

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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](mailto: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](http://philacrosstown.org) and emailed to our 19 member organizations.

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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The Office You Are Seeking: Councilman-At-Large

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### *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

## 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 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? **Yes.***

*Should it be modified or abolished? **I am open to modification. The original idea was for the abatement to kick start development. I believe that has happened in many neighborhoods across the city. Properties that fell off the tax rolls are now back on them. I open to modification because the marketplace has dramatically changed and the incentive may not be necessary or it perhaps it can be reduced to a shorter period of time.***

*If you favor modification, what modifications should be made?*

### 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? **Ideally, reassessments should be done annual basis. Unfortunately, the current process seems to be random at best. Resources are an issue and our inventory is large, however, property owners need a predictable and fixed assessment schedule. The City needs to commit to doing this right way.***

### 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?*

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

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

**We can't rely on one tax exclusively for revenue. I believe we need to seriously look at reducing our city wage tax. While the rate has dropped just over 1% over the last 20 years, it's not enough to make Philadelphia attractive to businesses with multiple employees. This is reflected in comparison with other east coast cities. We need to attract both the sole proprietor and the bigger established business to set up shop in our city. I like the concept, which is supported by Paul Levy of the Center City District, of different property tax rates for commercial and residential properties. Commercial properties would be taxed at a higher rate than residential ones, while reducing the wage tax. I believe this can spur real estate development and job creation in time. The difficult challenge is the potential loss of revenue during the time such action takes root.**

#### **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? If not, what steps would you take to ensure that the delinquency is addressed? **No. I believe a strong***

**mayor and a diligent city council can find ways of collecting these delinquent taxes.**

## **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 yea 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?*

**Yes, council should have conducted public hearings, but I only introduce legislation based upon what I am for not what I'm against. Furthermore, the lack of information about the RFP and the proposal made the entire process a challenge for me.**

**In the state of Pennsylvania, we have an abundance of natural gas. Philadelphia and its ports are strategically in perfect position to be an export hub of that valuable commodity. I believe PGW is properly positioned to be a part of that emerging marketplace. The sale of PGW will provide a one-time infusion of revenue, which the city can certainly use at this time. However, there are many questions about the potential long-term financial consequences for our citizens.**

**At this time, I am unsure if it is in the city's best interest to sell all or parts of such an extraordinary asset because there are so many outstanding questions. I believe we should be looking at all**

**possible ways to capitalize on this asset, but in a very open and public conversation.**

## 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? **I believe we must employ the best practice to make the city more fiscally solvent.***

*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. **I believe we are suffering from failed leadership by multiple administrations. The pathway out requires strong leadership by the mayor working with council. I believe we need a beginning point and a timeline that is driven by hard actuarial data that gives us the parameters. We need full commitment to the process and the end goal.***

*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? **Traditionally such matters are handled in a collective bargaining process. I believe in protecting the rights of workers. Collective bargaining allows for a fair and inclusive negotiating process that is predicated on good faith. It’s a proven process that gives workers a voice and buy-in.***

## 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?*

*If so, list the disruptions you would target and the remedies you would suggest. I believe in the tax relief efforts we've taken since I've been on council. We have to be sensitive and aware of neighborhoods and their changes. We need a balance between those new to the community and those that have been in there for a long time as it turns the corner. We owe it those that stuck it out during down times.*

## 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? I judge everything on a case-by-case basis and do not blindly follow prerogative. I do understand that sometimes a comprehensive plan offered via ordinance by a councilperson, who is accountable to the voters of that area, might be the appropriate way to proceed forward. That legislative process should be an open and inclusive one. It's very important to me to have community inclusion and input. As a councilman at large I will continue to do analysis as development*

**proposals come along and judge each on its merits. I am open to community groups helping me to better understand an issue and their neighborhood concerns. Finally, I am always willing to advocate if I am in agreement.**

## **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.* **Our land bank, which I supported with a yes vote, is still in its infancy. I want to be patient and see how it takes shape. It's simply too early at this time to say I would vote for such an ordinance.**

## **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 am in favor of it.**

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

### **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?*

**No.**

## **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?*

**No.**

## **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 )?*

**No.**

#### 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?* **Since our new zoning code went into effect and the Philadelphia 2035 work started across the city, we've never had such a high level of community engagement here in Philadelphia. We have a robust roster of community associations that are dialed into everything that is going on in each part of the city. The Registered Community Organization formalization process has created a standard for all parties and strengthened lines of communication. Community input has never been greater. Finally, the constituents of their geographic section of the city elect the district councilperson and they have a say as to who holds that spot every four years. I encourage them to hold their elected leaders accountable in the interim.**

#### 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.*

**I do not have a specific dollar amount.**

**The School District of Philadelphia is in crisis. The shamefully weighted cuts to our budget, and the absence of a fair funding formula represent a fair portion of the problem but not the entire crisis.**

**Philadelphia has 10 percent of all school children in the state and was decimated by receiving 30 percent of the total statewide education**

**funding cuts. Of the 501 school districts in Pennsylvania, about 400 saw an increase in funding last year, but the 100 poorest districts saw substantial decreases. These are districts, like Philadelphia, that strive to educate the children of our Commonwealth with the fewest resources, whose best hope for a life better than their parents is our nation's commitment to a free public education. How can these children obtain an education in schools with no paper, textbooks that are falling apart, and walls that are crumbling? With teachers who are filled with anxiety because they don't know what their next paycheck will look like or whether they will have health insurance? With principals struggling to lead without the funds to provide the most basic of educational necessities? This crisis will not abate until Harrisburg steps up and recognizes its responsibility to our children by adopting an appropriate and fair funding formula. While we must fight for fair funding in Philadelphia, our children can't wait for us to resolve this funding crisis. They are experiencing a crisis of their own that must be addressed now.**

**I am supportive of any recurring revenue that will sustain our schools. I want to actively participate in those conversations. One time funding fixes aren't a fix once it lapses. We need a thoughtful approach that avoids the several times a year emergency that puts everyone's back against the wall, limits the options and creates angst for our educators, students, parents and the entire city. We need reliable and predictable funding not one-shot deals.**

*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?*

**Yes. I think we need conditions related to testing and the educational services and supports for students with special needs. The use of high-stakes standardized testing has no use in this conversation. It forces educators to teach for a test that takes nothing into account but the final result. It's flawed. It's punitive. And, I believe it's purposefully designed to hurt a struggling district. Also, I've advocated for those with disabilities during my entire career. Those wonderful children get crushed in this testing environment and they are viewed as a liability.**

**Separate from the issue of funding and testing, education in our schools does not look like what it should. Additional funds should not be used to return to the status quo. We have an obligation to change our models of education so that they take advantage of latest understanding of how children learn. We must rethink the value of such heavy emphasis on**

**standardized testing. We must rethink the role of schools in supporting families as well as children.**

**Nowhere are the challenges our school face more evident than in how we educate and care for children with disabilities. As funding has disappeared, these children have suffered more than others from increases in class size, cuts in staff, and reduction in other resources. While federal law protects their educational rights, that law is premised on a basic educational foundation that all schools should provide. When we cut these basic resources, this foundation is pulled out from under these children. In these cases, children with disabilities often end up isolated and ignored, despite best intentions. The strength of our commitment to our children can be measured by how we care for those with disabilities.**

## **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?*

**Philadelphia has adopted innovative best practices as it relates to housing, including the mentioned “housing first” model, and I believe that has contributed to our low level of homelessness. Unfortunately, housing remains a difficult challenge for those with substance abuse issues and disabilities.**

**I chair Council’s Committee on the Disabled and Special Needs and called for the February 9, 2015 public hearing to examine the state of housing in Philadelphia and our compliance with federal mandates for**

**people with physical, psychiatric, sensory, intellectual and developmental disabilities.**

**Across the United States millions of people with disabilities, face a severe housing crisis due to affordability, accessibility, aging caregivers, housing discrimination and availability. Philadelphia has made significant efforts to address the housing needs of individuals with disabilities; however we continue to fall short of meeting the needs of many individuals with disabilities.**

**The 1999 Olmstead Supreme Court Decision provides the legal grounding that individuals with disabilities have the right to live in the community like their non-disabled peers. The Court found that medically unnecessary segregation was a violation of Title II of the American's with Disabilities Act of 1990.**

**Some housing waiting lists in the city are as long as 10 years causing individuals to unnecessarily reside in institutions. Under Olmstead, states can meet their obligation by developing a plan for community placements, with a waiting list that moves at a reasonable pace. Waiting lists that exceed 3 years are arguably not moving at a reasonable pace.**

**The February hearing showed that much has been done in Philadelphia, but we still have more work to do on this issue.**

*Do you favor sidewalk ordinances to regulate aggressive panhandling and other antisocial behavior? **No.***