

## 2023 Mayor and Council Candidate Forum • Summaries

Community Reach of Montgomery County with Rainbow Place Shelter hosted a Rockville Election 2023 Candidate Forum at F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre on October 5, 2023.

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*ChatGPT prepared the following summaries based on transcriptions of the Candidate Forum. The candidates' statements of qualification, assertions, experiences, facts, explanations, and conclusions were not verified.*

*Candidates were randomly arranged on stage and delivered opening and closing statements. The main part of the Forum involved answering two questions randomly picked by the moderator from a bowl and answering yes-or-no to the four Advisory Referenda questions on the November ballot (lowering the voting age to 16, permitting noncitizens to vote, setting term limits, and creating representative districts).*

### Council Candidates:

*The summaries represent the candidates' responses to the random questions posed by the moderator and are combined by candidate name in the order that the questions were answered.*

**Izola Shaw**, a Town Center resident, emphasizes that the area's issues directly affect her life. She's discussed with local business owners and neighbors about their needs and concerns, particularly about the vacant spaces in Town Center. The candidate suggests enhancing signage, initiating creative art projects, and implementing other measures to attract more consumers. The closure of the CVS on Rockville Pike, which served the basic needs of many community members, is a concern, and there's a desire for a similar store to open in its place.

She describes Rockville's economic outlook as promising, given its proximity to metro stations, federal government agencies, and being the seat of the county. As an elected leader, she plans to attract businesses and create jobs. She intends to work with consulting firms that are already doing business with Montgomery County and nearby federal agencies, aiming to bring more firms to Rockville. She also plans to invest in Rockville Economic Development Inc (REDI) to further stimulate economic growth.

**David Myles**, a council member, has previously advocated for tying funding for needs-based organizations to inflation. He believes more funding is necessary due to rising costs of living and increasing demand for services, as observed during their volunteer work at a food distribution center. While appreciating current city staff and volunteers for managing grant funds, he suggests that more city staff could be beneficial to better handle these services.

She started the last debate with concerns about Town Center but ended on a hopeful note, inspired by their mother's appreciation for the area's potential. He is optimistic about the new owners, Morguard, and their ideas for Town Center. He acknowledges that the issue of vacancies isn't unique to Town Center and recognize the additional challenge of visibility from major thoroughfares. However, he believes in a bright future for the area and are eager to collaborate with current and new business owners throughout Rockville.

**Ricky Mui** emphasizes that nonprofits play a crucial role in serving specific needs within the community, such as feeding the homeless or providing shelter, which may not be adequately addressed by the government. He suggests that nonprofits, through their community partnerships, can often deliver these services more cost-effectively than government entities or individual community efforts.

He emphasizes the diversity of the city and the importance of inclusion, specifically in regard to the LGBTQ+ community. He believes that the city already embraces various aspects of diversity, but more attention should be given to ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals are not excluded. He stresses that these individuals could be family, relatives, or friends, and that all city decisions should consider whether they are inclusive, exclusive, or have a positive impact.

**Richard Gottfried** acknowledges the regional crisis in affordable housing supply. If elected, he would follow the recently adopted Comprehensive 2040 Master Plan, which outlines three housing goals for Rockville. These include introducing diverse housing types like duplexes and small apartments, maintaining the Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) program, and enhancing public and assisted housing programs for low-income residents. With the plan approved, the focus now shifts to the mayor, council, and Planning Commission to implement these strategies in accordance with current zoning laws.

He acknowledges that Rockville property owners are facing a 4.7% property tax increase from Montgomery County, increased property recordation fees, and expected annual increases in water service bills. He notes that the city budget will need either increased revenue or reduced expenses to stay balanced. When asked about supporting a city property tax increase and balancing the budget for FY25 and beyond, the speaker emphasizes their expertise as a CPA. He acknowledges the challenges of market volatility, inflation, supply chain delays, and recruitment and retention issues, as well as the impact of pandemic recovery. He suggests that the solution lies in setting priorities to match estimated revenues, which will be received in November.

**Barry Jackson** expresses strong support for nonprofits, specifically naming The Arc of Montgomery County, AARP, the American Cancer Society, and Community Reach. He has worked closely with nonprofits throughout his career and also volunteered for them. He believes that the city should work to connect nonprofits with residents who need their services, viewing this as a mutually beneficial relationship. If elected to the council, he would encourage the city to collaborate with nonprofits to ensure all Rockville residents have access to necessary services.

He believes that Rockville is doing fairly well in terms of diversity and inclusion, but feels the city could improve its actions to match its commitments. He mentions an incident where the council candidates' orientation was held on Rosh Hashanah, a Jewish holiday, suggesting a lack of consideration for the diverse cultural and religious practices of the city's residents. Going forward, he advocates for more mindful actions that truly embody the city's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Anita Neal Powell** believes there is a need for more live music and entertainment in Rockville, specifically in Town Center and throughout the city. She cites downtown Silver Spring and other places within the county as examples of areas with regular concerts and entertainment, suggesting that Rockville should follow suit to enhance its cultural offerings.

She believes that Rockville's economic outlook is currently in deficit and suggests that the city needs to improve its financial management, particularly by controlling spending. As a concrete

action to influence the city's economic future, she proposes having discussions, particularly in the upcoming budget hearing, to strategize on how to enhance the city's economy.

**Adam Van Grack** believes their unique perspective is shaped by their diverse experiences. As an attorney in Rockville dealing with property and land use law, a former staff member of US Senator Paul Sarbanes, a member of the Maryland Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, a nonprofit board member, and a current member of the Rockville Chamber of Commerce Public Policy Committee, he has consistently advocated for city safety, small business support, and preservation of green spaces. He highlights his relationships with county, state, and federal leaders, as well as endorsements from twenty former and current elected officials, as assets that can help improve Rockville.

He identifies several problems facing Town Center, such as empty storefronts and the loss of key businesses like CVS and various restaurants. He proposes addressing these issues by following the expert guidance from the 2019 report by the Urban Land Institute. He believes that implementing the report's recommendations, which include increasing residential density, altering the parking layout, adjusting streets leading into and out of Town Center, improving signage, and stopping city subsidies to certain businesses, can help improve Town Center.

**Marissa Valeri** believes in the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and has actively raised these issues during her tenure on the Charter Review Commission. She feels that as a white woman, she has a specific role in promoting these values not just as talking points, but as integral parts of all public policy. She mentions her experience living in the diverse community of Twinbrook as further evidence of her commitment to these principles.

She has a strong connection to nonprofits due to their career and personal experiences. She supports the National Multiple Sclerosis Society because of their father's experience with the disease, Montgomery Hospice for their end-of-life care work, and America Walks, a pedestrian-focused organization, due to their co-founding of a similar mission-based group. She encourages everyone to support a nonprofit that aligns with their values, emphasizing the significance of donations to these organizations.

**Kate Fulton** believes that the funding of city services should not be seen as a binary choice between city staff and nonprofits, but rather a combination of both. She suggests that the city government should be fully staffed to provide services, while also targeting and prioritizing funding for nonprofits that have the most impact. She proposes assessing the effectiveness of the funding and investing more in areas that demonstrate significant outcomes. This dual approach, she believes, would enhance services and better meet the needs of the city.

She acknowledges the importance of tree canopies, parks, and green spaces for physical and mental health. She's heard from residents about their love for these features in Rockville. She advocates for not just preserving, but expanding these spaces. She mentions the pedestrian master plan, which requires new sidewalks and pathways but also encourages creative ways to preserve trees. She believes that any new developments should prioritize maintaining these green spaces, which are a defining characteristic of Rockville.

**Daniel Belay** views the current relationship between the city and nonprofits providing safety net services as positive. However, He would like to see increased engagement from nonprofits in the city. He envisions nonprofits contributing to areas like environmental issues and economic development, and believe that expanding nonprofit involvement could help Rockville grow.

If elected as a council member, he plans to establish liaison positions for communication with state and county levels of government. Their goal is to engage in ongoing discussions about real estate, economic development, climate threats, and community policing. He believes it's crucial to maintain close relationships with county and state entities to protect and serve the residents of Rockville effectively. He would use these liaisons to facilitate this communication and collaboration.

## Mayoral Candidates

*The following summaries represent the candidates' responses to the random questions posed by the moderator and are combined by topic in the order of the questions posed to the candidates.*

### Support for Nonprofit Organizations

**Mark Pierzchala** supports several nonprofit organizations, including Community Reach and Rainbow Place Shelter, with whom he's worked as a council member. He also supports the Kaseman Clinic. He has a longstanding spiritual and financial commitment to their church near George Washington University in DC. Through personal donations, he supports around 30 to 40 nonprofits, particularly those focused on civil rights, scientific research, and environmental conservation, reflecting their personal values.

**Monique Ashton** views nonprofits as a vital part of the city's fabric. She has served and fundraised for many, including Community Reach, for whom she's helped organize galas and promote their services for underrepresented groups. She's also worked with Interfaith Works, assisting them in securing more favorable rent costs and sourcing funding for property maintenance. She's supported MCH by organizing food packet preparation events for the unhoused with Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other groups. She serves on the board of RHE as a liaison and has contributed to a 31% increase in their affordable housing portfolio. The speaker deeply believes in giving back and living a life of public service, and values their partnerships with nonprofits.

### Rockville's Economic Outlook

**Monique Ashton** acknowledges that COVID-19 has significantly impacted Rockville's economic landscape and that there's much work to be done. She highlights the city's commercial vacancy rates, which, although better than nearby jurisdictions, still need to be addressed due to their impact on the tax base. She emphasizes the importance of proactive economic development and business engagement, including attracting new businesses and investments. She's led efforts to change the small business incentive fund to support not only Town Center but also other neighborhood centers. She has worked to attract new businesses to fill vacancies and has actively reached out to inform people about zoning changes and business opportunities in the city, particularly for mixed-income housing near Rockville Town Center. She believes in creating a welcoming environment to encourage businesses to invest in the city.

**Mark Pierzchala** takes credit for saving Rockville Economic Development Incorporated (REDI) from defunding and for promoting economic development as a positive concept. He believes that to improve Rockville's economic outlook, barriers such as restrictive zoning and public facilities ordinances need to be removed. He suggests shifting focus towards residential development, as he doesn't believe all office and retail spaces will be filled. He advocates for paying attention to the Urban Land Institute Report and addressing the issue of declining commercial property values, which leads to lower tax payments. He led efforts to attract businesses through grants and believes in the importance of resuming the WMATA study. He argues against the idea of undergrounding 355 from Viers Mill to Beall Ave, as he sees it as a

hindrance to Town Center's progress.

### Relationship Between the City and Nonprofits

**Mark Pierzchala** views the current relationship between the city and nonprofits providing safety net services as very good, based on their experience on the Human Services Advisory Commission. He acknowledges that nonprofits are an efficient way to deliver certain services. However, He note the city's challenge is to find its role, as it doesn't receive direct state grants like the county. The city helps guide people to resources and maintains reserve funds for when county funds are depleted. The speaker emphasizes that the city's contributions to about 10 or 15 nonprofits, selected through a competitive process, are important and well-considered.

**Monique Ashton** believes that the city and nonprofits have a strong relationship. She actively engages with nonprofits to understand their needs and challenges, and have helped her access services and funding. She advocated for increased funding for caregiver agencies during COVID-19 to address food insecurity and other pressing needs. She views public safety from a perspective of mitigation and prevention, identifying housing and food as key issues. She supported a 5.6% inflationary increase to help nonprofits post-COVID. She also helped connect nonprofits to state bond funding and acknowledged the role of state leaders in supporting nonprofits.

### Resolving Town Center's Problems

**Monique Ashton** identifies several issues facing Town Center, including wayfinding problems, the need for increased residential opportunities, marketing needs, and support for small businesses. She proposes creating gateway opportunities from the Metro and at 355 to increase Town Center's visibility. She also suggests converting existing buildings into housing to increase density, in line with recommendations from the Urban Land Institute report. She stresses the importance of supporting small businesses and mention that Rockville Economic Development Inc. (REDI) has been helpful in this regard. She also highlights pedestrian safety as a concern and support implementing improvements such as a road diet. She believes these measures will help businesses thrive in Town Center.

**Mark Pierzchala** identifies several issues with Town Center, including lack of visibility from 355, lack of density, and high costs for parking garages. He also mentions crime issues and an excess of storefronts for the population, as noted in the Urban Land Institute report. He believes Rockville Economic Development (REDI) can do more, but ultimately, it's up to businesses like Morguard, Comstock, and FRIT to invest money and creativity. He criticizes the current Mayor and Council for their handling of the Town Center and its 2040 master plan, and claims credit for insisting on redoing the Town Center master plan. He expresses frustration over the delay of the WMATA report due to discussions about undergrounding 355, which He believe is not feasible or beneficial.

### Future of Red Gate Park

**Mark Pierzchala** recounts the history of Red Gate Park, which was once a heavily subsidized golf course. He criticizes the current Red Gate Master Plan as overambitious and financially wasteful, suggesting that the allocated funds could be better used elsewhere, such as increasing police officers' salaries. He envisions Red Gate Park as an arboretum, opposing any new asphalt or permanent structures like a pier or amphitheater. He believes the park should make use of existing parking and that current practices of bringing portable stages for events work well. He expresses concern over the city's financial discipline, mentioning unfulfilled

capital projects due to spending on items he deems unnecessary. He also mentions a missed opportunity with an entrepreneur who wanted to invest in King Farm Farmstead, which was rejected in a closed session vote.

**Monique Ashton** notes their efforts to bring events back to Town Center, believing they generate activity and support economic vitality. She pushed for Oktoberfest to be held in Town Center, seeing it as a central location that encourages pedestrian activity. Regarding Red Gate Park, she worked with the community to officially designate it as a park, emphasizing the importance of green spaces for health and mental well-being, particularly during COVID-19. She supports the Arboretum and believes in finding ways to fund necessary work without relying solely on taxpayer dollars, such as through grants like the Chesapeake Bay grant. She envisions a trail network, nature playground, community garden, and dog park as part of Red Gate Park's offerings.