

DC for Democracy Questionnaire
April 2014 Primary, At Large (Democrat)
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DEMOCRATIC AT LARGE CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

ECONOMY & JOBS

1. Given the strong economic and population growth in recent years, we can all agree that this city is now a hot place to live and work. Going forward, what criteria should justify the use of DC taxpayer funds for economic development?

There are two major issues with the current system for tax-supported economic development. First, economic development is not concentrated in communities that need it the most and have the most to gain from public investment. Our tax dollars are not supporting enough minority or women-owned small businesses, we are not growing quickly enough in neighborhoods with disproportionately high unemployment, and we are not properly incentivizing current businesses to hire locally. Shifting to a model which addresses these issues can empower not only the business owner, but all stakeholders in an area. The second issue I want to address is government inefficiency. When developers seek tax breaks for new construction, they commit to do something in return that develops a community be it establish affordable housing units, hire local workers, or provide a currently unavailable service. Far too often, developers do not properly follow through on their commitments and the citizens are left behind with negligible benefits. We need to reduce inefficiency by enforcing the laws on the books and punishing developers who continually circumvent their obligations.

All projects that receive public funding should have requirements to hire local residents and pay them a living wage. If employers fail to do those things the must be held accountable "clawbacks" being one of the tools to do so. I will provide keen oversight over workforce development and economic development efforts in DC to make sure that our dollars are well spent. My skills as a policy analyst will help me ask the right questions and make the critical assessments needed to bring stronger enforcement to our laws. As stated previously, I add value because of my ability to skillfully craft and design legislation to achieve public goals. I agree with the need for guarantees to increase the rate of return on public investments here in the District of Columbia. Below are elements of my plans to create jobs, and I will ensure that reporting requirements, and auditors are put in place to make sure that public investments are used wisely and actually create the intended outcomes.

To create jobs we have to begin to tear down the numerous barriers to investment in the city. We have to get real returns when we incentivize investment and we must advantages of coming to the District to do business much more hefty than the disadvantages.

Creating jobs in the District should focus on the following aspects:

Encouraging Businesses to Make DC Home

We have to make the investment to **make sure that the District has the most well-trained workforce in the nation**, prepared to do the job that incoming businesses are providing. We have to grow access training programs and higher education to make sure our residents are prepared and most competitive for the new opportunities coming to the city. Secondly, the District should be proactive in providing **financial assistance for the**

expansion of businesses that create real jobs into the city. For businesses who are looking to bring quality, high-paying jobs to the District, there should be available loans and grants that provide that extra incentive.

As we know, the District isn't one of the most affordable places to start a business. We have to support businesses looking to bring impactful sources of employment to the city. Businesses who are willing to hire District workers, train them and/or provide high-paying salaries should be given the advantage of benefiting from **tax incentives that reward their good efforts**. But we must ensure that we get real results by creating a reporting mechanism similar but more robust than the current office of OCF to insure compliance and to audit and fine/ban violators. We must institute a death penalty for contractors that run afoul of DC laws. Tax incentives to create jobs might include a:

- Quality Jobs Tax Credit: for companies that provide 50 new jobs to DC residents in a 12-month period at wages at least 10 percent higher than the District average.
- Work Opportunity Tax Credit: for companies that hire residents who have faced "barriers to employment". This credit would be per-hire
- Mega Project Tax Credit: for companies that have 300 new net hires who are District residents and have placed them in quality, high-paying jobs.
- Expanding our Retraining Tax Credit: for companies that train employees to use new equipment or learn new skills.

Lastly, we have to make sure that businesses know that they have a place to call home here in DC. The District government should work to make available a **database of available spaces for business and development** in the District. Providing a central place that provides square-footage, zoning classification and other pertinent details about available spaces here in the District is important to showing that the District is place where business is welcome and can thrive, and it doesn't require payouts to developers that don't benefit the District.

2. The tipped minimum wage has been frozen at \$2.77/hr in DC for over 20 years. Meanwhile, the Minimum Wage Act left out the issue of tipped minimum wages. Would you support an increase in the tipped minimum wage, and to what level?

We're finally seeing a reconsideration of archaic minimum wage rates in localities across the nation. I support an increase in the minimum wage to \$12.50 at a gradual rate and believe similar laws involving tipped workers should also be created. I support a tipped wage increase up to \$7.50-\$8.50 per hour. The first necessary step forward is the implementation of paid sick leave for tipped workers. Next, we have to crack down on abusive employers who do not properly pay tipped workers at the current level. Finally, we have ensure that any gradual increases in the minimum wage for non-tipped workers is coupled with a commensurate increase for tipped workers.

TAXATION

3. The Tax Revision Commission was presented with clear, official data showing that the District's current tax system is regressive. The Commission has recommended some proposals to reduce this regressivity. Are you comfortable with their proposals in this regard? What further changes would you propose, if any?

I am not comfortable with the response to the regressive nature of DC's taxes. I would propose creating a working class bracket for those who in between 40k and 90k, to address the regressive nature of the system. DC's regressive tax system disproportionately burdens the city's working class. Proposals such as expanding the earned income tax credit to childless workers raising deduction limits to Federal levels are responsible way to remove the onerous tax burden that is arbitrarily placed on Washingtonians. I support the Commission's recommendations with the added proposal that the government should aggressively pursue a program of providing tax incentives to minority and women owned small businesses as well as small businesses located in communities with high unemployment who hire workers locally.

DC has one of the most regressive tax frameworks in the country. Those who make working class salaries pay the same income tax rate as those with over \$300,000. In addition, sales taxes, government service fees, and parking fines also have a regressive effect that challenges economic opportunity. In addition, DC taxpayers foot the bill for city services used by the above 60% of non-taxpayers that work and use the city's services. This a driver of the structural deficit in DC, where although our taxpayers pay among the highest taxes in the country, they do not receive an average level of city services in return. So in addition to our regressive structure, there are negative externalities that reduce the return on investment our citizen's tax dollars. This is one reason why I support DC Statehood, in that statehood would eradicate our structural deficit by allowing for taxing of income earned in the District and through the removal of federal restrictions on the District's property tax authority that will result in DC receiving a payment in lieu of taxes to compensate us for federal property that is untaxed.

4. DC has a reputation as a high-tax jurisdiction that drives investment and wealthy families out of the District. In reality, how big a problem is this?

In reality, I do not view this to be the most urgent of problems facing the district, considering our high growth rate. I do not agree with the premise posed in this question. More and more, we're seeing DC become a place where opportunity is constrained for residents who are not wealthy. As the cost of living rises, particularly regarding housing prices, Washington's institutions are driving out the poor and working class. We're fortunate to have an educated and robust tax base and we need to use our tax dollars responsibly to grow and economically diversify every ward in the city.

ELECTION REFORM

5. In order to reduce the influence of large contributors on legislation, a number of states and localities have turned to public financing. Do you in general favor public financing, and if so, what model(s) do you recommend?

Public financing is an important tool to protect the role of voters as the primary drivers of elections. Public financing is a responsible political reform which the District desperately needs because the current campaign finance system in municipal elections encourages the recruitment of influential bundlers who could have undue influence on the political process. I support the District of Columbia adopting a system that is somewhat similar to New York City's campaign finance system because the emphasis on matchable low-dollar donations makes it possible to fund a campaign through individual district voters so candidates can refuse corporate donations that come with strings attached.

Here are other ideas that I have relative to restoring trust in government.

Use town halls, symposiums, workshops, and forums to create dialogue and receive input from the community on important issues.

Open and maintain a dialogue with residents, community organizations, business owners, community advocates and faith leaders in order to build a wide coalition of Washingtonians to solve our most pressing issues.

Put spending limits on government-issued credit cards.

Leverage emerging technology tools, platforms and applications to increase participation and collaboration with government.

Leverage technology to eliminate inefficiencies and to deliver government services more effectively.

Would have voted for 2014 Attorney General Implementation.

Support public financing of elections.

Support procurement reform.

Reform conflict of interest policies related to outside employment for councilmembers.

Support the use of using open data to bring sunlight to city contracting and other forms of government spending.

Craft a law that restricts the Council's ability to overturn citizen approved initiatives and

referendums.

6. The electoral system in DC allows candidates to be elected to office with a plurality, not a majority, of votes. Do you support any type of runoff system of voting? If yes, what mechanism do you favor? If not, why not?

The spirit of our electoral system is inclusivity. In that vein, a plurality of votes in a crowded field is not necessarily worse than a low-turnout runoff election. Therefore, a runoff election should only occur if a winning candidate receives a plurality of <33% of the vote in a primary, general or special election with turnout <25% of registered voters. Runoffs tend to have considerably lower turnouts than the originating election and could result in allowing special interests to circumvent a more representative electoral outcome if we change to an electoral system with automatic runoffs for any candidate receiving a plurality but not a majority. I am open to other approaches as it relates to this issue. We must do more to ensure quality choices for the voters.

HOUSING

7. Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie has introduced a bill (Disposition of District Land for Affordable Housing Amendment Act of 2013), which includes a requirement that private developments on surplus public lands with transit access (½ mile of metro station or ¼ mile of major bus route/streetcar line) to provide at least 30% of rental units to be set aside for very-low to low-income households. Would you support this bill? Why or why not?

Yes, I enthusiastically support any effort to responsibly and aggressively address the growing issue of housing affordability. In addition to Councilmember McDuffie's bill to set aside units for affordable housing, we also need to strengthen the city's inclusionary zoning regulations to developers cannot circumvent their obligations to our community. Developers benefit greatly from a tax structure that encourages growth but does little to oversee or enforce commitments to affordable housing. It is the duty of the government to keep the city affordable for all residents and any developer seeking to make a profit off government tax breaks needs to share that collective responsibility.

We need a full overhaul and review of our city's zoning code to find inequities and places where we can make substantive improvements. I am looking forward to reading the zoning rewrite as a step to initiate this process.

I support this bill because housing in D.C. is expensive. Compared to states, the District is the [least affordable](#) housing jurisdiction in the country. And with a rental market vacancy rate of 3.5 percent, the scarcity of places to live makes rent a challenge for even middle class residents and their families. Some 50 percent of our city's households pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income in rent, meaning that half of D.C. residents live in housing situations that meet the technical definition of "unaffordable." A stable roof over one's head should not be a privilege

reserved only for the wealthy. A safe place to live is a [human right](#), and the denial of it makes virtually every facet of an individual's life more difficult. There is no single solution to fixing D.C.'s affordable housing crisis.

Government-funded "housing first" programs (like [Pathways to Housing](#)) that secure places for people to live have worked on a small scale in D.C., and have [nearly ended homelessness](#) in parts of the country where the policy's been widely adopted. Voucher systems in D.C. could be better funded; the current wait for one is [20 years](#). And of course, a living wage is crucial for making housing more accessible. If you don't make enough to live on, you can't afford a place to live.

Among the solutions to D.C.'s lack of affordable housing that I support is a policy referred to as [inclusionary zoning \(IZ\)](#). First put in place in Montgomery County in the 1970's and subsequently adopted in communities across the country, IZ essentially involves a governmental body trading density for affordable housing units with developers. Builders can build more units (and make more money) as long as they set aside a certain percentage of those units to be affordable for low- or middle-income people.

In Washington, D.C., IZ policies were signed into law in 2006. Theoretically, the passage of the so-called Inclusionary Zoning Implementation Amendment Act meant that any new housing or mixed-use development in Washington, D.C. would reserve 8 to 10 percent of units for households with incomes below defined thresholds. But because of developments grandfathered in without affordable units, and a developer's lawsuit against the city, D.C.'s IZ policies didn't actually take effect until earlier this year. In July of 2013, a D.C. development sold its first affordable unit through the IZ program. The Department of Housing and Community Development [expects](#) about 1,000 more such units to become available for purchase over the next several years.

It's good news that D.C.'s IZ program is finally getting off the ground, but we need to strengthen it. We have to **ensure that developers, without exception, have affordable units set aside** when they build in D.C. We can **reassess the requirements for affordable housing** – and we should, regularly – so that the balance between income qualifications and defined rent levels does not place onerous burden on householders. We should **determine if the 8 to 10 percent set-aside rate in D.C.'s IZ program is appropriate under current market conditions, or if it should be higher.** And we can [further empower](#) D.C. residents of IZ units by allowing them to sell their homes if they appreciate in value.

Our city is growing – to the tune of about [35 people a day](#). They need places to live. And so do our long-term residents, our elderly, the young people who were raised here, and everyone else who calls this city home. If half our residents can't afford to live here now, they're not going to be able to in a city with more people and higher-priced housing. As we develop, we must **ensure the supply of affordable**

housing expands along with our population.

- RENT CONTROL

Rent control is unusual in the United States. Only [four states](#) – California, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York – have rent control policies in place, in at least portions of their states. 35 states prohibit the practice of rent control outright. To control housing costs, D.C. engages in rent control. But the practices we do have are insufficient, and they can be stronger. I want to strengthen them.

For rent-controlled properties in Washington, D.C., landlords cannot raise rent more than once a year, and when they do raise it, it generally cannot be in excess of cost of living increases, plus 2 percent. About [60 percent](#) of rental units in the District are rent controlled, but that number is likely to decrease. Under current law, any rental units built after 1975 are not subject to rent control restrictions, meaning that new properties can raise rents more often, and to any amount they choose. Developers have the capacity to tear down old rent-controlled buildings and put in new ones that are not subject to cost increase restrictions.

Housing is a [human right](#), and it is already too expensive in Washington, D.C. About [50 percent](#) of D.C. residents pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent, meaning that half of the District lives in housing that meets the technical definition of “unaffordable.” The wait time for a housing voucher now stands at 20 years.

D.C.’s population is rising, and as it grows, we need to ensure that affordable housing does, too. There are various policies we can implement to make housing more affordable for District residents, including [inclusionary zoning policies](#), [housing first](#) initiatives for homeless residents, voucher subsidies, and community villages that allow civil servants, like teachers and firefighters, to live in the communities where they work.

But one of the tools in our tool kit of making housing less expensive in D.C. is enhancing the reach of rent control. It does not make sense for new construction to be exempt from rent control rules; we have to fix that. And we must regularly reassess if the cost increases allowable under rent control law make sense in current market conditions, or if they are too high.

The high cost of housing in D.C. is a complex problem, and we have to address it in different, creative ways. Making rent control more broadly available is one of them.

We must also:

Invest in and support initiatives that educate and prepare current district residents for a transition from renting to homeownership.

Strengthen the city's inclusionary zoning law to prevent developers from circumventing the

requirement to set aside part of their new development for affordable housing.

Provide incentives for police, firefighters, and teachers to live in the district. Consider the creation of "community villages" for such workers in order to encourage community workers to live in our communities.

Support initiatives that break down the concentration of poverty and promote mixed income communities. Disintegrate socioeconomic segregation in favor of more socioeconomically diverse communities.

EDUCATION

8. The percentage of children in traditional public schools has declined dramatically in DC and is now, at 56%, the third lowest in the nation. Should we be concerned about this trend? If so, what should be done to halt or reverse it? If not, what changes would you propose to accommodate to the trend?

The reason charter and private schools enrolls 44% of District students is because the traditional public education system chronically fails to meet the needs of our youth. This, however, must be balanced with the fact that every dollar going to charter or voucher programs weakens the ability of traditional public schools to institute long-term programmatic change. Non-traditional public schools are at best a stop-gap for Washington's education crisis. Innovation is imperative to strengthen our public school system to the point where it can accommodate the needs of all students. This means we need to invest aggressively in STEM education, college preparation and counseling, and job training for District youth. Furthermore, DC must address its racial education gap which is the largest in the nation. To improve education in communities of color, we must reverse the policy of school closures and move towards a model that allows for students to attend either a strong community school or a specialized public school that provides an enriching curriculum tailored to the student body.

I am a supporter of neighborhood schools. As such, I will not advocate for any more public school closings. I understand first hand the impact of traveling and transportation on student achievement. We must build strong neighborhood schools in order to increase parental engagement as well. Parental engagement is another key determinant of student achievement. Therefore, I am a supporter of community schools. Clearly, there can be no community schools if there are not many schools in the community. Community schools are schools that have resources that are open and available for parents and the entire community. (e.g. community libraries, parent engagement offices, offices providing access to government services). Community schools also refer to a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. There are a number of models and local community school initiatives that share a common set of principles: fostering strong partnerships, sharing accountability for results, setting high expectations, increasing parental engagement and building on the

community's strengths to support educational efforts.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

9. What would you do to improve job and living prospects for the high number of returning citizens in DC?

The biggest problem for returning citizens in the city is that they are viewed as a burden or liability by the DC government. I am against asking for an applicant's history in the criminal justice system in job applications because it replaces an individual's skills and abilities with a government-imposed label of inadequacy. A "ban the box" law for private sector jobs when the crime is not directly related to an applicant's job will lessen discrimination of returning citizens and lower barriers to their successful employment and complete reintegration into society.

The first step is related to education, we must make the investment in our schools to reduce the dropout rate, truancy, and the number of students who leave our system without strong employment options. We also must focus on reducing criminal penalties for non-violent offenses. Our lack of a prison system makes it difficult for our "offenders" to remain integrated and connected with family and to reconnect with society once they return from prisons around the country. We must think hard about our policies to rehabilitate those who have criminal histories, from expanding programs like the Community Courts, Youth Court, and Drug Courts which focus on crafting dispositions that are not overly punitive.

We must make it more difficult for employers, public service agencies, and housing agents to legally discriminate against those with criminal histories. I support the creation of family centers and fatherhood initiatives to reconnect families and households that have been severed through interaction with the criminal justice system. Such initiative to support not only the individual but the family has proven successful in reducing recidivism in cities such as Newark. These centers and initiatives can teach skills both soft and hard and provide services to adjust those with criminal histories back to society.

We must encourage entrepreneurship, which is a pathway for those with barriers to employment. If we can encourage aspiring returning citizen entrepreneurs, they will be more likely to hire from their communities and to hire other ex-offenders.

I also support taking a **closer look at our expungement laws** in the District of Columbia. So many people are turned away from employment because of misdemeanors or petty crimes that are still present on their records. We can expand our expungement laws and narrow the time period in which petty crimes can be expunged. Currently, our expungement process is overly complex and narrow. With such a large returning citizen population, we should have a more

robust expungement procedure.