

Who's
Running?

2026 HOWARD COUNTY CANDIDATE GUIDE



DEMOCRAT

DISTRICT 1
JAMES HANDLEY
HOWARD COUNTY COUNCIL

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

What is your vision for strengthening Howard County's competitiveness for business investment, job creation, and private sector growth?

Howard County is home to a highly educated populace and is centrally located between two major Metro areas. In order to keep Howard County competitive we must ensure that we increase investment in our nation-leading schools and teachers, redevelop in our aging community hubs all while preserving our Historic districts and green spaces, and invest in transit oriented infrastructure.

Howard County schools are a key component to our competitiveness. They attract young families into the County, creating a solid workforce and ensuring that the next generation of residents are career ready. We can work with business and the unions to ensure that our High School graduates are equipped with the knowledge and skills to lead a 21st workforce.

Transit oriented infrastructure creates workforce mobility, allowing for residents to easily move from home to work. This infrastructure is also critical for sharing our county's gems with the world, from Old Ellicott City to shows at Merriweather Post Pavilion. Transit is the key to guaranteeing that Howard County is connected and accessible.

Given this current administration's chaotic policies towards the federal work force, we must ensure that Howard County continues to be resilient to the federal chaos by investing in local business development, and focusing on the stability of the County and its residents.

How will you measure progress on your goals?

Setting measurable goals is essential to guarantee that policies are having their desired impact. I will measure our progress on economic development based on the number of stable, well-paying jobs that are created in our County. I will also look to make sure that we increase the number and reliability of our transit lines, making sure they are dependable and on time. I will make sure that the timeline for permitting and zoning is easily understood and look to see if there are any choke points in the process and how to best alleviate them. My goal is to make sure that the policies we put into place have their desired effect, and to remedy them if they do not.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**What steps will you take to reduce regulatory barriers and create a more predictable, pro-business environment?**

Howard County has regulations in place to ensure the safety and security of its residents. However, even well-intentioned regulations can become outdated or could require improvement. As a result, I am willing to review any regulations, which are antiquated or overly burdensome. But any reduction of a barrier must balance the rationale for the regulation in the first place.

Predictability is a key factor when making the decision to start a business in any location. I would work to ensure that our regulations are easily understood and clearly defined, allowing for businesses to make certain that they are compliant. Regulations are in place to ensure the safety of our citizens, but that does not mean they have to stifle business.

How do you plan to align economic development with workforce readiness, ensuring residents are prepared for emerging jobs (especially in tech, healthcare, and trades)?

The first thing we need to do as a County is ensure our public schools are fully funded. The best way we can make sure that our residents are prepared for emerging jobs is to give our young people a world class education to set them up for success. Unfortunately, funding for our great public school system is trending in the wrong direction, and on the Council I will be a strong advocate for fixing this trajectory. Further, we should be working with the private sector, schools (both our public schools and Howard Community College) and local labor to ensure there are pathways for those preferring to enter the trades, whether that be through trade schools, apprenticeships, or some other means of certification.

What role do you see for public-private partnerships in advancing innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth?

Public-private partnerships can be a worthwhile strategy to advance our economic goals as a County. In recent years Howard County has created numerous public-private partnerships to positive effect, including increasing green energy production of solar energy and assisting in building large capital projects like the new County courthouse. The County should build on these previous successes in the next administration and iteration on the Council.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

How will you ensure that small and minority-owned businesses have equitable access to County contracts, incentives, and support services?

Small, minority owned, and women owned businesses are an economic engine that we must guarantee have equitable access and support. Simplifying how to access and navigate permitting and zoning is a key component to ensuring these businesses are able to thrive. Increased transparency in how the bid process works, what factors are considered and where different contracts are through that process would make sure that business owners know what they need to do and where in the process different contracts are.

I would also strive to make sure that there is adequate technical support and outreach, including language access, to ensure that every business is able to access and navigate the tools to succeed, regardless of size.

In this era of unprecedented attack from the Trump administration on our minority business owners and communities, supporting County and public-private programs that assist small and minority owned businesses to get an equitable seat at the table are a priority.

BUDGETING

What do you see as the biggest challenge for the County budget, and how do you plan to address it?

The biggest challenge to the County budget is the continued unpredictable actions from the Trump administration, whether it be arbitrary budget cuts, a long-lasting federal shutdown, or firing of federal employees who call Howard County home.

As a County, we must continue the great work already done to make sure that former federal employees are able to put their skill sets to use at the state or local government level, or in the private sector.

Likewise, as the Trump administration continues to make cuts, it forces the General Assembly to make its own cuts, or push costs down to the Counties. And this will make our difficult budget decisions in the coming years even more difficult. On the Council, I will use my platform to advocate against pushing funding responsibilities down to the County level.

Given the huge changeover in leadership in Howard, we will need to take a broad and comprehensive approach to reviewing County revenue and services, and look to leverage our unique position and educated population to raise additional revenues.

BUDGETING**What steps will you take to increase transparency, trust, and civic engagement in budget and policy decisions?**

I will maintain an open and transparent office, with office hours, and regular community facing events throughout my time on the Council. As a public servant, I think this is the only way such a job should be done. Further, consistent and accessible communication with the community, via social media, email, and other media, can assist in expanding civil trust. Clearly in the last several years, we as a country have lost ground in our ability to engage in the civics required for a functional democracy. I want to be part of the next generation of leaders that reverses that trend, helping our residents to again have faith in their elected representatives.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**Do you share the concern that our road and transit infrastructure is inadequate to support current and future growth?**

Yes, I share the concern that our road and transit infrastructure is inadequate to support current and future growth. Too often development has occurred in the County without fully thinking through resulting infrastructure needs. Adequate transit infrastructure is key for ensuring our county continues to be competitive.

What are your top three priorities for transportation, infrastructure, and public facilities investment?

The County, along with our state partners, needs to make tackling our increasingly deferred school maintenance a larger priority. This is my first priority, as our kids cannot learn in schools that are falling apart. Second, related to transportation, every day I see students walking on a busy main thoroughfare without side walks. Our students must have a safe means to get to school, and I will make it a priority to ensure that all students who walk to our County schools have a safe route that includes adequate sidewalks and cross walks. Finally, I want to make sure that our County continues to support and expands our public transportation options both inter and intra-county. The Council must ensure that the RTA is adequately funded and work with neighboring county and state partners to make sure that we build a robust regional transit network.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**How will you work with regional, state, and federal partners to secure needed resources?**

I have a great relationship with many members of our state delegation. I know that we rely on the state to support the development and renovations of our school facilities. Beyond that, the state is a major partner in many of our larger infrastructure development projects. I will be able to leverage my relationship with people both in the General Assembly and in the different Maryland state agencies to ensure that Howard County gets the resources it needs in order to thrive.

The rewrite of zoning and land-use regulations will shape Howard County for decades. What are your top three priorities in this process, and what is your overall zoning and land use philosophy? What outcomes do you expect to see from this effort?

My top three priorities in the comprehensive rezoning are to avoid school overcrowding (and to generally protect adequate levels of infrastructure), protect our green and historic spaces, and to expand our ability to build affordable housing. Howard County needs to grow and should be building more affordable homes, however, we cannot ignore our infrastructure needs, including schools while doing so. As the district in Howard that has suffered catastrophic floods, a significant part of my emphasis in comprehensive rezoning will be to protect the Tiber watershed and Old Ellicott City from over development. Likewise, the Route 1 corridor in ElkrIDGE cannot be overburdened. Finally, as explained below, ending protections for school overcrowding, like the APFO schools question, is a mistake.

The outcomes I would expect to see from this effort would be an expansion of affordable housing in the County where such steps would not overburden an already stressed school capacity problem. I also expect this housing will attract a young workforce into the County, allowing business to hire a dynamic, educated workforce.

What are your plans to encourage redevelopment of existing commercial properties?

I have made preserving green spaces throughout Howard County a major part of my campaign. Given this, and the lack of open, unused land in Howard, encouraging the redevelopment of existing commercial properties is sound policy. As the Council completes its comprehensive rezoning, it should look for ways that permitting diverse uses of commercial space can encourage redevelopment.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Development is often framed as a conflict between housing growth and school capacity. How do you believe the County should balance school funding needs with new housing development?

I do not believe we need to choose between failing to grow and stressing our infrastructure with black check development. Smart, managed development that recognizes and mitigates school capacity issues and other infrastructure needs is possible.

Howard County's APFO law attempts to do just this, yet there are calls from many to weaken it. During the recent APFO Review Commission, I testified against ending the APFO schools question. While it makes sense to take a fresh look at how best to keep a balanced approach, ending the "schools question" is a mistake. As I noted in my testimony to the APFO Review Committee, ending the "schools question" would take off any guard rails on managed growth and would exacerbate school overcrowding in many District One schools. It is well known that overcrowded schools lead to worse outcomes for students and tougher conditions for teachers and staff. Moreover, adopting this recommendation would likely make disruptive redistricting more common, which should be avoided. Thus the next Council needs to ensure that increases in density and other options to increase housing are done in ways and focused on areas of the County that would not be disruptive to school capacity concerns.

EDUCATION

How will you support stronger school-to-career pathways that connect students with local employers and internship opportunities?

Creating stronger school-to-career pathways will require working alongside the Howard County Board of Education, the private sector, and local labor. On the Council I will also advocate for increased opportunities for apprenticeships and trade schools, whether through the unions or Howard County Community college, and the potential for certification opportunities with public schools.