



GSSCC Questionnaire
Montgomery County Council Candidates

Name: Omar Lazo _____

Email Address: omar@omarlazo.com _____

Web Address: www.omarlazo.com

Council District for Which You Are Seeking Election: Montgomery County Council District 6 _____

Number of Years Lived in that District: ___33_____

Party Affiliation: ___Democrat_____

Relevant Non-governmental Professional Experience/Positions Held: 2nd Vice President of the Wheaton and Kensington Chamber of Commerce, Realtor and GCAAR member, Owner Los Chorros Restaurant, Owner Simply Bliss Hair Salon, President of the Montgomery County Latino Restaurant Association, Board of Trustees for Montgomery College, Board of Committee for Montgomery.

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. 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?

I believe we need to create a much better business environment and work closely with our business community leaders to see where they need the most help. We must stop passing legislation that puts the onus on the business to enforce county laws. Currently, as a chamber, we have had to push back against the vaccine passport that DC implemented for 2 weeks. This would have had police officers enforcing a vaccine passport rule that they themselves for the majority are not following. More recently we had a healthy kids meal mandate law proposed and approved by the council. We must start reaching out to the business community to get their input on decisions that affect us directly. I believe that we have no representation on the Council right now from people that understand that it is to run a business. Council member Andrew Friedson seems like is the only ally right now for small business. We must also look into creating avenues for access to capital for small business. I am currently working with Bethesda Green and One Montgomery to bring a Sustainable Innovation Zone to the Wheaton area. We are requesting a \$500,000 grant from the Federal government to create this program targeted to underserved communities. I also believe that we need to have a business navigator program that will work to help new and existing businesses succeed. This department would oversee personally reaching out to different industries with experts in that industry that will work to help them grow and in turn increase our tax base.
 - What will you do to support business should the COVID pandemic remain with us?

I think that we need to find ways to reduce the expenses and fees for business. As a business owner in Montgomery County, I feel like we continue to have more and more fees put on us. Our costs keep rising, plus the crazy amount of inflation makes it very hard to run a business these days. Our payroll costs have gone up significantly with the minimum wage increase and many small businesses are struggling to keep up. I agree with the minimum wage increase, but we must make sure that the small businesses see an increase in revenue to cover

this burden. If the increase is not there as promised, then we must focus on decreasing the government-imposed liabilities.

- 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)?

I think we should look at even another round of grants to help combat inflation. The majority of landlords did not offer rent assistance to their tenants, me included. This is one of the biggest burdens on many of the businesses as many weren't even using their space. I do understand though that the many landlords also have their own liabilities to pay and had their hands tied. I do believe we should look into future grants for telework, testing kits, and masks. The last grant we received for telework was for \$1,300 in my case. Though I do appreciate the effort, it really does not make a dent in our expenses when my overhead is well over \$15,000 per month.

2. 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?

I believe that we need to be working more closely with a lot of the large companies to see exactly what type of employees they want so that we can structure our workforce development to meet their needs. I currently sit on the Board of Workforce Development for the county. I am also on the Board of Trustees for Montgomery College and the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence. These three boards that I sit on are connected from kindergarten to higher education. This is something that is not by accident. I am very focused on making sure we concentrate on creating a highly skilled workforce that lives and plays here in Montgomery County. When Amazon was looking for a headquarters, one of the failings was that they believed the trained workforce was lacking here in Montgomery County. We need to take a holistic approach to this that will also include communities that have been traditionally left out. We have an opportunity to make sure that our black and brown communities have access to these programs. I believe focusing on a robust workforce development program will definitely help bring those jobs here to Montgomery County, especially those in the IT and Biotech. United Therapeutics in Downtown Silver Spring is a shining example of what could be.

- What will you do to revitalize our daytime economy in Silver Spring?

The daytime economy gets revitalized once we start focusing on bringing more jobs to Silver Spring. We have the same challenge in Wheaton right now with a very government building in the middle of our downtown. We need to work on marketing efforts that highlight not only large chains, but the great local small businesses that are the character of our community. We need to make our areas more walkable as well. Pedestrians need to feel safe to walk around which makes an area more of a destination to explore.

3. 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?

As in my previous answer, I do believe that walkability is extremely important, but it is but one piece of the puzzle. If people don't have a place to walk to, then there is no benefit or incentive for anyone. I am a small business owner and I truly believe in investing in your local small business owners that live in the county and pay taxes in the county. Even if you are a chain like IHOP in Wheaton, the owner lives here in Wheaton and owns two homes that he pays property taxes on in Wheaton. I think that we need to invest in making sure that we protect our local business owners and give them the tools that are necessary to thrive here in our county.

4. 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?

To be honest, DTSS is not in my District, so I only know about crime from what I have heard in talking to my friend Reemberto Rodriguez and Jacob Newman. I do believe that we need to have a police presence though because there has been an uptick in crime in DTSS and in Wheaton. We have had a significant uptick in

commercial crime in Wheaton as well. To decide whether it should be a substation or a full police station I would have to have a more in-depth conversation with local leaders and the police in that area.

- 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?

We do not live in a bubble here in Montgomery County. When we make laws that affect our businesses, we must always analyze what the surrounding jurisdictions are doing. During the pandemic the county closed the dining rooms in restaurants. At one point in January 2021, all the local jurisdictions opened the dining rooms except for Montgomery County. We saw an exodus of customers going to all the surrounding jurisdictions and local businesses lost tons of revenue. I think that we should not pass any laws that would give an advantage to business in surrounding jurisdictions, especially in DTSS where the border is so close.

5. 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.

Back in 2012 I worked on supporting and testifying for the Small Business Assistance Program that would provide technical assistance and grants to businesses on the Wheaton Triangle during the upcoming redevelopment of the downtown that would take away all their parking. This bill help save almost 100 small businesses here on the triangle. All a business had to do was prove that their revenue had decreased due to the redevelopment and the county would offer a grant up to \$150,000 over 3 years. I didn't just help pass the law, I helped tweak it and offered feedback so that they could roll out the program.

Currently as I spoke about in the first question, I am currently working with Bethesda Green and One Montgomery to bring a Sustainable Innovation Zone to the Wheaton area. This would allow costs savings to current businesses and offer solar panels and other green saving opportunities to local landlords. This would also encourage the creation of new businesses in the area that would focus on sustainable and environmental focused businesses. There is a good opportunity to lay the foundation for the jobs and industry of tomorrow.

- Please describe your plan for increasing the tax base – rather than tax rates – in the County.

My plan to increase the tax base is to focus on workforce development to attract companies that offer good paying jobs. We need to start from elementary school to give our children the tools to be ready for the jobs of tomorrow. Biotech, IT, and Green jobs are what the future brings. For all those that are reanalyzing their careers after the pandemic we must also make sure that they have the ability to get the training and help to find a much better paying job.

We must also focus on those looking to start their own business or expand their existing business. We have seen companies like CAVA, United Therapeutics, Don Pollo, and many others that have very successful business that are thriving here in Montgomery County. We must make sure that we offer the tools to all our local companies to grow while we wait for those big fish companies to also want to be here.

- 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)?

It is still taking way to long for people to open businesses here in Montgomery County. We must make sure that we focus on streamlining the process and making sure that we work on speeding up the permitting process. We are still having issues with inspectors that come in have different opinions than the previous inspector. This lack of standardization leads to delays. We also have a program that will help with rent subsidies for the first year to companies that relocate here. We must advertise and expand these types of incentives.

6. 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.

One specific example that I am very passionate about regarding access to capital is that I believe the County should have a program to guarantee loans for small local businesses that want to expand. If you have a successful IT company that you started here in Montgomery County and you can demonstrate financial viability and potential for growth, then you should be able to have access to capital. There is not much risk for the county because tax revenue should come almost immediately once the expansion occurs with income tax, sales tax, property tax for the

commercial space, etc. The Latino Economic Development Company already does this on a micro loan level for the county, but we should really start looking at working with our local business owners who have the potential to generate much more income for the county.

With the recordation tax, I believe we should not have policies that would punish a smaller small business owner for trying to increase the tax base for the county.

The third thing I would do is create the Business Ambassador program that would have experts in each industry that have worked in that industry. Too often we get “experts” or business liaisons that have no real-world experience. You can have someone who studied hospitality at Harvard, but I would much rather have a manager who ran a restaurant for 20 years. We need people that will help you find a bank to get a loan for growth or expansion. Someone that will help you with procurement contracts, and so many other things that would be beneficial to the business and to increasing the county’s tax base.

7. 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?

Currently I sit on the board of Trustees for Montgomery College. We are very much on our way to creating a college campus in east county. I believe that this will be a catalyst for bringing more people and jobs to the east county. The other major initiative that we need is to expand public transportation to the east county. Many of the business owners that I have talked to in the east county complain that they cannot find employees for their businesses because many people don’t drive, and the buses don’t run late up there. I think we need to put more money into attracting business to the east county, but we need to invest in the infrastructure first.

8. 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.

I believe that it is very important to have metrics in place with any plan of action. We need to make sure that if we are making policy changes that we have clear indicators as to whether we are moving the needle in the right direction. If we place bicycle lanes and dedicated bus routes, we must proactively promote them to ensure that we are in fact getting vehicles off the roads. Downtown Silver Spring, like Wheaton, is challenged by having to wait on MDSHA to implement changes. We sit at intersections that are extremely busy. I have worked with SHA and will continue to work with MDSHA and MCDOT to make sure that we work towards making these areas safer and more walkable to attract people to our downtown areas.

- What is your proposal to balance this equation -roads, trains, buses, roads, parking garages? Need all to get people to work?

We need way more reliable, efficient, and expansive public transportation. Most people will rather take their car in to work if taking the bus or train will take them just as much time or more to get to work. We need better option and if that means dedicated bus lanes on certain roads then we must build them if we can ascertain that this will indeed reduce the number of cars on the roads. I worked in DTSS from 2000-2004 while I lived in Gaithersburg. I drove 270 every day but some days I would take the MARC train. The train was good but I was very limited with the times I could take it, so it wasn’t a viable option. The Metro would take me an hour and a half to take because the redline ran through all of DC before getting to DTSS. If I had a more viable public transportation option I definitely would have taken that. As for parking garages, I think we need to seriously consider public/private partnerships to develop lots that could add more parking as well as development that could bring more business to the area.

- 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 think that we should be seriously looking to using the same model that we used in Wheaton with the Small Business Assistance Program to save these local businesses. I have a cousin that owns El Gavilan on Flower Way. She tells me the struggles she is having with this. We need to make sure that if there are policy changes that directly affect our businesses owners, that we take full responsibility. In Wheaton we did that with grants that helped those businesses survive.

9. 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?
100% and this is one of the major reasons that I am running. We have so many civically engaged residents here in Montgomery County and this includes business owners like me. It is a shame that for the most part we as business owners are not consulted about decisions that directly impact us. I am the President of the Montgomery County Latino Restaurant Association and do you think that the councilmembers that proposed this legislation even reached out to me, of course not. We need to be part of the discussion because we have the ability to provide input that could make the legislation even stronger and more effective in most cases.
 - Would you require this analysis to include formal input from the Montgomery County Economic Development Corporation? Why or why not?
I don't understand why you would leave the MCEDC out of the discussion. At the end of the day everything must fit into the budget and has to be financially viable. The legislation must pass through a racial equity lens, but I think we should always have all those that are affected to be able to at least be heard.
 - 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?
100% I would. During the pandemic I was on several committees and witness the important input that the local chambers of commerce provided. We are the ears on the ground to the community. We as the Wheaton & Kensington Chamber of Commerce were not consulted on anything directly and it boggles my mind that having access and direct input into the business community that we are not taken into consideration.
10. 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?
- I believe that we need to focus our efforts on job creation, investing in our local business owners while we search for those "big fish" companies. I personally believe that while we keep trying to attract those big companies, we have lost focus on the companies that are currently supporting the tax base that we currently have. We must continue to try to attract those big companies with a highly trained workforce, but we must also not lose focus on those that have been committed for decades to making Montgomery County one of the richest counties in the country. In the next 5 years I believe we will have a boom in the Biotech and IT sector, but we must focus on making sure that we make our county attractive for new companies coming in from outside. We must also invest in our own homegrown entrepreneurs that traditionally have been very innovative but been lured to surrounding jurisdictions.