



2026 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Paul Dongarra
Position: Baltimore County Council
District: 1

What is your position regarding the Councilmatic Courtesy norm?

Councilmatic courtesy is not a neutral tradition; it is a political mechanism that has long enabled Baltimore County's pay-to-play development regime. For decades, developers have maintained outsized control over land-use decisions by flooding campaign coffers, and councilmatic courtesy functions as the enforcement arm of that system. Once a deal is cut with a sponsoring council member, the rest of the Council falls in line, regardless of community testimony, fiscal impacts, or ethical concerns.

I will not participate in this practice. It is fundamentally anti-democratic. It makes a mockery of public hearings to invite residents to spend hours testifying, often after work and against well-funded interests, only to disregard them in deference to an unwritten rule that protects political insiders. That is not representative government; it is performative democracy designed to legitimize predetermined outcomes. There are also serious fiscal consequences to councilmatic courtesy. A clear example is the extension of tax benefits under Bill No. 61-25, sponsored by Councilperson Jones, for the Security Square Mall area and around the Owings Mills Metro Station. While transit-oriented development can and should be part of a sustainable, equitable growth strategy, extending tax breaks without transparent analysis of how these projects are actually penciling out is reckless. This approach privatizes profit while socializing risk asking working families to subsidize development without any accountability for financial performance or public return on investment.

An even more troubling example is Bill No. 67-25, sponsored by Councilperson Young, which effectively legalized previously illegal behavior tied to a developer who had been indicted and pled guilty in connection with illegal campaign donations that coincided with a land deal involving the very parcel addressed by the bill. Councilmatic courtesy ensured that this history was politically irrelevant, when it should have been disqualifying. That is not just bad governance; it is institutionalized corruption.

The bottom line is simple: I do not intend to adhere to an abusive pay-to-play scheme, nor to the role councilmatic courtesy plays in sustaining it. Land-use decisions should be made based on community need, fiscal responsibility, ethical governance, and the public good and not on deference to power, money, or backroom arrangements. Baltimore County deserves a Council that represents people over profit, democracy over deals, and justice over convenience.

What concrete steps will you take to address the acute shortage of affordable housing in Baltimore County? Please include your position on the current Urban-Rural Dividing

The first step to solving any problem is to understand it. My campaign is taking that approach: looking our growth and housing challenges squarely in the face and inviting the community to the table to solve them together. Baltimore County's affordable housing crisis is not accidental; it is the predictable outcome of land-use policy captured by developer interests, chronic underinvestment in public planning, and a built environment that forces working people to spend an ever-greater share of their income just to get to work, school, and basic services.



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1. Build housing where people can live affordably: near transit, jobs, and daily needs

Affordability is not just about rent or mortgage payments; it is about total cost of living. Requiring a car to live, work, and play is one of the largest drivers of unaffordability. The average cost of owning and operating a car now exceeds \$10,000–\$12,000 per year, depending on vehicle type. For working families, that is effectively a second rent payment. If we are serious about affordability, we must reduce car dependency by placing housing near transit and employment centers and by building walkable, mixed-use communities with access to groceries, schools, childcare, and services.

Housing policy and transportation policy are inseparable. Quality of life improves, and costs fall, when people are not forced into car ownership just to survive.

2. Require real affordability when zoning is changed!

When developers ask for zoning changes, upzoning, variances or special exceptions, the public is granting them significant economic value. In return, the public must receive something tangible. That means mandatory, meaningful set-aside units for affordability, or a substantial payment in lieu of fees that is actually sufficient to produce affordable housing elsewhere.

In District 1 during the last CZMP cycle, two major zoning changes were granted to developers who had donated large sums to the sitting councilperson. Neither project included any meaningful affordable housing. One will rent townhomes starting around \$3,200 per month. The other, well that developer publicly claims that there is already “plenty of affordable housing” in Catonsville. This is precisely why public finance and independence from developer money matter and why developer-financed candidates must be opposed. Without enforceable requirements, zoning changes become wealth transfers upward, not tools for public good.

3. Proactively redevelop where reinvestment is long overdue without blank checks!

We must actively identify places that clearly cry out for redevelopment dead malls, underutilized commercial corridors, aging parking lots and bring those projects forward intentionally. However, any county-provided incentives must be justified against the actual financial productivity of the project. Public subsidies should never be automatic. They must be transparent, time-limited, and revisited regularly to ensure we are not using public dollars to underwrite private profit without a clear public return.

This is how we stop privatizing profit while socializing cost.

4. Empower accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in targeted growth areas

Accessory Dwelling Units are one of the fastest, least disruptive ways to add naturally affordable housing. In areas already targeted for development under the master plan, we should actively enable ADUs, especially through pre-approved, community-designed plans that are ready to build.

I live in such an area, and I am taking this issue directly to my neighbors: explaining why we need to evolve, how we can evolve, and how we can do so for mutual benefit. On my own street alone, ADUs could add 40+ affordable units, improve walkability, expand housing options for seniors and working families, and grow our tax base without extracting wealth from older communities to subsidize new development elsewhere.

5. A clear, principled position on the Urban-Rural Demarcation Line (URDL)



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We must be careful not to oversimplify the URDL into a purely symbolic equity argument. While it is true that rural communities have historically fostered exclusion and racial animus, and that history must be acknowledged, the core purpose of the URDL is concrete and urgent: it protects the drinking water supply for more than 2 million people. That is why it was created.

Developers, after recklessly overbuilding inside the URDL, now argue it must be moved. Progressive voices on the Planning Board, including Cathy Wolfson, have been warning about this for years.

Weakening the URDL would be an environmental and public-health disaster. It would also continue the abusive extractive model that supports chronic disinvestment of marginalized communities.

Even setting water aside, rural areas are simply not appropriate places for affordable housing. They are far from job centers, lack mass transit, and do not have the infrastructure needed for walking or biking. Pushing housing into rural areas deepens car dependency, raises household costs, and worsens affordability rather than solving it.

In short: affordable housing requires democratic planning, independence from developer money, and a commitment to people over profit. We must build denser, walkable, transit-oriented communities; demand real affordability in exchange for zoning power; invest public dollars responsibly; empower gentle density like ADUs; and defend the URDL as both an environmental necessity and a commonsense planning tool. Being intentional with our strategies and align our resources to see them to fruition is how we address the housing crisis honestly and equitably.

What resources are under-utilized in our County that could be used to increase economic growth?

Baltimore County is not lacking in assets; it is lacking the political will and planning discipline to use them. Some of our most powerful economic resources are sitting idle, or are actively undermined, by a development model that prioritizes short-term extraction over long-term community wealth.

1. District 1 is one of the most transit-rich areas in Baltimore County, with four mass transit stations, each designated in the Master Plan as a Mobility Hub. These hubs should be engines of economic activity, affordability, and job access. Instead, they are largely surrounded by disconnected, car-dependent development that squanders public investment.

A recent development near the Halethorpe MARC station is a clear example of failure. Despite being adjacent to a major regional rail line, the sitting councilperson failed to secure even basic improvements: No short-term car or e-bike rental stations

No completion of sidewalks connecting surrounding neighborhoods to the station

No walkable amenities that would support riders, workers, or local businesses

This is how you stifle economic development, not enhance it. When transit stations are treated as afterthoughts rather than anchors, we lose jobs, foot traffic, and opportunity. District 1 is arguably one of the most transit-rich places in Baltimore County, and I am committed to fully realizing those



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opportunities.

2. Walkable main streets as engines of local wealth

Our walkable main streets are another deeply under-utilized resource. When paired with the right public tools, especially pre-approved designs and predictable zoning, main streets enable incremental, small-scale development rather than speculative mega-projects.

This model is particularly powerful for minority-owned and locally owned businesses, which tend to capture a larger share of market activity in walkable commercial districts. Money stays in the local economy, circulates among residents, and is reinvested rather than being extracted by outside developers under the current exploitative model of economic development.

3. Our people and their willingness to solve growth challenges

One of the County's most overlooked resources is its people. My experience is that residents are willing to engage seriously with growth and redevelopment if they are offered real assistance, clear guidance, and an authentic role in decision-making. Too often, community engagement is treated as a procedural hurdle rather than a collaborative planning process. When people are empowered with information and support, they become partners in growth not obstacles to it.

4. Institutional anchors designated as Nodes under the Master Plan: UMBC and CCBC

Baltimore County's Master Plan explicitly identifies institutional Nodes as targeted areas for development, yet we routinely fail to leverage them. UMBC and CCBC are prime examples.

Across the country, universities and community colleges are playing a larger role in solving housing, workforce, and demographic challenges particularly through senior affordable housing, workforce housing, and mixed-use development integrated into or adjacent to campuses. These strategies address real social needs while also strengthening the institution's long-term stability and creating a built-in population close to services, education, and employment.

Strategic partnerships with UMBC and CCBC, aligned with their designation as institutional nodes, can drive inclusive economic growth that benefits students, workers, seniors, and surrounding communities without relying on speculative, car-dependent development.

In conclusion, Baltimore County's economic future does not depend on sprawl or developer giveaways. It depends on using what we already have: transit we have already paid for, main streets that already exist, institutional nodes already identified in the Master Plan, and residents willing to help solve the problem. District 1, in particular, holds extraordinary untapped potential. I am committed to an economic development strategy that captures that value for the public, builds durable local wealth, and replaces today's extractive model with one rooted in equity, access, and shared prosperity.



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What is the greatest need in the district you are seeking to represent and what are your plans to address it?

The greatest need in the district I am seeking to represent is the restoration of community confidence in places that have suffered from decades of chronic disinvestment. This did not happen by accident. It is the direct result of a sprawl-based development model that extracted wealth, through property and income taxes, from established communities in order to subsidize outward growth and the expensive new infrastructure that growth requires.

Social scientists call this process chronic disinvestment in marginalized communities. On the ground, it looks like physical decay: roads crumble, sidewalks disappear, green infrastructure fails, and public buildings deteriorate. But the damage does not stop there. Over time, disinvestment seeps into people's mindset. Residents begin to ask a devastating question: "Is this a place I want to live?" Those who can afford to leave often do, moving to newly built areas that feel safer and better maintained. That departure accelerates decline, and the cycle repeats.

This is why poverty is growing in Baltimore County. It is why District 1 has 13 community schools working heroically to mitigate the consequences of policy failure rather than being allowed to focus solely on education. I have spoken directly with teenagers in our poorest neighborhoods who refer to their own communities as "the ghetto." I tell them the truth: that their neighborhoods are often more than twice as tax-productive as the wealthiest streets in the district, that they matter, and that they should hold on because help is coming.

My plan to address this crisis is centered on intentional, people-centered redevelopment.

Redevelopment is not a campaign slogan; it is a necessity. It means reinvesting in the physical fabric of our communities: streets, sidewalks, stormwater systems, parks, schools, and public spaces while also rebuilding trust that government has not abandoned them. It means directing growth back into places that have been stripped of it, rather than continuing to subsidize sprawl at their expense.

This approach is essential to:

Restoring public safety, by stabilizing neighborhoods and increasing positive activity and economic opportunity

Improving educational outcomes, by strengthening the communities that surround our schools

Creating real pathways to a brighter future, especially for young people who have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that they do not matter

Rebuilding community confidence requires consistency, honesty, and visible investment. It requires saying clearly that existing communities are not expendable, that they are worth reinvesting in, and that their residents deserve the same quality of life as anyone else in Baltimore County.

If we are serious about equity, safety, and opportunity, then redevelopment of disinvested communities is not optional. It is the work.