

2021 Boston City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Joel Richards

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(A) Your Candidacy

1. What would be your top three priorities if elected to serve?

Education: Education is always at the top of my list of priorities. As a public school teacher I have witnessed the inadequacies within our system: things like poor infrastructure, overfilled classrooms, and disparities in the quality of education between races. My platform calls for a transparent and bolstered school budget so that we can curb the trend of budget-slashing and closures, and start repairing injustices and promising children the education they deserve and which we are more than capable of delivering.

Housing: Housing is another top issue of mine, especially with Boston facing a housing and homelessness crisis. Rent prices have been increasing for decades and pricing people out as their salaries fail to rise accordingly. Even the assistance we offer is proving inadequate as the section 8 voucher no longer suffices for single households but are often combined between multiple people. In short, I am of the firm belief that rent prices must be controlled and that tenant unions must be emphasized as a basic right of all residents to ensure their safety and security. I also believe that Boston has the ability to invest in and build affordable housing for both rent and purchase, especially in communities that have been historically denied that investment.

Small businesses: Small businesses are the core of the community. Not only do they provide us with their services, but they contribute to the culture of the neighborhood, they become household names and form intimate bonds with their customers and fellow residents. The pandemic, however, has tested our resolve to preserve these pillars of the community. They have faced complete business failure and many have been driven

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out of business. We, as a people's campaign, cannot allow such institutions to go under and give rise to ubiquitous corporations. We must do all we can to preserve our small businesses.

2. What qualifies you to hold this office?

As a teacher in Boston Public Schools, I've seen time and again how our city fails our youth. I could not stand by and let my students and coworkers go unsupported, so I became active in my union, organizing with my fellow educators. Together we fought for smaller class sizes, increased funding, more teachers of color, and a safe learning environment for all. After years working shoulder to shoulder with my fellow teachers, I was asked to be Regional Representative for the Boston Teachers Union.

After 13 years as a public school teacher, and as a Black man in America, I personally understand how our systems put down our Black and POC youth. Determined to uplift my students, I became Chair of "Black Lives Matter at School". As Chair I organized to break down the school to prison pipeline by pushing for restorative justice practices and demanding Counselors not Cops.

Outside my work, I spend my weekends traveling Boston delivering sermons across congregations. I dedicate getting to know the people and the families in our churches. What I have learned is that no matter the congregation, our communities are connected by the values of racial justice, uplifting those in need, and the desire for our neighbors to live safe and dignified lives.

As the former Chair and active member of Fields Corner Main Street, I am in constant communication with small business owners and workers to best support them through this hardship.

3. What is the one policy you've seen pioneered in another city that you'd most like to see Boston adopt?

Community schools: it is beautiful to see a community build a school where every part of the family is brought into the education process and are educated themselves. This new approach towards schooling where our youth are treated holistically, where we strive to build their social, emotional, and physical skills along with their academic abilities, is both an inspiration and a learning experience. This type of learning has great promise for the community at large and I would enthusiastically welcome it in Boston.

4. Which of the following groups have you chosen to reject / would reject campaign contributions from? (For-profit developers, Fossil fuel executives or lobbyists, Charter school advocates and lobbyists, Police officers)

For-profit developers, Fossil fuel executives or lobbyists, Charter school advocates and lobbyists, Police officers. I am the first District 4 city council candidate to openly reject

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for-profit developer, fossil fuel, and police union money. Also, as a Boston Public School teacher and union activist it would be against my values to accept charter school money.

(B) Racial Equity & Community Engagement

1. Name three accomplishments you've been able to achieve to advance racial justice or equity.

1- As chair of Boston Black Lives Matter of School I have organized with fellow educators to end the zero tolerance policy, establish ethnic studies curriculum, and push for "Councillors not Cops".

2- Within my national union, the American Federation of Teachers, I was able to organize with others to successfully push AFT to formally endorse and support Black Lives Matter at School.

3- I proudly founded and organized the Dorchester Juneteenth Celebration, an event that was able to fundraise thousands of dollars for local black-owned businesses and bring together diverse communities to celebrate with one another. I am proud to continue organizing this event.

2. What steps would you take, if elected, to engage all the diverse communities of Boston in policymaking, and what past actions of yours should give voters confidence that you will follow through?

I will hire a full-time community liaison whose purpose is not only to help me engage with the community, but to also connect the community with valuable city programs that are often shrouded in bureaucracy. I will also continue to host community events such as the Dorchester Juneteenth Celebration.

(C) Charter Reform & Balance of Power

1. What do you see as the role of the City Council in our strong-mayor system?

With our current strong-mayor system, I believe it is crucial for City Councilors to proactively organize community members and leaders. It is easy to say no to Joel Richards, it is hard to say no to a collective of individuals unified behind a single issue.

I also believe that a City Councilor's current role must include pushing for charter reform that would result in shifting power away from the mayor. This system that vests almost absolute power in one person is not conducive to a democratic government. This is a fact, regardless of how beloved a given mayor may be. The City Council, along with the many community organizations currently calling for charter reform, must actively push for reforms that would redistribute power to the City Council and, consequently, the community.

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- 2. The City Council currently has very little ability to influence the budgeting process. Would you support legislation to enable line-item budgetary changes? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 3. Would you support Charter Change to allow for Ranked Choice Voting in Boston? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 4. Would you support changing the city charter to impose term limits for the office of Mayor in Boston? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 5. What, if any, other changes to the City Charter would you like to see?**

I support changing to a publicly elected school committee. A committee that is accountable to the families and communities of Boston is essential to an equitable school system. Our current School Committee is beholden to only one person, where the community is consistently ignored and shut out of crucial decisions. Without a fully elected school committee, we can not ensure a school system that benefits all students and families. Our School Committee must be beholden to the community, where our parents, teachers, and students will have a meaningful voice in the direction of our schools.

(D) Revenue

- 1. Do you support the PILOT Action Group's [recommendations](#) for a standing PILOT commission with community representation? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 2. Given state law, Boston is limited in its taxing power. What opportunities do you see for the city to raise revenue?**

As a city councilor, I will focus on securing new revenue. I would start by working with the PILOT Action Group and the broader PILOT coalition to ensure that nonprofits are paying their full PILOT, create a PILOT oversight commission, and win full transparency and a community voice in non-profit community benefits. I would also work to develop new taxes on the wealthy, through property taxes on large landlords and real estate speculators. I would also explore creative ways to develop new revenue. For example, working with the BTU and building trades unions to put solar panels on school buildings

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to reduce schools' electric bills and even sell the extra power back to the power companies.

(E) Education

1. What are your top priorities for reducing persistent racial and economic achievement gaps in the Boston Public Schools?

1- A publicly elected school committee. As stated before, a committee that is accountable to the families and communities of Boston is essential to an equitable school system.

2- Education budget involvement and transparency. The success of our students is directly correlated with public investment. When our schools' funding is limited, we all recognize the pattern: it's the schools with Black and Brown children and youth from underinvested communities who bear the burden of the unambitious budget. So those who already have get more. Those who don't get less. These blatant inequalities must be put right. It is easy to say, we must fully fund schools, it is much more difficult to achieve this as a lone City Councillor. That is why we must open up the education budget process. I propose the creation of a joint "Budget Education Council," that will educate the general public about the budget, and will be tasked with opening the budgeting process to public input, where the community can have a meaningful say in the money and resources that is put towards their schools.

3- Establishing safe and supportive schools - I have personally witnessed the differences in how we go about treating our youth in our schools. Black and Brown youth are dealt with harshly, in a way I was familiar with and assumed was natural for people who looked like me. But then I saw the kind, open environment that was prominent in wealthier schools and realized that our youth of color don't have to be treated with punishment, but could and should be treated with love and inspiration. Our schools need to be a place that provides social and emotional support, especially in the aftermath of COVID. That is why as City Councilor, I will advocate for the end of zero tolerance, expanding our mental health services, and adopting a curriculum that is representative of our students' cultural diversity.

2. Do you oppose the expansion of charter schools in Boston? YES/ NO

Yes.

3. Do you support a change in BPS governance to allow Boston voters the right to elect school committee members, like every other city in Massachusetts? YES/ NO If so, what would your ideal structure be? If not, why not?

Yes. As stated before, I fully support the shift to a publicly elected school committee that is beholden to the community.

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4. Do you support removing police from Boston public schools? YES/ NO

Yes.

5. Do you support making a permanent change to the admissions process for Boston's exam schools? YES/ NO And if so, what would your proposed alternative system be?

Yes. We must first ask the question, why is there only one school that is known for academic excellence? Every school in Boston should and must receive the support and resources it needs to properly educate its students.

With the admissions process, I support the current endeavors of the Exam Schools Admissions Task Force. As City Councilor, I would work with them and use their recommendations to help shift to a more equitable admissions system.

6. What steps would you take to make universal pre-K a reality in Boston?

First, we must pass a home rule petition at the city level in the short run. In the long run, we must build a coalition between community organizations, my union (BTU), and state legislators to make universal pre-K state wide.

(F) Public Safety

1. Do you support requiring the police department and other city agencies to get City Council approval before acquiring new surveillance technologies or military equipment? YES/ NO

Yes.

2. Do you support the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office's do-not-prosecute list and expanded approach to dealing with such low-level offenses? YES/ NO

Yes.

3. Do you support ending information sharing between the Boston Police Department and ICE? YES/ NO

Yes.

4. Do you support closing the loopholes in Boston's Trust Act which allow BPD to inquire about immigration status or pass information along to ICE? YES/ NO

Yes.

5. Do you support shuttering the Boston Police gang database? YES/ NO

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Yes.

- 6. Would you support a hard cap on overtime for individual officers? If so, what percentage of an officer's salary? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 7. What changes to the 2017 Boston Police Patrolman's Association (BPPA) contract would you advocate for in the latest round of contract negotiations?**

Our current contract negotiation process with the BPPA is conducted in complete darkness. Our community deserves to know how their public safety is being negotiated and financed. Police contract negotiations must be made public, where we may hear the opinion of the community and have real discussions on how our public safety is administered and performed.

- 8. What current functions of the Boston Police Department should be transferred to agencies under civilian control, and what governance would you propose for them?**

There are many functions that are not necessary for the police to have. We see many people

whose only crime is not having a home. They are then put in the control of the police force, who are then tasked with finding them housing and services. These interactions between the police and homeless individuals too often escalate into a traumatizing conflict, and this is simply because police do not have the time, resources, nor training to find these individuals housing or support. This inability to support Bostonians extends to people experiencing chemical dependency as well. We must implement and fund response teams that will properly address these situations, de-escalate them, and find suffering individuals the support which they need and provide them with a promising future of recovery.

I also believe that traffic stops should be taken out of police control. We have seen too many of these stops devolve into a life and death situation for it to stay in police hands.

- 9. Would you advocate for the reallocation of money from the Boston Police Department budget to reinvestment in communities? YES/ NO If so, how much?**

Yes. Yes I would. My first step would be a call for a complete audit to see how much it would cost to operate mental health services, chemical dependency assistance, response teams, and homeless shelters. The number then given from that audit should be reallocated from the BPD budget into those services.

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We should be striving for a system of public safety that prioritizes restorative justice, not punitive measures.

10. Which of the following would you support banning the use of by the Boston Police Department? (Tear gas and other chemical weapons, Rubber bullets, Attack dogs)

Tear gas and other chemical weapons, Rubber bullets, Attack dogs.

11. Do you believe that affiliation or sympathies with white supremacist organizations among officers is a problem with BPD? YES/ NO If so, what measures would you take as mayor to combat that issue?

Yes. While we know of the issue of white supremacists in the BPD, and there should be a zero tolerance policy for those with ties to white supremacist organizations, we must be able to identify them. This is where the issue of transparency arises, we as a community must know how our public safety functions and WHO is in charge of our safety. That is why as City Councilor, I will support the newly established civilian oversight board and their efforts to have full access to information in the BPD.

12. Do you support safe consumption sites? YES/ NO

Yes.

(G) Environment & Transportation

1. Do you believe Boston needs to reduce its dependence on cars, and if so, how would you propose to do so?

Absolutely, yes. Reducing our dependence on cars is essential to combating our current climate crisis and high levels of respiratory illnesses plaguing our youth. In order to lower our dependence I propose three plans: expanding and freeing our public transportation system, expanding bike infrastructure, and planning for transit friendly development.

2. What are your top three policy priorities for making Boston a climate-resilient city, and how would you ensure that equity is at the center of any such efforts?

1) Expanding and freeing our public transportation system - I support expanding current bus routes to areas that have been historically denied coverage, particularly in communities of color. Also, I will advocate to make public transportation accessible to all by making it free.

2) Expanding bike infrastructure - To combat air pollution and promote healthy, sustainable living, we must expand our bike infrastructure (especially in communities of color that have been historically denied that investment). We can not accept lines painted on the ground as real infrastructure, we need protected lanes that will make biking more accessible, welcoming, and safe.

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3) Transitioning to green energy and green jobs - Investment in renewable energy infrastructure will employ unionized local labor that will give POC an opportunity to make a real living. With the expansion of renewable energy, we have an opportunity to become a leader in solar and wind power development using our public property and resources. With the funds generated (pun intended) from our investment in clean energy, we can increase municipal funds and finance community programs in historically marginalized communities. Those funds should also go to lowering energy costs in communities of color.

3. Do you oppose the creation of new fossil fuel infrastructure in Boston? YES/ NO

Yes.

4. Do you support fare-free public transit? What steps would you take to achieve this goal? YES/ NO

Yes. With the political push for fare-free public transit, we understand that this is not a fight around finding the funds needed to provide for this service. MBTA received near \$1 billion in federal funding through COVID, and it still went and cut services that were desperately needed by the people. This is an issue of political will. As City Councilor, I would push for a home-rule petition and cooperate with fellow legislators and community organizations.

5. Do you support the adoption of a curbside composting pickup program? YES/ NO

Yes.

(H) Housing

1. How would you expand affordable housing in Boston and ensure development without displacement?

This is a core issue to the campaign. It is a shame that in one of the wealthiest cities in the world, we are facing a housing and homelessness crisis. Boston is such an appealing housing market because of the work of working-class and immigrant communities, but now it is those exact communities that are being disrupted and priced out. Our communities need real investment put into building affordable housing for both rent and purchase, tax incentives for small time landlords to keep rents low, a vacancy tax that would fund housing initiatives, enforcement of the PILOT program, to raise the Inclusionary Development Policy to 33% with a priority of 40% AMI for rental units and 60% AMI for homeownership, and the expansion of current housing lotteries so that working class people have the ability to attain homeownership at an affordable price and build generational wealth. As City Councilor I will also use my voice and vote to make sure that any appointee to a housing related commission or agency will support the protection of public housing, expansion of affordable housing for rent & ownership, and are against public land being sold off to developers.

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2. What opportunities do you see for leveraging city-owned land for expanding affordable housing?

In a time of mass housing instability and homelessness, we must be creative with our current public land and vacant lots.

3. Do you support a real estate transfer tax for commercial and residential sales, with the revenue going to an affordable housing trust? YES/ NO What exemption threshold, if any, would you advocate for?

Yes. I support the current proposal that would allow the city to tax up to 6 percent of commercial and residential sales valued over \$2 million.

4. Do you support rent control? YES/ NO If so, how would you structure such a policy? If not, why not?

Yes. As City Councilor, I will work with community groups to pass a home rule petition, and cooperate with state legislators to lift the statewide ban on rent control. Till that moment, our communities need IMMEDIATE action in the form of: real investment put into building affordable housing for both rent and purchase, tax incentives for small time landlords to keep rents low, a vacancy tax that would fund housing initiatives, enforcement of the PILOT program, to raise the Inclusionary Development Policy to 33% with a priority of 40% AMI for rental units and 60% AMI for homeownership, and the expansion of current housing lotteries so that working class people have the ability to attain homeownership at an affordable price and build generational wealth.

5. Do you support the renewal of Boston's condo conversion law, which affords residents of covered properties a notice period, right of first refusal to purchase their unit, relocation assistance, just cause eviction, and relocation benefits if their unit is converted to a condominium? YES/ NO

Yes.

6. Would you support a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase ordinance, enabling tenants to purchase a building if the owner seeks to put it on the market? YES/ NO

Yes.

7. Boston's inclusionary development policy (IDP) requires that 13 percent of the units in a building need to be affordable. Do you support increasing this number? YES/ NO If so, to what? *Please List %*

Yes. I support increasing the IDP to 33% with an emphasis on 40% AMI for rental and 60% for homeownership.

- 8. Do you support requiring that a majority of new affordable units be built on-site, in order to ensure communities are diverse and integrated? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 9. Do you support breaking up the BPDA and creating an independent public office of planning? YES/ NO If so, how will you make it happen?**

Yes. I support breaking up the BPDA into separate organizations, and making all the successor organizations democratically accountable to communities. We deserve a planning system where the community is put at the center and has say over the direction of their neighborhood. Until the BPDA is broken up, as City Councillor I will use my vote and voice during the vetting process to push for a BPDA board who support the protection of public housing, expansion of affordable housing for rent & ownership, and are against public land being sold off to developers.

- 10. Do you support increasing the number of units that are ADA compliant in projects that receive City funds? YES/ NO**

Yes.

(I) Economic Opportunity

- 1. What steps would you propose to reduce Boston's income and wealth inequality, especially the racial wealth gap?**

A core part of my campaign is investing into renewable energy, with a guarantee that the jobs created be unionized. This is a fast growing industry that will last for decades, if the

right leadership is in City Hall we can utilize the green economy to uplift thousands of working class Bostonians. Also, we can guarantee a path to high road jobs for many working class, young adults in Boston by expanding current vocational programs and connecting high schools with unions and community colleges. As City Councilor I will push to make sure every BPS student has the access to technical programs, union based training, and community college courses at no cost to them. We can address climate change, wealth disparities, and racial injustices with this concerted action.

- 2. Do you support requiring city contractors to give their employees at least two weeks' notice before changing their schedules and to compensate workers for late schedule changes? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 3. Do you support ending subminimum wages for tipped workers in Boston? YES/ NO**

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Yes.

- 4. How would you enforce the hiring goals set forth in the Boston Jobs Residency Policy (which requires that least 50 percent of the total work hours in each trade must go to *Boston* residents, at least 25 percent of the total employee work hours in each trade must go to people of color, and at least 10 percent of the total employee work hours in each trade must go to women)?**

Boston has the tools to ensure that communities of color can attain well-paying, worker-representative union jobs in the BJRP. The question however, is do we have the administration to utilize it? We need strict, punitive measures against employers who fail to meet their quotas like fines and more severe penalties for multiple violations. We need an culture of zero tolerance and accountability coupled with strong cooperation with union leaders, developers and contractors to make sure that no one is prevented from attaining good union jobs because of their skin color.

As a proud union member and organizer, I understand that a worker can only realize their full potential when they are part of a collective of other workers. Establishing an agency whose purpose is to enforce these

- 5. What targets in city contracting would you commit to for minority-owned businesses as well as Black-owned businesses in particular, and what steps would you take to realize such targets?**

I believe that our city contracting should accurately reflect our population. With that, I support a target of 45% for POC businesses. To make city contracting more equitable: streamline the application process, make the process more transparent, provide better translation services, and have more city employees meet small business owner's of color where they are at.

- a. Will you commit to immediately directing all City departments and quasi-city agencies to unbundle large contracts that are set to become available in 2021 and beyond in order to facilitate this? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- b. Will you commit to regular reporting to track progress toward and beyond this goal? YES/ NO**

Yes.

- 6. The cannabis industry is expected to be a major source of growth in Boston in the coming years. What steps should the City take to make sure that it grows in an equitable way, in which the communities most impacted by the drug war are able to benefit?**

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I believe that the beginning growth of our cannabis industry has been equitable, where the inequity lies is in sustaining these businesses. Due to federal funding, Boston's small business office is barred from working with cannabis related businesses. That is why it is pertinent that we allocate city specific funding for a city worker to assist cannabis related businesses in opportunity zones. We must continue to support and assist small Black and Brown-owned cannabis businesses, or they will fail, leaving a gap to only be filled by large corporations. We have seen significant victories for the unionization drive in Boston dispensaries since the legalization of cannabis in Massachusetts. We need to encourage these unionization efforts and get workers the protections and bargaining power they deserve.

7. Would you support the creation of a municipal broadband network? YES/ NO

Yes.

(J) Democracy

1. Do you support allowing non-citizens with legal status the right to vote in municipal elections? YES/ NO

Yes.

2. Do you support allowing 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in municipal elections? YES/ NO

Yes.

3. In 2022, Boston will engage in redistricting on the municipal level. What would an equitable redistricting process look like to you?

How we draw our districts deeply affects the community's engagement with our city government. We must avoid the gerrymandering practices long held in this city and so many others in this country. Instead, we must call out and reject any attempts at cracking or packing. We should draw reasonable, intuitive district lines that allow residents to understand their representation and their neighborhood. I have met with the most politically involved Bostonians and even they get confused about what district they are in because of the obscure boundaries. Let's clarify these ambiguities and make a more readily understandable city council.

4. Would you support the redrawing of Boston's wards and precincts ("reprecincting"), which has not happened in more than 100 years -- and which happens decennially in other MA cities and towns? YES/ NO

Yes.

(K) Additional Comments