

Dr. Laura Gilchrest
Prince George's County Council at Large

Questions for County Council Candidates

- What strategies will you use to increase transparency of council proceedings to Residents?

I'll improve transparency and accountability and repair trust and participation within our communities through public processes, community-driven policy, and accessible meetings with advanced notice and outreach. I'll ensure that our websites are up to the minute, accessible to everyone, and include working links, and an easily searchable digest of all proposed, pending, and passed legislation. I'll also maintain an open door/phone policy and regularly meet with county civic associations and civil society groups to share updates, solicit feedback, and share community concerns and demands with fellow council members.

- What skills and experience do you have to encourage other legislators to adopt strategies for transparency?

I'm a professor of human rights and ethics and have been involved in organizations, movements, and fields where cooperative governance and consensus-based decision-making are expected. I use asset-based and common ground approaches to group work and consensus building. I will practice transparency and accountability and hold my colleagues to the same standards of good governance. I also have strong skills in productive conflict resolution that comes with the process of cooperative governance and consensus-based decision-making processes and are normal parts of community-driven policy and collaboration, especially in highly diverse communities across class, politics, education, ethnicity, religion, and other categories that make up our amazing Prince George's County communities.

Our Concerns

I. Mega Data Centers

- a. Can county-level zoning laws protect communities from unwanted development of mega data centers?

YES. Under Section VII and its subsections, the county council has authority and duty to determine, review, and approve or deny zoning, changes, and applications for special exceptions. The county council can reject any proposals by the county executive for data centers and can also propose an indefinite moratorium or permanent ban. The county council is also responsible for approving or denying proposals for zoning exceptions and developing and approving zoning laws in conjunction with the planning commission. The council can also determine use of space details and permits, for example restricting development to community-centered projects like commerce, residential, or repurposing existing properties like the Landover Mall or rural zones for specific purposes that explicitly exclude data centers or related projects.

- b. How are data centers defined? Can the council develop a cut point of

public resource usage (e.g., water and electric power grid), beyond which the project can be forbidden?

Data centers are not currently defined in the County Charter or in the updated Zoning Ordinance in any way. There are currently no regulations or guidelines in the existing Zoning Ordinance or County Charter that refer to data centers or any type of development that data centers might all under. The Council has the explicit authority to determine any limitations on water and electric power grid usage, or to explicitly forbid the construction and operation of data centers in the county. I would absolutely propose updates and amendments to the existing charter and zoning regulations to prevent construction of data centers.

II. Support for Small and Local Businesses

a. What incentives can you advocate for that will help small businesses open, stay open, and be able to fend off huge, billionaire-owned Companies?

Prioritizing small business development over large corporate interests through improvements to local logistics and supply chains, and housing and transit development that follow smart growth principles can help ensure that small businesses have sufficient foot and commercial traffic to be successful. The Economic Development Corporation and our small and urban business incubators are helpful and free or low-cost resources to help entrepreneurs and existing small businesses navigate applications, business plan development, training, and other supports that already exist. Large corporations in our county typically are not invested or active in our neighborhoods and do not currently generate significant economic or tax revenue. I have a tax plan that includes an *effective* tax on large corporations to ensure that they are contributing to our communities and tax base proportionately and are engaging in pro-labor and other best practices. We currently have a practice of paying for the privilege of attracting extractive large, billionaire-owned companies through tax incentives or other mechanisms, when we see little return on our investment or the financial promises those companies make in order to gain access to our county.

III. ICE Invasion of Our County

a. Will you pledge to speak out against ICE's harassment and arrest of county residents?

I have been a loud and active presence against ICE in our communities and provided written testimony at the county, state, and federal levels in support of restrictions on their activities and disbanding ICE and returning authority to Customs and Border Patrol. Immigrants are not an enemy or a problem to be removed from our country, they are integral parts of our communities and have rights! I will continue to be an active defender of our immigrant residents. Where it is within the authority of the council to do so, I will propose and enact legislation that protects and recognizes our residents' human and civil rights. I will also use the power of my seat on the council to promote and fight for legislation with the Prince George's delegation and the rest of the State General Assembly, as well as with our representatives and senators in Congress.

b. What is your plan to prevent ICE from renting/buying space in buildings in the County (as they are trying to do in Hyattsville) to use as they choose, for logistics, staging, or detention centers, for example.

On the county council we can limit uses of properties or the types of properties that can be near social service and education facilities through legislation and zoning regulations. For example, KNLB is attempting to broker lease or sale of a building in Hyattsville that also houses a SNAP office and Prince George's County Community College, which would immediately threaten access to these resources and the safety of immigrant residents. Similar to regulations that dictate where and when alcohol or tobacco shops can be built, the county has the authority to exercise similar discretion in the interest of the public about whether buildings can be used as staging, detention, transfer, intake, or any other purpose

How will you encourage the Council to use their platform to speak out against ICE's illegal kidnapping of our residents?

I will enthusiastically speak out against ICE's illegal activities and presence in our communities and work with fellow council members to present a united front through ongoing discussions, holding them accountable to residents, and proposing/establishing a county-wide advisory council for ICE oversight and strategies to remove them from our county/state.

IV. Protect our County from the Federal Government's plan to sell land at the Goddard Space Flight Center, USDA, and other federally owned land.

a. What tools are there to prevent sale to unwelcome buyers?

One option that has been used to protect BARC for example is establishing zoning rules for those tracts of land and the lands around them that would functionally and effectively limit potential buyers for using them for undesirable purposes. The BARC area is designated open or green space, so future development must comply with those rules. An existing proposal on the council would prohibit use of lands for jails or other types of detention centers. That said, federal authority over the sale of land is controlled by Congress. The state of Maryland is attempting to purchase the properties to retain control over them, but is not the final authority. We can also pressure our congressional representatives to prevent the closure and sale of critical facilities, fully fund them, and/or to grant our state the right of first refusal to be able to buy the properties in the public interest.

b. Can the county order studies on the environmental impact and use of county resources by a potential buyer before any sale is completed?

In the event the county requested studies, they would be non-binding to any potential buyer. Federally owned property is subject to sovereign authority and exempts them from local zoning and related regulations. The EPA, such as it is presently, would have that authority.

V. Keep Prince George's County affordable and livable for residents

a. Property taxes are skyrocketing and the housing market is inaccessible to the majority of residents. Infrastructure such as roads, schools and

emergency services have not kept pace with new housing developments.

How do we grow our county responsibly without leaving people behind?

There are a few reasons that property taxes and other taxes on residents continue to rise despite us rarely seeing a significant change in the services or conditions of our aged infrastructure. County councils to date have not diversified the tax base nor prioritized infrastructure improvements in budget decisions over housing developments that both outpace and overwhelm our existing roads, public transportation, utilities, schools, parks and social service capacities. To address the budget priorities I would seek the immediate hiring of a county auditor, as the position has been unfilled since the resignation of the previous auditor in mid 2025. We have not had a county-wide budget audit in thirty years in order to know where and how money has been spent, mispent, unspent, or how our priorities have been reflected in this spending. We can make much better decisions with a transparent accounting of our books, and prioritize those most critical projects like infrastructure improvement, public school and transportation investments and stop taking loans to pay property developers to build sprawl. To address the tax base and long-term revenue to protect our county budget from federal or state fluctuations, I would introduce bills to institute a land value tax, and call for corporate tax fairness policies. These are straightforward effective bills that would generate and redistribute a significant amount of revenue throughout our public goods and services, like housing grants and more funding for first time buyer programs **and** allow for residential property tax relief.