

Who's
Running?

2026 HOWARD COUNTY CANDIDATE GUIDE



DEMOCRAT

VANESSA ATTERBEARY HOWARD COUNTY EXECUTIVE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

My vision is for Howard County to compete on quality, talent, and predictability. We know from the Augustine Commission's work at the state level that businesses make location decisions based on a mix of business costs, quality of life, regulatory environment, and workforce capability, not just tax rates.

Howard County already has tremendous strengths: an educated workforce, proximity to major federal and private-sector hubs, and a high quality of life. As County Executive, I want to build on those strengths by:

- Reducing wait times, updating the process, and improving predictability in permitting, licensing, and inspections so businesses can plan and grow expeditiously without surprises.
- Investing in education and workforce development so employers know they can find the talent they need here.
- Targeting infrastructure investments – roads, transit, and digital infrastructure – so people and goods can move efficiently.
- Keeping our quality-of-life assets strong – schools, healthcare, public safety – because they are part of the “return on investment” businesses get when they choose Howard County.

We can maintain our high standard of living while ensuring our businesses in the county are producing reliable and valuable products/services. Businesses are an integral part of our community. I want to bring more businesses to Howard County and support our existing businesses so that they can be successful.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

How will you measure progress on your goals?

I will track progress using clear, public, data-driven metrics that reflect both economic and quality-of-life outcomes, including:

Business activity:

- Number of new business starts and business expansions in the County
- Changes in commercial vacancy rates
- Retention of existing firms, especially in key sectors (tech, healthcare, trades, logistics)

Workforce and wages:

- Employment levels in high-demand sectors
- Median wages and job quality indicators
- Participation in local apprenticeship, internship, and CTE-related programs

Process and predictability:

- Average time to receive key permits and approvals
- Number of applications processed on time under publicly posted timelines.
- User feedback from businesses on regulatory and customer service experience

Inclusive growth:

- Share of County contracts awarded to small and minority-owned businesses
- Uptake and success rates in County incentive or technical-assistance programs

All of these metrics would be shared in an open and transparent matter so the business community and residents can hold my administration accountable.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

The state-level conversations I've been part of have reinforced something fundamental: process matters as much as price. Businesses are clear that beyond the burden of taxes and fees, they need to know what they're getting and what to expect.

As County Executive, I would:

- Create clear, public timelines for major permits, zoning approvals, and inspections – and report performance against those timelines.
- Streamline and digitize processes where possible so it is easier to start and expand a business in Howard County.
- Establish a “business concierge” or ombudsman within the administration to help navigate County processes, especially for small and minority-owned businesses.
- Regularly review regulations to identify redundancies and outdated requirements, focusing on changes that ease compliance without compromising health, safety, or environmental protections.
- Use business input as a formal part of policymaking, similar to how public testimony is critical at the state level; we should institutionalize opportunities for the business community to flag unintended consequences early.

The goal is not deregulation for its own sake, but a predictable, efficient environment where businesses know the rules, the timelines, and the path forward.

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

At the state level, we've invested in education and workforce development because we know businesses locate where the talent is. I would bring that same mindset to Howard County.

My approach would include:

- Deepening partnerships between schools and employers in sectors like tech, healthcare, and the skilled trades, so curriculum and credentials match real hiring needs.
- Expanding school-to-career pathways – including apprenticeships, internships, and dual-enrollment options – so students can earn industry-recognized credentials and work experience before graduation.
- Leveraging community colleges and training providers to upskill adults and career-changers, especially in fields where we know there is unmet demand.
- Addressing barriers to work like child care, housing, and transportation, which I know from experience are real constraints on workforce participation.
- Aligning economic development incentives with workforce commitments, so businesses receiving County support are also investing in local hiring, training, and mentoring.

The goal is a continuous loop: employers help shape the talent pipeline, and the County helps residents access good-paying jobs in growing fields.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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

Public-private partnerships are essential if we want to be both competitive and inclusive. I see several roles:

- Infrastructure and redevelopment: Partnering with businesses and institutions on key transportation, commercial corridor, and digital infrastructure projects that enable growth and redevelopment of underutilized sites.
- Workforce development: Joint initiatives with employers, schools, and training providers to design and deliver programs that reflect real-world skill needs.
- Entrepreneurship and small business support: Collaborating with chambers, nonprofit intermediaries, and lenders to provide technical assistance, incubator/accelerator space, and access to capital for startups and small businesses.
- Targeted incentives tied to outcomes: Working with the private sector to ensure that County incentives are effective—mirroring the state-level lesson that programs must be evaluated and, if they are not working, reformed or reallocated.

Done well, public-private partnerships can help us modernize infrastructure, grow new industries, and broaden participation in our economy, without placing all of the fiscal burden on taxpayers.

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

From my state work, I know that it's not enough to have programs on paper; businesses need to know they exist, be able to navigate them, and see that they are fairly administered.

As County Executive, I would:

- Set clear, public goals for small and minority-owned business participation in County contracting.
- Simplify application processes for County programs and contracts, including breaking large contracts into components where appropriate to make them accessible to smaller firms.
- Establish a dedicated small business and MBE support team to provide technical assistance, help firms get certified, and troubleshoot barriers.
- Regularly evaluate our incentives and programs as we've stressed at the state level to ensure they are actually benefiting the businesses they are intended to support.
- Partner with community organizations and chambers to proactively reach underrepresented entrepreneurs, not just wait for them to come to us.
- Ensure transparency throughout all processes.

Equitable access is both a fairness issue and a competitiveness issue; we can't leave talent and innovation on the sidelines.

BUDGETING

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

The biggest challenge for Howard County's budget mirrors what we've seen at the state level: balancing must-fund priorities with slow revenue growth and external headwinds.

Education and public health remain core obligations. At the same time, we face:

- Rising costs driven by mandates and expectations
- Economic uncertainty and federal decisions that can quickly affect local revenues and employment
- Structural gaps that appear once temporary surpluses fade

My approach, informed by my experience in Annapolis, is to:

- Take a hard look at existing programs and mandates first, making tough choices and identifying cuts or reforms before turning to new revenues.
- Prioritize investments that support long-term economic growth like education, workforce development, and infrastructure because they ultimately stabilize the revenue base.
- Maintain a disciplined approach to one-time vs. ongoing spending, so we are not committing to permanent obligations with temporary funds.
- Use transparent data and public engagement so residents and businesses understand the tradeoffs we face.
- Encourage tax base growth by bringing new businesses to the county.
- Look for creative solutions, as opposed to a "this is the way things have been done" mindset.

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

Trust comes from clarity, honesty about constraints, and meaningful opportunities to participate.

I would:

- Publish clear, accessible budget documents and dashboards, not just technical summaries, showing where money comes from and where it goes.
- Hold public budget forums that are structured to solicit real input, not just check a box, similar to the importance of public testimony at the state level.
- Invite business, nonprofit, and community stakeholders into the conversation early for input.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Do you share the concern that our road and transit infrastructure is inadequate to support current and future growth?

Yes. Just as we've recognized at the state level that transportation investments are key to business competitiveness, like the improvements to the Howard Street Tunnel, Howard County must ensure our road and transit infrastructure keeps pace with growth.

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

My top three priorities would be:

- Targeted road and intersection improvements on the most congested corridors that directly affect commuting and goods movement.
- Strengthened transit and mobility options that connect workers to job centers and reduce pressure on the road network.
- School and public facility capacity is aligned with where growth is occurring, so we are not perpetually behind on classrooms, public safety facilities, and other core services.

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

My experience as Chair of the Ways and Means Committee, working with the Governor's Administration, the Department of Commerce, and other state agencies has taught me how to leverage partnerships and external funding. As County Executive, I would:

- Aggressively pursue state and federal infrastructure grants and advocate for regional projects that benefit Howard County.
- Coordinate with neighboring jurisdictions on regional mobility and economic development initiatives.
- Use the County's capital planning process to align local dollars with larger funding streams, so we can match and draw down outside funds more effectively.

DEVELOPMENT & REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

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 overall philosophy is that zoning and land use must support economic competitiveness, protect quality of life, and maintain fiscal stability. We know from the broader tax and competitiveness debate that we cannot improve our business climate at the expense of education, infrastructure, and community wellbeing.

My top three priorities in the zoning rewrite are:

- Predictability and clarity for all stakeholders – businesses, residents, and developers should know the rules, the timelines, and the expectations.
- Alignment of growth with infrastructure and schools – new development must be matched with realistic plans for roads, transit, utilities, and school capacity.
- Support for redevelopment and mixed-use projects that revitalize existing commercial areas and make better use of already-built infrastructure.

I expect:

- A more transparent and efficient development process that reduces uncertainty and delays.
- A land use pattern that supports long-term fiscal health, by leveraging existing infrastructure and reducing the costs of sprawl.
- Stronger alignment between housing, jobs, and transportation, so residents can live, work, and thrive in Howard County without overwhelming our systems.

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

Consistent with what we've learned at the state level, that incentives must be effective and targeted, I would:

- Identify key commercial corridors and centers where redevelopment would have the highest economic and community impact.
- Use zoning and design standards to make redevelopment feasible and attractive, including mixed-use where appropriate.
- Review and refine County incentives and tools (such as TIF, tax credits, or other support) to ensure they are actually delivering redevelopment, not simply subsidizing activity that would have happened anyway.
- Pair redevelopment efforts with infrastructure upgrades and public realm improvements to signal long-term commitment to those areas.

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?

Education is a must-fund priority, just as we emphasize at the state level, and we cannot improve competitiveness by undermining our schools. At the same time, housing growth contributes to the tax base and provides homes for our workforce.

Balancing these requires:

- Honest, data-driven projections of student enrollment tied to development patterns.
- Development policies and fees that ensure growth helps pay for the school capacity it requires, rather than shifting the entire burden onto existing taxpayers.
- A capital program that prioritizes school construction and modernization in growth areas.
- Encouraging redevelopment and infill projects that make better use of existing school and infrastructure capacity where possible.

The goal is not to pit housing against schools, but to plan and fund them together so growth strengthens, rather than strains, our education system.

EDUCATION

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

My experience as Chair of the Ways & Means Committee at the state level has underscored that workforce capability is one of the defining factors in business location decisions. Howard County is well-positioned to lead on school-to-career pathways.

As County Executive, I would:

- Work closely with HCPSS, Howard Community College, and local employers to expand career and technical education options linked to high-demand fields like technology, healthcare, logistics, and the skilled trades.
- Promote and help coordinate internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities so students can earn credentials and real experience.
- Align county economic development efforts with employers that are willing to invest in local talent, including mentorship and training programs.
- Address practical barriers, like transportation and scheduling, that make it harder for students to participate in off-campus work-based learning.

By strengthening these pathways, we support students, families, and employers at the same time, and we reinforce Howard County's position as a top destination for businesses that depend on a highly skilled workforce.