

GARRETT COUNTY DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM

*Adopted by the Garrett County Democratic Central Committee on 08/31/2020
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PREAMBLE

Garrett County is at a historic juncture. In the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic, states and municipalities are now in even more intense competition for jobs and economic growth. Will we welcome new approaches to our challenges? Or, will we be fearful of change?

The modern history of Garrett County was born at another such momentous event, fifty years ago this year. For more than seven months in 1970, the longest public worker strike in U.S. history stopped all work by the Garrett County's roads department and divided our citizens. Two narrow-minded county commissioners, fearful of change, refused to recognize the roads workers' rights to a union. The same commissioners had blocked the building of Garrett County Community College, forcing the county's bi-partisan board of education to sue the Commission to fund the college.

On Election Day, the people of Garrett County—tired of the division and disruption—elected three Democrats, led by Wayne Hamilton, a well-respected farmer and businessman. On November 17, 1970, under Hamilton's leadership, the strike was immediately settled. After months of conflict, Hamilton led an extraordinary bi-partisan effort to produce Garrett County's first comprehensive plan.

The process brought together all elements of the county's economic, political and cultural life. Zoning was established in the Deep Creek Lake region with plans for all major municipalities, balancing the need for economic development and tourism with the desire to retain the county's unique character. After much public dialogue, the plan that was adopted qualified the county for more federal and state funds for infrastructure development, job training and aid for impoverished residents and educational innovations, including support for Garrett County Community College's new campus. Even more importantly, it brought new vitality to the county's economy, strengthening Bausch and Lomb, a major new employer.

The bi-partisan civility, cooperation and vision initiated during those times—bringing together men and women of the Greatest Generation with baby boomers, many returning from college and the military—survived and thrived through many decades. Holding candidates for political office accountable was a hallmark of the times. Democratic Party activists led by the League of Women Voters, interviewed candidates, published supplements in *The Republican*. The League held candidates' nights where citizens showed up with the supplements in hand and questioned candidates on their priorities and qualifications.

Today, Garrett County Democrats are proud inheritors of that legacy. We are active participants in every sector of the county's economy and culture, including construction, hospitality and food, business services, medicine, education, tourism and farming and the arts, faith and non-profit communities.

Thomas Jefferson said, "The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest." Applying that standard, Democrats and Republicans in Garrett County must now acknowledge that, despite our significant progress, many of the problems identified by county leaders fifty years ago are still unresolved.

Most of the extraction industries and large-scale manufacturers like Bausch and Lomb and the Verso Paper mill were replaced by the service industries of today. But the county's workforce, especially women, still lag behind the state's average in pay and benefits. New employers are still scarce.

Too many young people, who would like to remain in the county they love, are still forced to leave for want of decent jobs or a more diverse and welcoming culture.

We will never solve these and other complex and multi-layered challenges by replicating the polarization of our national politics at the local level.

Whatever our viewpoints or ideology, a state politics dominated by our urban centers will only pay sufficient attention to the needs of our more rural areas when our citizens speak with one, united voice. Moving Garrett County into the future will require accompanying our honest look at our problems with a commitment to develop a real, operational consensus that draws upon diverse points of view and people of different backgrounds, experiences and skill sets.

This platform is our contribution to that process. We encourage Democrats and all members of our community to examine our proposals and let us know where you agree or disagree.

Above all, we encourage our fellow citizens to engage in the political process and reimagine the best hours of our county's history to bridge our differences and work together for the common good.

PLATFORM VALUES

I. EDUCATION:

Public Schools are the foundation of community growth and development. Education is not limited to academics but includes the entire development of the student and impacts the economic success and potential of our community. Students should have the opportunity to explore all career choices, including vocational, agricultural, and creative arts. We believe Garrett County Public Schools and our elected representatives must commit to the following:

- Provide an Equitable Educational Experience that is supported by staunch advocacy for appropriate funding from all levels of government and by quality leadership from the Garrett County Board of Education Administration, Garrett County Elected Board of Education, and the Garrett County Commissioners.
- Enhance the highest quality of Support Services necessary for an Equitable Educational Experience including prioritizing services for low-income students, technology for all students, and programs with appropriate levels of funding to effectively support students affected with fetal exposure to drugs and alcohol, Special Education students, and students with behavioral and emotional issues.
- Prioritize, emphasize, and value transparency from the Garrett County Board of Education Administration and the Elected Board of Education with all staff, contract issues, and hiring procedures, and with providing an arena for student concerns to be voiced and considered.
- Call for the election of Board of Education members who can well speak to the educational needs of the community, including those who are experienced educators and administrators and those who are parents/guardians of students, especially those from low-income families.
- Attend to ongoing funding issues regarding passage of the Blueprint for Maryland (Kirwan) and COVID concerns that will dominate planning for the immediate future, especially in areas of staff training, technology, planning, and providing resources to all students. Adequate funding is critical for these challenges to be met.

- Provide solid funding support and advocacy for Garrett College as an integral part of all aspects of our community.

II. ECONOMY:

Economic Development initiatives and programs must focus on infrastructure, communication, education, operations, and COVID-19 recovery. Additionally, County government departments must reduce the complexities when interacting with local businesses to improve efficiency. We challenge Garrett County elected and professional leaders to:

- Conduct a countywide long-term vision and plan for economic growth, as well as a countywide study to determine the affordability and availability of subsidized and market-rate housing. Such planning should be conducted along the lines of the County's first comprehensive plan (1973) which was developed by a bi-partisan planning commission appointed by three Democratic county commissioners and marked a turning point in moving the County to greater economic prosperity.
- Improve communications with citizens, using Zoom or other electronic media, to return to regular weekly meetings, to provide a platform for greater citizen input, and to offer regular citizen interaction with county departments, especially from the director and staff of the Garrett County Office of Economic Development.
- Promptly assess the county's economic and social damage caused by the COVID-19 crisis and provide necessary support to counteract those losses. The assessment should determine the effect on unemployment, along with faster delivery of benefits; closely monitor Chapter 11 and 13 bankruptcy filings to provide assistance to local individuals and businesses in their rehabilitation; assist homeowners impacted by mortgage and rent issues; and evaluate the county's capacity to deal with pandemic issues.
- Expand broadband infrastructure, for both wireless and fixed, to reach 90+% of county residents by 2022 and ensure the speed and capacity of the system is sufficient to meet market needs. Promote Garrett County as a great place to live while teleworking and telecommuting.
- Provide and support enhanced programming in the high schools and Garrett College that give training and education in marketable skills to help create local employment opportunities for a trained work force, thus providing incentives for young people to remain in the county.
- Require conducting appropriate public meetings and discussions before exporting public sector jobs to privatization, which include justification in terms of long-term savings to the public, effective delivery of services, and oversight of provider quality assurance; contingency plans and long-term effects on loss of jobs and benefits.

III. ENVIRONMENT:

Garrett County has been blessed with an abundance of natural beauty, clean water, and farmland, but we have not been good stewards of this abundance. These resources must be respected as the basis of our local economy and preserved for the health and prosperity of future generations. As such, we demand that our local leaders enact policies and practices that protect, restore, and fund the following:

- Promote sustainable and regenerative agriculture practices to reduce the use of synthetic fertilizers and to restore degraded soil by returning carbon to it, as well as the regulation of county aquifers and other water resources to protect the quality and quantity of this vital resource.
- Pragmatically reduce reliance on fossil fuels including participating in programs like the Million Acre Challenge⁽¹⁾ and Community Solar.
- Increase support from the Garrett County Office of Economic Development for small farmers, organic farmers, and producer co-ops through a variety of programs including the development of a local investors fund made available through our community bank.
- Increase local government support for robust community education on our local environmental issues and options, including programs that address the role of local government and non-profit organizations, such as the Western Maryland Food Council and Garrett Growers and their efforts to address the storage and distribution problems that confront farmers in Garrett County, and for the development of K-12 programs honoring our natural resources and offering actual methods and practices to protect them.
- Develop improved infrastructure to assist our community as we work cooperatively and collaboratively through this time of change including universal high-speed internet access, grant writing assistance for local small farmers, and addressing the health of our forests affected by the closing of the paper mill.
- Advance the economic and environmental viability of hemp by advocating for the classification of hemp as an agricultural product; for the appointment by the Governor of a hemp representative to the state Agricultural Commission; for the initiation of a study in support of the use and marketing of local hemp; and for supporting a hemp processing plant in Garrett County.

IV. HEALTHCARE:

Healthcare services in Garrett County must be coordinated on an inter-agency basis with an emphasis on social determinants of health. To accomplish this and improve the overall health of our citizens, we expect our public officials and our healthcare organizations to:

- Engage the community proactively in conversations on the multiple aspects of community health and the policies that affect us all, especially those who are not taking advantage of healthcare services.
- Require local healthcare providers to work collaboratively in common planning, strategy implementation, healthcare record access, and more.
- Coordinate with all providers to strategically and collaboratively combat local resistance to systemic wellness services and healthcare services and coverage, including destigmatizing using social services, increasing the education on patient self-responsibility, increasing access to healthcare services, and decreasing the avoidance of attention to symptoms of chronic diseases and the implementation of effective self-care strategies.

- Advocate for legislation at all levels focusing on factors contributing to poor health, including lessening of food insecurity, affordable access to high speed Internet, available and affordable healthcare, increasing job security and minimum wages, regular patterns of public transportation, and socially relevant dignity for all.
- Fight for universal access to quality and affordable healthcare services and healthcare coverage including strengthening the Affordable Care Act and providing for a quality public option, as well as making an on-ramp for healthcare coverage available when seeking service from any local healthcare provider.
- Commit to investing in good public health services by actively going after state and federal funding for programs and services including Medicare/Medicaid, home health, young family services, reproductive health and education, immunizations, behavioral health at all ages, chronic disease prevention programs, and addiction and substance use disorders.

V. POVERTY & INCOME INEQUALITY:

A successful Garrett County is one where prosperity is widely shared. The seasonal and weather challenges of the region's business and farm economies are unique. But, to move forward, the county must reject the faulty premise, once widely held, that boosting business development means promoting the county as "low-wage" and "non-union." Low wages undermine the county's tax base and force even many skilled workers and college-educated employees, like teachers, to buy homes in neighboring states. Low wages lead to greater numbers of young people leaving the county after completing their education. Low wages result in greater political and cultural polarization between citizens born in the county and others who move here to work or retire. The Garrett County Democrats call for county officials to lead a community-wide effort to:

- Recruit "high road" employers to Garrett County in the manufacturing and service sectors who are committed to employee training, fair compensation, and worker empowerment, including worker ownership and cooperatives.
- Win more state support for employee health care costs and other benefits, enabling employers to raise wages.
- Launch public-private programs to support the "working poor" with services including job training, substance-abuse counseling, legal assistance, and subsidized ride-share services, enabling them to become more stable, better-qualified and better-compensated workers, and to assist elderly retirees to stay in their homes instead of moving into nursing homes and rehabilitation centers, helping them secure adequate food and assistance with their health and safety needs.
- Reintroduce the highly successful and universally supported Garrett County-Community Action-First National Bank program offering mortgage assistance and loan forgiveness to first-time homebuyers with a focused effort to seek state, federal, and private funding for the program.
- Endorse Garrett County joining the list of Maryland counties that recognize countywide collective bargaining rights for public employees.
- Study Appalachian counties with similar demographics and economic factors to establish a list of best practices to better transition from old economies to new manufacturing and service models and to more closely work with state and federal agencies to promote a "just transition" for workers who are impacted by structural economic changes.

VI. COMMUNITY BELONGING AND RESPECT

As a community, we have much to be proud of in terms of the county's past accomplishments in the face of change and preparing for the future in all its complexity. At the same time, current complex events mandate that we honestly assess the limitations placed on our community by outdated intolerance, including the devaluation of any member of our community. As stated in the 2019-2021 Garrett County Community Health Assessment ⁽²⁾, being different in any way is perceived as a risk or disadvantage in Garrett County. In order to stem the outmigration of local youth and attract new families, businesses, customers, and others, thus strengthening our economy, we must commit to becoming a welcoming community for all, one that lifts up the disenfranchised and works actively to reduce our narrative that lessens the worth of our residents who, for example, were not born here, who are of different races and ethnicities, who have recovered or are in the midst of recovering from unhealthy substance use, who have made mistakes outside of the law, who love differently, who pray differently, who believe differently, who vote differently, etc. we believe a cohesive effort by all county leaders is required to:

- Call for a community-wide effort at all levels to cultivate general respect for all people and to become a community that embraces difference and the gifts each person contributes to our social, economic, and public health.
- Require regular Diversity and Inclusion trainings for all County and Board of Education staff and offer such training for local businesses through the Chamber of Commerce to include a focus on attracting new visitors and residents to our area and providing a quality customer service experience for all.
- Address openly Garrett County's history of racism and the lingering belief system of some residents that is based on hate and prejudice, including actively discouraging symbols of this racism (e.g., effigies, the confederate flag, KKK flags, etc.) from public view; encouraging open and honest dialogue about racism in our community; and challenging educational curriculums and telling of our own history that does not include the history of people of color.
- Call for ethical public officials who operate from integrity, who are committed to the well-being of everyone not just a few, and who are representative of the many different constituents in our community especially by party affiliation, gender, and time in our community.
- Actively work to reduce the stigma of receiving government support and the active disparaging in our community of government.
- Protect the voting rights of all community residents who are eligible to vote, making it as easy as possible to exercise this right in every election.

NOTES:

⁽¹⁾ The Million Acre Challenge (MAC) is a 7- to 10-year project to build a vocal and sustained farmer- and consumer-driven movement necessary to transform Maryland agriculture into a regenerative system that improves water quality and farm resilience, is profitable, and helps mitigate climate change. The long-term measure of success of this movement will be reaching a truly transformative tipping point -- no fewer than one million Maryland agricultural acres in regenerative production by 2029.

⁽²⁾ 2019-2021 Garrett County Community Health Assessment, page 15.