

City Paper's 2011 City Council Candidate Questionnaire

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1. Name the main problem facing your district and propose three specific steps you will to take to fix it.

At the exact moment of this survey, the major problem we are struggling with in my district is a break-out of home burglaries (one leading to the stabbing of a resident in Charles Village) in a number of neighborhoods and our need to "break that cycle" by apprehending and court-watching the relatively few individuals responsible for these crime-waves. I am already meeting with residents and police to better communicate what strategies the police are employing to stem this tide and what better information the residents can provide to assist in such apprehensions. I am also adding those arrested to our volunteer Greater Charles Village Court Watch program so we can impress upon the State's Attorney's Office and the court system the importance of dealing seriously with persons convicted of multiple and armed burglaries.

In the larger picture, three steps are:

- 1) Promote the significant dedication of regular foot patrol officers in troubled neighborhoods, to promote better police understanding of and respect for the residents as individuals and to help restore the mutual trust required for effective policing, criminal apprehension and grassroots public safety.
- 2) Continue to advocate and work for a sustained public/private funding priority for the employment, recreation and academic opportunities to divert our youth from those default peer associations which too often can lead from aimlessness to criminality.
- 3) Organize to help my constituents get jobs, especially adult men whose very roles and identities are diminished by lack of gainful employment.

2. Many candidates, and many citizens, favor a city property tax cut. Do you favor a cut, and if you do, a) how big should it be and b) what specific areas of the city's budget/services should be cut to make up for the lost revenue? If you don't favor a cut, explain why not.

I would legislate now to secure a system of consistent property tax reductions, triggered and sustained by objective indicators of recession recovery. All reductions would stay in place despite "dips" in recovery, but resumption of reductions would be triggered annually based on indicators leading into each upcoming fiscal year. First step in recovery, however, should be to eliminate many of the regressive fee and tax increases enacted to help close the \$121 million budget gap in fiscal year 2011.

To bolster the revenue base as prelude to this property tax proposal, I support State approval of a "penalty" tax rate for abandoned properties; local adoption of capped and transparent criteria for any further downtown development tax relief; and, negotiation of public safety service charges for income-generating non-taxable local properties.

The amount of property tax reductions would depend on our revenue status after rescinding regressive FY 2011 fees and taxes and enactment of more progressive tax enhancement proposals.

I support the use of anticipated slots revenue for the \$2.8 billion required to bring our school facilities up to the quality status our students deserve and our City's wellbeing requires. Even more than radical property tax reductions, quality schools attract and retain the young families we need to stabilize our demographic and taxpayer base. Baltimore's children should "trump" as the primary investment we make in the City's future.

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3. Andres Alonso has earned praise for improving city schools test scores, closing poorly performing schools, and focusing on children, though the school system has not lacked for controversy either. What do you think about Alonso's approach and his leadership style? As a councilmember, what would you do to help improve city schools further?

Dr. Andres Alonso has brought an energetic sense of mission to the Baltimore City Public Schools; a series of clear and accountable indicators to measure success (increased attendance and graduation rates, decreased drop out rates, etc.); and, a policy of addressing setbacks with practical steps for remediation. His tenure has revitalized the system, encouraged the "choice" for families of new charter and transformation schools, and positioned us for accountability in undertaking the \$2.8 billion "catch-up" in replacing, rehabilitating and repairing long neglected school facilities. I disagree with some decisions, but I support and commend Dr. Alonso's overall leadership and am relieved and pleased that he has signed-on to remain as CEO for at least three more years.

To help improve the schools at this juncture, I applaud the addition of so many new charter and transformation schools, but the time has come to stabilize our academic inventory so as to evaluate its hitherto "moveable parts." We also need to re-emphasize the importance of neighborhood-based schools to families and to neighborhoods themselves.

In adding so many new "choice" options, we must also take care to support and maintain the City's traditional schools of excellence, such as Poly, City, Western, School for the Arts. These are the "known quantities" and acknowledged centers of excellence to which our students have traditionally aspired and on which our families have relied in seeking the best opportunities for their children. They should thrive, at the least, as the first among equals.

4. While crime statistics have improved, Baltimore police have been involved in several scandals over the past two years. What would you do to improve the operation of the police department, and what ordinances, if any, would you sponsor to attack crime and quality of life issues in your district?

As mentioned above, we need "feet on the street" to improve the effectiveness and reputation of the Baltimore Police Department, that is, a significant and consistent deployment of foot patrol officers assigned to troubled neighborhoods. Even sometimes when beloved neighbors are the innocent victims of violence, such as 12-year-old Sean Johnson in Darley Park, witnesses do not come forward to help police build a case against suspected assailants. Yes, fear of retaliation is the key factor, but so is a deep-seated and mutual distrust between police and troubled neighborhoods. Police are sent in to make sweeps in which youth and adults alike are often treated with disrespect in being halted, seated on the ground, addressed rudely and questioned loudly and publicly.

That's what police know of a neighborhood. That's what the neighborhood knows of the police. What we need are officers given the opportunity to walk a beat and remain to work in a given troubled neighborhood, so they know who's who and can develop positive relationships with the residents, young and old.

In this fiscal year, the police department's legal/claims allocation was increased by \$1.9 million. I have asked, by resolution, for a hearing and review of claims and payments with the idea of 1) reducing such budget increases in the future; 2) identifying common occurrences leading to the claims; and, 3) proposing police training to address the common occurrences which adversely affect any hopes for restoring mutual respect between officers and residents of troubled neighborhoods.

5. What will you do to deal with the thousands of vacant houses in Baltimore City, many of which are owned by the city itself?

The City must first set population goals, then build new homes and recycle or demolish vacants to achieve a right-sized and right-priced inventory to achieve those goals, by neighborhood and citywide, replacing surplus inventory with community-managed green spaces to enhance livability and value.

For affordable homeownership, it makes sense to offer a low-interest loan pool to promote "dollar-house" rehab for low-to-moderate income residents. The Fells Point and Otterbein "dollar house" programs used 3% federal money for rehab and received professional design help from City agencies. Buyers had a time-limit for completion --- or default. They took title only upon completion. Their success was based largely on the group nature of the effort. Scattered site "dollar houses" were never so successful.

The 3% federal money is long gone, so we would need to go to the voters to approve a "dollar house" loan fund via general obligation bonds; then, work with neighborhoods to identify sufficient numbers of vacants in one place to encourage that group spirit. Fells Point and Otterbein vacants had to be rehabbed to meet historic standards because of their status and locations. The proposed new "dollar program" would keep it affordable by requiring completion of only basic housing code compliance --- along with the standard 5-year residency obligation.

Once the City plans on its ideal population and its distribution, the affordable "dollar house" could take root in suitable locations with enough available vacants to create a group effort and a significant neighborhood impact. In such locations, we could also begin the community green space program by demolishing vacants too deteriorated, isolated or numerous for rehab.

At the root of it all, however, is the City's need to invest in acquisition of vacant properties for disposition, a major stumbling-block to progress for all these vacant-making years of free-fall abandonment.

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6. More than \$50 million in taxpayer money is spent each year on drug treatment in Baltimore, and yet the city has hardly dented its addiction problem. What, if anything, would you suggest the city do differently?

Most of the crimes committed in my district are drug-related, and most of the defendants we track through Greater Charles Village Court Watch began their criminal histories with minor drug-related convictions, then escalated into more serious and violent crimes. My experience in representing so many paroled men is that, despite wanting to change their lives for the better (because those are the ones who seek me out), they cannot get jobs because of their prison records, meanwhile lacking work experience and all but the basics of formal schooling.

There's no easy solution. As a teacher, however, I truly believe that falling behind in school is one sure sign of trouble ahead, especially for children whose families are unable to identify and address this slide. Falling behind all too often leads to dropping-out --- and falling-into default peer organizations where older youth steer the younger into entry-level positions of local drug commerce and personal addiction.

With Dr. Alonso's leadership, the school system has set goals and made gains in preventing the dropping-out. What we need far earlier, however, is a virtual corps of social workers, tutors, psychologists per elementary school to reverse the falling behind in the first place.

We the City must also ensure that any child who stays the course, overcomes the obstacles and is accepted into college will have the private/public means to attend. In return for which help, beneficiaries should pledge to serve as a generation of successful big brothers and sisters to inspire and mentor our children to conceive of their own achievement.

7. What are your personal legislative goals for the coming term of office? Please include specific legislation or programs you'd like to see advance.

LAWS

- Living Wage minimum pay for all employees of major retail establishments in Baltimore City (CCB10-0505).
- Living Wage from City Subsidized Employers (to be introduced): Living wage requirements for the employees of all developers, businesses and non-profits which receive capital subsidies and tax breaks from City government .
- Cycletracks required for bicycles on all arterials in Baltimore City.

PROGRAMS

- Establishment of a private/public consortium to ensure the full tuition and associated college costs for any Baltimore City Public Schools high school graduate who is accepted into college and lacks the funds to attend.
- Establishment of a 14th District employment center to meet the job-search, counseling, resume-writing, support group and employment needs of 14th District adults and youth.
- Establishment of sports leagues to serve all 14th District youth, based on the expertise and support of existing youth sports leagues, and fundraising to pay fees for children unable to afford membership.
- Reform of State GED program to permit high school students older than 14-years-old to legally attend GED program in lieu of regular high school programs; to permit certified GED programs to offer regular high school credits and diplomas; and, to require State GED to schedule exams and release scores in a timely manner which supports this GED education option.
- Restoration of the Baltimore City Commission on Aging and Retirement Education (CARE) to its traditional status as an independent City agency with representation on the Mayor's Cabinet.

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