

DC for Democracy Questionnaire
April 3, 2012 Democratic Primary
At-large Council - Peter Shapiro

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?

Our city is at a crossroads. We have much to be proud about, but some of our highest elected officials are badly damaging our city. The DC Council has been broken and paralyzed by a culture of greed and self-dealing and disrespect for the truth.

Until we fix that problem, until we fix the Council, DC will be missing out on jobs, better education and opportunities for everyone. Which is why we cannot accept the low bar for leadership that has been set on DC Council. "Not currently under investigation" cannot be a reason to vote for anyone.

I'm the only candidate in the race who can show you a proven record of integrity and effective leadership – I've gotten real things done for real people, and I'm not afraid to stand up for what's right and what's wrong.

I am running because I have the leadership skills and experience to forge a more progressive and ethically-oriented vision for the city. The city deserves public leaders who serve the public, and not themselves.

On the DC Council, I'll work for more and better jobs, a school system that serves all DC's kids and parents, and safe streets and neighborhoods.

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?

City programs that help the most vulnerable – TANF, Medicaid, housing assistance, to name a few – must be preserved, and strengthened where possible. As leaders, we will be certainly be judged on our fiscal prudence, but should also be judged on our compassion.

While we attend to the immediate needs, we should be smart about budgeting for efforts to address the long term, like job training and placement services. [see answer to 15 below for more]

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

Currently, the District's budget is clearly not meeting all the needs of all citizens. Whether that's because it is too small or not allocated correctly is difficult to judge, given the lack of accountability and transparency in DC spending. A recent study from

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Good Jobs First placed the District dead last among the states in this regard. As Councilmember, I will aggressively fight for openness in budgeting, so that citizens and leaders alike can make more informed decisions about how large the budget should be and how well taxpayer money is being spent.

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?

While I would have voted for this measure last year, I would like to see much more progressivity in District income taxes, most likely by adding brackets.

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

Looking at District neighborhoods along the spectrum of revitalization, what is striking is that first, there is no one “best model for the city as a whole,” and second, that’s probably a good thing.

Look at just three examples where very different paths and factors have had some level of positive results:

- U Street, NW, where development followed long-planned transit, is well-scaled, and includes a diverse mix of locally owned businesses and corporate chains.
- H Street, NE, where development and commercial growth has been seeded by city investment in street improvements and new transit.
- Penn Quarter, where a single, very large, privately financed installation has over time spurred not only restaurants and entertainment/tourism destinations, but very strong office-space demand, in sectors that probably even Abe Pollin didn’t foresee.

Different communities and redevelopment opportunities require diversity of approaches. Just as our communities are made up of diverse individuals, so are the neighborhoods diverse in terms of land ownership (public/private - city, Federal, WMATA, private landowners), assets, challenges, and opportunities (i.e., waterfront properties, former industrial sites, former Federal installations). Southwest and Southeast and Walter Reed come to mind here in particular.

The District has always benefited from an engaged populace with respect to development, and this has been enhanced by new types of community engagement and activism.

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The challenges for DC government: First, to maximize the public's bang for the buck – where do public subsidies make the most sense, when/where/how can they most effectively be used to generate most gains? Second, to continue to foster internally and bring in talent and technical expertise in planning and community development at the high levels of the last decade.

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

The District ranks lower than only six states with respect to affordable housing. We need to fully fund the Housing Production Trust Fund, LRSP and funding for shelter and permanent supportive housing (and these should be first-order priorities, not contingent on hoped-for future revenue increases). We should also strengthen inclusionary zoning and hold developers accountable to helping further community goals for diversity and inclusion.

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

Yes, DC education reform appears to be on the right track, but of course there is much more work to be done and we need to keep moving forward.

I agree with Chancellor of DC Public Schools Kaya Henderson when she says "Our focus now is on the hard, non-sexy reform involved in turning around high poverty schools." To do this we must continue to improve teacher quality, improve principal quality, and especially, focus on school transformation. We need systemic responses to school-based poverty along with continuing curriculum reform. We have some excellent initiatives underway including the Turnaround model, which is in four schools right now and the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative. These are the types of reforms we need to support and see more of.

I support a rigorous but fair teacher evaluation system – whether its IMPACT, a revision of IMPACT, or something else – the key is not to go back to what we had before, which was a system that failed to identify, retain, reward high-performing teachers or identify, retrain, and if necessary part ways with the low-performing ones. Nobody who cares about kids and their education can argue with this. Critics of the current system need to talk about how to improve it, not eliminate it. I was disappointed to learn that the planned study of IMPACT (by Roland Fryer of Harvard) was cancelled, and look forward to renewed efforts to study the current system, understand what is working well, and what needs to be improved.

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All children in this city must have access to a high quality education - and we need to continue to improve schools in every corner of this city. Some will need more help than others, and that is fine. Equity has always been and remains a major concern – equity by ward, between traditional and charter schools, between schools with more special needs students and those with fewer such students, etc. I look forward to the important work of the DC Public Education Finance Reform Commission. We also need to continue to get a handle on special education because, as in every other school district in the country, it affects every aspect of the system.

The schools, however good they are, can only do so much. We need a comprehensive plan to support, sustain, and empower children and their families in this city. Too many children are falling between the cracks and disconnecting from mainstream developmental and educational pathways. The city needs these children; they are our future. While there have been some efforts at coordinating the many child and youth-serving systems that we have (education, health, child welfare/foster care, juvenile justice, summer programs, food programs, housing etc.), we have a long way to go on this front.

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.

School buildings and the space that surrounds them are powerful reflections of community values and aspirations. School buildings, especially old or historic ones, often serve as community anchors for generations of residents. They not only house schools where teachers teach and students learn, but they also meet the social, recreational, and development needs of the broader community that surrounds and supports that school. When school buildings and spaces are recognized and valued for the many critical roles they play in the larger community, it becomes much easier to manage change, including the controversial and painful closing of a school. The ability of that building to continue to serve and strengthen the community the surrounds does not end when a school closes.

Over 20 public schools have been closed by DCPS over the last several years, and others have been closed and remained vacant for much longer. The Franklin School in downtown DC, an historic gem and home to the city's first high school in 1880, was recently taken over by the Occupy DC protesters. Some former school properties are slated for future renovation, but others are designated for uses that are clearly out of sync with the District's comprehensive plan and the wishes of the surrounding community.

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Revitalizing former school buildings as "centers of community" preserves important links to a neighborhood's past, and requires shared vision and strong leadership. As a Council member, I will work actively to develop a comprehensive inventory of all of the city's vacant property, especially its school buildings, evaluate the needs of the city and its many vibrant neighborhoods, and carefully consider the ideas and preferences of the communities that surround individual sites. There is no reason why many of these buildings cannot be designed for mixed use with educational, cultural, and non-profit tenants working alongside commercial clients.

Many of these buildings can and should be retained for educational use. Compared to the 20th century, the education and training needs of DC residents are growing, not shrinking. Both DCPS and public charter schools continue to need space, and especially modern 21st-century learning environments. If the city does not support and strengthen its fledgling community college and public law school, who will?

Other possibilities include magnet schools; teacher training facilities that are co-located with model schools; alternative education programs and schools; youth mentoring and youth development programs; adult education and family literacy programs; and specially-designed space for career and technical education and youth apprenticeship programs that are linked to local employers and local jobs. Space is also needed for the city's many cultural and other non-profit institutions that sponsor concerts, poetry slams, and gallery space that inspire newcomers and long-term residents alike. Public-private partnerships can provide very stable and enriching community anchors in neighborhoods and allow the surrounding community to benefit from that space in many different ways.

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

WMATA is unique in that it has no dedicated funding source. WMATA relies on the political whims of the three jurisdictions – and more recently the federal government – and is often used as a political football by the different governments to pick at each other. I believe that identifying a dedicated funding source and increasing resources is critical, especially those that can go toward maintenance and safety. This will be even more critical as the system expands with the Purple and Silver Lines.

I also believe that WMATA has fundamental governance issues that inhibit its abilities to move us forward as a region. I was pleased to have been appointed to the WMATA Governance Task Force that was created last year by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments and the Greater Washington Board of Trade. I supported the recommendations made, some of which have already been implemented: Restructuring the board; clarifying board member roles and authority; more fully empowering the

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board chair and the General Manager/CEO; creating a safety committee, among others.

Finally, since WMATA is a company with such an important public mission, the role of citizen/resident advisory boards is critical and should be enhanced. For example, I support efforts to include the Riders Advisory Council more fully in decision-making processes.

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

I support funding in the DC budget for planned, strategic and effective promotion of statehood. I question whether a state-legislature strategy is the right use of both money and the Mayor and Council's time.

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?

In many ways, the current council does not reflect the diversity of interests and backgrounds of the residents of the city. Representation matters. Access matters. In the end, money matters a lot. Our broken campaign finance system ensures that the voices of ordinary citizens can be and are drowned out by narrow corporate interests. When a sitting member can raise over a third of their contributions from a handful of "bundlers," it is right to ask whose interests are really being represented.

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.

I support the creation of the ethics commission (BEGA) as laid out in the legislation sponsored by Councilmember Bowser. But there are a few ways in which I want it strengthened. First, I would increase the size of the board to five members. Second, I would change the board nomination process. Nominations to the board should be made by an independent *ad hoc* nominating committee and submitted to the Mayor and Council. A super-majority of the Council would be required to reject a nomination. Finally, I will make sure there is enough money budgeted for the Commission to do its job. Of course, beyond increased transparency, the legislation did little to address the firmly entrenched pay-to-play system in place. See answers to question 13 for my approach to address this issue.

13. Unlike most states, the District allows entities under contract with or soliciting

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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?

It is wrong to allow entities under contract or soliciting contracts from the city to contribute to political campaigns. If elected, I will sponsor legislation to ban this practice. I would also sponsor legislation to ban corporate contributions to political campaigns altogether. Corporations are not persons and should not have equal standing as citizens, regardless of what the Supreme Court has ruled.

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?

Elected officials should not be in the business of giving money directly to individuals. It is inefficient and ripe for abuse. The size of the CSF isn't the issue. The administration and structure of the fund is the problem.

I imagine we would all agree that the goal of the fund should be to help those in need in the most efficient and effective way possible. This would be to work with and empower non-profits that already provide support and services to city residents. A simple approach would be for each CSF to be organized as a donor-advised fund with the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. With this structure, there would be no need to limit money coming in. However, money coming out could only go to 501 (c)3 organizations licensed with the city and approved by the Community Foundation.

This system would potentially maximize rather than shrink the pool of resources available for constituent assistance, grow and empower the DC non-profit sector and provide more transparency and due diligence. Barring this type of tightly controlled and transparent structure, I would support the total elimination of CSFs.

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

DC needs to be much more strategic and responsible in its approach to job training and to developing strong career pathways for young people and other residents looking for work. These are important functions at any time, but during times of economic uncertainty, like now, they can help reduce unemployment, lift families out of poverty, and reduce income inequality across the city.

An effective job-training and workforce development system helps DC residents acquire new job skills, sharpen existing ones, and prepare for jobs in high-growth, high-demand industries. Currently we have over 30 programs and services administered by a dozen

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city agencies. They serve residents with different skills and backgrounds -- some targeting youth, seniors, or people with disabilities – and deliver a host of services including literacy and adult education, job readiness training, occupational skills training, subsidized on-the-job training, and assistance for employers.

Unfortunately, the entire system of programs has had little coordination or strategic direction, often offering a mishmash of programs with few linkages to employers, little oversight of contractors delivering job training services, and no evidence of effective service delivery models, program accountability, or client outcomes.