



Central Brooklyn Independent Democrats: 2021 CD39 Candidate Questionnaire

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Name of person filling out this questionnaire: Brandon West

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

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

My top priority for my first term is addressing the economic impacts of COVID-19 by reallocating funding from the NYPD budget to community services. We must move away from a policing- and incarceration-focused form of community safety. The long-term vision is that our communities will have a say in how safety works in their neighborhoods. That means restorative justice. This also means that people have what they need to feel whole.

I have been very active on this issue and was one of the organizers of the Occupy City Hall movement in Summer 2020, calling on the Mayor and the Council to defund the police. The “cuts” made to the 2021 budget were a joke. In the Council, I would advocate for a budget cut to NYPD of \$3 billion. This should come from headcount, overtime, school safety agents, and capital projects (particularly the most problematic and dubiously legal ones, such as facial recognition software, which was recently used to target a protestor at his own home).

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

I have always lived with a deep interest in building power for people who don't have it. The last few years reaffirmed in me that the circumstances in the district and city require something more transformative, and that means bringing more working people into creating solutions.

I'm the son of teachers--my father was from Jersey City, and my mother from Newark. I got involved in leftist organizing as soon as my parents let me get out of the house. After college, I knew that I wanted to get involved in community organizing, specifically around democracy and building power for Black and Brown people in our democracy. I was drawn to community organizing specifically, as opposed to legal advocacy or philanthropy, for example, because I believe change and justice have always come from the ground up. I have worked most recently as an advocate for voting rights with the Center for Popular Democracy, where I have helped ensure ballot access for black and brown communities around the country, and advocated locally for ranked choice voting and automatic voter registration, among other efforts.



I've also worked for City government - as a Budget Analyst for the Office of Management and Budget and City Council Finance. As I mentioned above, making major changes to the City budget is my biggest priority, and I have the experience and the tools, combined with the organizing skills, needed to get it done.

I am also a Black man, which means my very existence is political and politicized. Too often my community is talked about, but not talked to. We are statistics to white lawmakers and policy analysts who make decisions that shape our lives. As a leader in my own right, having been the President of New Kings Democrats and having run for Chair of the Brooklyn Democratic Party (and lost to the machine), I'm ready to bring my folding chair to the table.

3) List all of your endorsements, including but not limited to elected officials, unions, political clubs and community-based organizations.

Democratic Socialists of America -NYC
New York Communities for Change
Churches United for Fair Housing Action
Future Steps US
State Senator Julia Salazar
State Senator Jabari Brisport
State Assemblymember Zohran K. Mamdani
State Assemblymember Marcela Mitaynes
State Assemblymember Phara Souffrant-Forrest

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 campaign donations from the real estate industry (including short-term rental platforms like AirBnb), anyone involved in the military-industrial complex, police and their unions, or any industry actively involved in the deterioration of our planet (such as fossil fuels). I have a very proactive team reviewing my campaign donations. While I have received few from folks in these industries (I'm sure they know I'm not their candidate), I have returned a few donations and will continue to review and return as necessary.

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

In this economic crisis, we need borrowing power and new sources of revenue through taxing the rich, and the Council must organize to put pressure on our state government to provide that. In addition, the Council can create more and better jobs with the expansion of programs like universal pre-K and 3-K, investing in human services, and increasing targeted training and opportunities for workers to migrate towards new industries like resiliency and a Green New Deal. We need to hire people for the programs that serve our community, and those programs will increase employment. In fact, the climate legislation passed in 2019 ("CCPLA"), was predicted to create 150,000 new jobs over the next ten years. We should work with Albany and the Climate Action Council to ensure a portion of those jobs come to New York City. By also allocating



funds for workforce development and adult education, we can connect people to skills for opportunities throughout their life.

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?

Education is one of my top three issues, and I'm very focused on school desegregation. I do support the D15 integration plan, and will work hard to monitor its implementation which would happen in the 2022-2023 school year, and will also advocate for more districts to undertake such processes. Making sure to better include the families of low-income communities into this plan's development process was very important to do, even despite the delay that it caused. The D15 PAR Project and its findings I believe made me very optimistic that while challenging, this plan will be successful in the long run. The research is telling us that in the community families want, in particular lower income and BIPOC families, really want strong schools close to home. I think really pairing this work with a reassessment of the Fair Student Funding formula will be needed if we want to see the outcomes that the families are asking for. Also the transportation challenges in Red Hook will also need to be addressed in tandem with this project..

The biggest battles for desegregation are the admission procedures, and adequate and equitable funding for schools in general. Also school choice is very much a contributor to segregation. Considering student class rank in middle school can potentially be a more equitable way to assess performance, this will make high schools more diverse over time, but moving away from rankings would be the better long term goal. We need to immediately eliminate the use of attendance in admissions, which is discriminatory against poor students, students in temporary housing, and students with disabilities. We also need to immediately eliminate the District 2 preference in high school admissions--how we have let such a wildly discriminatory policy stand for so long is indicative of who holds the power in this city.

Even with these reforms, it is more important that we move away from any form of screenings. At a minimum, we need to totally overhaul the way we approach so-called Gifted and Talented education in elementary schools. The Bloomberg model of G&T immediately produced predictably racially discriminatory outcomes. There is no way to sort children at the age of 4 that does not privilege privilege, which perpetuates segregation from the earliest grades. There are a number of models--some which call for increasing G&T slots with admissions beginning in third grade, some which call for the outright elimination of academic segregation in elementary school and whole-school enrichment--that should be piloted and funded. For high school, the City could pursue an Ed-Opt model, which provides better academic integration. Lastly, the City's system of school choice and admissions is painfully complex to navigate, again privileging the privileged. Systems of school choice almost always perpetuate and increase segregation. In the immediate, the application process must be streamlined and unified, with ready access to guidance counselors at all grades at reasonable ratios (1 guidance counselor for 250 students, at most) to help students and their families navigate complex systems of bureaucracy.

The City Council has very little structural ability to influence what the DOE does or doesn't do. In a system of Mayoral control, with the state holding legislative power over most areas of education, our power rests in the



budget and the bully pulpit. We can and must use our voice to uplift the importance of desegregation. We can prioritize resources for other districts to replicate the work done in D15. We can fund a demonstration program for schools to experiment with whole-school enrichment. We can better financially incentivize academically-integrated schools by changing the weights in the Fair Student Funding formula. Most importantly, we can work to make sure that every school has access to the resources and funding it needs to meet the educational and social needs of its students.

We also need to end the school-to-prison pipeline. The notion that we need school safety agents (SSAs) is flawed and is one of the biggest contributors to this pipeline. Interactions with SSAs often lead to suspensions, and suspensions correlate with increased likelihood of incarceration. We can have community safety measures that also apply to schools, but the police are arbiters of carceration, they don't keep people safe, and they certainly don't in schools. Once students are safely back in school, we need to focus on creating positive and safe learning environments without the police by abolishing the presence of SSAs in schools (whether they are housed in NYPD or DOE doesn't matter). Acknowledging that SSAs are overwhelmingly Black and Latina women who are New York City residents, we should work to craft a just transition, particularly given that job loss of a parent is a major source of trauma for children, and we are seeking to mitigate trauma by abolishing SSAs. These should be given opportunities to transition to more restorative roles within schools.

We need to ensure that school staff are grounded in trauma-informed restorative practices and social-emotional learning techniques. In the 2018-2019 school year--admittedly, before a massive overhaul of the NYPD-DOE Memorandum of Understanding governing SSAs--the majority of school-based arrests were not conducted by SSAs. In too many schools, the response to misbehavior or mental health situations is to call 911. We need to equip schools with trauma-informed alternatives. Teachers need to receive trauma-informed training on how to deal with harassment and bullying. We must expand the City's investment in restorative justice practices in schools by ensuring that every school has at least one full-time restorative justice coordinator, rather than relying on professional development. We must ensure that all schools have appropriate numbers of social workers, guidance counselors, and school psychologists--there are more SSAs than there are mental health staffers combined. We should work to expand the community schools model. Overall, we should look to expand the number of supportive, positive relationships that students can build. Kids respond to trust, not to authority or punishment. Cops out, counselors in.

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?

The closure of schools and the flawed reopening plans have been deeply unequal and unacceptable. Low-income families of color often do not have easy access to the resources needed to supplement remote learning - An estimated 60,000+ students still have not received remote learning resources. The City must get families the technology and the high speed internet they need to access quality remote education. It must give teachers the professional development they need to better teach remotely. It must prioritize planning to



remotely support ELLs and students with IEPs. I've heard from parents that these students are being left behind the most, and we need to really focus on how to better serve these students however way is possible.

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

Yes. Absolutely. I would also want to work closely with immigrant led organizations about how to do so in a way that members of this community would feel safe participating. In addition to giving immigrant New Yorkers a voice - which they deserve to have - it will send a powerful message to the rest of the country and maybe even a model for other cities and counties to adopt.

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

The city's matching system has proven a success in terms of empowering small donors and allowing more candidates who don't come from money to run and win. That is huge. I would support a model that goes even further than small donor matching, and that is a democracy voucher program. This is a model adopted by Seattle wherein every resident (regardless of citizenship status), receives four \$25 vouchers that they can donate to a candidate of their choice. The results from Seattle's program were tremendous: the number of small donors tripled from the previous city council elections, and were largely from low-income neighborhoods. Comparing donor data from the races eligible for the Democracy Vouchers program, including City Council and City Attorney, to donor data for the Mayoral election (which was not included in the program, in order to have a point of comparison in the evaluation stage), Democracy Dollar donors better reflected Seattle's population, including women, young people, people of color, and low income residents.

The goal is to eliminate money as a barrier entirely to supporting candidates that voters believe in. Now more than ever, it is undeniable that too many New Yorkers don't have even \$5 to spare, so we need a system that allows them to exercise and build political power. I would support a democracy voucher program, funded by taxpayer revenue (especially doable if we tax the rich!) to really ensure that we can all share in the political power monopolized by the elites in this city.

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?

Reproductive care needs to be widely accessible, and the City and State need to offer it for everyone not already offered it. We especially need to support efforts to reduce maternal mortality, especially for women of color. The City does offer reproductive and sexual health care through Health+Hospitals and supports private providers, but we have an awareness problem -- we need to do more to get the word out about what services are available and where, and create more satellite locations and mobile health centers across the city to ensure that more people will have access. We also need to make sure that hospitals and community-based organizations that provide sexual, maternal, and reproductive healthcare services are funded sufficiently. Additionally, we have to stop the closures of community health centers and expand the model, and ensure that we offer reproductive care as a part of our school system, by expanding the



community schools model and school-based health clinics and making sure school-based clinicians are trained in providing family planning services.

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 39th District relies heavily on public transit, which as you state, is currently threatened by major budget cuts. We instead need to heavily invest in our transit system, restore the Fair Fares program (which provides free and low-cost Metrocards to low-income New Yorkers), and ultimately work towards City management of public transit, where we can make it free to everyone.

We also need to reverse the history of automobile-centric urban planning in the district and the city as a whole. This can start with creating more protected bike lanes, and other interventions that make biking and walking safer, such as daylighting (removing parking spaces from corners), and making sure our traffic lights have Leading Pedestrian Intervals (LPIs).

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?

There are a lot of reasons why union membership and power is declining in New York City. There is nothing stopping City Council from working to provide more information and resources for workers so that they understand their rights, and can engage in collective bargaining. As a Council member, I will also encourage the development of "organic leaders", within workers in my district, and provide training and resources on how to better organize in their places of employment, even if they don't have union representation. I will also work to make sure that we continue to fund pro-worker programs in the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection.

At the federal level, if the Protect the Right to Organize Act gets passed, it will give workers in the City more tools to expand and protect unionization. In Council, the strongest way to have an immediate impact on union workers is to help amplify their members' needs as they go to negotiate their contracts with the Mayor and private employers. Council can be supportive to the needs of rank and file workers when this process happens when their contracts are renegotiated.

Throughout the Campaign, I have and will continue to headline my deep union ties as the son of two unionized teachers, and the co-chair of the chapter of CWA NewsGuild at my place of employment. I don't just believe in the power of unions, I am a union leader myself, and I know what it means to be at the table, negotiating for the strongest possible terms for myself and my colleagues. Unions remain critical to the well being of every employee, regardless of industry or class. It is the only counterweight to the power of the purse that employers hold, which is why public education, training, and resources for all workers is so important.



Accordingly, I strongly support the efforts of Council Staff to unionize.

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 want to provide quality constituent services for everyone in District 39, but we need to be most thoughtful about how we serve populations that don't traditionally have access to power, such as our immigrant communities. The largest immigrant community in District 39 is concentrated in Kensington, where the South Asian community is very strong and has been present for many years. Not only does this community face challenges that other communities of color face, in the vein of housing, transportation, affordability, and community support, but many people live in fear of ICE and deportations. I intend to work particularly hard to have a regular presence in this community. This will require developing and maintaining long-standing relationships with important organizations and groups like PAYS and DRUM to try and collaborate on projects and ideas. I intend to hire someone who can organize specifically in that community, who has deep ties and language skills. This will anchor a lot of the needed constituent services needed to support this community. I will work to prioritize needs in this part of the community as often as possible, and build the constituent services program out from there to other parts of the district.

The problem is that the Mayor plays off in speeches that we are Sanctuary City, and then coordinates with ICE and then acts as if he has no control altering the NYPD's behavior. The first part is actually having a City that commits to the existing protections. A federal judge already ruled that ICE arrests at court are illegal. The Protect Our Courts Act in Albany needs to go to the Governor and get signed, and we need the City to apply pressure to make sure that happens.

Also the work that activists have stepped in to do, like the Sunset Park ICE watch, are examples of community work that the government could support, either by providing resources, or helping community groups do that work with grants and funds to continue their programs. I would need to double check the legality of it, but I'm confident it's possible. At a high level, the government has to be committed to the principals of a Sanctuary City, which it isn't, and we have to better equip the people on the ground doing the work to protect their community.

Language access in general needs to be expanded at agencies throughout the city. While Local Law 30 in 2017 did improve access, we still lag in implementation, including services like 311, where there aren't enough interpreters, and often people are given the wrong person over the line. 311 is flawed as it is, and I can't imagine what it might be like for the many New Yorkers who do not speak English. Language access through 311 is one area I would focus on. We need to hire more front line service employers in all city agencies that directly interact with communities to meet language access needs. We need to put funding towards this work in a real substantial way. I also intend to make significant steps towards having staff and volunteers who are multilingual and can do constituent services in a substantive way.

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?



I believe first and foremost that housing is a human right, and so it needs to be decommodified. While much of the responsibility for this falls to the state and federal governments, the City Council does have an important role, from legislation and budget to the bully pulpit.

There are few things the Council could do in the near term: pass the Community Opportunity to Purchase Act, increase the value of City FHEPS vouchers, provide more funding for housing discrimination enforcement, fund tenant organizing, legalize Accessory Dwelling Units, expand right-to-counsel, defund the NYPD and reinvest in housing programs. The Council also needs to address the fact that the way we allocate City subsidy right now is broken, and simply not meeting the needs of New Yorkers. Most developments receiving City subsidy are available to a range of incomes from about \$30,700 to over \$100,000 for a family of three. Even in District 39, which is a relatively well-off district on average, about 14% of families are living below the poverty level, which is just under \$22,000 for a family of three. We need to ensure that the affordable housing we are paying for with public money meets the needs on the ground in our communities. All of these proposals are already being discussed, and need leaders in the next Council to make them happen. My experience as both a budget analyst and an organizer, and my deep connections to movement builders in NYC, make me well-positioned to work with colleagues to move these initiatives forward.

But we also have to think bigger. Now that there will be a Democrat in the White House, New York City must lead an advocacy campaign to get more Federal dollars to build 100% affordable, publicly owned housing, and to re-invest in NYCHA.

This is also tied to major reforms needed to our planning and land use process. (See below.)

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?

The conditions in the city’s NYCHA developments are unacceptable. We’ve seen these impacts, particularly as health issues caused by underlying building conditions have increased NYCHA residents’ vulnerability to COVID-19. NYCHA needs a dedicated division with dedicated leadership responsible for capital improvements and repairs, and they should be able to use the 311 system so that repair needs, timing, and scope can be documented, and residents can have recourse when they are not addressed.

I strongly oppose privatization of public housing, sale of open areas, and sale of air rights. The evictions that took place at Ocean Bay Houses after the building’s conversion through RAD are a huge red flag. We need to be advocating for a large federal infusion of funding for NYCHA before we move ahead with any plan that could potentially put tenants at risk of displacement.

Most importantly, tenants need to be directly involved in decision making about what happens to their homes. We have recently seen an outcry from tenants that they had no involvement in the development of the NYCHA Blueprint and associated Preservation Trust proposal. While there are potential benefits to moving forward with a public entity to manage the necessary repairs, rather than turning over responsibility



to private developers, ANY plan for NYCHA's future must include significant, meaningful resident engagement before it moves forward.

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?

I support No New Jails, and I believe we should close Rikers. The institution itself is a stain on our City, isolated from communities, so that we do not have to deal with the uncomfortable reality of roughly 10,000 souls locked up, exposed to violence and psychological torture, enduring substandard conditions, and often broken beyond repair, while proclaiming ourselves the most progressive city in the nation. Kalief Browder's death, and the recent COVID outbreaks, have been wake-up calls for this city and a clear representation of the outcomes of a system that has nothing to do with justice and everything to do with racial oppression and social control.

It is also worth noting that the administration's default strategy for closing Rikers was to build new jails elsewhere, rather than considering how the population (most of whom have not been convicted of any crime), can be released on their own recognizance. The vast majority of the population at City jails are being held pre-trial, meaning they haven't been convicted of anything and are innocent until proven guilty. The fact there is no question about detaining people who haven't even had a trial, unless they have the money for bail (which was addressed in state reform legislation in 2019, before being rolled back in the 2020 budget), is yet another example of a system that is both rigged and rotten to the core. We need to break out of the narrow and violent ways we imagine our criminal justice system. This does not mean we shouldn't care about the poor conditions caused by the Department of Corrections. But, the fact that they are delaying closing Rikers but continuing with the construction of the new jails shows that we can't trust this system, and shows that we are failing to think beyond the system to humane and viable alternatives. Jails do not keep people safe.

Changes to the cash bail system should start to make an impact on our ability to bring down the occupancy rate of our jails. But lower levels of policing increase public safety, and will decrease the amount of people in prison. The vast majority of police stops don't lead to arrest, and the ones that do, very few lead to felonies, and more than half lead to the charges being dropped. Our jails are filled with people who shouldn't be there, and who all will be much worse off for it, as will be their families. I think we are in a stronger position to migrate to a post-incarceration focused community safety system in the city than many people think we are. I believe the relatively low acts of violence in our district will continue if we move away from incarceration and supporting communities more with services and resources.

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?

As I mentioned above, I am calling for a \$3 billion decrease to NYPD's budget in order to support our communities. The first shift would be school safety officers, followed by removing NYPD from Homeless Outreach and Subway Diversion Programs. This funding can go to adding more social workers and guidance counselors in schools, truly investing in restorative justice (ensuring that all schools have at least one full-time restorative justice coordinator, expanding the number of community schools, increasing DYCD's budget (including expanding SYEP, COMPASS, and SONYC slots; expanding the scope of Beacon and



Cornerstone services; and expanding the Learning Bridges model to provide permanent, universal, free childcare), and providing subsidies to get people into permanent homes. I think the community should also have an impact on what programs we choose for investment, and support participatory methods of working with my constituents on these priorities. I believe that the sheer scope of the police budget gives us space to create programs that will reduce what we associate with crime.

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

One of the most critical tasks of the next Council will be to re-envision the way the City does planning. Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) is not being used as intended, to bring affordable housing to well-off neighborhoods. Instead, it's being used as a trojan horse to bring gentrifying rezonings to Black and Brown communities. We need to start over and work with the State to ensure that affordable housing is part of ALL new development, not just development that comes with more density.

We need a new approach to planning and land use that meaningfully involves communities. One of my main priorities as a Council Member would be to work with the Speaker to create a Charter Revision Commission focused on land use, so that ULURP and the land use process can be radically changed to encourage the decommodification of housing. This would include requiring a Citywide Comprehensive Planning Framework that balances citywide needs with neighborhood priorities. It will outline growth targets and anti-displacement strategies, analyze neighborhood needs, and include necessary siting of public facilities, all while leaving the implementation strategy to a community process. This can mean community and worker-led planning that actually gets implemented, using inclusive, democratic processes to establish neighborhood priorities. This would also include the creation of an Office of Community Planning that would provide technical assistance to communities.

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

Ending homelessness will require the decommodification of housing. A city where housing is a human right is one where homelessness will end. The best way to do that is building more housing, and having the housing be publicly-owned or managed so that we can provide it to those most in need, including those currently living in the shelter system. We also need to increase rental subsidies for those currently experiencing homelessness to Fair Market Rent (FMR) to widen the rental options currently available (and provide more funding for enforcement of source-of-income discrimination violations).