

Preston Cornish survey—(L-Ward 5)

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. However, this growth has not benefited many people, especially lower income and unemployed DC residents. How would you leverage taxpayer funds for economic development in ways that would benefit the neediest DC residents?

Answer: The key to leveraging taxpayer funds to help the most needy is to remove development barriers that most directly affect them. It means allowing for density, so that developers will provide plenty of affordable housing-- not just for those who are at 80% Area Median Income. We should let neighborhoods around Metro stations build taller, and we should do the same with downtown office buildings. More density means more jobs closer to more affordable housing. That benefits everyone, especially those with low incomes and the unemployed. Density also means not devoting chunks of our city to uses like parking lots and stadiums. These places can be neighborhoods if we zone the city to allow it. In sum, the best way to make development serve the most needy of DC's residents is to allow more of it. It will bring lower housing prices, more choice, and more jobs.

2. Seattle has enacted a minimum wage of \$15.00. San Francisco will vote on a ballot initiative in November of \$15.00 an hour for all workers. The mayor of Los Angeles has proposed a minimum wage of \$13.25, and Mayor Rahm Emanuel supports a \$13.00 minimum wage for Chicago. Should DC set its sights higher? If so, to what level and in what time frame? Should tipped workers get an increase as well? If so, to what level?

Answer: We want to avoid setting the minimum wage too high, because the small businesses that employ many minimum wage workers are often running on thin margins. We don't want to discourage them from hiring two workers at \$10 an hour, when they can only afford one worker with a \$15 minimum wage. If we try to raise the wage too high, some businesses won't be able to stay open, and that means previous minimum wage workers would be out of a job entirely. Let's not make the amazing the enemy of the good. DC's minimum wage is already set to increase to \$11.50 in the next few years, from \$9.50 now. I will not seek to repeal that increase. Let's see how that affects minimum wage workers, and then decide what to do.

TAXATION

3. In 2014, the DC Council enacted significant changes in tax law, many of which were recommended by the Tax Revision Commission. What do you think of these changes?

What further changes would you propose, if any?

Answer: I think what the Council did was absolutely sound, but could have been better. My biggest qualm with it is the increase in the tobacco tax. This tax disproportionately harms lower-income residents, who spend a greater proportion of their income on tobacco products. The income tax cuts for the middle class and the increase in the standard deduction were great ideas. The controversial expansion of the sales tax was even good policy for a whole bunch of reasons that my tax policy advisor Ben will talk your ear off about. I'd like to make a number of changes to the tax system to make it more fair. I'd like to attempt to derive more of the city's total revenue from income and sales taxes and less from fines, fees, and taxes on businesses. This should keep the city's finances more stable, and prevent recent problems caused by shortfalls in traffic fine revenues.

ELECTION REFORM

4. Do you think that public financing of elections is an effective way to reduce the influence of large contributors on legislation? If yes, what model do you favor? If no, what alternative do you recommend?

I do not believe public financing is a solution to this problem. DC's politics are the laughingstock of the nation. We deserve better. Public financing of campaigns is a blunt tool that hurts the ability of average citizens to express their political preferences through small or medium dollar donations. We need checks and balances so that special favors can't be handed out. This means audits of city contracts, disclosure of conflicts of interest (with strong emphasis on prosecution of those who do not disclose), and 100% transparent city government. That's how we get a government that is accountable to voters, taxpayers, and the recipients of city services. Elections are only one way influence is peddled in this city, and reforming them might simply put a band-aid on the problem and keep bad city government around even longer.

5. 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?

I support nonpartisan elections with a runoff system. Each system has its benefits and flaws, but I tend to lean toward the simplest of them. A basic runoff is understandable to voters, and transparent in design. A runoff would encourage competitiveness in elections in a city not known for competitive elections at all. I also support nonpartisan elections for city office, although I understand that we would need to lobby Congress to make this happen. The current system allows former Democrats to run as 'independents,' which is despicable politics and a farcical run around of the rules. All candidates should be nonpartisan and judged on their individual merits.

By moving to a runoff system, the top two candidates--regardless of party affiliation--would go head-to-head in a final election, if neither captures 50%+1 in the general election. The dismal turnout for the primary elections signals that it may be time to change the system.

HOUSING

6. How do you propose we better use development projects on public land for affordable housing, particularly housing for low-income residents?

The key to helping low-income residents via housing policy is to allow for greater density than we do now, while cleaning up public land deals. Right now, the laws give city government massive amounts of leeway to decide what constitutes the “right” use when a city-owned parcel is put on the market. I’d like to see the choice made primarily on the number and types of housing units and office space added. Places like Fort Totten are ripe for dense development around Metro stations, and we’ve seen success around NoMa, Brookland, and Rhode Island Avenue stations, so let’s allow more of it. Ward 5 can grow more dense with its public land, and that will do a lot to keep rents down and help the city’s low income residents. Additionally, the city should consider significantly taxing undeveloped land, which is both a blight on the city and a waste of space that could be developed.

7. Are our rent control laws adequate? If not, what can be done to reduce the burden on tenants?

As a renter who makes significantly under the area average median income, I oppose rent control. Price controls restrict supply and increase demand. As a result, a few winners are able to hang onto artificially inexpensive properties for decades, while shutting out new families and those moving to the city. We need to be careful with these laws that they don’t hurt the same people we’re trying to help. If we tighten restrictions on rent increases further, or increase tenant power in negotiations, landlords may elect to simply not put their properties up for rent. It also means fewer conversions of single family homes to group houses. These have historically been among the cheapest places to live for lower-income singles and represent an important part of the rental stock. One of the biggest burdens on tenants is the lack of clarity in what their rights are. We have strong tenant protections in place, but many residents who don’t know to take advantage of the protections we have in place. On the other side, the difficulty of evicting problem tenants has led to a small number of renters taking advantage of the system. I have used resources available through the Office of the Tenant Advocate, and I strongly support the Office’s work to inform citizens of their rights.

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 adapt to the trend?

My team and I have talked to many parents in Ward 5, and our takeaway has been a clear and resounding embrace of this trend. DC's charter school program is popular. I was born in DC, but my parents moved to Montgomery County instead of keeping me in DCPS. I understand why, and I hope that today's parents will raise their children in the city. What matters is this: DC's children have ample choices to get a good education that meets their unique needs. Nothing else matters. I want teachers to thrive, but they are secondary to the students. Right now charter schools receive less money per student than public schools do, while systematically outperforming them. Funding should be the same for every student, public or charter. Parents deserve an option for where they send their child to get the best education possible. As the debate over the school boundary rewrite has shown, only a few of DC's public high schools are actively sought after. Why force children into a failing public school when we can make it easier for them to attend a high-performing charter?

PLANNING

9. The Executive's zoning, planning and historic preservation functions report through the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED). In your view, does this structure work well for the city? If not, how would you alter it?

While the current structure may have suited DC in the past, it is long past time to reform the planning system in DC. Zoning, planning, and historic preservation functions often come at odds with each other. Having them all report through one person gives a single office an inordinate amount of power and temptation to pick favorites. Ultimately, I want to eliminate the ability of government to stifle and slow reasonable development. I would like to see the city's historic preservation separated from those of zoning, planning, and economic development. Ideally, we would transfer many of these responsibilities to the various historical societies in the city that already exist, on an advisory--but not legally binding--basis. This reduces the conflicts within city government when redevelopment is on the table. Moreover, such a separation would divide the largely aesthetic historic preservation functions from development, which has much broader implications in job and housing creation.