



Councilmember Gabe Albornoz Council President's Speech

Tuesday, December 7, 2021

Thank you Councilmember Hucker for your service this past year as Council President. You ably led us through the second phase of the pandemic and your leadership in so many areas was instrumental in ensuring that the County was well positioned to weather challenges both big and small.

Thank you to my colleagues on the Council for the confidence you have placed in me to lead as president this year. For as long as I've served, I've been deeply impressed by your passion, intellect and resolve to help our County move forward, and that's what makes me doubly humbled to serve in this role, and with all of you.

I look forward to serving with Council Vice President Glass. As the first Councilmember to serve in leadership from our LGBTQ community, Evan is making history. And I look forward to working with him to make progress, on our entire shared agenda, including our work to fully live out our values as an inclusive community.

I would like to thank my office family, Joy, Mayra, Lillian and Beth for your support and outstanding public service to our residents. I would also like to thank our central staff and support team for your continued leadership and will do my best to support all of you.

Among the millions watching at home today are my family. I would like to acknowledge my mom and dad for their sacrificio, apoyo y amor. They taught me the important principle that it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice.

While I'm proud of being named Council President, the title that matters most to me is dad to my wonderful four kids and husband to my incredible wife. Catherine, Alicia, Paul, Mateo and Teresita, you are the reason I breathe, and I love you with all my heart.

Changes in leadership give us an opportunity to reflect, as we sit at the crossroads of the past, present and future. This year will mark the fourth and final chapter of the 19th County Council of Montgomery County, Maryland. The first three chapters each have enough content to write several dozen books. Or, given our society right now, several million tweets.

Our challenges have been well documented, but worth recalling. They include addressing the local fallout of the longest federal government shutdown in history, navigating the greatest test to our public health and social safety net in a century, living through one of the most consequential awakenings on the subject of racial equity since the Civil Rights movement, and confronting the toxic aftershocks of the most contentious presidential election in modern times that led to an insurrection and attempted political coup. You know it. You lived it. And you know there's much more we could discuss.

Despite those challenges, the leadership of this Council in partnership with the Executive Branch, and private and nonprofit sectors helped us weather this storm much more successfully than other communities. We have the highest vaccination rates in the country, and we have prevented more than 7,000 evictions to the point where we are at pre-covid levels. We have also passed historically significant legislation to address racial inequities, economic stability and the climatic challenges facing our environment.

I'm proud of our accomplishments and leadership these last three years. But as we reflect, I think we'd all agree that many of the events of the past year have felt disorienting, tragic, and exhausting. As we can look at those challenges with some of the clarity that comes from hindsight, the work that remains to be done comes into focus. And that brings us to the present.

Another variant of the virus is circulating; crime is at a sobering level; our local economy, which was stagnant prior to the pandemic remains deeply impacted; our first responders, teachers, nurses, social workers are overwhelmed and exhausted; and the mental health of our entire community, but especially our most vulnerable including seniors, children, youth, caretakers, and parents is cause for concern.

I am confident that we will meet this moment with resolve. The moral compass of this and previous Councils has always been pointed toward true north, toward just social policies and the relentless pursuit of the common good. However, it's one thing to have a true north and another to make sure the ship survives the journey.

The County's fiscal health is far better than we predicted at the start of the pandemic, but we must heed the red flags such as inflation, unemployment and our still recovering small business sector. We also must be prudent in our future spending as we prepare for the upcoming capital and operating budgets.

We must balance bold and principled policy initiatives with fiscal responsibility. We must think through short- and long-term consequences, both intended and unintended. We must work together with our Executive branch and key stakeholders to take a holistic and sustainable approach to fully recover from the pandemic and address long-standing inequities that existed prior to it.

I promise to fulfill my duties as Council President and most importantly, ensure that we stay on course.

As we look to the future, there are policy initiatives I plan to pursue during my tenure as Council president that are critically important to the health of our residents. We must close the gap on health disparities in our community. We have long known that these disparities existed and have worked hard to resolve them; however, the pandemic shone a spotlight on communities where these inequities already existed along with daunting public health barriers, too often with tragic outcomes.

Closing that gap means we must meet people where they are by expanding telehealth and telemedicine opportunities and mobile care capacity. This will allow us to go deep into our diverse communities to ensure health care is not only delivered but delivered in a culturally appropriate manner. We must pursue the ability to share data among providers so that they can provide holistic care to all patients. If we take these steps and make this a priority, I believe we can achieve a great deal.

Equally important is mounting a strong fight against hunger in our community. Right now, in Montgomery County, there are 100,000 residents at risk for hunger with 41,000 of them are children. While our County's food security response during the pandemic is nationally recognized as collaborative, strategic and innovative, we must transition from the emergency food distribution models that proved critical during the crisis to tackling the root causes of hunger and building a sustainable approach.

All families should have the opportunity to grow food in a garden, shop at a grocery store or farmers market, or purchase ready-to-eat food. The fact that we can make this vision a reality while also supporting local farms and small businesses and protecting our natural resources is a bonus. Montgomery County is blessed with tremendous strengths - a robust food assistance network, a strong nonprofit sector, and government leaders dedicated to ensuring that every child never has to worry about their next meal.

We have arrived at a point where I believe we can boldly state that we can end childhood hunger in our community. As Council President, I will work with our partners and stakeholders to make that vision a reality and will work with my Council colleagues to announce a path forward in the new year.

I often think of our 1.1 million residents as a constellation of stars in the sky. Each one bright, with its own story of resilience, sacrifice and strength. I think of the teacher, battling through exhaustion to continue to guide her students; I think of the small business owner, working hard to provide for her family and support her employees; I think of people like Dr. Mike Greenberg, a physician who helped hundreds of providers and families in the developmental disability community navigate the pandemic; I think of Grace Rivera-Oven, a community leader who saw the devastating impact in her community and organized to establish a social services hub that is helping thousands of residents get basic supplies, but more importantly to receive love and hope.

These stories fill me with hope. While the last three years have been unimaginably challenging, I have never been more optimistic for the future of our County and prouder to call it home. I am hopeful because of all that we have been able to achieve the last three years, and I know that the resolve of this Council will move us forward.

We will meet this moment, and we will move forward to ensure that our County remains one of the best places across America to live, work, worship and raise a family for all who choose to call Montgomery County home.

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