

Montgomery County Muslim Council

MoCo Council Candidates Questionnaire, 2026 Primary

Response of Lelia True, Candidate for Montgomery County Council At-Large

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Thank you to the Montgomery County Muslim Council for compiling these questions and for your civic engagement work. The Muslim community has been a vital part of this county for decades, building institutions, serving neighbors, and contributing across every sector. You deserve a Council that takes your concerns seriously, not just at election time. My responses follow.

Question 1: Civil Rights

Many MoCo residents who are members of the Arab and Muslim community have engaged in public protests but have unfortunately experienced a curtailing of their first amendment rights to free speech, including doxxing, student and teacher suspensions, and unequal response by local police. (1) What are your thoughts on the county's response thus far? What has worked? What has not worked? (2) What specific steps will you take to protect the free speech of residents and students, regardless of their positions on issues? What is your stance on the county's response to peaceful advocacy and protests? How will you protect the free speech rights of residents on local and global issues?

On the county's response so far, my honest answer is that it has been uneven, and that unevenness has fallen hardest on Arab and Muslim residents. When some protests are met with measured restraint and others, often by your community, are met with disproportionate police presence, faster discipline in schools, and a tolerance for doxxing that would be unacceptable if it targeted other groups, that is a civil rights problem regardless of how anyone feels about the underlying issue being protested. The First Amendment does not have an asterisk for unpopular speech. That is the entire point of it.

What has worked: Montgomery County does have on paper one of the better local frameworks in the region, including protected status under county law, reasonably strong public accommodation rules, and a school system that nominally protects student speech. What has not worked is the gap between the framework and the lived experience. When a teacher is suspended for a social media post about Gaza but a teacher posting equivalent commentary on another conflict is not, residents notice. When students are disciplined for school walkouts on one cause but not another, students notice. And when police presence at a peaceful protest looks one way for one community and another way for another, that is the kind of thing that erodes trust for a generation.

Specifically, as Councilmember I will: (1) push for transparent, public reporting on MCPD's protest response practices, including staffing levels, use of less lethal weapons, arrests, and citations, disaggregated so we can actually see whether response is consistent across protest topics and demographics; (2) work with MCPS to ensure that student and teacher discipline related to political

speech follows clear, content neutral standards, with an appeal mechanism that does not depend on the goodwill of a single principal; (3) treat doxxing as the serious civil rights and safety issue it is, including pressing the State's Attorney and county HR practices on what protections county employees have when they are doxxed for their political views, and supporting state level legislation on doxxing where county authority is limited; (4) be a Councilmember who shows up to peaceful protests across the political spectrum and makes clear by my presence that constituents have a right to be heard.

I will also be honest with you. I will not always agree with what is being said at every protest. That is not the point. My job is to protect the right to say it, and to make sure the county does the same.

Question 2: Non-Profit Support

Many Muslim-led non-profits, like MCMF (Montgomery County Muslim Foundation), provide critical social services that the county cannot. Some may not even be aware of grant funding opportunities let alone have experience applying for competitive grants. How will you ensure an equitable approach to communicating and granting funding for faith-based community organizations?

This is a problem I have been talking about across this campaign in my conversations with Nonprofit Montgomery and other community partners. The county too often acts as if the only nonprofits that exist are the ones with full time grant writers and longstanding relationships at the Council Office Building. That model systematically excludes the community rooted organizations, including Muslim led, Black led, and immigrant led nonprofits, that often deliver the most direct, trusted services.

Concretely, I will push for: (1) a single plain language grant portal, modeled on the kind of one stop digital window I have proposed for small business permitting, where every county and county administered grant opportunity is listed in one place, with deadlines, eligibility, and application materials available in the languages our communities actually speak; (2) proactive outreach to faith based and community led organizations in advance of grant cycles, with the county doing the relationship building, not just waiting for applications to arrive; (3) free or subsidized grant writing technical assistance, through Nonprofit Montgomery and other capacity building partners, so smaller organizations are not effectively excluded by the cost of the application process itself; (4) multi year funding agreements where appropriate, so that organizations like MCMF can plan and serve consistently rather than reapplying every year just to keep the lights on; (5) transparent, public reporting on which organizations receive county grants, broken down in a way that lets us see whether faith based and community led organizations are getting an equitable share.

My background is in operations. I know the difference between an open process and an open process that actually feels open from the outside. My job is to close that gap.

Question 3: Housing and Displacement

(1) What do you propose to prevent current skyrocketing housing costs across Montgomery County, especially with residents facing record high interest rates? (2) What is your plan to prevent the displacement of immigrant and low-income families, who have been disproportionately impacted?

Housing affordability is my top priority, and I have been clear throughout this campaign that we have an affordability crisis driven by the simple fact that we have made it too hard and too expensive to build the kinds of homes people actually need. A household needs roughly \$270,000 in combined income to afford a median priced home in Montgomery County while the median couple earns around \$131,000. That gap is not sustainable, and high interest rates have only made it worse.

On costs, I will: (1) accelerate the More Housing N.O.W. framework and cut the permitting delays that slow housing production, applying the same efficiency standards I have proposed for business permitting; (2) spearhead an Essential Worker Housing Initiative, a public private partnership with major county employers (hospitals, school systems, tech firms) to fund and build workforce housing for the people who keep this county running; (3) increase height and density allowances in transit adjacent areas where we have already invested heavily in infrastructure like the Purple Line, so that zoning reflects that investment; (4) expand down payment and closing cost assistance, with priority for first generation homebuyers, because the single biggest predictor of who owns a home is whether their parents owned a home, and many immigrant families have been working their way up that wall on their own.

On preventing displacement of immigrant and low income families, I will fight for: (1) right of first refusal for tenants when buildings are sold; (2) relocation assistance and right to return for residents in any redevelopment that uses county resources; (3) expanded rental assistance with streamlined applications, in multiple languages, so immigrant families do not lose homes to a paperwork problem they could have solved with a translator; (4) targeted property tax relief for long time homeowners in rapidly appreciating neighborhoods so that seniors and working families are not taxed out of homes they have owned for decades; (5) infrastructure investment (sidewalks, transit, broadband, parks) in immigrant and low income communities, so that thriving in place is a real option, not just a slogan.

I have personally tried to find housing for teachers and have watched talented people leave this county because they could not afford to stay. The same forces are pushing immigrant families out. They just rarely get the same press attention.

Question 4: Transit

For many families, transit is a lifeline. What are your specific plans to improve the reliability of public transportation (such as the Ride-On bus system and completion of the Purple Line, and more), as well as pedestrian safety in all parts of the county, but especially in the Up-County region?

Transit reliability is an equity issue. When the bus is late or does not come, the person who pays the cost is rarely the policymaker. It is the home health aide, the restaurant worker, the parent trying to pick up a

kid before late pickup fees, the student riding to community college. A lot of those riders in this county are immigrant and Muslim families, and the county has not treated their time as if it has the same value as anyone else's.

On reliability and service: (1) push for dedicated, sustained funding for Ride On, including driver recruitment, retention, and competitive pay so we can actually run scheduled service; (2) champion full buildout of the Bus Rapid Transit network along Routes 355, 29, Veirs Mill, University, and New Hampshire, the Up County and East County corridors where families are most dependent on transit; (3) hold the state to its commitments and schedule on the Purple Line, and advocate hard for station area planning that maximizes walkable density around each stop; (4) push for real time transit information and dignified bus shelter improvements in underserved communities; (5) require that frequency, span, and reliability metrics be reported publicly by route, so we can actually see where service is failing rather than relying on aggregate numbers that hide the worst routes.

On pedestrian safety, especially Up County: (1) dedicated funding to close sidewalk gaps along major corridors and around schools. There are stretches of the Up County where families are forced to walk in the road, which is unacceptable; (2) protected bike lanes and safe crossings on key routes that connect neighborhoods to transit and commercial centers; (3) traffic calming around mosques, schools, and community centers that draw foot traffic, including lower speed limits where appropriate, raised crosswalks, better lighting, and signal timing that gives pedestrians a real chance to cross safely; (4) require complete streets infrastructure as a condition of new development approvals, so density does not outpace the active transportation network needed to serve it; (5) target traffic safety capital investment to the corridors with the worst pedestrian crash data, not just the corridors with the loudest neighborhood associations.

Question 5: Healthcare Access

(1) What legislative measures will you support to bridge the gap in healthcare access for uninsured or under-insured residents in our community? (2) What legislation could you introduce or expand to bolster funding for free or reduced cost health clinics run by nonprofits in our county, such as medical clinics run by MCC (Muslim Community Center) and ICM (Islamic Center of Maryland)?

My father is in MoCo hospice care, and my brother has struggled with addiction. Health access is not abstract to me. I have watched what it costs families when the system shows up late or shows up differently for different people. As Councilmember I will fight to bridge the gap for uninsured and under insured residents through:

First, sustained and expanded funding for the Montgomery Cares program and the Maternity Partnership program, which together form the backbone of safety net primary and prenatal care for uninsured residents in this county. These programs need predictable, multi year funding, not budget cycle uncertainty that forces them to scramble every year.

Second, support for community health workers and culturally competent care navigation, with intentional partnerships with trusted institutions including mosques, churches, and immigrant community organizations, so that residents who would never walk into an unfamiliar government office will get the care they need from people they trust.

Third, language access as a baseline requirement, not an afterthought. Every county funded clinic and every safety net program should have meaningful access in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Bengali, Pashto, Somali, and the other languages MoCo's Muslim community actually speaks, not just a phone line that connects to a translator after a forty minute wait.

Fourth, mental health parity and culturally responsive mental health resources, including for Muslim residents who face specific stigma and specific clinical needs that are not always well served by mainstream programs.

On clinics specifically, yes, I will champion expanded county support for the free and reduced cost clinics operated by MCC, ICM, and other faith based and community led providers. These clinics are doing work the county cannot do as well or as cheaply, with the trust the county does not have. As Councilmember I will: (1) push for a dedicated, recurring line in the county budget for community run clinics, with multi year grant agreements; (2) support capital and equipment funding so these clinics can expand capacity, not just maintain it; (3) integrate community run clinics formally into the Montgomery Cares network so referrals, patient records, and reimbursement work properly across providers; (4) provide back office and grant writing assistance through the same nonprofit support infrastructure I have already proposed, so smaller clinics are not penalized for not having a full administrative staff.

Question 6: County Budget

(1) Do you support tax cuts, tax increases, or maintaining the status quo? (2) Regardless of your approach, how would you propose paying for many of the county's programs?

I do not start from a tax cut versus tax increase framing. I start from this question: what does the county actually need to deliver, and is the public getting honest value for the dollars it is already paying? My corporate background at Comcast, McKinsey, and US West taught me that the answer is almost always that there is real waste before there is a real revenue problem. At Comcast I cut \$12 million in waste while delivering 10 to 34 percent efficiency gains. That same discipline has not been consistently applied to the county budget, and it should be.

So my honest position: I am not running on a promise of new tax increases. I am running on a promise to make the dollars we already collect work harder before asking residents to send more. At the same time, I am not going to pretend that across the board tax cuts are responsible during a period of federal workforce shocks, growing service demand, and serious fiscal pressure. That would be a campaign slogan, not a budget.

On how to pay for programs:

First, grow the tax base by growing the economy. The fastest way to fund schools, transit, and the safety net is to stop losing employers to Northern Virginia. A Business Express permitting portal, competitive employer incentives tied to real job creation, and serious investment in the I-270 life sciences corridor are not nice to haves. They are revenue strategies. More good jobs at good wages means more property tax, more income tax, and less pressure on the safety net.

Second, cut waste before cutting services. Every department should be subject to the same kind of operating review I ran in the private sector: where are we paying for redundant systems, where are we using contractors instead of in house staff for the wrong reasons, where are vendor relationships costing more than they should. That work is unglamorous and it is also where the money is.

Third, prioritize. When resources are limited, the most vulnerable come first. I will protect direct services to residents, including schools, mental health, safety net healthcare, and housing assistance, before administrative overhead and deferred capital that can wait.

Fourth, transparency. Residents in this county have repeatedly been surprised by mid year budget choices. I will push for a transparent community process to set and communicate budget priorities up front, with clear consensus building before cuts, so families and community organizations are not finding out about decisions after they have been made.

Fifth, when targeted revenue is justified, be honest about it. I would rather have one honest conversation with residents about a specific need than disguise revenue choices through fees and surcharges that hit working families hardest. As Head of School during COVID I had to make hard budget choices in front of families, faculty, and a board: protect direct student services and staff compensation, defer the rest. I will bring that same transparency to the Council.

Respectfully submitted,

Lelia True

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