

Who's
Running?

2026 HOWARD COUNTY CANDIDATE GUIDE



DEMOCRAT

DISTRICT 4
LINFENG CHEN
HOWARD COUNTY COUNCIL

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

My Vision: A Resilient, Adaptable, Global, Inclusive, and Forward-Looking Local Economy. Howard County's economic future must be resilient in the face of change, adaptable to shifting regional and global markets, globally connected through our diverse communities, inclusive of residents and businesses of all backgrounds, driven by innovation, and forward-looking in how we plan for growth, innovation, and opportunity.

- Reimagining the Business Environment

Howard County should regularly assess its economic strengths - such as its location, workforce, and quality of life - while identifying areas for improvement. This includes modernizing zoning to support mixed-use redevelopment, streamlining permitting processes, and improving coordination between government and the private sector.

- Leveraging the County's Global Diversity

Howard County's diverse immigrant communities bring international connections, language skills, and entrepreneurial energy. Supporting immigrant-owned businesses, expanding multicultural business networks, and promoting global trade opportunities can strengthen the county's role as an international business hub.

- Encouraging Innovation and Youth Entrepreneurship

A strong economy depends on encouraging risk-taking and providing pathways for young people to develop entrepreneurial skills. This may include:

- Small business training programs
- Youth entrepreneurship incubators
- Mentorship opportunities with local industry leaders
- Lowering barriers to starting small or home-based businesses

These efforts help create a culture of innovation that supports long-term economic vitality.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

How will you measure progress on your goals?

Measuring progress requires clear metrics, transparent reporting, and regular community input. Key indicators include:

- **County Revenue and Economic Growth**

Track year-to-year changes in:

- County revenue trends
- Business growth and new business registrations
- Job creation and unemployment rates

These indicators reflect the overall strength and sustainability of the local economy.

- **Community Feedback and Resident Satisfaction**

Regular surveys, town halls, and community engagement tools can provide direct insight into how residents feel about:

- Quality of services
- Transportation and infrastructure improvements
- Public safety
- Schools and community facilities

Resident satisfaction is an essential measure of effective governance.

- **Comparative Rankings and Benchmarks**

Monitoring how Howard County ranks compared with other counties - both in Maryland and nationally - helps evaluate performance in areas such as:

- Economic competitiveness
- Education
- Public safety
- Quality of life
- Environmental sustainability

These benchmarks provide an external, data-driven perspective on county progress.

- **Project Milestones and Implementation Tracking (SMART Goals)**

For major initiatives - whether infrastructure, environmental goals, or public facilities - progress can be measured through milestone tracking, budget adherence, and timely delivery.

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

A supportive business climate depends on clear rules, efficient processes, and consistent communication. Key steps include:

- **Streamline and Modernize Permitting Processes**
 - Reduce long wait times by improving coordination among permitting agencies.
 - Expand online permitting and tracking tools so businesses can see real-time status updates.
 - Standardize review timelines to provide predictable expectations for applicants.
- **Simplify Regulations and Increase Transparency**
 - Conduct regular reviews of county regulations to identify outdated, redundant, or overly complex requirements.
 - Publish clear, step-by-step guidance for starting or expanding a business.
 - Ensure zoning and land-use rules are understandable and applied consistently.
- **Improve Communication Between Government and Businesses**
 - Establish business advisory groups to provide ongoing input on barriers and opportunities.
 - Create a single point of contact for businesses navigating county regulations.
 - Hold regular roundtables with small businesses, startups, and industry leaders.
- **Support Small Businesses and Lower Entry Barriers**
 - Offer technical assistance, workshops, and multilingual resources for new entrepreneurs.
 - Expand access to micro-grants, incubation spaces, and mentorship programs.
 - Reduce fees or streamline requirements for small, home-based, or minority-owned businesses where feasible.
- **Ensure Consistency and Predictability in Decision-Making**
 - Apply rules uniformly across applicants to avoid confusion or unnecessary delays.
 - Update policies and timelines publicly so businesses can plan confidently.
 - Use data to guide decisions and provide clear justifications for regulatory changes.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

A strong local economy depends on a workforce that is trained, adaptable, and ready for the jobs of the future. Aligning economic development with workforce readiness requires coordinated planning between schools, employers, and public agencies. Key steps include:

- **Strengthen Partnerships Between Schools and Local Employers**
 - Expand collaboration between HCPSS, Howard Community College, and local industries to create more internships, student loans/scholarships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities.
 - Build programs that reflect real job market needs in emergency services, technology, healthcare, logistics, advanced manufacturing, and other skilled trades.
- **Expand Career and Technical Education (CTE) Pathways**
 - Increase investment in the Applications and Research Laboratory (ARL) and related career academies.
 - Update equipment and facilities so students train on the same technologies used in modern workplaces.
 - Grow programs in cybersecurity, biotech, nursing, HVAC, electrical work, plumbing, welding, and other high-demand careers.
- **Provide Training for Adults and Mid-Career Workers**
 - Support retraining programs for adults seeking to move into fast-growing fields like IT, healthcare, and green energy.
 - Strengthen partnerships with Howard Community College for certificate programs and accelerated training.
- **Attract Businesses That Invest in Local Talent**
 - Encourage companies to offer apprenticeships, job-shadowing, tuition assistance, and on-the-job training.
 - Prioritize economic development strategies that connect private-sector investment with local hiring.
- **Build a Pipeline That Starts Early**
 - Support student entrepreneurship programs, STEM clubs, BSA Scouting programs, and internship opportunities at the high school level.
 - Encourage youth exposure to a wide range of careers through mentoring, job fairs, and hands-on experiences at the middle school level.

By aligning economic development strategies with education and workforce training, the county can grow its economy, support local employers, and create meaningful opportunities for residents whether they are students entering the workforce or adults seeking new career pathways.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

Public-private partnerships (P3s) can play a valuable role in advancing innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth when structured thoughtfully. As a board member, I have seen the benefits of leveraging private sector expertise to support public infrastructure projects - particularly in building, renovating, and maintaining school facilities. For example, the Prince George's County Public School system has successfully implemented P3s to deliver high-quality facilities efficiently.

Key considerations include:

- **Project suitability and customization:** Not every project is appropriate for a P3. Each initiative must be evaluated for risk, cost-effectiveness, and long-term community benefit.
- **Encouraging innovation:** P3s can bring private sector creativity, new technologies, and operational efficiency to public projects, creating more modern and adaptable solutions.
- **Inclusive economic growth:** P3 agreements can be designed to include workforce development, local hiring, and opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses.
- **Transparency and accountability:** Strong oversight ensures that public resources are protected and that the benefits of collaboration reach the community.

When implemented carefully, P3s can complement public investment, expand resources, and foster innovative approaches to economic development, infrastructure, and education.

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

To support small and minority-owned businesses, it is essential to provide training, resources, and transparent processes that create real opportunities for growth and participation in county contracts and programs. Key steps include:

- **Training and Capacity-Building**
 - Offer workshops and mentorship programs to help businesses navigate procurement, licensing, and regulatory requirements.
 - Provide guidance on proposal writing, financial management, and compliance to increase competitiveness.
- **Transparency in Contracting and Incentives**
 - Publish clear, accessible information about county contracts, incentives, and support programs.
 - Standardize procurement processes to ensure fairness and predictability for all businesses.
- **Expanded Access and Outreach**
 - Actively reach out to small and minority-owned businesses to ensure they are aware of opportunities.
 - Simplify application processes and reduce barriers that disproportionately affect smaller firms.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- **Feedback and Continuous Improvement**

- Regularly seek input from business owners to identify challenges and refine programs.
- Monitor participation rates and adjust policies to ensure equitable outcomes.

By combining training, transparency, outreach, and ongoing feedback, the county can create a business environment where all entrepreneurs regardless of size or background can compete and thrive.

BUDGETING

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

One of the biggest challenges for the County budget is its heavy reliance on property taxes and personal income taxes, which makes revenue sensitive to economic fluctuations. For example, a large portion of revenue is impacted by federal workforce trends, leaving the County vulnerable to shifts in federal employment or economic conditions.

To address this, the County should focus on diversifying its tax base and broadening revenue sources. Key strategies include:

- **Create a business-friendly environment**

- Encourage entrepreneurship, innovation, and international business connections.
- Support small and medium-sized businesses to generate local revenue and jobs.

- **Invest in workforce development and STEM education**

- Develop talent pools through Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and marketable skill training.
- Attract employers who value a highly skilled, locally trained workforce.

- **Differentiate Howard County economically**

- Position the County as a hub for global/international business, innovation, and high-demand industries.
- Encourage growth in sectors such as technology, healthcare, and skilled trades, reducing dependency on volatile revenue sources.

By diversifying revenue streams, investing in human capital, and fostering innovation, the County can build a more stable, sustainable, and resilient budget while supporting economic growth and opportunity for all residents.

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

Transparency and public engagement are essential for building trust and ensuring that county decisions reflect the will and needs of residents. This has been central to my work on the school board, and it must remain a shared commitment because good governance is a team sport. We should co-own the budget and policies. Key steps include:

- **Maximize Access to Information**

- Share as much information as possible about decisions, unless confidentiality is legally required.
- Publish budgets, reports, and policy documents in accessible, easy-to-understand formats.

- **Engage the Community in Decision-Making**

- Invite residents to participate through public hearings, town halls, and community forums.
- Remove barriers to participation, including providing multilingual materials and interpretation services.

- **Follow Clear, Procedural Standards**

- Ensure that all budget and policy decisions adhere to established procedures and legal requirements.
- Make decision-making processes transparent so residents understand how and why choices are made.

- **Solicit Feedback and Act on Input**

- Actively seek input from diverse communities and incorporate their perspectives into policy.
- Use surveys, advisory committees, and stakeholder meetings to guide decision-making.

By providing open access, inviting meaningful participation, and adhering to clear procedures, the county can build trust, accountability, and a stronger civic connection with residents.

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

No answer provided.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**What are your top three priorities for transportation, infrastructure, and public facilities investment?**

My top three priorities for transportation, infrastructure, and public facilities investment are:

1. **Invest in Safe, Modern, and Well-Maintained Public Facilities** - Starting with Schools Howard County must prioritize renovating aging school buildings, addressing deferred maintenance, and planning for future capacity needs. Modern, healthy learning environments are essential for student success and community well-being. Public facilities including schools, libraries, parks, and community centers, should meet the needs of a growing and diverse population.
2. **Modernize and Expand Regional Transportation Infrastructure** We need a long-term, coordinated approach across federal, state, and county levels to relieve congestion and improve mobility. Key corridors like Route 29 and Route 32 require targeted investments, better traffic flow, and enhanced safety. Strengthening north-south and east-west connections and preparing for future growth are essential for a functional, resilient network.
3. **Build Walkable, Bikeable, and Transit-Connected Communities** Residents benefit when travel options are safe, accessible, and efficient. Priorities include:
 - Improving bike and pedestrian safety, especially near schools, parks, and transit stops.
 - Expanding walkable neighborhoods, trail systems, bike lanes, and multi-use paths.
 - Strengthening transit connections between Downtown Columbia, East Columbia, Ellicott City, and other major job centers.
 - Improving access to MARC stations and exploring long-term options like bus rapid transit or regional rail connections.

These investments support economic growth, environmental sustainability, and a high quality of life for all residents.

How will you work with regional, state, and federal partners to secure needed resources?

Securing resources for transportation, infrastructure, education, and community services requires strong coordination across all levels of government. My approach includes:

• Using Data to Drive Requests

I will ensure that all funding requests are backed by clear data - traffic studies, enrollment projections, environmental analyses, and community needs assessments. Data-driven proposals increase credibility and improve the likelihood of receiving state and federal support.

• Partnering With Subject-Matter Experts and Consultants

For complex projects such as major road improvements or transit expansions, I will work with planning and engineering consultants who can help refine proposals, develop cost estimates, and strengthen applications for federal and state grants.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**• Bringing State and Federal Leaders to Howard County**

Inviting regional, state, and federal officials to visit project sites, tour schools, and meet with local residents helps them directly see the needs and opportunities in our community. These visits build stronger relationships and make funding priorities more visible and compelling.

• Learning From Best Practices in Other States and Countries

I support studying successful models from other regions - domestically and internationally - to identify innovative solutions. Whether it's transportation planning, green infrastructure, or mixed-use redevelopment, learning from global best practices can help Howard County implement modern, effective strategies.

By combining data-driven planning, expert support, strong intergovernmental relationships, and openness to innovation, we can secure the resources needed to support long-term growth and community well-being.

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:

• Balanced and Responsible Development

My top priority is ensuring growth aligns with school capacity, transportation systems, and public infrastructure. Development should not outpace our ability to support it. That means coordinating land-use decisions with school and capital planning, and ensuring new projects enhance - rather than strain - existing communities.

• Environmental Conservation and Protection of Green Space

Howard County must preserve natural resources and prioritize sustainability. The zoning rewrite should reduce greenhouse gas emissions, support walkable and transit-friendly communities, improve stormwater management, and protect forests and open spaces for future generations.

• Meeting the Needs of a Diverse Community

Our zoning and land-use policies must reflect the needs of a diverse and growing population. This includes expanding affordable housing options, supporting equitable economic growth, enabling thoughtful redevelopment, and creating inclusive community spaces that strengthen neighborhoods.

I expect this effort to deliver:

- Development that matches school capacity and infrastructure.
- Stronger environmental protections and preserved green space.
- More equitable access to housing, services, and economic opportunity.
- Revitalized commercial areas that reduce pressure on undeveloped land.
- A zoning framework that supports long-term sustainability and a high quality of life.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**What are your plans to encourage redevelopment of existing commercial properties?**

Redevelopment of existing commercial properties is one of Howard County's greatest opportunities. These sites already have infrastructure, are close to transit, and are often underutilized. By revitalizing what we have, we can conserve more green space, strengthen the economy, reduce school overcrowding, and create vibrant community spaces. My plans to encourage redevelopment:

- **Repurpose suitable commercial sites for educational uses**

Some aging or vacant commercial buildings can be converted into early childhood centers, CTE hubs, or satellite learning spaces. This is cost-effective, reduces overcrowding, and brings schools closer to where families live and work.

- **Reimagine commercial areas as business and cultural hubs**

Underused shopping centers can be transformed into mixed-use destinations that support:

- Small businesses and start-ups
- Cultural and arts centers
- Youth entrepreneurship programs
- Career training and certification programs
- Indoor farmers markets and community events

These spaces can become walkable, community-focused centers instead of declining strip malls.

- **Create spaces for trade shows, innovation, and business exchange**

Redeveloped sites can host local conventions, maker fairs, global business exchanges, and technology demonstrations supporting economic growth and attracting visitors.

- **Establish international business hubs**

Given Howard County's strategic location near BWI, Baltimore, and Washington, we can repurpose commercial centers as landing spaces for international companies, cultural institutes, and global collaboration.

Tools to make redevelopment easier:

- Incentives such as tax credits or expedited approvals for projects that provide community benefits
- Updated zoning to support mixed-use redevelopment
- Stronger partnerships with small businesses, universities, and workforce organizations
- Meaningful community involvement to ensure redevelopment reflects local needs and avoids displacement

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?

The County should align development decisions with actual school capacity and funding needs. From my experience living in Laurel, I've seen how growth and school planning can fall out of sync, and we can do better.

To achieve balance, we need coordinated planning across DPZ, HCPSS, and the County Council; development approvals based on real, not theoretical, school capacity; and meaningful developer contributions toward school infrastructure. The County must also prioritize school capital funding so new housing is matched with the classrooms families need. Transparency is essential - residents should understand how each project affects nearby schools and what mitigation is planned. And exemptions must be carefully reviewed to ensure they don't worsen overcrowding.

Balanced development means thoughtful growth that meets community needs and protects the high quality of life Howard County families expect.

EDUCATION

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

Not all students pursue college, every student has unique talents and deserves opportunities to explore meaningful careers. I support stronger school-to-career pathways that connect students with local employers, internships, and hands-on training. I will advocate for increased funding and expansion of facilities like the Applications and Research Laboratory (ARL) to create a comprehensive business and career center.

This includes co-developing multi-year plans and curricula with local businesses, expanding programs like the Teacher Academy of Maryland (TAM), hiring high school students as paid paraeducators to gain practical experience, and addressing teacher shortages especially in special education. I strongly support expanding Career Pathways to reflect current industry needs and emerging new trades and strengthening training in trades and high-demand fields such as emergency services, trucking, HVAC, electrical work, plumbing, welding, and nursing.

By providing these pathways, we can ensure students graduate with real-world skills, build the local workforce, and give every student the opportunity to succeed whether in college, trades, or immediate employment.