

Latino Democratic Club Questions and Answers

Graciela Rivera-Oven, Candidate for County Council at Large

1) What do you think are the top three priorities of the Latino community in Montgomery County and why?

As with all other communities in Montgomery County, Latino families' priorities concentrate on their home economy and their children's education. However, in these particularly difficult political times, the Latino community is also experiencing a collective assault by the federal government on our mixed status families, and so the politics of immigration are also of major importance today.

- a. **Economy/Jobs:** Montgomery County is home to the one of the most educated Latino communities in the country, while many of our families are still sustained by their own small businesses. We have the fastest growing business start-up population, establishing businesses at much higher rates than other communities, yet this hasn't necessarily translated to higher wages. Our businesses are highly concentrated in the provision of services and we also have the lowest rates of local, state, and national government-business contracting. This means our Latino businesses are highly susceptible to the whims of the overall economy. We remain a business community in need of more resources; capital, tech, and human resources to expand our investment and hiring capabilities, as well as more educational opportunities for individuals to increase their earning potential. The County can facilitate existing programs to help expand individual and start-up stability and long-term success. This can ensure Montgomery County continues to be the thriving, diverse community we all love.

- b. **Education:** Our Latino children have several challenges within our educational system that must be addressed; a lack of access to early childhood education, a significant and growing achievement gap, the stigma that English as a Second Language students often face (which may also result in compounding their growing achievement gap), and most recently, the potential trauma experienced by children attending MCPS that were once unaccompanied minors crossing the border as well as their susceptibility to falling victims to gang activities. I am running for office precisely to ensure that we address these very real challenges that our children face in our schools. We must be more vigilant in addressing mental health and behavioral issues for our children, and at the same time enhance their safety both at school and at home, Today's political climate is having a negative impact on our families and children and threatening their stability. In order to continue to be the economically strong and viable County that we are, we must ensure and enhance all of our children's education.

- c. Immigration: With the current susceptibility to detention and deportation, Latino families across our County are living in fear of being separated and consequently economically and emotionally affected if caught by ICE's dragnet. As County officials we must look to what other similar jurisdictions are doing to strengthen our ability to protect those who may fall victim to the cruel policies of the federal government. One such strategy may be in our County's ability to create public-private partnerships to create a legal defense fund to ensure those family members without legal representation, and which are law-abiding working men and women without a criminal background, can have access to attorneys that will advocate for them and help keep families together.

2) Do you believe it is important to support Latino candidates?

As a Latina candidate, I certainly do. Councilmember Nancy Navarro has been our champion precisely because she understands the challenges facing Latino families. We need more similar voices to address our growing, ethnically diverse County, especially now in the face of the current political climate in our nation. Supporting Latino candidates is supporting our community needs and ensuring that we have a place at the table that is in parity with and representative of the ethnic makeup of our County.

3) What steps are you making to ensure the diversity and cultural and linguistic proficiency of your campaign staff, and if elected, your staff/cabinet?

I have been a very strong supporter of protecting and promoting the diversity of Montgomery County, and I have a life-long advocacy proven record of improving the health, education, and safety of all Montgomery County families and our most vulnerable and diverse populations. I am committed to continuing my strong advocacy work and plan to recruit and hire office staff that are as passionate and devoted as I am to social causes. As a Latina and Spanish-speaking candidate I plan to have a staff that reflects my background and that can communicate effectively and appropriately with my constituents in their native language. Understanding the importance of the mother tongue, I will also reach out and try to hire staff with links to and communication with other minority communities.

4) What steps will you take to engage with your constituency, including those of limited English proficiency?

A strong reason for my candidacy is to ensure that the Council is as diverse and as engaged with as many constituents as possible. Aside from establishing a culturally and linguistically diverse office staff, I also plan to enhance the County's outreach efforts to strengthen our services with those most in need. I will also support programs that teach English and grow them so we don't have a waiting list of 3,000 eager adult learners without a resource to learn English.

5) Latino children are the fastest-growing segment of the child population. What initiatives are necessary to ensure that these children and their families have access to high-quality, affordable childcare and early education?

We must do better to expand access to early childhood education. We all know the statistics and overall life improvement to our children's education with just an investment on early childhood education alone. The viability of our County to continue to attract a world-class economy is pinned directly to the ability of our schools to provide the best education possible. The foundation to these objectives is precisely early childhood programs for the most number of kids, so that we can begin to minimize achievement gaps. The initiatives necessary begin with prioritization of the budget to ensure the Council is funding more slots for students. We must also innovate to work with the business community to open more opportunities to early childhood education in locations where parents have close access from their place of employment. I believe we have the human resources within the County to expand early childhood education, we just need to get creative so that together with our business community we are facilitating these types of programs for all working parents.

6) Do you agree that the achievement/opportunity gap is the socio-economic imperative of our time?

Yes. I am certain that in order to maintain an economically strong, safe, and vibrant Montgomery County, we must begin with the foundation; access to early childhood education for more students to begin closing the achievement gap in K-12. Greater access to resources that ensure each child has a safe family environment is also imperative, including access to positive mental health outcomes for both children and parents—this is particularly urgent granted the inability by the federal government to deal with the easy access to guns and school massacre crisis. The opportunity gap for our older student population is also of great importance, and in that respect, I also think the Council can play an important role in facilitating learning opportunities with private-public partnerships. This isn't just a crucial effort to maintain our quality of life, it's as you've stated, a socio-economic imperative now.

7) What do you feel is the responsibility of the office you seek with respect to TPS and DACA?

The Montgomery County Council has made an effort in partnership with Montgomery County's Chief of Police to curb the impact of the federal government's mandates in regards to immigration (mitigate requests for citizenship documentation during traffic stops, minimize calls to federal ICE authorities upon apprehension of an individual, and increase community policing that strengthens the trust of the community).

However, due to differences of opinion on the matter from other offices, pressure on police has increased. Our impact as County Council members will be greater if we align with the Councils of other Counties, and together with the Montgomery County Delegation and delegates of those other Counties, we can have a more forceful push to support legislation like Delegate Maricé Morales' (D-19) Trust Act, which she proposed last year. Greater coalition-building across jurisdictions, levels of government, non-profit, community and business sectors will build the strength we need to push back against the destructive and cruel efforts by the current federal government against our immigrant families. We must demonstrate an unbreakable, jurisdiction-wide force to put greater pressure on those with a different mindset to join us.

8) Latino entrepreneurs are starting small businesses faster than the rest of the startup population and becoming a bigger part of the total U.S. market. How do you plan to support and engage Latino small business owners?

As a small business owner, I mentioned in a previous answer in this questionnaire (#1, Economy), it is a fact that Latino businesses are being created at a faster pace than those of other communities. However, because a significant proportion of those businesses are providers of services, Latino businesses are left to the whims of the economy. The housing bubble that burst between 2008 and 2012 is a good example: Latino businesses in the construction industry were among the most vulnerable to an economy that saw house sales drop dramatically. Consequently, personal economies were so impacted, that they were also victims of the foreclosure crisis. We all lose in a crisis like an increase in foreclosures, because County government then loses our tax base and services are impacted.

One way the County Council can help reinforce against the effects of a rollercoaster economy is to increase County - Minority Business contracting. I think we can find qualified contractors that would save County dollars, which would offset costs and provide greater stability in the long run. We must do a better job of matching our spending on infrastructure with businesses within the County.

9) You have the option to include any other proposals/initiatives you have worked on or will be championing during your term.

I am very passionate about improving minority health outcomes throughout the County. I've worked with all of the County's Minority Health Initiatives to ensure they have the resources necessary to do their work and make our communities healthier.

I have also built coalitions to ensure growth in our healthcare centers, large and small, from Holy Cross to Suburban to Mary's Center and other community clinics. I hope to bring greater advocacy as a Councilmember to ensure we improve minority health across the board.