



Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats: 2021 CD33 Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Ben Solotaire
Candidate Email Address: solotaire@gmail.com
Campaign Contact Name: same
Campaign Contact Email: same

Office Sought: City Council D33
Candidate Phone Number: 917 373 7484
Campaign Contact Phone: 917 373 7484
Name of person filling out this questionnaire:
Ben Solotaire

Please answer each of the following questions to the best of your ability:

If elected, what would be your top priority in your first term?

At this point I don't believe we will have brought the virus under control. We will still be learning how effective the vaccines are long term and if any variants have arisen that are not controlled, so working to continue to protect public health and moving daily lives towards a return to post-pandemic normal will be important.

If schools aren't fully reopened by Sept 2021 we will need to aggressively move towards that goal while protecting our students. We've lost a year we can't lose another one. That primarily includes full vaccinations as well as being clear and honest regarding the measures that need to be taken

While we do that, we will need to continue to help our businesses reopen or open. Consolidating regulatory hurdles, giving breaks on property taxes and managing payments so that businesses aren't hit hard while trying to get back in the black (and working to give landlords a break as well while ensuring that they pass anything assistance onto their tenants).

2) What personal and/or professional experiences do you believe make you uniquely qualified to run for City Council? Attach resume or CV if desired.

I have lived in Brooklyn for almost 30 years. I have worked in the private sector, in the arts, in a non-profit, and as freelancer. I have been a renter the whole time and understand how hard it is to find a good home with a good landlord. I have raised two kids, been successful and had hard times. And I have worked for almost five years in the City Council learning about the district and how to work with people. I understand what it takes to live here and to get by. And my career experience and public service experience is all about working with people to achieve a common goal. This is the career path I have chosen and I will do everything I can to do it well and serve the people of my district and Brooklyn.

3) List all of your endorsements, including but not limited to elected officials, unions, political clubs and community-based organizations. I have endorsements from several district residents, Martynka Wawryzniak, Nilsa Roman, Robert Hickman, Marguerite Scott, and Yun-Hee Proffit



4) What, if any, groups or industries will you not accept campaign contributions from? If any, please note specifically whose money you will not accept.

I will not accept any money from police unions or real estate developers.

5) How do you propose helping NYC recover from the COVID pandemic and resulting economic recession, particularly given the projected shortfall in city revenue?

It will have to be a multilayered approach. On a local level we will have to comb through the budget to look for waste and redundancy to save money and determine which hard cuts will have to be made, but we must not put our youth or our seniors in jeopardy, and people must be able to stay in their homes. We need to make cuts in the carceral system and reallocate some of it to the social safety net. We are going to have to depend on the state and federal governments to find new revenue sources. We know the possibilities, higher taxes on the ultra-wealthy, pied-a-terre taxes, stock transfer taxes, among them. And bailouts from the federal government are needed as well.

In addition we can move more aggressively towards a renewable energy future, retrofitting of existing buildings and delivery systems will provide new jobs for years, as well as investing in solar panels, wind energy and geothermal. Investing in our infrastructure through major capital projects will not only provide new jobs but prepare our city for the future. And building a city-wide broadband will allow all students access to more resources, business to reach more customers, and services to be delivered more efficiently.

6) What measures would you take to improve educational opportunities for all students in NYC? How do you plan to ensure that all NYC children are able to attend high-quality, integrated schools? Do you support D15's integration plan as it has been implemented? What changes, if any, would you make to the current D15 integration plan?

As for the D15 plan, I do support it. It is new and was barely given a chance when the pandemic hit but it seemed to be moving the district schools in the right direction, as long as you wanted that direction to be greater socio-economic and racial diversity. Removing screens and replacing them with a weighted lottery did change the demographic breakdown of many schools in the district. Some parents opted out and went to private schools, and some parents and students were sent to schools so far away or had siblings unnecessarily split up. The system will probably need some modifications but it is too early to tell and we will need to continue to involve the parents and students in those decisions.

As for the city-wide goal of increased diversity we will have to continue to provide funding and assistance to each district to develop their own diversity plans. We need to continue to fight for the full funding we deserve through Foundation Aid which is approximately 4 billion dollars underfunded state-wide. And we need to give Community Education Councils more power and control within their school districts so that decisions include their input. And Parent Teacher Associations need to be provided with fundraising trainings and have interschool cooperation so that the wealth can be distributed equally. Events like the current PTA Fun Run should be promoted so that all schools benefit.



7) How would you have handled the reopening of schools for the 2020-2021 academic year? How will you prepare for a second wave of this pandemic? How would you propose to ensure that the needs of highly vulnerable children with special needs, who are homeless, come from poor families, and/or live in households without adults who could aid their learning are not left further behind when remote learning has to be relied on?

I would have kept the schools closed at the start of the 2020/2021 school year, except for certain high need students. We weren't ready to reopen at that time. The summer should have been dedicated to devising a robust remote learning program and guarantying that all students had access to the devices they needed. The key to protecting students, or anyone, is distance and ventilation. Schools needed resources to install any necessary HVAC units and to have PPE on hand to protect teachers, as well as to devise effective teaching plans. The students who are indicated in the question should have priority for in school teaching, especially special needs student and kids living in shelters. Every student has fallen behind in this pandemic but none more then those.

8) Do you support allowing non-citizen New York City residents to vote in City-based elections? Why or why not?

I do support allowing everyone who lives in NYC to vote. NYC would have to be your primary residence for perhaps the previous 30 days at least. But there should be no citizenship requirements. If you live in a community and contribute to the community you should have a say in the representation of that community. NYC is built by immigrants, people who love our city and contribute to it every day, and their voices should be heard.

9) Do you support any campaign finance reforms for NYC? If so, please describe.

I support CM Kallo's bill to limit coordination between candidates and an independent spender and redefines when an expenditure is not independent. His bill allowing for \$10,000 fines for every violation where the independent expenditure violates the law is also one I support.

10) Now that the State government has passed the Reproductive Health Act, what steps would you have the Council and City Hall take to increase reproductive healthcare access, including maternal healthcare, and to do so equitably?

First let me say, I am male, I would be led by women in how these decisions and choices are made. I am pro-choice. A women's right to choose whether to carry a pregnancy to term or not shouldn't be codified by criminal justice laws but should be a health care decision that she makes. We need to continue funding options for abortions for low-income women so cost isn't a factor when deciding whether or not to have an abortion. And in addition we need to have better access to contraception and women's health care by expanding clinics and lowering co-pays. Pre-pregnancy education and counseling can prevent more unwanted pregnancies.



11) The MTA is facing a significant revenue shortfall and many parts of the city lack access to reliable public transportation. What measures would you implement and/or enforce, to promote safe, efficient, and accessible transportation options for mass transit users, pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers in Brooklyn?

The transportation system is an integrated network that today has to equally serve all its users, pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, and mass transit users. Our system was put in place when the car was king, and now we realize that is not the best way to move people around. People are coming to recognize that streets are public spaces and should be enjoyed by everyone safely. Protected bike lanes, dedicated bus lanes, less space for car storage and more for businesses and public use are all policies that need to be moved forward more quickly but with thorough public review and debate. We also need fewer trucks on the roads by utilizing our waterways for freight delivery, and cargo bikes for the last mile deliveries. And businesses should try and move to overnight deliveries to ease daytime congestion and keep trucks off the streets when more bikers and pedestrians are using them. It isn't an easy transition but we must do it.

The MTA is both an amazing regional transportation system and big mess. It serves millions of people a day bringing them from across the region. But its costs are outrageous, its per mile operating costs are among the highest in the world. We need to bring those costs down so repairs and basic maintenance can be done. Increasing speeds, going to one person train operations, expanding the FastTrack program so repairs can be done more quickly should all be considered (while continuing to run 24/7 on lines not getting worked on).

The proposal of putting the subways and buses under City control is certainly worth looking at more deeply. It was that way prior to 1968 and could be again but I am concerned that it is a lot to take on when we can barely manage what we have to do now. Congestion pricing must be implemented to bring in revenue and cut down on car usage, though of course if we want to drive people to public transportation we need to improve subway and bus service.

The city has pilots for electric car charging stations and electric buses and those programs need to be accelerated so we can implement them throughout the city. One issue that needs to be a national discussion is why are our cars essentially the same today as they were 50 years ago. Lower emission, higher gas mileage, better and more efficient electric cars, safer cars, we need all of those and they are all within our reach with the popular and political will.

12) How would you ensure fairness in employment, salary, workplace conditions, and promotion? What is your position on strengthening and increasing access to union membership? What do you think about the unionization push by City Council Staff?

I would consult with union membership and leadership across the city as to what concerns and issues they felt need to be addressed and work with them to correct those issues. Workers must have protections against at will firings, wage theft, and discrimination and those protections must be enforced.

Union membership is a proven pathway to the middle class and to having true worker protections. I am and have always been a supporter of unions. Being able to unionize is a bedrock right of workers, there can be no barriers to doing so if the workers wish to pursue that course. Being a City Council Staff member I have supported the unionization of the staff and would do so as a Council member.



13) How would you ensure that underserved communities receive fair and equitable treatment from city government? What policies do you support that would level the playing field for historically marginalized groups?

I would introduce legislation calling on all city agencies to undergo a racial equity review and analysis to remove policies and practices that contribute to systemic racism.

I would address aging out of foster care. Many kids in foster care come from marginalized communities and when they get out of foster care often aren't ready for being on their own. So after someone turns 21, they should still be eligible for extensive case work, someone assigned to them to help with a career or finishing their education.

The same goes for youth involved in the criminal justice system. They need alternative programs to be kept out of the system and instead be able to be enrolled in restorative justice programs and offered job training and substance abuse programs if necessary.

I believe programs like participatory budgeting allow for involvement of marginalized communities in how their tax dollars get spent on projects they decide on. I would work to expand PB to be a fully city-wide equitable process like it was voted in to do.

We need to promote opportunities for M/WBE's more widely and make the application process easier and less time consuming. In 2019 we saw a decline in contracts yet a growth in businesses.

Agencies also need to conduct a tech overview for user accessibility, online services are often too complicated for many people and result in unfinished applications and certifications.

14) What policy and practice changes are needed for NYC government to ensure sufficient quality housing that actually is affordable for existing residents in Brooklyn neighborhoods?

We need to scrap the current Mandatory Inclusionary Housing program. It does not provide enough truly affordable housing. We can't put all our housing needs in the hands of the free market, but when we do ask developers to provide affordable units, they must be deeply affordable, 20%, 30% or 40% of AMI, and permanent. And AMI needs to be redefined, using surrounding suburbs as part of the NYC AMI does not reflect the reality of our neighborhoods.

Most importantly we need to build on Community land trusts to provide long term affordable housing based on community needs. Housing should be built by non-profits that are focused on the local community with their needs in mind.

15) What policies would you pass or enforce to ensure public housing/NYCHA repair, upkeep and security, and access to alternate housing and services when lacking essentials such as heat, gas and hot water? What is your position on "privatization" of public housing/NYCHA, and on City government sale of public housing "open areas" (outdoor seating & recreation plots) and air rights to private developers?

We need to fully fund the capital repairs that are desperately needed in all out public units which is currently at about \$40 billion. And we need to change the culture in NYCHA that results in waste and inefficiency.



Those are both huge undertakings, but in conversations with the current chair Greg Russ it seems like he understands the issues and is trying to address them.

We have been falling behind in funding from all sources year after year. We have a new Democratic administration but we had one four years ago and still we didn't get where we need to be, I see no reason for optimism now, we will get some funding but not what we need.

I do want to clarify that I don't live in public housing so what happens there isn't up to me, it is up to the residents and nothing should be undertaken without their complete agreement.

I am against the selling of public land, saying some greenspace on a NYCHA campus is unused and should get used for development is absurd, it is used by the residents, it is their yards. I have a back yard and I don't think it should be built on! TDR, transfer of development rights, is a common practice in NYC and could be used with public housing as long as it goes through the appropriate approvals.

Then you have the controversial current program, PACT/RAD and the proposed Blueprint. Both change the developments from Section 9 public housing to Section 8 public housing. Doing that allows for financing that can be used for the needed repairs and renovations. With PACT it involves bringing in private developers and turning construction and daily management over to them while NYCHA retains some controls. In the Blueprint, which is still far from approved, it does something similar but while keeping the trust a public entity. Both have tenant protections. I wouldn't rule either one out but, once again, the residents have to have a say in the process.

16) Given the City's Covid and post-Covid economic crisis, how would you approach your role in addressing the city's carceral system, including the plan to close Rikers?

We need to close Rikers Island. The four-borough plan is not a great one but we have a long way to go towards it being a reality and there is room for improvement. The design of the facilities is key, they can be spaces conducive to rehabilitation not punishment. Everything from colors and layouts, to services provided.

Building the jails would provide many construction jobs and turning Rikers into Sustainable Rikers would be a huge benefit for the City. We should have fought for more community-based jails that would be even smaller and closer to communities as the Lippman Report suggested but that was too heavy a political lift for the Administration.

Would it be better to not spend billions of dollars on jails, of course but I do not believe we are at that point yet as a society. When I was in college in the early-80's I wrote a paper about changing the prison system from one of punishment to one of rehabilitation. 30 years later we still need to do that.

16) Describe your vision for public safety in New York City? What, if any, functions would you like to see removed from the police department? What agencies assume the functions removed from the NYPD?

I just want to start by saying that public safety is when we have good jobs, great schools, secure and safe homes, and opportunity for all. NYS spends billions more on the carceral system than on social services and we need to reallocate that. Arresting someone, then putting them in jail does more harm to them and society than trying to provide opportunities and services in the first place. I want to cut the police budget and refund the services that help not harm.



If there is an agency that already does what an officer has been asked to do then that agency should do it. We are on the way of removing some the appropriate functions, homeless outreach, mental health calls, school safety. But like many things the de Blasio administration has done, the efforts so far were done without much thought. I am always reluctant about creating new agencies when existing efforts are already in place. The Department of Homeless Services has a Street Outreach team, we should use them to react to any reports that need to be addressed but only after giving them extra resources to cover it. As well with mental health calls, there should be a team from DOHMH that responds, and when the two overlap we should have systems in place to ensure appropriate personnel respond. School safety agents need to be transferred to the DOE and provided de-escalation and mediation training. They come from a criminal justice perspective and they need a social service one. Traffic enforcement should also go to the DOT.

17) Do you support changes to the ULURP process and to other NYC zoning mechanisms? If so, what specific changes do you support?

I would support a complete review and update of our zoning laws which were last revised in 1961. Use groups are included that don't exist anymore and uses exist that aren't included. The balance of Commercial/Residential/Manufacturing are different now then 50 years ago. Manufacturing zones should be allowed greater FAR that require a percentage to stay manufacturing but also permit other business uses, parking requirements should be reduced to allow for the fact that many people take public transportation or bikes. And while we need to preserve manufacturing in the city, we can look at additional housing near M zones since the toxic uses that used to exist thankfully have mostly left.

We also need to get rid of exclusionary zoning and end single family zoning by allowing duplexes, triplexes and basement apartments. Keeping large swathes of the city single family zoning not only keeps people out of neighborhoods but makes it impossible for homeowners to create an apartment or two for extra income.

As for ULURP, the process needs to be lengthened so that the community is more informed about a project sooner in the process. And it's dependent on the Borough Presidents and Council Members to appoint people to Community Boards so they are more reflective of the neighborhoods they serve. And they should be provided technical land use assistance on a full-time basis. And the creation and reinvigoration of the 197-A plans should be encouraged or required for all Community Districts.

18) Do you have a plan to reduce and prevent homelessness in Brooklyn and NYC? Explain your plan.

This is such a multi-faceted problem not involving only homelessness but being underhoused and living in substandard conditions. A prime cause of becoming homeless recently has been economic, losing a job or having rent increased beyond your ability to pay. We need more secure, better paying jobs across the city, which also means better funded schools teaching real world skills for today's market. A diversified job market that reaches non-English language speakers, allows for job security in the freelance/gig market and benefits that allow people to care for their families and themselves. A sound, growing economy keeps people in their homes. We are in an enormous hole from the pandemic but we can rebuild.

After the jobs we need housing that is actually affordable to the average New Yorker, this means non-profit community-built housing that is subsidized for permanent affordability at levels matching the neighborhood. And when developers build market rate housing, they must provide more units at a lower AMI than they currently do with a variety of unit sizes if they ask for any rezoning or tax breaks. And we have to do that



while ensuring union construction jobs and safe quality housing even if it means fewer units in the short term.

For people who do end up homeless we need to provide them with supportive services they need to get back on their feet, and rental assistance vouchers that meet the market rates. Our shelters must be safe and comfortable, while no one should stay in a shelter for months or years if the facilities were better than we would have more people off the streets and on the first step back to stable housing.