

DC for Democracy
2012 DC Council Candidate Questionnaire
Max Skolnik, Ward 4 Democrat

1. Why are you running for City Council, and if (re)elected, what are the priority areas you intend to concentrate on in the near term?

My parents taught me that I had to give back more than I took from the world. That lesson in public service has shaped me as an educator, youth advocate, and former elected official. With every atom and fiber of my being, I believe that we are all responsible for building a city safe and beautiful for all, especially those most vulnerable. After the birth of my son in 2010, it became profoundly personal.

We need a government that is driven by a grass roots ethic. For too long, decisions have been made behind closed doors with little citizen input. To that end, I will fight for the removal of corporate influence from the political process so that regular people can control the civic arena. I will champion a more democratic school reform based on community-school models of teacher, parent, and youth empowerment. Finally, I will lead the community in developing an economic plan built by small business entrepreneurs rather than faraway corporate executives.

2. With unemployment, homelessness, and general economic distress at historically high levels, do you favor increasing safety net spending in future budgets? If yes, which programs should be given highest priority?

Yes, I believe that it is a fundamental responsibility of government to provide a strong social safety net particularly in times of economic peril. This support system must be comprehensive in order to provide a broad spectrum of care for those in need. There is no hierarchy of vulnerability, but we must ensure that young people, seniors, the homeless, and the jobless are not left behind. Some key supports include:

- Expanding child care subsidy programs and ensuring robust funding for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families in FY13
- Funding the DC Children & Youth Investment Trust Corporation at \$12.5 million (\$7.5 million for year-round youth programming and \$5 million for summer programming). Currently, the Trust is severely underfunded at

\$3M. In light of recent scandals, we also need to fix the Trust by ensuring a fair and competitive granting process, an independent Board of Directors, and a dedicated funding stream.

- Expanding programs that guard against homelessness, such as the DC Emergency Rental Assistance Program (\$9M, 2009 levels), Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (restore the recent 23% cut), and Interim Disability Assistance (5.6M, 2008 levels).
- Supporting Workforce Intermediaries (e.g., non-profits, faith institutions, etc.) to connect employers and employees.
- Expanding senior support programs (e.g., financial assistance for grandparents raising grandchildren, Commodity Supplemental Food Program that provides free groceries, etc.).

3. Do you consider the District's total current budget to be too large, too small, or about right? Please explain.

Generally, I believe that we do not spend enough on human services. However, I am more concerned about the way our budget is developed rather than its size. I would fight for the following reforms:

- Top-to-bottom review of agencies to reduce waste, fraud, and inefficiencies.
- Increased transparency to better understand program rather than agency expenditures and increased focus on outcomes measurement.
- Smarter budgeting practices to break the endless cycle of unexpected deficits and surpluses and reduce intra-agency transfers.
- More careful review of future tax abatements so that they ensure community benefits, fulfill economic development priorities, and contain clawback provisions if commitments are not met.
- Participatory budgeting mechanisms so that citizens have control over how dollars are spent in their communities¹

4. Last year, income taxes for those earning above \$350,000 were increased from 8.5% to 8.95%, subject to a "sunset" provision after 4 years. With this temporary increase, all taxpayers earning between \$40,000 and \$350,000 remain subject to the 8.5% rate. Do you believe this is fair? If not, what would you propose?

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that "taxes are what we pay for a civilized society." I believe that a defining principle of the Democratic Party is the establishment of a progressive taxation system. Under the previous structure, it was deeply unfair

¹ Modeled after programs in Chicago's 49th Ward and New York City (<http://www.participatorybudgeting.org>)

for someone earning \$40,000 a year to be in the same tax bracket as someone making \$40 million. Thus, I would fight to make the increases permanent, and I would push for the creation of two new tax brackets (i.e., 9.1% for \$500,000 and 9.2% for \$1 million).

5. What recently revitalized DC neighborhood would you suggest as the best model for the city as a whole, and why?

I believe that the DC neighborhoods that are most vibrant are the ones that promote small business development. Barracks Row/Eastern Market has particularly diverse, neighborhood-serving retail and restaurant options. Additionally, it is supported by a strong community resource (i.e., Eastern Market and farmer's market) rather than a big box store or other corporate entity. I will fight to build an economic model of small, local businesses matched with key neighborhood anchors (e.g., arts institutions, farmer's markets, entertainment facilities, etc.). The model will be supported by micro-grants, technical assistance, incubator programs, peer-to-peer mentoring, and reduced regulatory burdens. The process begins with a continuous and honest dialogue amongst small business owners and community members, a step I initiated in December 2011 at our Ward 4 Small Business Forum.

6. If (re)elected, what will you do to create and protect affordable housing for both home-buyers and tenants, and alleviate homelessness?

If elected, I will work with government agencies, advocacy groups, and local businesses to implement a full *Continuum of Housing*. This campaign developed by the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development seeks to end homelessness and preserve affordable housing for all in the District. Some elements of the strategy include:

- Re-funding housing support programs cut in 2011 (e.g., Emergency Rental Assistance Program, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Interim Disability Assistance, Local Rent Supplement Program, Housing First Fund, etc.).
- Restoring funding for the Housing Production Trust Fund (\$18M level).
- Supporting programs that expand and protect home ownership (e.g., Home Purchase Assistance Program, 1st time homebuyers tax credit, etc.).
- Supporting programs that allow for the elderly to safely and comfortably age-in-place.
- Expanding inclusionary zoning.
- Investing in effective transitional housing programs for youth, families, and adults.

- Expanding early intervention programs to prevent youth homelessness.

7. Do you think reform in the DC public schools is headed in the right direction? Explain your answer.

No, despite several years of so-called reform, DC youth are facing mounting challenges. Recent standardized assessments in Ward 4 and throughout the city have shown alarming reversals. Teachers operate under a punitive and highly-politicized IMPACT evaluation system. Meanwhile, the District has the worst teen unemployment rate², the largest black-white achievement gap³, and one of the worst college graduation rates⁴ in the nation. The top-down, technocratic approach is not working.

We need to change course and embrace the community-school and Promise Neighborhood movements. We need to marshal all of our local resources to build a comprehensive cradle-to-career pipeline that expands education beyond the classroom.

In the District, we are experimenting with a Promise Neighborhood in Ward 7, a model that brings a wide-array of services to a targeted community. This is not enough. Let's build the Promise City. Let's bring everyone to the table: government, business, non-profits, educators, the faith community, parents, and young people. Such a strategy would include the following elements:

- Full implementation of a P-20 Council with multi-sector support to act as the main driver of youth policy and programs in the District.
- Funding and expansion of DC Promise Neighborhoods throughout Ward 4 and the District.
- Allowances for curriculum diversity and teacher independence within the Common Core Standards so that students are not strictly tied to test preparation.
- Increased access to credit-recovery programs so that all high-school students are on track to graduate
- Improved academic achievement through the professional development of teachers (e.g., instructional coaches/master teachers, apprenticeship and mentoring programs, financial incentives, etc.).
- Increased focus on wellness and enrichment programs (e.g., more funding for Out-of-School-Time programs through the DC Children & Youth Investment Trust Corporation, funding parity for athletic programs for young girls, full funding for the Healthy Schools Act 2010, increased funding for mental health and family support programs, etc.)

² 50.1%, Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011

³ Source National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011

⁴ 9% of 9th graders will graduate from college in 5 years, Source: DCPS (<http://1.usa.gov/Asejvo>), 2011

- Passage of an expanded version of the Community Schools Incentives Amendment Act.
- Passage of a DC Dream Act to ensure that the children of immigrants have pathways to higher education.
- Introduction of a Participatory Educational Budgeting Act to bring transparency to the funding process and allow for formalized citizen input.
- A push for structural changes in the city government, such as the reestablishment of the Education Committee on the Council and the creation of a Central Youth Office (under mayoral control) to coordinate the efforts of the P-20 Council and consolidate youth budget-setting and grant-making authority.

8. How do you suggest that we repurpose the large number of school properties that have been closed over the past few years? Cite specific schools/communities as examples, if possible.

In repurposing school properties, it is essential to provide for community control of the process and to ensure a viable plan for the transition period. Ultimately, schools are valuable community resources that should not be turned over to high-end commercial and residential developers. Through a careful planning process, the surrounding neighborhood should be able to develop options that meet its needs (e.g., cultural and recreational institutions, health clinics, senior centers, job-training centers, etc.). Additionally, given the time necessary to make these facilities changes, the District should help develop transitional uses for the space such as artist communities, community gardening, or green space. An example of this process not working is Rudolph Elementary School in Ward 4. Since its closure in 2008, the school has remained lifeless, community input has been inconsistent, and no plans were made to activate the space in the interim.

9. What are the most important steps that need to be taken to reform the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority?

It is vital for the District to have a high-quality, multi-modal, safe, and reliable transportation system. To ensure this, I will push for the following reforms:

- More equitable funding from Virginia and Maryland
- Increased police presence in Metro stations and buses
- Investments in vocational training programs that prepare workers for WMATA-specific employment (e.g., escalator repair, track work, etc.)
- Improved accessibility for those with disabilities

- Expansion of Capitol Bikeshare docking station locations
- A more transparent and responsive Board of Directors

10. Do you support funding the DC statehood campaign in the 2013 budget? If so, what amount would you support and for what purposes?

Yes, I support funding for the DC Statehood campaign at the \$250,000 level. The campaign should work tirelessly towards the goal of statehood through advocacy activities, media outreach, and educational programs. In the short-term, we should focus on increased budget autonomy from Congress and greater internal democratic reforms (e.g., increased role for Advisory Neighborhood Commissions, participatory budgeting and legislative mechanisms, etc.)

Finally, I will fight all efforts to infringe on DC Home Rule, including recent attempts by Congressional Republicans to ban all abortions in the District. I believe that all avenues of protest should be explored including White House and Congressional advocacy, direct action, and civil disobedience.

11. Do you believe that the current DC Council represents the interests of the broad public? If not, what segments of the public are underrepresented?

The current DC Council does not represent the interests of the majority of citizens given its near total takeover by corporate interests. Barely regulated money flows into the political process through outside employment, corporate bundling, Constituent Service Fund gifts, and lobbyist and contractor donations. Additionally, the Council has adopted an insular, top-down approach to the issues. I would propose opening the process to include more participatory budgeting and legislating mechanisms. These tools have been adopted in other progressive cities and allow for citizen control of finances and law-making. Finally, I believe that the Council has lost its sense of community service. A central theme of my campaign is reclaiming that civic spirit. To date, we have organized food drives, trash brigades, snow shoveling crews, youth projects, and other service activities.

12. Do you support the creation of an independent ethics commission with members nominated by the Mayor and confirmed by the Council, as provided for in the newly enacted ethics reform legislation? Please explain your position.

No, the creation of yet another commission and moderate increases in transparency requirements do not address the root problem of barely regulated campaign money. Additionally, I am opposed to the makeup of the Commission given the highly compromised and conflicted positions of the Council and Mayor. Instead, I will fight for a Commission composed of outside experts selected by local universities, civic advocacy groups, and the faith community. In terms of financial issues, I will fight for the following:

- A ban on all corporate, LLC, and partnership donations to elections. Everyone should have equal access to the political process. To that end, I am incorporating the efforts to pass a ballot initiative banning these types of donations into my campaign.
- A ban all lobbyist and contractor donations. Our leaders must draw a sharp line between political activities and the business of the District.
- An end to outside employment for Councilmembers. This is critical given the current high salary level (2nd highest in nation) and the dangers of significant conflicts-of-interest.

13. Unlike most states, the District allows entities under contract with or soliciting contracts from the city to contribute to political campaigns. Is this a problem which future legislation should address, and, if so, how? Should DC ban all corporate contributions?

Yes, I believe that DC should ban all corporate, contractor, and lobbyist donations. Currently, I am supporting a ballot initiative by the Committee to Restore Public Trust to ban all corporate donations. I will be integrating the petition drive into my campaign and introducing support resolutions at all Ward 4 ANC's. Furthermore, to truly level the playing field, I will fight for the public financing of elections. Other cities, such as New York, provide successful matching programs along with a strict prohibition on donations from sources other than individuals.

14. Do you support the use of Constituent Service Funds (CSFs)? If so, why? If not, would you be willing to work for their elimination?

No, I believe that Constituent Service Funds should be abolished. If elected, I will seek to end the practice and I will not establish a personal fund. Most Councilmembers have misappropriated these funds to support unethical purposes (e.g., bartending services, sports tickets, election consultants, etc.). I will fight instead for full funding for safety net programs and non-profit organizations that meet the urgent needs of constituents. Councilmembers should not have access

to personal favor banks and secondary election accounts.

15. What should DC do to improve its job-training programs?

To improve job-training programs, I will push for the following:

- Increased vocational training slots in DC Community College
- Increased adult retraining programs
- Greatly expanded Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and career academies in public schools
- Partnerships with and funding for high-quality non-profit and labor organizations that focus on employment training
- Expansion of year-round youth employment activities and the professionalization of the Summer Youth Employment Program
- Investments in "green" jobs such as weatherization, community gardening and food processing, renewable energy installation, environmental consulting, etc.