

ETHICS BALLOT QUESTIONNAIRE

County Council Primary 2026

Name/District: Jessica Nichols/County Council District 2

Campaign Address/Phone/Email: P.O. Box 8019, Elkridge, MD 21075/(443) 398-2288/info@teamjessicanichols.com

Educational History

2001- B.S. Secondary Education/Social Studies Concentration University of Maryland-College Park

2020-M.S. Human Resource Development/Education Leadership I, Towson University

Languages Spoken/Other Skills/Relevant Experience

2014-Present-Teacher, Howard County Public Schools

2023-Present-Assistant Administrator, Black Student Achievement Program (BSAP) Summer Institute/Howard County Public Schools

2020-2025- Elected member, Howard County Democratic Central Committee

2024- Presidential Elector, Electoral College

2024-2025-Howard County Teacher of the Year and Maryland State Department of Education Teacher of the Year Finalist

2020-2024- Appointed Commissioner, Howard County Commission for Women

2022- 2024-President, Columbia Democratic Club

2020-Present-Member, Board of Directors, Columbia Community Care

2023- 2025-Board Chairperson, Board of Directors, Columbia Community Care

2018-2021-Director, Howard County Education Association Board of Directors

2019-2021- Maryland State Representative, National Education Association Resolutions Committee

2014-2018- Building Representative, Howard County Education Association

1. Why are you running for this office? Non-Incumbents, please describe how your campaign is viable.
 - I'm running now because I bring a rare combination of experience and temperament. I've spent over twenty years as an educator, have been honored as Teacher of the Year, and have built deep relationships across our community through years of service and advocacy. Just as important, I have the temperament to listen, collaborate, and get things done even when challenges are complex or emotions run high. At a moment when Howard County is facing significant and interconnected challenges, we need leaders who are deeply rooted in the community and steady enough to help guide us forward.
 - My campaign is viable for several reasons:
 - We have strong fundraising, primarily through local small dollar contributions
 - We have low overhead. Fortunately there is no dearth of people who are willing to volunteer their time and expertise to this campaign. This has eliminated the need for paid staff and expensive consultants.
 - We have secured several key endorsements, most notably, the Howard County Education Association
 - I have excellent name recognition because of my roles in community leadership, being Teacher of the Year, Chair of Columbia Community Care, President of the Columbia Democratic Club and an elected member of the Howard County Democratic Central committee.

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?
 - If elected, I will be the first teacher on the Howard County Council. By trade, I am an instructor of economics and government - which means I have a strong foundation in the fundamental principles of municipal governance.
 - I have worked closely with various departments within Howard County Government over the years and have become very familiar with how the county council impacts the daily work of county employees and daily lives of our residents.
 - I have testified at all levels of state and local government—sometimes as an individual, and sometimes on behalf of a group or organization. I have supported environmentally friendly changes that will help Howard County combat climate change and I have advocated for education funding as well as several social justice issues.

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

- My campaign is using traditional financing, although I strongly support CEF as an option. At its onset, CEF was intended to make elected office more attainable for residents who were not independently wealthy or lacked access to large donors. I think it is important to remove financial barriers that could be preventing excellent public servants from holding elected office.
- I am very fortunate that I have the ability to raise enough money from private donors to run a very competitive race.
 - CEF participation makes it virtually impossible to legally engage volunteers or resources from endorsing organizations. Contact lists, featured publications, signs, banners, and even strategic guidance all constitute in-kind contributions that publicly funded candidates are strictly prohibited from accepting.
- The original, noble intention behind CEF has been co-opted over time and is commonly used now as a moral/ethical purity test. I do not wish for there to be any confusion: I am not for sale. My values are not for sale. My integrity is not for sale.

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.

My top three priorities for 2026 are Education, Public Safety, and Economic/Housing Security

1) Making Our School Stronger for Students and Educators

a) As the 2024-2025 Howard County Teacher of the Year, I am well aware of the issues that exist in our schools. I have spent a good deal of my career standing up against these inequities. As the County Council Member from District 2, I will address three main problems.

i) Aging School Infrastructure and Safety Systems

(1) First, I would utilize my relationships with state level legislators to ensure that the Blueprint and it's obligations are fully funded.

(2) Secondly, I would push for funding to prioritize repairs, modernize safer communications while supporting stronger collaboration between schools and emergency responders.

ii) Teacher retention and workforce development

(1) I would support grow your own programs, expanded teacher pipeline program and would offer student loan assistance for teachers to attract and retain teachers.

2) Balanced, Trust-Based Approach to Public Safety

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

a) Public Safety isn't just about enforcement. It's about trust, transparency and support before the crisis hits. My priorities emphasize prevention and accountability alongside other traditional safety measures. As the County Council Member from District 2, I will address three main problems:

i) Lack of mental health response capacity

(1) Mobile crisis units with trained medical professionals to respond to non-violent emergencies

ii) Youth Crime/Violence

(1) Our teens have complex needs and many of them are living life one day at a time. We need preventative measures in place to help steer them away from activity that may seem appealing but is truly harmful and dangerous. I've spoken to our young people and they want free recreational spaces where they can just hang out. They want adult mentors and life coaches. As Chair of Columbia Community Care, we financially supported mentorship programs but it wasn't enough. Much more investment is needed for these programs to be sustainable.

iii) Insufficient support for food-insecure families

(1) I would expand food access programs, extend hours of operation for our county food pantries and remove "proof of need" barriers when possible.

3) Making Howard County Truly Affordable.

a) Far too many families struggle with basic needs, from high housing costs to stagnant wages, despite working hard. Affordable living is central to community stability. Simply put, our residents are being priced out of Howard County by rising housing costs, unpredictable rents, and everyday expenses that continue to outpace wages. As the County Councilperson from District 2, I would address the rising cost of housing and rent, families experiencing housing displacement, and communities designed without affordable transportation or access to services.

i) Housing stability first

(1) I would expand affordable housing through zoning tools, incentives for expansion of affordable housing offerings, and preservation of existing affordable units.

(2) I would also prioritize housing for educators, first responders and essential workers through our Homes for Heroes program.

(3) I would also require transparency and accountability in county-funded, private-public housing development.

- ii) Stronger tenant protections
 - (1) I would support policies that prevent unfair rent increases and improve enforcement of tenant rights
 - I would endeavor to increase access to legal and housing navigation support for renters facing eviction
- iii) Lower everyday costs through smart infrastructure
 - (1) I would invest in reliable public transit and walkable community design to reduce transportation costs
 - (2) I would support mixed-use development that puts housing, jobs, and services closer together

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 most apparent weakness of the current county council is their inability to get along — with each other and with the administration. This is more and more apparent each year to anyone observing public work sessions and meetings. A lot of mistrust has been breeding among them and unfortunately it has spilled out into the community, with residents now taking sides and exacerbating the negative discourse. This has resulted in 2-2 split between the four Democrats, leaving the lone Republican member to be the swing vote on nearly every issue.
- And despite the escalating negativity - Howard County remains one of the most desirable places to live in all of America. Our community routine tops lists that nationally rank safety, opportunity and quality of life.
- As a teacher and community leader, I demonstrate my ability to work with people who have diverse positions on a daily basis. From helping my students navigate discourse on sensitive topics to holding community meetings in which the public challenges me over decisions I have made, I have a great deal of experience navigating some times dicey issues while maintaining the integrity of each process and classroom I have worked in and through.

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 focus on investing in people while being responsible with taxpayer dollars. First, I will prioritize fully funding public education, including classroom resources, educator recruitment and retention, student mental health supports, and safe, modern school facilities. Education is the county's most important long-term investment, and funding decisions must reflect that.
- Second, I will support strong, balanced funding for public safety that ensures first responders have the resources they need while also investing in programs that emphasize prevention, mental health services,

and community-based support. This includes funding for emergency response, training, accountability, mobile crisis teams, and behavioral health services that help reduce emergencies before they escalate.

- Third, I will prioritize housing stability and cost-of-living relief by funding affordable and workforce housing, tenant protections, eviction prevention, and transit investments that reduce everyday expenses for working families.
- Across all funding decisions, I am committed to equity-driven budgeting, transparency, and fiscal responsibility to ensure county resources are allocated fairly, efficiently, and in ways that strengthen the entire community.

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.

- I believe that planned residential growth in Howard County should be responsibly increased, but only where infrastructure, equity goals, and community well-being can be met first. Growth should not occur simply to meet numerical targets. We must be realistic about the needs of our residents and the capacity of our schools, transportation networks, and emergency services.
- The Baltimore region continues to grow, and housing demand is not being met at current production levels. At the same time, Howard County faces real constraints, particularly in school capacity, traffic congestion, and housing affordability. For these reasons, I support increasing planned residential growth overall, while being deliberate about where that growth occurs. Growth should be directed to areas with existing capacity or with clearly funded and scheduled plans for infrastructure expansion, while limiting development in areas where facilities are already overburdened.
- As an educator, I believe schools must remain central to any growth strategy. New development should not overwhelm classrooms or staff. Instead, residential growth must be paired with modernized school planning tools and reliable funding mechanisms that ensure capacity keeps pace with enrollment. It isn't enough to arbitrarily delay growth without any assurances that the infrastructure will be sufficient in the future.
- Affordable housing must also be a core consideration. Growth without affordability leads to displacement and limits who can live and work in the county. Planned residential growth should prioritize housing that serves teachers, service workers, families, and seniors through incentives for missing-middle housing and stronger affordable housing requirements.
- Transportation and safety must be addressed alongside housing. Population growth without adequate multimodal options leads to congestion and reduced quality of life. Residential development should support walkability, transit access, and safer road design, rather than relying solely on automobile capacity.
- I support the 2025 APFO Review Committee's recommendations to modernize school capacity standards, strengthen transportation and multimodal considerations, and activate affordable housing

tools within the APFO framework. These changes would allow APFO to continue protecting community services while better responding to housing needs.

- We must use a targeted, accountable approach to planning that ensures growth strengthens communities rather than strains them.

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.

- Multiplexes, triplexes and duplexes are most appropriately located near transit, business parks, walkable areas and areas that are not already experiencing high density.
- I support ADU's that are owner occupied, as long as they meet the permitting requirements and architectural standards for the neighborhood in which they are built.
- I do not support ADU's as "rooms for rent."

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

- There are commercial office buildings in Howard County that are taking up large footprints without being fully occupied. These properties can be turned into housing units, even if rezoning is required.
- When affordable housing is added to the county's overall supply, it should come with rent stabilization requirements.
- Require developers to include a minimum number of low income housing units with every project over a certain size. And hold them accountable if they fail to comply.

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 needs more low and moderate income housing, not just rental housing, but opportunities for ownership as well.
- Developers that promise to provide low income housing units often under-deliver, which only serves to drive the market rates up higher.
- Howard County has historically concentrated lower income housing in the western part of Columbia and some other small pockets in the county. This has resulted in a lack of socioeconomic diversity in Howard County neighborhoods. We cannot continue to concentrate economically disadvantaged residents into the same spaces indefinitely.

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 important tool for expanding and preserving affordable housing. Fund usage should include both public and private projects, because addressing housing needs requires collaboration across sectors.
- Public and nonprofit projects are essential for serving residents with the greatest need, while private and mixed-income developments can increase housing production and leverage public dollars more efficiently. Any use of housing trust funds should require clear public benefits, including long-term affordability and transparency.
- Housing trust funds should be allocated based on the outcomes they deliver for residents, not on who builds the housing.

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

- I am generally opposed to large-scale commercial uses on preserved agricultural land when they conflict with the purpose of preservation. Preserved farmland is a public investment meant to support long-term agriculture, food production, and environmental stewardship, not industrial or quasi-industrial uses.
- Uses such as large-scale mulching or alcohol production can undermine farming operations and rural character. While I support renewable energy, large solar installations should be limited to approaches that allow continued agricultural use or are located on already disturbed land.
- Any commercial use on preserved agricultural land should be limited, directly related to agriculture, and carefully regulated so preservation truly means preservation.

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?

- It is important for the county to retain its AAA bond rating. This requires reserves anywhere from 10% - 35% of the general fund. If all other financial measures are strong, the amount needed in reserve decreases without impacting the county's AAA standing. Any PayGo funds remaining beyond that **can and should** be used for HCPSS deferred maintenance.
- It is important to note that capital projects are more expensive with a municipal bond rating below AAA - so it is crucial for the county to find the right balance of spending and saving.

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 using the ENR index as a reference point, but not as a hard cap. The County should retain flexibility to adjust excise taxes and MIHU fee-in-lieu rates when needed to fund infrastructure and affordable housing, as long as increases are transparent and tied to public benefit.

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?

- Members of county boards (volunteer or paid) should receive training as part of their onboarding. County council members should also receive training on the expectations of their conduct with respect to county boards and commissions.