



2022 Endorsement Questionnaire - Prince George's County Council
[All Responses Will be Made Public]

Candidate Name: **Wala Blegay**
Contact Email: **wblegay@gmail.com**
Council Seat Sought: **County Council District 6**

1. How does your life experience qualify you for the office you seek?'

My life as an attorney and advocate, with legislative experience and a labor background are the qualifications I bring to my candidacy for the Prince George's County Council District 6 seat. I have been a legal advocate in the community, working with community leaders advocating and educating on issues impacting the community. I have been an advocate through my show Chat With a A Lawyer where we brought legal information to the community and I was legal advocate for seniors who were victimized by a predator who caused them to lose their homes, for parents in District Heights who were suffering from mold in District Heights Elementary School and on other issues impacting our community. Legal advocacy for the community has given me first-hand knowledge about issues impacting residents in the community and about laws that can be improved to address them.

I served on the board of the ACLU of Maryland where I worked on police accountability issues, during which I learned about processes that can be implemented to improve police accountability at the local level. As a labor advocate and counsel for the DC Nurses Association, I currently advocate to improve working conditions for nurses at the local level which gives me firsthand knowledge of how to improve our healthcare system but also how to support workers, both public and private.

Finally, given that the County Council is the legislative body of County government, my legislative experience is relevant and further qualifies me for the position. I have spent most of my career drafting and advocating for legislation that benefits the community.

2. What have the primary sources of your campaign's fundraising been, both in this campaign and past campaigns?

The primary sources of funding for my campaign has been over 80% from voters and progressive and labor advocates; 10% of my funding has been labor organizations including LUINA, SEIU, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), National Nurses United and more. For my January finance report, I had over 500 individual donors, most of which made donations under \$100 dollars with over 700 individual donations.

3. In 2018, the Prince George's County Council approved a small-donor public financing program for Council and Executive races to come into effect for the 2026 election. As yet, the Fair Election Fund Commission has not been set up and no funding has been allocated to the program. Do you support the small donor public financing program? If elected to the Council, will you work to ensure the program is funded each year leading up to the full funding needed for the 2026 election?

I fully support a small donor public financing program and I testified in support of implementing the small donor public financing program in 2018. Furthermore, I believe it is important to get money out of politics and the public financing program is one way to ensure that elected officials' first priority is to the people. I will work to ensure the program is funded each year leading up to full funding needed for the 2026 election.

4. In 1992, through a citizen-driven referendum, a two-term limit was placed on council members which the council repeatedly attempted to repeal over the years and repeatedly failed. As a result of the addition of two at-large seats on the council in 2016, the two-term limit has been diluted with council members allowed to jump from at-large to district seats and back without limit. Do you think district membership on the council is significantly different from at-large membership? Would you support or oppose the reinstatement of strict two-term limits?

I am in full support of strict two-term limits. I do not think district membership on the council is significantly different from at-large membership.

4. What is your position on the Maryland MAGLEV train proposal?

I support the position of the communities who will be directly impacted by MAGLEV in Prince George's County.

5. There is a great shortage of affordable housing in Prince George's County. What role can the County government have in creating policies that will provide affordable housing for residents at all income levels? How will you engage on this issue?

I strongly believe in affordable housing in Prince George's County especially for our seniors. We are currently experiencing a housing market in the Washington DC Area that is unaffordable for multi-level income communities and even some with unionized jobs. My own father, who recently passed, was a member of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689 and worked at Metro, lived in an apartment in District Heights that went from \$800 a month to \$1500; his income was under \$50,000 at his passing. The \$1500 monthly rent was unaffordable for my dad. Many families are like him, especially if they are renting or looking to purchase a home. As a

Council member, I will support policies to improve affordable housing options, which should include rent stabilization policies, increasing senior affordable housing communities, land banks, and developing programs to ensure that those who are making under \$60,000 are able to purchase and keep their homes and more.

More specifically, I will support any initiatives that funds non-profit and faith-based organizations and public private partnerships that will create affordable housing options for seniors and families in need. I will also support the continuation of limits on rent increases and even rental payment assistance programs to help current families struggling with rent. I have participated in the Housing Opportunities for All Workgroup where there have been discussions of ideas that will increase options for affordable housing in Prince George's County.

6. As part of the Maryland Police Accountability Act of 2021 (HB670-2021), the Maryland General Assembly requires each county to set up a Police Accountability Board (PAB). Prince George's County Council must pass legislation to fulfill this State mandate.
 - a. Do you support incorporating the functions of the existing Citizen Complaint Oversight Panel in the PAB?
 - b. How would you ensure that the composition of the PAB reflects the community?
 - c. Do you support a PAB with subpoena powers and paid investigators to effectively review complaints of police misconduct filed by members of the public?
 - d. Do you support adequate funding to staff the PAB to investigate the number of complaints filed, including budgeting for independent legal counsel?

I am in full support of police accountability and worked on police accountability advocacy, while I was serving as Board member of the ACLU of Maryland, right after the Freddie Gray demonstrations in 2016. I am pleased that the State took action to dismantle LEOBR. I support the County implementing a strong accountability Board. I do support incorporating the functions of the existing Citizen Complaint Oversight Panel in the PAB. I will support legislation that will not only incorporate the functions of the existing Citizen Complaint Oversight Panel but ensure the members of the community who represent the racial, gender and cultural diversity of the County serve on the PAB. I support a PAB with subpoena powers and paid investigators to effectively review complaints of police misconduct filed by members of the public. I also support adequate funding to staff the PAB to investigate the number of complaints filed, including budgeting for independent legal counsel. It is important that the PAB ensure real police transparency and accountability in our county.

7. The County Council approved a councilmanic district map that was very different from the map created by the independent Redistricting Commission appointed by the council. The map was found illegal by two separate levels of our judicial system. Please share your thoughts on the Council's map, public opposition to the map, and the judicial finding.

It is time to change the charter and remove the ability for the Council to play politics with redistricting. The independent Redistricting Commission spents months meeting and requesting public input on the redistricting map and the Commission made an effort to keep communities together in the same districts. The Davis map was produced overnight without input from residents and even some councilmembers. We are fortunate that the judicial outcome brought the

map back to the version that had public review and input. However, the victory was brought forth after county tax dollars were spent on legal fees and a fight against the county for many residents. We can avoid this concern if we change the charter before the 2030 census.

8. The County has a massive backlog in school maintenance, renovation, replacement, and expansion, which former Board Chair and education stalwart, Dr. Alvin Thornton, has attributed in large part to 20 years of historical racial discrimination towards Prince George's students.

- a. The County's solution to part of this problem has been to engage in a Public-Private Partnership for the construction and maintenance of six middle schools - the first county in the entire country to engage in a P3 for school construction. Do you think that using private capital with significantly higher interest rates that places the burden on Prince George's taxpayers is a viable model to address historical racial discrimination or should the State make Prince George's schools whole through State funding.
- b. What is the solution to fixing the huge remaining backlog in school maintenance, renovation, replacement, and expansion?
- c. What actions do you think the County should take to ensure that school capacity matches current and future demand?

Prince George's County is one of the largest school systems in the State with the highest number of African American students. It is time that the county receives their fair share from State funding, especially when it comes to school maintenance, renovation, replacement, and expansion. Prince George's County is one of the largest voting blocks in the State and many State-wide elected officials rely on Prince George's County to win elections, but yet we are still backlogged when it comes to school maintenance. Many of the schools in District 6 have been on the school maintenance, renovation, replacement, and expansion list for years.

For school capacity, District 6 is an area where there has been tremendous residential growth, but the schools in many areas are overcrowded and, in some area, there is low capacity. We need level the capacity issues by adjusting the school boundaries. We also need an Adequate Public facilities test where we match future growth with determining whether we have the school capacity and resources for any new development.

9. Should the Prince George's School Board be restored to a fully elected body? Why or why not?

Prince George's School Board should be restored to a fully elected body. I campaigned on this issue in 2018 and I have maintained my position. It is important that a democratic process prevail so that the voices of parents and taxpayers - stakeholders in education in the County - are properly heard at the school board level; the only way to maintain proper representation and accountability to stakeholders is a fully elected school board. An appointed or hybrid school board stifles the voices of residents, creates an atmosphere of opposing forces and divided loyalties where unity of purpose should prevail and the only loyalty should be to students, parents, educators and administrators to produce a world-class public education system in the

County. Although this is a State issue, the County Council does engage with the school board, and this is an important issue for all County residents.

10. Through legislation and through zoning and land use decisions, the Council plays a decisive role in county planning, and that planning drives transportation demand, demand for services and facilities, environmental and public health impacts, greenhouse gas emissions, and many other impacts. The Zoning Ordinance Rewrite eliminates the requirement that developers file Conceptual Site Plans (CSPs) for certain kinds of projects. CSPs provide critical opportunities for public review and comment on land use proposals early in the development process. Will you commit to working to restore the requirement for CSPs as soon as possible?

I will commit to working to restore the requirement for CSPs. I believe in full transparency in the development process where residents will be fully informed of the new projects coming to communities.

11. The County Council often uses Zoning Text Amendment bills to rewrite the Zoning Ordinance on the fly and to help developers advance certain projects without going through the normal public review process. ZTAs weaken the Zoning Ordinance and undermine the public's right to know and to have a meaningful say on development proposals. Will you commit to working to end or severely curtail the use of ZTAs and to ensuring that:

- a. Any ZTA bill filed includes a list and map of all of the potentially affected properties, as well as analysis of the potential impacts on communities, the environment, agricultural lands, and demand on public services and facilities?
- b. For each potentially affected property, the Council notifies all adjoining property owners, local community associations and watershed organizations, and local municipalities, by first-class mail and no less than 60 days prior to any public hearing on the ZTA?

I am in support of curtailing the use of ZTAs and the two above mentioned propositions. ZTA usurps the transparent process that ensures that residents are informed of development in their community. District 6 has had many ZTAs in many communities including, Westphalia, the Freeway Airport project and nearly one in the Cameron Grove community. ZTAs not only exclude the residents from participating in the development in their community, it is contrary to plans that have been previously approved with community input. I am in support of any efforts to ensure a transparent process.

12. In May of 2021, the County Council unanimously passed CR-027-2021 in support of a single payer Medicare for All system at the federal level, becoming the first county in Maryland to support the federal legislative initiative. The resolution cited the increase in racial health disparities due to the pandemic that only a single-payer system could address. The resolution also pointed out that Medicare for All “would reduce County spending on healthcare and enable local governments across our state to invest additional dollars into education, environmental protection, housing assistance, and other critical services.” Will you join the County Council in calling on our Congressional delegation to support and enact federal legislation for a single-payer system?

As Our Revolution is fully aware, I am a full supporter of single payer Medicare for All system at the federal level. I have spoken and advocated for Medical for All for years at OR events to encourage others to support Medicare for All, including at rallies and on advocacy panels. My personal loss of health care coverage in college which led to medical debt that impacted my credit rating led me to be an advocate for a Single Payer system since the early 2000s. It is time to fix our disjointed healthcare system and I will join the County Council in calling on our Congressional delegation to support and enact federal legislation for a single-payer system.