

Who's  
Running?

# 2026 HOWARD COUNTY CANDIDATE GUIDE



DEMOCRAT

DISTRICT 4  
**REGINA CLAY**  
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 is to strengthen Howard County's competitiveness by positioning the entire county as an Innovation Corridor for inclusive, sustainable growth, where business investment, job creation, and private-sector expansion are intentional and equitable. While Howard County remains a strong economic engine, we cannot afford complacency. Recent data shows our small-business survival rate has declined sharply—from 19% to just 12% in 2024—one of the steepest drops in the region. That trend demands decisive, countywide action.

I will work to market Howard County's greatest assets—our diversity, highly educated workforce, strategic location, and quality of life—to attract global technology firms, green-energy companies, life sciences, and government contractors that value innovation and inclusive environments. Maryland is ranked #1 for minority-owned business success, yet Howard County is losing ground to neighboring jurisdictions in job creation tied to new business formation. We must do more to convert our advantages into sustained growth.

## How will you measure progress on your goals?

**Procurement Retention Rate:** We need to know exactly how much of our county's procurement spend stays within Howard County zip codes. Currently, we lack a transparent, real-time metric for this.

**Small Business Survival Rate:** I will specifically target reversing the drop to 12% survival, aiming to return to and exceed the 19% benchmark within my first term.

**Wage-to-Housing Ratio:** We must monitor whether new jobs pay enough to live here. With median home values over \$600,000, creating minimum-wage jobs isn't enough. I will track the number of new positions paying at least 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI) to ensure we are building livelihoods, not just statistics.

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

Time is the enemy of small business. Data shows that Maryland's new business applications are trending down (-6% in 2024), often due to bureaucratic friction. I will propose a "Small Business Concierge" service within the Department of Inspections, Licenses, and Permits.

Instead of a business owner navigating zoning, health, and fire codes alone, they will have a single case manager. I will also introduce a "Revitalization Fast-Track" for businesses filling vacancies in our older village centers like Long Reach and Wilde Lake. Long Reach has seen success with its "Long Reach Rising" initiative, filling office space to 75% occupancy; I want to codify that success into policy so that any business revitalizing an older space gets priority permitting.

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

We must build a pipeline that connects our classrooms directly to careers. Howard Community College (HCC) is a crown jewel, with record enrollment growth and a new workforce development center funded by a recent \$43 million campaign. I will aggressively expand dual-enrollment partnerships between HCPSS and HCC, specifically targeting "middle-skill" careers in allied health and cybersecurity.

I will advocate expanding apprenticeship programs. With the county's Workforce Development Board releasing its 2024-2028 plan, I will ensure District 4 residents are prioritized for training in the trades needed to maintain our aging infrastructure. A Wilde Lake graduate should have a debt-free pathway to a \$70,000+ career as an electrician or HVAC technician right here in Columbia, without needing a four-year degree.

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

The government can provide the seed, but private partnership provides the soil. I see P3s as the engine of my proposed "District 4 Innovation Fund."

Drawing on the model of the Ujamaa Business Roundtable, I plan to facilitate partnerships between faith-based organizations, many of whom own underutilized land, and local entrepreneurs who need affordable space. For example, a church with an empty annex could partner with the county to host a small business incubator. This isn't just theory; it's "cooperative economics" that allows us to build affordable commercial space without relying solely on taxpayer dollars. We can look to the Maryland Innovation Center's "Pumpkin Pitch" as a model of how to energize startups; I want to bring that same energy directly into our District 4 neighborhoods.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

Equitable access must be intentional. While Howard County has launched a disparity study to examine barriers, we already know that minority-owned firms often struggle to win prime contracts.

I will fight to unbundle large county contracts into smaller scopes that local small businesses can actually bid on. I will also advocate for mandatory "capability statements" in procurement, requiring prime contractors to document their use of local subcontractors. The county's Local Business Initiative spent over \$44 million with local firms in the first half of FY2025; I want to ensure that a specific, measurable percentage of that spend goes to District 4 businesses. We will move from "good faith efforts" to "measurable results," ensuring our tax dollars are reinvested in our own community.

Here are your enhanced, data-backed responses for the "Budgeting & Fiscal Prudence" section. These answers position you as a fiscally responsible leader who understands the numbers and is ready to modernize how the county handles taxpayer money.

## BUDGETING

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

The biggest challenge we face is the "Revenue-Reality Gap." We are navigating a perfect storm: a projected \$3 billion state budget shortfall that threatens local aid, combined with slowing local revenue growth and new, mandated costs from the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

Specifically, Howard County is absorbing millions in teacher pension liabilities transferred from the state. Our residential tax base, which makes up a significant portion of our revenue, is feeling the strain. Though we have maintained our AAA bond rating, we cannot take our fiscal health for granted.

My plan to address this is three-fold:

- "Zero-Based" Program Review: We can no longer afford "autopilot budgeting." I will call for a review of non-statutory spending. If a program hasn't demonstrated a measurable ROI for District 4 residents in the last three years, its funding should be re-evaluated and potentially reallocated to core services like education and public safety, which currently account for over 75% of our general fund expenditures.
- Diversifying Our Tax Base: We rely too heavily on residential taxes (approx. 1.21% effective rate). I will aggressively pursue commercial tax base growth by fast-tracking the redevelopment of aging village centers like Long Reach and Wilde Lake and incentivizing high-growth sectors like cybersecurity to set up shop here. A stronger commercial base eases pressure on homeowners.
- Advocacy in Annapolis: We cannot accept cost shifts without a fight. I will build a coalition with other Councilmembers across the region to lobby for a "Fair Funding Formula" ensuring that state mandates come with the state dollars to pay for them.

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

Trust is the currency of governance, and now the budget process feels like a "black box" to too many residents. A 600-page PDF released once a year isn't transparency; it's a doorstop.

I will revolutionize how we engage the public on the budget:

- The "District 4 Taxpayer Receipt": I will propose an online tool where any resident can enter their property assessment and see exactly where their tax dollars go, down to the penny. You deserve to know that for every \$100 you pay, roughly \$50 goes to our schools and \$20 to public safety.
- Participatory Budgeting Pilot: I want to empower you. Modeled after successful programs in cities like New York and Chicago, I will launch a pilot where a portion of District 4's discretionary grant funding is decided by a direct vote of residents. You know your neighborhood's needs, whether it's a new playground or better lighting, better than anyone at the George Howard Building.
- "Budget & Breakfast" Roadshow: Instead of one formal hearing in Ellicott City, I will hold budget workshops in the community at diners, churches, and community centers during the drafting phase. We need your input before the ink is dry.
- Quarterly "Fiscal Health Checks": I won't wait for the annual audit. I will publish simple, one-page quarterly updates on the county's fiscal health, tracking key metrics like revenue trends and debt capacity, ensuring there are no surprises at tax time.

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

Yes, I absolutely share that concern. For too long, our infrastructure planning has been reactive rather than proactive. We have allowed development to outpace our road capacity, leading to congestion in corridors like Route 1 and Broken Land Parkway that frustrate residents and stifle commerce. A 2040 transportation plan is meaningless if parents are stuck in gridlock today.

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

- **"Complete Streets" Implementation:** We must move beyond just widening roads. I will prioritize funding for the Complete Streets Design Manual, ensuring that major corridors like Route 1 and Rogers Avenue are safe for all users, pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers, not just cars.
- **Flash Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Expansion:** I fully support the expansion of the Flash BRT system to connect Downtown Columbia with major employment hubs like Johns Hopkins APL and Maple Lawn. We secured a \$750k federal grant for this; I will fight to ensure the local matching funds are in the budget to get shovels in the ground.
- **Fixing "Structurally Deficient" Bridges:** Safety is non-negotiable. With projects like the River Road Bridge replacement highlighting our aging infrastructure, I will prioritize maintenance of existing assets over new sprawling road projects.

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

We cannot go it alone. I will leverage my experience in grant writing and coalition building to aggressively pursue federal infrastructure dollars available under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. I will work directly with our State Delegation and the Baltimore Metropolitan Council to ensure Howard County's projects, specifically the US 29 and MD 32 corridor improvements, remain top priorities in the state's Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP). We need a seat at the table, not just a spot in the queue.

**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 philosophy is "Growth with Character." We can grow without losing the soul of our communities.

1. **Protecting Green Space:** I will fight to maintain our "Green Infrastructure Network," ensuring that new zoning codes respect the 100+ miles of pathways and environmental buffers that make Columbia unique.
2. **Incentivizing "Missing Middle" Housing:** Our zoning code is too binary, either single-family homes or large apartment blocks. I will push for zoning that allows for duplexes, triplexes, and cottage clusters that fit the scale of existing neighborhoods but offer price points our teachers and nurses can afford.
3. **Village Center Revitalization:** I will prioritize a "Village Center Overlay Zone" that cuts red tape for mixed-use redevelopment in our older centers like Wilde Lake and Long Reach, making it easier to bring in new amenities while preserving community gathering spaces.



## **DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**

I expect a zoning code that is predictable, equitable, and sustainable. Predictable for developers so projects don't stall; equitable so affordable housing is integrated, not segregated; and sustainable so we protect our watersheds. Success looks like a thriving, diverse District 4 where a young family can buy a starter home and a senior can age in place within the same neighborhood.

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

We have too many asphalt deserts and aging office parks that are ripe for reimagination. I will champion the expansion of the Route 1 Tax Credit Program to other aging commercial corridors in District 4. This program has successfully incentivized façade and structural improvements; we should replicate it. Additionally, I will propose an "Adaptive Reuse Incentive" for converting vacant office space into residential or mixed-use community hubs. With office vacancy rates shifting post-pandemic, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform empty desks into vibrant neighborhoods. I will also streamline the permitting process for these complex redevelopment projects, creating a "fast lane" for developers who commit to sustainable, community-focused designs.

### **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 support the APFO Review Committee's recent recommendation to move toward a fee-based system that generates immediate revenue for school construction rather than just imposing moratoriums. However, I will demand that these fees go into a "School Construction Lockbox" guaranteed to be spent only on increasing capacity, not absorbed into the general fund.

We must also recognize the data: multifamily housing often generates fewer students per unit than single-family homes. We cannot let "school capacity" be a smokescreen for excluding affordable housing. We can and must fund our schools and build homes for our workforce by ensuring new development pays its fair share upfront.

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

We need to fundamentally redefine what "success" looks like for our graduates. For too long, we have celebrated the four-year degree as the only path, leaving behind brilliant students who are ready to work but lack the network to get started. My vision is to build a "District 4 Career Pipeline" that starts in the classroom and ends with a job offer and a living wage.

I will champion three specific initiatives to make this a reality:

- **Expand Apprenticeships Beyond the Trades:** While construction trades are vital, our economy is diversifying. We recently saw Howard Community College make history by launching the nation's first Cardiovascular Tech Registered Apprenticeship with MedStar Health. That is the model we need to scale. As your Councilmember, I will push to replicate this success in Cybersecurity and IT, specifically partnering with District 4 giants like the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab (APL). We have thousands of unfilled tech jobs in this region; our own children should be the ones trained to fill them, earning a salary while they learn rather than accruing debt.
- **"Summer of Success" Scaling Youth Employment:** The county's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) is a fantastic start, having grown from just 13 participants in 2018 to 300 participants in 2024. But in a school system of over 57,000 students, 300 spots are a drop in the bucket. I will fight to double the funding for SYEP, with a specific mandate to subsidize wages for minority-owned and small businesses in District 4 that want to hire interns but can't afford the overhead. We know that early work experience increases future earnings, yet youth unemployment remains double the national average. Every teenager in Wilde Lake or Harper's Choice who wants a job should have one, and every local business should have the support to hire them.
- **Dual-Enrollment as the Default, Not the Exception:** Under the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, the goal is for 45% of graduates to earn an industry credential or apprenticeship by 2031. Right now, we aren't moving fast enough. I will advocate for tuition-free dual enrollment courses at HCC to be the standard for our juniors and seniors. We have data showing that community college enrollment is bouncing back up over 4% last year because students want skills, not just theory. A District 4 graduate should be able to walk across the stage with a high school diploma in one hand and an Associate's degree or a CompTIA Security+ certification in the other, entirely debt-free.

This isn't just education policy; it's economic justice. When we connect our children to careers, we aren't just building a workforce; we are building generational wealth right here in Columbia.