the other state courts in Maryland, ensuring the Board of Appeals decision is a legally sound one, is a best practice.

My understanding is that the Board of Appeals procedures have not be amended in decades. This along with numerous high-profile cases and drama surrounding membership, demonstrates that the next Council needs to make reforming the Board of Appeals a priority. In my legal practice, I know that procedural requirements can have a huge impact on the outcome of cases, and as a result, there needs to be a thorough reworking of the Board of Appeals' procedures to ensure sound outcomes and sufficient due process.