

Philadelphia Crosstown Coalition Questionnaire for Candidates

The Crosstown Coalition, a federation of 19 civic associations listed below, voted to present the enclosed questionnaire to Mayoral and Council candidates who will be on the ballot for the May 19th primary.

DUE DATE: *Responses from Mayoral candidates* should be delivered no later than *Friday March 13* in advance of the March 18 Mayoral Candidates night be hosted by four of our members from communities east of Broad Street. *Responses from Council Candidates* should be delivered no later than *Friday April 3*.

INSTRUCTIONS: Electronically insert your answers after each question.

RESPOND TO: Deliver the completed questionnaire to Crosstown Chair Stephen Huntington by email to shuntington@hhflaw.com.

QUESTIONS: Present any inquiries you may have by email or, less preferably, call Mr. Huntington at 215 523 7900 or Communications Chair Ilene Wilder at 215 514 0449

CIRCULATION: Answers (but not the Contact Information) will be promptly posted, first come, first served, on the Crosstown Coalition website: philacrosstown.org and emailed to our 19 member organizations.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your Name: Blondell Reynolds Brown

PO Add: 601 North 33rd Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Tel #: 215-778-7868

E Mail Add: brbwin2015@gmail.com or tshphila@gmail.com

The Office You Are Seeking: Philadelphia City Councilmember At-Large

Contact info for staffer liaison: Tracy Hardy

TAX AND FINANCE QUESTIONS

1. TAX ABATEMENT

Philadelphia's ten-year tax abatement eliminates real estate taxes on new construction and improvements (but not the underlying land) for ten years. Supporters argue that the

Members of the Coalition:

Bella Vista Neighbors Association • Center City Residents' Association • Central Roxborough Civic Association • East Falls Community Council • East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association • Fishtown Neighbors Association • Logan Square Neighborhood Association • Northern Liberties Neighbors Association • Overbrook Farms Club • Packer Park Civic Association • Passyunk Square Civic Association • Queen Village Neighbors Association • Society Hill Civic Association • South Broad Street Neighborhood Association • South of South Neighborhood Association • Washington Square West Civic Association • West Powelton/Saunders Park RCO • Woodland Terrace Homeowners Association

lost tax revenue is more than offset by enhanced business, wage and sales tax collections and note that since the abatement went into effect, development activity has increased dramatically. Opponents argue that the abatement stimulates development for only high income housing, and reduces much needed city real estate tax revenue, of which more than 50% goes to schools.

Should the ten year realty tax abatement continue as is?

NO

Should it be modified or abolished?

MODIFIED

If you favor modification, what modifications should be made?

I believe it is time for Philadelphia to reexamine the merits of the "10 year property tax abatement". Given the School District's recurring funding crisis, I think it is time we explore alternative strategies for encouraging development that does not take revenue away from our children and schools.

I believe we should start by scaling back the property tax abatement so that going forward, it is used strategically to encourage growth and development in particular neighborhoods that are in need of development and growth. I believe a citywide 10 year abatement strategy no longer fairly benefits ALL the citizens of our city.

2. REAL ESTATE TAXATION

In 2013, for the first time in over two decades, the City reassessed all 579,000 parcels within the City limits. Tens of thousands of residential property owners were shocked to receive much higher property tax assessments

How frequently should reassessments occur?

To prevent our citizens from experiencing property tax assessment shocks in the future, the way they did in 2013, I believe assessments should be done every two or three years. I also believe our City must continue to support and offer programs such as LOOP so that long term residents who comprise the backbone of our neighborhoods are not forced to leave their homes.

3. WAGE TAX

Philadelphia receives 66% of its tax revenue from wages and business receipts; in contrast, in New York City and Washington DC, 34% and 35% of tax revenues are from wages and business receipts. In those two cities, proceeds from real estate taxes are much larger (41% and 36%, respectively) than in Philadelphia, where this value is 17%. Critics contend that Philadelphia's reliance on wage/business taxes drives workers and businesses out of the City because it is easier to relocate people than it is to relocate offices and factories.

Should Philadelphia shift more of its revenue sourcing from wage and business taxes to real estate taxes?

YES

If you believe we should shift away from wage and business taxes to real estate taxes, how would you propose to do this?

I believe that all of our City's taxes, the wage tax, the sales tax, the business income and receipts tax (BIRT) are interconnected and do not operate in isolation of each other. Therefore, I do not advocate for a piecemeal approach to tax reform. Instead, I believe that the entire business and wage tax structure in Philadelphia needs to be examined and a universal reform approach should be undertaken. Within this approach, I would advocate that the City begin to shift its tax policy away from things that can move (workers and businesses) and to things that cannot (buildings, offices, and factories).

Our current tax structure has placed Philadelphia at a competitive disadvantage to many of our surrounding counties. Philadelphia must not only become a place where entrepreneurs choose to start a new business, Philadelphia must also become a place where established businesses want to remain after they have become profitable and begin to thrive. Unless we reform our tax policies from the bottom up, businesses will continue to move across City Line Avenue once they turn a profit.

If you do not believe that such a shift should occur, why not?

N/A

4. DELINQUENT TAXES

The City currently has over \$1 billion in delinquent taxes. Approximately half are delinquent property taxes and half are delinquent wage, business income, and related business taxes. Each year, the deficit grows, a trend which suggests that the City lacks the political will or competence (or both) to collect taxes. One tax collection strategy is to remove the collection task from the City and sell tax liens to private investors so that the private sector would set about collecting these debts. Proponents observe that because the \$1 billion delinquency shows that the City is incapable or unwilling to collect delinquent taxes, tax collections should be transferred to the private sector. Critics worry that private concerns would engage in improper collection tactics or fail to fairly treat tax delinquents who are down on their luck.

Should the City sell tax liens to private investors?

YES

I believe the City should explore the narrow use of tax lien sales.

New York City is often heralded as the model for the successful use of tax lien sales while Camden, NJ is used as why such sales are disastrous. Thankfully, Philadelphia is neither New York City nor Camden, NJ, like all other cities, Philadelphia is unique.

In conjunction with bolstering the revenue department with additional resources necessary to effectively collect delinquent taxes, I would support the use of tax lien sales

for those parcels purchased by speculators and out of town investors who buy up our property, fail to maintain it, do not participate in our communities or revitalization, but still hope to reap a future profit after a transitional neighborhood has become stabilized.

If not, what steps would you take to ensure that the delinquency is addressed?

N/A

5. PGW SALE

Advocates of the recent failed sale of the Philadelphia Gas Works (PGW) favored the sale because the City could use the proceeds, about \$400 million, to reduce the \$5 billion underfunding of the City's pensions. They further contended that the City had no business running a gas company, that City ownership leaves open the door for patronage positions at PGW, that City ownership limited the business opportunities of the operation, and that under public ownership, it will take nearly 90 years to replace the City's ancient and increasingly unsafe gas mains. Opponents asserted that a sale would eliminate PGW's annual \$18 million contribution to the City's general fund. Opponents were also concerned that even though a privately operated PGW, like PECO, would be regulated by the Public Utility Commission, a private operator would be more likely to raise rates and be less responsive to the needs of low income residents than a City owned utility. Critics also contended that the private operator produced no credible plan for upgrading infrastructure that would not have entailed substantial long-term rate increases. Both sides presented reports substantiating their positions. Despite these divergent views, City Council decided not to hold public hearings on the proposal, let alone conduct a ye or nay vote.

Do you believe that City Council should have conducted public hearings on the PGW controversy? Please explain your answer. What is your vision for the future of PGW?

Narrowly NO.

I do not believe the deal presented to City Council by the Nutter for the sale of PGW to UIL should have been afforded a public hearing.

The deal as it was presented to City Council contained no commitment to keep rate and bill increases at reasonably affordable levels beyond three years of corporate ownership; contained no contractual commitments on income-based assistance programs after the initial tariff filing for programs other than the Senior Citizen Discount; contained no commitment to or details of potential acceleration of the cast iron main replacement program; contained no commitment to a minimum number of PGW employees beyond three years of corporate ownership; contained no commitment to ensure or prioritize the hiring of Philadelphia residents; contained no commitment by UIL to retain ownership of all or some of PGW's assets for any period of time after the sale (which is extremely relevant given that UIL was recently acquired by Spanish company Iberdrola); contained no commitment by UIL to maintain a local presence beyond its guarantee to keep PGW headquarters in Philadelphia for three years; and most importantly, contained no Economic Opportunity Plan to ensure equal employment opportunities for women, minorities and the disabled or to include Disadvantaged Business Enterprises in UIL's procurement of goods and services.

Given all these omissions from the sale agreement presented to City Council by the Nutter administration, I do not believe the deal AS PRESENTED by the Mayor should have received a public hearing.

I still remain very optimistic about the future of PGW and am open to exploring a Public Private Partnership. However, I will remain vigilant in that any future public private partnership must include clauses that address the concerns I mentioned above with particular attention being paid to a guaranteed income-based assistance program and an Equal Opportunity Plan.

Administration

6. PENSIONS

The City spends 18% of its budget – about \$660 million (in 2012) – on pensions. Even so, the City's pension obligations are currently underfunded by approximately \$5 billion, more than the \$4 billion the City expects to take in during the next fiscal year. Three questions:

Do you believe that the City can “grow” its way out of this deficit– i.e. that prosperity in the City, as distinguished from tax hikes, will produce higher realty and business tax revenues so that the additional funds can be used to pay down the deficit OR that the City can somehow change its ways and pay down the deficit by better practices?

No. I do not believe that growth alone will allow Philadelphia to emerge from its under funded pension crisis. While growth is without question needed, it is not a silver bullet.

If you do not believe that “growth” alone will suffice to address this issue, , which do you favor: raising taxes, cutting spending or selling assets? Depending on your answer, specifically identify the taxes to be raised, the names of the programs that should be cut (please no generalities like eliminating “waste and abuse”), or the assets to be sold.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I believe this answer reverts back to the financial health of our School District. Bill No. 140489 (2014) extended the City's additional 1% sales tax allocating a portion of the revenue to the School District. However, through a fair funding formula and increased state support of our School District, our City might one day be in a position to reallocate all or a portion of this tax revenue to our pension fund, which would obviate the need to increase taxes or sell city assets.

To gradually improve the pension plan's funding status, do you favor continuing the defined benefit plan for existing employees while instituting a defined contribution plan for more recently hired employees?

YES.

DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS

7. CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS

Some Philadelphia neighborhoods are changing, with better-off people moving into areas historically occupied by less well-off residents. This trend increases the city's tax base (and thus its ability to address the challenges many of its residents face) and often improves the physical characteristics of a neighborhood, but it can also bring unsettling changes, not only through increasing property taxes but also via alterations in the makeup of affected communities.

Other than providing real estate tax relief to long-time residents whose assessments have increased due to rising values in the neighborhood, do you believe that government should intervene regarding these neighborhood changes?

I believe that government and City Council are wholly accountable to the people of our City. Government or Council intervention in our neighborhoods should only happen with the consent of the residents of these neighborhoods. Government and Council should take its lead from the concerns of its constituents, intervening only when they ask it to do so.

If so, list the disruptions you would target and the remedies you would suggest.

As I mentioned above, the disruptions I would target would be those that the community expressed a need to do so. In respect to remedies, my staff and I would continue to work with stakeholders and community organizations to address each disruption on a case by case basis. A particular remedy that works for the residents of Center City may not be the appropriate remedy for the residents of East Falls, Fishtown, or Society Hill. It is for these reasons that Community input is so important. Philadelphia is not just a City of neighborhoods; it is a City of "unique" neighborhoods.

8. ZONING RELIEF THROUGH COUNCIL

In 2012, after years of effort, the City passed a comprehensive revision of its zoning code. Many developers with projects which do not conform to the new zoning code have sought City Council ordinances to revise the zoning of their parcels, without going through the Zoning Board of Adjustment for a variance. Critics claim that zoning by council ordinance favors those with Council connections and/or big-ticket projects. Proponents argue that stakeholder input can be received in Council and that the Council procedure will encourage development because legal challenges to council ordinances are less likely than appeals from Zoning Board decisions.

Would you vote for (or sign) ordinances enabling developments contrary to the zoning code and which have not received a variance from the Zoning Board of Adjustment? If so, under what circumstances would you vote for (or sign) such ordinances?

The Philadelphia Zoning Code was last overhauled in 2012. Since this update, Philadelphia's neighborhoods have continued to evolve and change; nothing in our City remains static for long. Because Philadelphia is continually evolving, there are circumstances in which I would vote for an ordinance that would enable development contrary to the zoning code because the code may not accurately reflect the development of the neighborhood since 2012.

As an At-large member of City Council, I take a city-wide approach towards zoning, always listening to and consulting with neighborhood and community organizations before rendering any decision. This is not just lip service. Last week I voted AGAINST the Urban Experiential Display ("UED") ordinance (Bill No. 140906) in part because of the opposition of neighborhood and community organizations such as yours.

9. CITY-OWNED VACANT PROPERTIES

The City owns some 10,000 vacant properties. These properties cost \$21 million per year to maintain. Selling these properties requires City Council approval under the newly enacted Land Bank Ordinance. Sales must also be reviewed by the 14-member vacant property review committee, composed of City officials. Some worry that these procedures serve to delay the sale of these properties and open the process to political bartering, favoritism, and waste. Others say that City Council and the Project Review Committee will appropriately protect the public interest and increase community input in redevelopment.

Will you vote to amend the ordinance by eliminating the Council ordinance provision? Explain your response.

I believe a provision requiring a City Council ordinance is important to maintaining transparency and community involvement throughout the process. While some may worry that such procedures only act to delay the sale of properties, I believe they provide a necessary public forum for any person or organization to voice their support or opposition to a particular sale or redevelopment.

GOVERNMENT & ADMINISTRATION

10. ETHICS: CREATING A PERMANENT INSPECTOR GENERAL

The current City Inspector General, Amy Kurland, holds office pursuant to an Executive Order originally issued in 1984 which could be rescinded at any time by any mayor.

Are you willing to support for Bill 130001 calling for a ballot referendum to amend the City Charter to establish an independent Inspector General funded by taxpayer dollars who would have oversight over every city department?

YES.

I would support any legislation that would bring additional accountability and oversight to City Departments.

If elected Mayor, would you leave the current Executive Order in place and promptly fill the Inspector General's position?

N/A

11. UNFAIR ELECTORAL DISTRICTING

“Gerrymandering” is drawing electoral districts to serve the interests of politicians or parties. A 2010 survey ranked two of Philadelphia City Council districts (5 and 7) among the top ten gerrymandered districts nationwide, with two others (1 and 9) also highly ranked on the gerrymandering scale.

Would you vote to amend the City Charter in 2015 so that the next redistricting in 2020 will be conducted by an independent, non-partisan commission?

I would support exploring an amendment to the City Home Rule Charter where future redistricting would be conducted by an independent, non-partisan commission.

I believe that such an important decision strongly warrants a public hearing so that our citizens, stakeholders, community, and neighborhood organizations can have a public venue voice their opinions.

As an At-Large member of City Council, I pay particular attention to the opinions of ALL our City's neighborhood and community organizations, and would only render an opinion on this matter after listening to their views and concerns.

12. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Philadelphia elects three “City Commissioners” whose only duty is to administer elections. They serve four years regardless of their performance. In most cities, the election process is not run by three people, but by one, who is appointed by the mayor and can be removed for poor performance. Proponents say that the current system in Philadelphia empowers voters who can reject ineffectual or dishonest Commissioners. Detractors assert that Philadelphia voters are largely unaware of the duties of the three City Commissioners whose job title does not describe their job function so that the ballot results do not reflect voter’s assessments of on the job performance.

Would you vote to amend the City Charter, eliminating the City Commissioners and adding the position of an election administrator that reports to the Mayor?

I believe the City Commissioners should remain an elected office accountable to the voters. Contrary to what detractors might think, Philadelphia's voters are acutely aware of the duties of our commissioners and have historically exercised their votes in accordance. In 2011, Philadelphians assessed the job performance of their Commissioners and decided to elect two new Commissioners to these offices. It is the responsibility of the City Commissioners to administer our City's elections, therefore, I believe it should remain an office wholly accountable to the people.

13. SHERIFF’S OFFICE

Per the City Charter, the Sheriff’s office is an elective position charged with responsibility for the sale of tax delinquent properties, courtroom security, and transport of inmates. Like the Clerk of Quarter Sessions, another elected office which was recently eliminated by a Charter revision, the Clerk of Quarter Sessions Court has been unable to account for the funds which it receives and its foreclosure procedures have been seen as partially

responsible for the half billion dollars of property tax delinquencies. Critics of the Sheriff's office maintain that its functions should be administered by administration appointees who can be hired and fired based upon their competence. Defenders of the Office assert that Philadelphia's voters, not the Mayor, should choose who should conduct sheriff's sales, and arrange for courtroom security and inmate transport.

Would you vote to abolish the Sherriff's office, transferring to other City agencies its functions (Sheriff's sales, courtroom security and inmate transfer)?

I believe the Sheriff's office needs to be reformed, not abolished. Through targeted investment in technology, the Sheriff's Office can work more efficiently for the citizen's of Philadelphia while at the same time remaining wholly accountable to them via an election.

I do not ascribe to the notion that an appointed office is always better than an elected office. If that was the case, the School Reform Commission would be preferable to an elected school board, which something I do not believe to be true.

14. ROLE OF NEIGHBORHOODS IN DEVELOPMENT & QUALITY OF LIFE

Philadelphia is called the city of neighborhoods, but many of our basic planning, resource, and development decisions are made with little or no effective input of neighborhoods--vital stakeholders in the city's future. These include overall development patterns, placement and design of special events, major construction, and placement and operation of key public facilities—each of which can have major impacts on adjacent communities. Some measures have been made, such as the design review process is zoning code and open public involvement. But these remain advisory, and most localized decisions and issues are still the purview of district Councilpeople rather than the administration.

What would you do to give neighborhoods more meaningful roles in decision-making and more effective engagement as partners in the city's goals and mission?

I strongly believe that neighborhood organizations should have a seat at the table when any development or zoning decision is considered. As I often tell my staff, "if you do not have a seat at the table, you are most likely on the menu."

Please know that my staff and I pay close attention to the concerns of neighborhood organizations before we take any legislative action on a zoning or development matters. As I mentioned earlier, last week I was proud to stand with the Crosstown Coalition and other neighborhood organizations by voting AGAINST the Urban Experiential Display ("UED") ordinance (Bill No. 140906).

My door is always open to the concerns, input, and suggestions of neighborhood and community organizations. As a member of the Wynnefield Residents Association, I know firsthand the time and energy your membership invests into their communities. You deserve to be heard.

15. SCHOOLS

Per the Mayor's Tale of the Tape, In fiscal year 2013-2014, Philadelphia contributed \$1,216,319,000 to fund the School District, a contribution which accounted for 42.3% of

the School District's revenues, a percentage smaller than Chicago (50.3%), Dallas (57.7%) and Boston (67.2%) but larger than Memphis (38.4%), Baltimore (20.7%) and Detroit (20.4%).

What is the dollar amount of the contribution that you believe the City should make in fiscal year 2016 – 2017, your first year in office, and how you would finance it. Explain your conclusion

It is without question that more local funding must be generated to support our School District. While I am optimistic that Governor Wolf will continue to do everything in his power secure additional dollars for our children and implement a "fair funding formula", it is imperative that we as community and civic leaders continue to search and fight for additional funding on the local level as well. While the School District has not yet released its fiscal year 2016-2017 budget, it is anticipated that there will be an \$80,000,000 deficit.

Solving the School Districts budget crisis will take a multi-pronged approach. There is no silver bullet. My staff and I are committed to finding "new and recurring streams of revenue" for the school district of Philadelphia. No idea is off the table. To this end, last winter I introduced legislation to place a tax on the sale of "electronic cigarettes" (which are currently exempted from the City's additional \$2.00 cigarettes tax) with ALL revenue going to the School District of Philadelphia. I am happy to report that this type of legislation was recently included in Governor Wolf's 2015 budget address.

Do you believe that any strings/conditions should be attached to the City's contributions to the School District budget and, if so, what are they?

Charter Schools have recently been fraught with fraud amounting to a price tag of over \$30,000,000. Increased transparency and accountability are what is needed over the City's contributions to the School District's budget. I do not believe it is City Council's place to place strings or conditions on the use of such funds. The School District should be returned to local control and the decisions regarding how these resources are spent should be made by an elected school board with the input of teachers, parents, and the community throughout the process. Every child in Philadelphia deserves the opportunity to receive a quality education. Anything less is unacceptable.

LIFESTYLE

16. HOUSING FIRST

Philadelphia has one of the lowest levels of street homelessness of any major American city – 1 in 5,000 Philadelphians lives on the streets in comparison to 1 in 2,700 Bostonians, 1 in 1,800 Chicagoans, 1 in 300 San Franciscans or 1 in 100 Los Angelinos. [Source: Project Home, Saving Money, Saving Lives, 2009, at p. 4] Nevertheless, anyone who has spent time in our public spaces recognizes that there is a significant street population, typically suffering from mental illness or substance addiction, many of whom are likely not homeless. The City has implemented "housing first" programs that place individuals in supportive, permanent housing without regard to continued substance use and/or untreated mental health conditions and spends 108 million per year on homeless services.

If housing is readily available for homeless people, should they be permitted to live in public spaces?

Helping the homeless is not addressed by simply increasing our City's available housing stock. Philadelphia's homeless often suffer from mental illnesses that are coupled with addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. Councilwoman Blackwell is a tireless advocate for our City's homeless and I have been proud to join her along with my many current and former colleagues on initiatives designed to help this community. "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members". Therefore, I would not support any initiative that punishes our homeless citizens because they choose to sleep in our city's public spaces. Instead, we as a society should re-double our efforts to help these individuals find the necessary medical and educational support they need.

Do you favor sidewalk ordinances to regulate aggressive panhandling and other antisocial behavior?

Philadelphians should be able to walk our streets and neighborhoods without fear. This goes without saying.

However, I believe that aggressive panhandling is the symptom of a larger economic problem; the lack of accessible entry level jobs. Ordinances alone will not stop aggressive panhandling, instead, the City must invest and partner with job training programs to help these individuals acquire the skills needed to find employment.

Individuals resort to panhandling out of desperation. By enacting an ordinance that either fines or arrests these individuals, we are not doing anything to address the root of the problem.