

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

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The Office You Are Seeking: Second Council District

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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, the ten-year tax abatement has accompanied the largest real estate development boom in Philadelphia in almost a century. The tax abatement encourages developers to invest in Philadelphia and helps to offset factors like lower rents and high construction costs, which would otherwise discourage investment. The tax abatement is responsible for the increased number and size of projects in Philadelphia. These development projects have many benefits that outweigh the loss of tax revenue. Construction projects create jobs. What's more the new developments house businesses that provide employment opportunities for residents and tax revenue to the city. On top of that, the new residents these projects attract spend their money shopping and going out in the city and expand the tax base.

Should it be modified or abolished?

No. I believe that any attempt to modify or abolish the ten-year tax abatement would have to be supported by evidence that doing so would financially benefit the city. The current research, conducted by Kevin Gillen, finds that the tax abatement is actually revenue positive for the City of Philadelphia. Gillen estimates that the development spurred by the tax abatement produces \$2 in revenue for every \$1 which is abated.

To date, I have not seen any persuasive argument that abolishing or modifying the ten-year tax abatement would benefit the city. In fact, if we were to abolish it today, the increase in real estate taxes collected would be minimized by the accompanying loss in other revenue it generates. It's also worth keeping in mind

that, over the next several years, as the tax abatements expire, the city will begin to see an increase in tax revenue.

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?

Reassessments should occur every ten years following the census. The city must ensure that everyone pays their fair share and pegging the reassessments to the completion of the decennial census helps to ensure better accuracy. No one should pay too much or too little. The assessments implemented under the Actual Value Initiative (AVI) were deeply flawed and I opposed the implementation of the formula that was used.

We must ensure that future citywide reassessments are executed properly. We must also ensure that the city provides some measure of relief for long-term residents who see a significant increase in property taxes. The city should use census data to formulate relief measures before implementing the new assessments to ensure that the relief measures are (1) adequately protecting vulnerable residents and (2) narrowly tailored so that the tax rate stays as low as possible.

It's worth noting that, leading up to the implementation of AVI I met frequently with the CCRA and the Crosstown Coalition to talk about their concerns and answer as many of their questions as I could. When I found out that the coalition had requested data from the Nutter Administration and that the administration was slow to release it, I pushed the mayor's office to make that data available and they did. Ultimately, it was this information that helped reveal the flawed nature of the new assessments and cemented my opposition to the assessment formula used in 2013.

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?

I'm open to the idea of this kind of a change for Philadelphia, but details matter. That's why I introduced a resolution authorizing city council to hold hearings on this very topic.

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

In its Pathways to Job Growth report, the Central Philadelphia Development Corporation and the Center City District highlighted some disturbing facts about Philadelphia. Today, Philadelphia has 25% fewer jobs than it did in 1970, largely due to the fact that we have lost 90% of our manufacturing jobs. Other large eastern cities have experienced similar job losses over this time period, but were able to replace the lost manufacturing jobs with other industries. Philadelphia has failed to do so. Many attribute this failure to our tax policy. While other cities like Boston and New York rely more on real estate tax and less on wage and business taxes, Philadelphia continues to tax wages and businesses more heavily than real estate. Economists suggest that shifting our focus onto real estate taxation will allow us to lower the wage and business taxes, which will attract business to the city.

As I said, I introduced a resolution authorizing City Council to hold hearings on this idea this spring. During these hearings I will make sure we thoroughly investigate the options available to us and use that information to formulate a clear plan of action. I will also look for ways to ensure that this system would protect homeowners and avoid creating winners and losers. We should look critically at our tax structure and move to align ourselves with cities that have experienced job growth. However, we must ensure that we protect residents from spikes in property taxes.

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

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?

For occupied dwellings, no. For vacant properties, yes.

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

We need to collect taxes, period. Our collection rates are unacceptable. This issue was especially relevant during the AVI process. Residents were being asked to pay more while the city had almost half a billion dollars in uncollected taxes on its books. While we have seen some improvement in the collection of delinquent taxes, it hasn't improved fast enough.

We can increase collection by (1) increasing enrollment in payment plans (2) pushing vacant properties to sheriff's sale and (3) making sure that we fully staff and fund the Revenue Department so that it can seek out every delinquent property owner and get them on a payment plan. Vacant properties that have back taxes need to be sold at sheriff sale.

Selling debt to private investors is not the way to address our delinquency problems for occupied dwellings. I am open to looking at proposals to sell debt on vacant properties to private investors.

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?*

I believe that city council should have debated the issue, however, because I had some significant reservations about the sale of PGW, I was not in favor of the bill passing.

I had two significant concerns about the bill. First, there are a lot of people in the Second District who work at PGW who had no real job protections if the sale went through. Second, certain protections for seniors and low income ratepayers were not protected in the sale, and I could not support such a proposal. UIL, the proposed purchaser, was resistant to binding commitments to certain protections for workers and vulnerable ratepayers, which was a concern for me. Many of my constituents reached out to me to voice their opposition to the sale, and I take those concerns very seriously.

City Council recently formed the Committee on Energy Opportunities for Philadelphia to focus on the future of PGW and the energy opportunities presented by the recent boom in natural gas. This committee will make recommendations regarding how the city can increase PGW's performance and position Philadelphia to benefit from increased energy investment. One thing is certain, we must ensure that PGW does not once again become a liability for Philadelphia.

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?

Certainly the increased investment occurring in the city will produce more tax revenue, especially as the tax abatements on thousands of properties expire, and that will help us to resolve some of the burden of the unfunded liability. We must continue this trend by making Philadelphia more attractive to business and development. However, we cannot grow our way out of this problem.

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.

First, we need to collect delinquent taxes. We need to protect homeowners who may have fallen behind from losing their homes to sheriff sales, and we are doing that through legislation I co-sponsored to reform the payment plan system. However, there is no excuse for allowing speculators to shirk their obligations on vacant properties. We should move to get these sold at sheriff’s sale immediately. This will greatly increase revenue to the city.

Second, we should move to sell city-owned property at a faster pace. We have led the way in the Second District. We are among the leading, if not *the* leading council district, when it comes to dispossessing city-owned property. Specifically, we have supported the sale of over 120 properties in South Philadelphia alone. This pace should be duplicated throughout the city, and we need to make sure the Land Bank has the staff to process these sales in a timely fashion. Some mistakenly confuse the process at the Land Bank with hold ups in council. By making sure the Land Bank offices are fully staffed and funded, we can expedite the process. This will bring in revenue while saving the city on the funding it takes to maintain these properties.

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?

We have an obligation to fulfill the promise we made as a city to the people who worked for us and were promised a defined benefit program. Our goal should be to make sure that those promises are kept. I cannot support the transition to a defined contribution plan, like a 401K plan, if it means that we have to break our promise to the employees who are using our commitment to them as a basis for planning their retirement. What's more, I believe we should look critically at the all of the costs and benefits of a defined contribution plan because they tend to carry higher administrative costs and may not be the solution to our retirement funding challenges. If we can resolve the current unfunded liability and figure out how to maintain our defined benefit plan into the future, that would be my preferred course of action.

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?

Yes, it is the government's duty to be proactive in protecting our most vulnerable residents.

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

I believe in smart, community oriented development policy that recognizes that diverse neighborhoods are strong neighborhoods. Everyone wants good schools, a safe environment, and clean streets, and it is the government's role to facilitate this common goal.

Allowing wealthier residents to move into a neighborhood without protecting more financially vulnerable residents does not address the underlying issue of poverty, it simply pushes it to some other part of the city.

Development is booming in Philadelphia, and that is exciting. The ten-year tax abatement and other factors have ushered in a wave of development, which will

expand our tax base. However, there are side effects to this development. For example, rents in Point Breeze have gone up by 17% on average in the last year alone. In some areas of the neighborhood, rents have skyrocketed. Taxes have also drastically increased. The government must ensure that rapidly developing neighborhoods maintain a level of affordability so that we reduce income isolation.

The government can address income isolation by investing in new, mixed-income housing opportunities and programs that allow vulnerable residents to maintain their homes. I have worked to attract mixed-income development to several neighborhoods in the Second District so that we have housing available to residents of all incomes. By the end of the year, in South Philadelphia we will have gained over 100 units of mixed-income housing since 2012.

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?

Yes, but only with the support of the community.

Decisions that we make on zoning are always driven by the community's input. We don't move forward with anything until the community groups have a chance to participate. Since 2012, I have offered over a dozen zoning ordinances for properties throughout the district. In each case, I ensured that the local community was supportive of the measure before I moved to pass the legislation.

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.

No. The sale of city-owned land requires an ordinance of City Council. This is an importance check to ensure that residents, who are, in truth, the owners of these properties, have a voice in the process. Removing this important check would allow unelected bureaucrats to take over this vital decision making process.

With that said, we need to streamline and reform the City's property disposition process. Since 2012, I have supported the sale of over 120 properties, that's among the most (potentially *the* most) of any district councilmember. The vast majority of these have been sold at fair market value for market rate development. Most of these transactions take months, and even years, to close *after* the authorizing legislation is passed because we have too many land holding agencies and no centralized, transparent, and efficient disposition process.

We are making progress on this issue with the current implementation of the Land Bank. IN order to build on that progress, I will ensure that we (1) establish a clear planning process so that Council and the Land Bank work together to target large assemblages of properties for sale (2) centralize the process in the Land Bank and (3) fully fund the agency so that the staff can handle the large volume of property transactions occurring throughout the city.

With Council and the Land Bank working closely together on planning, and a centralized agency with the staffing it needs to move quickly, we can streamline our property disposition process.

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

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, I believe that city residents deserve to have more of a voice in this process, not less. As representatives of the people, council ensures that the interests and concerns of residents are addressed in the redistricting process.

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, again, I believe that we hold elections for the residents of this city and, therefore, it’s the residents who should be allowed to select and elect the people who oversee elections. It would be a disservice to the voters to replace these elected positions with a single, unaccountable political appointee. Elections are the ultimate measure of accountability since it allows the people to decide whether a person’s job performance merits a return to the job.

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, as I’ve said before, the sheriff’s office has a direct, regular impact on the lives of the resident of Philadelphia. Therefore, residents should have more, not less,

input on the selection of the sheriff and making it an elected position is one way to do that. Accountability still exists in the form of elections. If someone does a bad job, voters have the power to remove that person from office.

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?

The Nutter Administration has made great strides to increase public participation in the planning process. The Planning Commission's 2035 District Plan process gives citizens direct input regarding planning for development, public investment, and infrastructure. I fully support this process and work in partnership with the Planning Commission to promote it.

I am currently working with the Planning Commission and CCRA on a strategic zoning remapping of Center City. The legislation which implements this remapping will contain the recommendations of CCRA. I am working on similar remapping processes with community groups along South Street West and Washington Avenue West. More community involvement in government decisions is a good thing, so I include the community at every step of the planning process.

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

The city's role in funding its schools can only be considered in the context of the state's funding formula. The state is the primary driver of school funding in the city and any effort to provide a dollar amount for the city's commitment without knowing what Governor Wolf will do to correct the currently broken funding formula would be acting without the benefit of the complete picture. That would be unhelpful and, potentially, could negatively impact the outcome of the governor's budget calculations.

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?

This year, the School District is requesting an additional \$103 million from the City of Philadelphia. Each year, the City struggles to find additional money for the School District. The state took over the School District, now the state needs to fund our schools with a fair funding formula. Before authorizing additional funding for the School District of Philadelphia, we must lobby the state to commit to a fair funding formula which ensures that individual school districts receive the funding they need to address their unique needs. Pennsylvania is one of the only states in the country does not use a funding formula which is tailored to meet the diverse needs of the school districts throughout the state.

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?

I believe that rather than debate where the most vulnerable people in our community should be “allowed” to live, we must first address the core problems: poverty, mental illness, and domestic violence. Until we, as a society, can honestly say that we have committed the necessary resources to address poverty and mental illness, everything else is putting the cart before the horse.

Domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness. I worked with Councilman Greenlee to dedicate \$2.5 million in funding to provide an additional 100 beds for victims of domestic violence through Women Against Abuse. Mental illness is another leading cause of homelessness, particularly among our veteran population. This is its own powerful tragedy. We recently welcomed a veteran’s housing development in Southwest Philadelphia and I am working on getting two more veterans housing developments in the Point Breeze and Grays Ferry neighborhoods. Poverty is another cause. I tirelessly advocate for affordable housing and partner with organizations like Habitat for Humanity to ensure that everyone has a place to live.

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

No. By partnering with the police, we can make sure to address problematic behavior in public.