



GSSCC Questionnaire
Montgomery County Executive Candidates

Name: David Blair

Email Address: david@blairformontgomery.com

Web Address: blairformontgomery.com

Number of Years Lived in Montgomery County: 52

Party Affiliation: Democrat

Please insert your answers after each question below, or answer using a separate document. Please return the completed questionnaire to jredicker@gsscc.org no later than close of business on Friday, March 4

1. Please speak to relevant experience that makes you qualified to be the County Executive. For example:

- **What specific executive experience do you have?**
- **What non-governmental professional executive experience do you have?**
- **What experience do you have in dealing with government requirements necessary to run a business profitably?**
- **What experience do you have in trying to obtain from the County or the State, a permit or license related to operating a business?**

I was Chief Executive Officer of Catalyst Health Solutions, a Fortune 500 company with thousands of employees across the country. I served as CEO from its formation in 1999 until its sale in 2012. Catalyst was recognized five times as one of Fortune's 100 Fastest Growing Publicly Traded Companies with an annual budget in excess of \$5 billion. Fortune listed the company among the "World's Most Admired Companies" multiple times because of the value of its products and the benefits we offered our employees. I learned a deep sense of accountability and the importance of first-class customer service, recruitment and retention of talented leadership, compensation strategies, financial discipline, procurement, and leveraging technology. As the leader of my company, my approach was to be inclusive, collaborative, and transparent – I recognize that I do not have all the answers and it's imperative to surround ourselves with leaders in their respective fields.

Montgomery County is my home, which is why I was proud to base my business in Rockville. Unfortunately, our county was uniquely difficult to do business in compared to the places around the country where we opened offices. Permitting and licensing were often confusing and strenuous and I got the sense that county government officials saw us a burden rather than a partner. That was a big reason I joined County Executive Ike Leggett's Economic Advisory Group. It's that experience that showed me our county can and should be doing better. I've also been a nonprofit leader in the 10 years since we sold Catalyst - addressing inequities in education, food insecurity, poverty, mental health, and starting the Council for Advocacy and Policy Solutions to study solutions for our community's most difficult challenges.

- 2. Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic affected our lives and our economy in unprecedented ways. The County provided financial assistance to help businesses through these unprecedented times, but many businesses and employers have still not recovered.**
- **What are you prepared to do to get businesses and our economy back to a sense of normal?**
 - **What will you do to support business should the COVID pandemic remain with us?**
 - **What kind of financial support (grants and loans) will you support to help businesses and nonprofit organizations (i.e. commercial rent support, reimbursement for testing kits, grants to support continued telework)?**

Supporting businesses and the community with the “new normal” will be my priority as County Executive. I am fully in favor of implementing another round of business assistance grants, commercial rent support, testing and telework equipment reimbursement, and proposing additional initiatives as needed.

Many businesses are still suffering as a direct result of COVID and restrictions that county government put in place. For instance, many in the already hard-hit restaurant sector report sales have been as low over the past three months as during any stretch of the pandemic. These businesses deserve more government support. Current county leadership has, since the first stage of COVID in 2020, decided to invest the majority of one-time federal relief funds elsewhere - including a major portion to pay for ongoing county employee costs. This is not just an unsustainable fiscal policy. It risks further leaving behind employers in our county.

Montgomery County is one of the most vaccinated large counties in the country thanks to the residents who took the time to drive to other jurisdictions to get vaccinated and who care about their health and protecting the health of their loved ones, friends, and co-workers. The data shows that vaccinations work and worked to significantly reduce the number of severe illnesses from the latest major COVID variant in late 2021 and early 2022. We need county leadership that recognizes we’re no longer in the early days of the pandemic. We know more about COVID and we know that vaccinations provide significant protection. As County Executive, I pledge consistency in ongoing health regulations with surrounding jurisdictions. We can no longer operate as if we’re an island and as if COVID stops at county or state borders.

- 3. The Silver Spring Central Business District was envisioned to become a smart-growth, live, work, and play community. However, in the past 10-plus years, Silver Spring has evolved into a primarily residential neighborhood (bedroom community), with virtually no commercial office development. At this point, the County seems to be focused on just the “live” and “play” aspects. But local retailers and restaurants are feeling the brunt of having fewer and fewer customers during office hours.**
- **What will you do to address this and help bring more employers and jobs back to Silver Spring?**
 - **What will you do to revitalize our daytime economy in Silver Spring?**

Montgomery County cannot succeed if Silver Spring isn’t a success. Revitalizing Silver Spring has been a major focus for me since the early days of my campaign and is a major element of the [Economic Development Plan](#) I released last year. Here’s what I propose:

- Build on Silver Spring’s potential as an arts and entertainment destination by partnering with developers to build artists studios, an arts district centered on a new Silver Spring performance venue that also can host high school graduations from around the county, a world-class art gallery and museum at the historic Blair House in Jessup Blair Park, and more.
- Implement a Business Improvement Grant program providing up to \$10,000 to landlords and tenants for façade improvements, sign improvements, property improvements, and demolition costs. The purpose of

this grant program is to boost the economic vitality of Silver Spring by incentivizing visually appealing physical developments to local business storefronts.

- Remake Georgia Avenue leading into the Silver Spring Central Business District (CBD) as a grand boulevard. Right now, Georgia Avenue immediately around the Beltway is a congested and awkward mix of dangerous turning movements that restrict access into and out of the area. The condition of this portion of Georgia Avenue has also prevented needed reinvestment in the commercial areas of Montgomery Hills and Forest Glen. I would invest the county's share of \$10 million into the State Highway Administration project now in design to rebuild Georgia Avenue as a walkable, bikeable, and safe corridor that will enable reinvestment and serve as an engaging gateway into and out of the CBD.

4. The Planning Board's Silver Spring Downtown and Adjacent Communities Plan's sole answer to reviving and expanding Silver Spring's office market is to simply "improve the public realm (i.e., build more sidewalks, bikeways, parks, etc.). Please explain why you agree or disagree that this is an effective and appropriate strategy for returning economic prosperity to the downtown Silver Spring business district?

I agree that safer and better sidewalks, bikeways, parks, and civic spaces are important elements of a successful overall strategy to revive Silver Spring's office market. Central to that strategy must be something more fundamental - changing the culture and perception of Montgomery County to a place that views businesses as partners, not enemies. That requires the right leadership in county government.

It also requires vision and effectiveness from county leadership. The largely vacant former Discovery Communications office building is emblematic of the office market struggles we are facing in Silver Spring. We must get creative. We can use two of our strengths - hospitality and biohealth. We should be using Marriott, Choice Hotels, the National Institutes of Health, Federal Drug Administration and more to attract the best and brightest in start-ups in those sectors. As County Executive I would connect start-ups in these industries to these anchors and provide the much-needed lab space and live/work space for these innovators to operate. We can partner with owners of vacant office buildings in Silver Spring to provide this space and the county could support these programs financially.

5. In recent months, Silver Spring has experienced a dramatic increase in violent crime, which threatens our economy, our business owners, and our residents. The expansion of our "nighttime economy" has been accompanied by some unintended consequences. Two recent surveys show that the top concern of most residents is crime and safety.

- **Will you support bringing either a police substation or creating a new district police station in downtown Silver Spring? Why or why not?**
- **Would you support legislation that requires a set closing time for restaurants operating as bars and nightclubs as well as hookah bars (as is done in Prince George's County and D.C.)? Why or why not?**

I support bringing a police station back to downtown Silver Spring and I support changing the closing times for restaurants, nightclubs, and hookah bars to be consistent with those of neighboring jurisdictions. Public safety is a County Executive's number one priority. It's disheartening to see the inaction by current county leadership on this issue and the County Executive and Council's decision to cut the police department budget for this fiscal year by 27 positions. This has resulted in rock-bottom morale in our police department, which I've seen firsthand when visiting with officers and department leadership over the past six months. Residents and businesses in Silver Spring and everywhere in our county deserve leadership that acknowledges the issue and seeks to correct it, rather than pointing fingers.

6. **GSSCC believes that a thriving business community brings prosperity for all of our citizens by increasing the number of good private sector jobs and expanding the tax base to support necessary public services.**
- **Please list all the initiatives/legislation you have supported/or would support to foster the growth of existing businesses and encourage new business creation.**
 - **Please describe your plan for increasing the tax base – rather than tax rates – in the County.**
 - **What is your plan for making Montgomery County more attractive to businesses looking to expand or relocate (i.e. increased tax incentives, subsidies, streamlining the development approval process)?**

I grew a Rockville-based business into a Fortune 500 company as a CEO, launched the Entrepreneurship Lab at The Universities at Shady Grove to train, connect, and fund entrepreneurs, and have laid out policies I will implement as County Executive to grow good-paying jobs. I also bring a fresh perspective that we desperately need in local government on this issue.

Tax incentives, subsidies, and streamlining development approvals are all economic development tools we should use. Montgomery County faces a deeper problem: Companies and competing jurisdictions perceive us and label us as anti-business because of years of restrictive and costly policies that my opponents for County Executive have led. It's time for a change and someone with real business experience to bring a truly business-friendly approach to county government.

My full [Economic Development Plan](#) contains more details and more proposals but I would start by instituting a Montgomery County Business Bill of Rights that sets the standard by which we'll hold ourselves as county government in our interactions with businesses. If one permitting official tells a business something different than another permitting official and it costs a business time and money, we'll reimburse that business. If there's a policy that is inconsistent and more burdensome than neighboring jurisdictions, we'll fix it via legislation or executive order. If there's a company that is important to our county, we'll build a relationship with them early on and figure out what they need to stay here and grow.

We also must better harness our county's entrepreneurial culture - new employers who we can help navigate regulations and requirements with a one-stop app, provide flexible financing for growth, and make part of a strong Montgomery County brand that makes it easy to find local businesses and buy local.

As discussed in my response to Question #4, we will implement ways to attract the best and brightest in hospitality and biohealth innovation to locate here - close to some of the major players in those industries that already call our county home. We can also do a lot more to accelerate the Agricultural Reserve as an economic engine by developing a centralized food processing center, incentivizing food chains to do their food buying from county farmers, and relaxing zoning regulations to allow for breweries, wineries, and other types of farm-based businesses.

7. **Many of our small- and medium-sized business members feel that the policies adopted by County government reflect a lack of appreciation for the contributions they make to our community. Please describe your understanding of the difference between the challenges faced by large multinational companies and small locally owned/operated businesses. (For example, the County requires small business owners to pay a recordation tax when they use their personal home as collateral for a business loan that is more than \$3 million. Yet large business owners don't have to personally guarantee anything, let alone put their personal property at risk for access to capital.) Please provide three specific examples of how you will support small businesses and ensure opportunities for them to grow and expand.**

The differences are significant and we must understand that the key to our economic success will be enabling small businesses to start and grow into medium-sized businesses and larger. That's why I focused on this in my [Economic Development Plan](#):

1. *We will harness our county's entrepreneurial culture*: New employers who we can help navigate regulations and requirements with a one-stop app, provide flexible financing for growth, and make part of a strong Montgomery County brand that makes it easy to find local businesses and buy local.
2. *We will expand access to working capital* by shifting the underwriting responsibilities for loans to the county so that underserved communities and businesses that cannot access financing through traditional banking requirements are able to get the support they need. Currently, our Microloan Program is outsourced to two organizations, Life Asset and Latino Economic Development Corporation. By increasing the funding pool, centralizing all Small Business Lending programs, and owning the liability of the underwriting process, we will improve the overall customer experience and access to working capital for local small businesses.
3. *We will build a strong Montgomery County brand*: We will establishing a centralized mobile and web application directory to bolster a new and powerful county brand marketing program. We'll also increase the amount of county government contracts that go to county companies and support and educate local companies so they have all the tools they need to successfully bid on contracts.

I've also done a lot of work with restaurants, one of the hardest hit business sectors through the pandemic. Working with restaurateurs from around Montgomery County, I'm proposing [a set of initiatives and policies](#) so that our county better supports these important local employers. This includes opening up the county's outdated alcohol monopoly to outside distributors so restaurateurs and alcohol licensees have a choice.

8. The Route 29 Corridor in Eastern Montgomery County has suffered from a lack of commercial and other development for many years. Few, if any new employment opportunities have been created to provide jobs that would address complaints about traffic congestion (that is taking employees to Silver Spring or D.C.) or bring economic prosperity to this area. What are you going to do to ensure economic development that brings new businesses and jobs to the East County/Rt. 29 Corridor?

I'm going to support property owners in White Oak and actively recruit tenants to Viva White Oak, work to bring a Montgomery College East County Campus here, and work to bring a 5,000-seat venue to serve as an economic driver.

We're also going to fund needed transportation infrastructure in White Oak and throughout the corridor - including true Bus Rapid Transit via fully dedicated bus lanes. In Burtonsville, we will work with the community to revitalize Burtonsville using the county-owned Park and Ride property adjacent to Burtonsville Crossing for mixed-use development.

- 9. The Chamber supports a balanced approach to transportation policies that takes into account the needs of our member businesses, their employees, their customers, and their vendors. That balance must accommodate those who use public transit, drive on our roads, travel by bicycle and on foot, and need sufficient parking options at their destination.**
- **Please describe your approach to finding the right balance of transit, roads, parking, and other transportation options.**
 - **What is your proposal to balance this equation -roads, trains, buses, roads, parking garages? Need all to get people to work?**

- **What will you do to address the needs and concerns of businesses that expect to be harmed financially during the continued construction of The Purple Line?**

I believe in a balanced approach and have many specific ideas for how we can improve the efficiency of our Ride On system and use advanced traffic signal technology to better time signals and reduce travel times. We must do this while also making our roadways and sidewalks safer for all users. There are common sense improvements we can make - such as adding safe crosswalks at mid-block bus stops - that will protect pedestrians. Safety must be our priority. Safety on our roadways is also an economic imperative. People increasingly want to live and work in walkable, urban settings. The Silver Spring Central Business District already provides much of this experience, but there are improvements that can be made.

We will work with our state legislators to create more State relief and assistance to businesses impacted by Purple Line construction. We'll also keep close watch on the Maryland Transit Administration and the new Purple Line contractors to ensure they're performing work in the least disruptive way possible before further closing off access to streets and sidewalks.

10. In 2019, the Council passed legislation to require an Economic Impact analysis to determine a proposed bill's potential positive or negative effects, if any, on the County's workforce, taxation policy, property values, incomes, operating costs to businesses and non-profits operating in the County, capital investment from the private sector, economic development, and the County's competitiveness. The Chamber believes that this effort has not always focused sufficiently on impacts to existing businesses and the economy as a whole.

- **Would you require that this analysis include interviews and discussions with actual business owners? Why or why not?**
- **Would you require this analysis to include formal input from the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation? Why or why not?**
- **Would you require this analysis to include formal input from the County Chamber of Commerce, and the individual area Chambers (rather than just the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation)? Why or why not?**

I support all of the additional requirements to the Economic Impact analysis that you have detailed here. This analysis can serve as a useful tool to improve legislation that may burden or challenge employers. However, as we've seen recently and from my opponents for County Executive, the Council and County Executive can easily brush aside concerns raised in Economic Impact Statements. What's most important to Silver Spring's and our county's economic health is growing good-paying jobs.

11. What is your vision for the future of greater Silver Spring and Montgomery County, and what is needed to accomplish this vision, over the next 5 years?

Montgomery County cannot succeed if Silver Spring doesn't succeed. Revitalizing Silver Spring has been a major focus for me since the early days of my campaign and is a major element of the [Economic Development Plan](#) I released last year.

As I detailed before, my vision for Silver Spring includes expanding its arts and entertainment offerings, supporting small businesses with building improvement grants, remaking Georgia Avenue leading into the Silver Spring CBD, and using vacant office space for Live/Work villages to attract the best and brightest entrepreneurs in the life sciences and hospitality industries in which Montgomery County already has strengths.

I need your support! I bring a fresh perspective with a genuine background in business and executive leadership. I also am passionate about seeing our county succeed because it is my home and I've been so fortunate to grow

up here, start and raise a family here, grow a business here, and be a community advocate here. Many of us recognize that Montgomery County doesn't have to settle for rising office vacancy rates, a decline in jobs, and a stagnant economy that forces continued tax and fee increases. Montgomery County can do better.