

2023 Boston City Council Candidate Questionnaire

JP Progressives * Progressive West Roxbury/Roslindale * Allston/Brighton Progressives

Name: Benjamin J. Weber

Office Sought: Boston City Councilor, District 6

Website: n/a

Facebook: n/a

Twitter: n/a

Instagram: n/a

The public part of the questionnaire contains a mix of yes/no and open-ended questions. Please keep all answers to open-ended questions to no more than 150 words. A non-response to a yes/no question will be treated as a no.

(A) Your Candidacy

1. What would be your top three priorities if elected to serve?

I am still in the process of determining what my top priorities are, but the issues that led me to run for city council include: ensuring our Boston Public School system best serves our families and communities, promoting affordable housing in the community through rent control, vouchers and promoting new construction, promoting the growth of local businesses, promoting the development of quality athletic facilities for all of the children in the district.

2. What qualifies you to hold this office?

I have worked as an attorney vindicating the rights of large groups of workers across the country to be paid fair wages and to work free from discrimination for most of the last 18 years. I also spent three years representing government agencies, including the Department of Unemployment Assistance, the Department of Environmental Protection, and the Department of Children and Families at the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office. I have lived in Jamaica Plain for 15 years and have raised two children who are still in BPS. Through my background as an attorney and as a BPS parent, I have seen firsthand how our government works and what needs to be done to promote

a more equitable community. I have also spent the last five years as a coach for JP Youth Soccer, and recently joined the JPYS board, helping young people across our district to learn to play soccer at a high level, and more importantly, build community. More recently, I have joined the JP Neighborhood Council to fill a vacant seat and last month ran and was elected to a full term, and plan to continue to serve on the housing committee.

3. What do you see as the role of the City Council in our strong-mayor system?

While Boston has a strong-mayor system, our district councilors play an important role in providing constituent services and promoting progressive policies in District 6 and throughout the City.

4. What is the one policy you've seen pioneered in another city that you'd most like to see Boston adopt?

I would like to see the City adopt some of innovative labor policies recently enacted in New York City, including a pay transparency law that will reduce wage gaps for women and people of color.

5. Which of the following groups have you chosen to reject / would reject campaign contributions from?

- a. For-profit developers
- b. Fossil fuel executives or lobbyists
- c. Charter school advocates and lobbyists
- d. Police unions

I am not planning to actively solicit contributions from any of these groups, but as a first-time candidate I will not have the resources or ability to apply donation screens.

(B) Racial Equity & Community Engagement

1. Name three accomplishments you've been able to achieve to advance racial justice or equity.

When I spent two years representing migrant farmworkers in the South, I was able to win cases for several groups of Latino migrant workers who lived near the Texas-Mexico border, two I found most meaningful were Sarmiento v. Producer's Gin of Waterproof, La. and Abrego v. Seyppel's Gin. Growers routinely took advantage of non-English speaking, immigrant workers by

failing to pay them what they were promised when they were recruited in Mexico and housing them in illegally-substandard conditions. Often the money that we recovered for these individuals was life changing and allowed them to pay off debt or buy homes in the Rio Grande Valley. By bringing those cases and winning judgments or settling my clients' cases, I was able to not only help my clients, but likely improved the conditions of migrant farmworkers who worked in the area in the future.

I spent nearly seven years working on Smith v. City of Boston where we successfully challenged the Boston Police Department's use of written exams for promotions. The Massachusetts federal court found that the use of the written exams caused disparate impact racial discrimination and that the test failed to identify the best candidates for positions like police lieutenant. We were not only able to obtain sizable awards for our ten Black and Latino clients, the City agreed to stop using the discriminatory tests for promotions going forward.

I recently represented the only Black firefighter in the history of the Town of Rockland who was discriminated against on the basis of his race. The fire department chose to fire him due to the wrongful actions of other firefighters in the department. We filed our lawsuit after the Civil Service Commission found that the discipline issued by the department was the result of bias. We settled my client's claims.

2. What steps would you take, if elected, to engage all the diverse communities of Boston in policymaking, and what past actions of yours should give voters confidence that you will follow through?

My 18-year career representing low-wage workers, including many Black and Latino workers, should give District 6 voters confidence that I will engage with them and follow through. In addition, I learned Spanish to represent farmworkers and can communicate directly with Spanish speakers, and will make speaking Spanish a priority in hiring any staff.

3. The future of democracy depends on robust youth engagement. Describe how you engage youth formally in your work as city councilor, or would plan to do so if elected.

I would team with the Hyde Square Task Force to find opportunities for young people to work in government and otherwise help them find youth programs to participate in throughout the country. I have learned so much from the

young people I coach at JP Youth Soccer, and I'd hope to promote the hiring of young people as interns in city government.

(C) Budget & Revenue

- 1. Do you support dedicating at least 1% of the operating budget to participatory budgeting?**

YES. But only if this does not require any cuts to funding for schools.

- 2. In 2022, almost 75% of Boston's revenue came from property taxes, but half Boston's land is tax exempt. To address this problem, then Mayor Menino created the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program, requesting large nonprofit hospitals, educational, and cultural institutions with over \$15 Million in property to pay 25% of their assessed potential property tax to reimburse the city for vital services, snow removal, fire and police protection, and sanitation. Half of that assessment can be fulfilled through provision of a community benefit. Each year fewer institutions pay their full PILOT request, and in the last 12 years, institutions have failed to pay the city over \$175 Million in PILOT requests. How will you work to create a stronger PILOT system that expands community engagement, defines community benefits and creates a fairer system to meet the needs of residents of the city of Boston?**

I agree that these institutions should be paying their fair share to support City services and would work with the mayor's office to pressure these institutions to pay at the 25% rate. Additionally, I think it is very important for local residents in defining community benefits.

- 3. Given state law, Boston is limited in its taxing power. What opportunities do you see for the city to raise revenue?**

While I'm most familiar with existing options like PILOT and the transfer fee, I look forward to exploring more options to expand revenue. I also think Boston should explore the creation of a regional taxing authority could raise revenue for public transportation in Boston.

(D) Education

- 1. What are your top priorities for reducing persistent racial and economic achievement gaps in the Boston Public Schools?**

From my experience at Mission Hill School, the City needs to track the performance of all the students in the system and deliver services to the kids who need it (instead of pushing back on requests for IEPs). The City and school district need to be held accountable to create at least one high school, if not more, that is academically rigorous so we can continue to compete with the high academic standards in neighboring districts.

2. Do you oppose the expansion of charter schools in Boston?

YES.

3. Last year, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education actively considered a takeover of the Boston Public Schools. Do you oppose any such future efforts at state takeover of BPS?

YES.

4. Do you support a change in BPS governance to allow Boston voters the right to elect school committee members, like every other city in Massachusetts? If so, what would your ideal structure be? If not, why not?

NO. I am not yet in favor of an elected school committee because I want Mayor Wu to have a chance to reform it. In addition, I worry about how large private funding of campaigns, for example if a candidate was supported by substantial funding from charter school groups outside the state, would impact who was elected. But if BPS continues on its current path, I think a mixed committee with appointed and elected officials might be the solution.

5. The Boston Public Schools district is working on a memorandum of understanding with the Boston Police Department that avoids placing police back in schools but clarifies when educators should call police to respond to incidents. What are your thoughts about such a proposal? Moreover, what would be your priorities in ensuring that BPS is a safe environment for all students to learn?

I am in favor of keeping police officers out of schools.

6. What steps would you take to make universal pre-K a reality in Boston?

I am in favor of universal pre-K and would support any budgeting option that made this a reality.

(E) Public Safety

- 1. Do you support closing the loopholes in Boston's Trust Act which allow BPD to inquire about immigration status or pass information along to ICE?**

YES. I don't think immigration status is relevant to an individual's rights and I think these kinds of policies have a chilling effect on immigrants' willingness to seek help from the police when it is necessary.

- 2. Do you support shuttering the Boston Police gang database?**

NEITHER YES NOR NO. I need to learn more about this issue, but without knowing more, I am in favor of a review by a third party of the database to determine whether it serves a legitimate purpose.

- 3. Although the Boston City Council is not directly involved in negotiations over the Boston Police Patrolman's Association (BPPA) contract, the City Council does have influence by way of a final vote. What reforms, if any, would you like to see in a final contract? What, if anything, would make you vote against it?**

I am in favor of requiring civilians to work as flaggers, strengthening the ability to hold police officers accountable for misconduct, and making it easier to put officers who are on extended leave on disability retirement.

- 4. Would you support allowing the use of civilians to direct traffic around construction projects and street work as opposed to limiting such work to the Boston Police Department?**

YES. But I would want to ensure the money is allocated to investments that improve root causes of poverty and community violence.

- 5. Would you advocate for the reallocation of money from the Boston Police Department budget to reinvestment in communities?**

YES.

- 6. Do you believe that affiliation or sympathies with white supremacist organizations among officers is a problem with BPD? If so, what measures would you take to combat that issue?**

NEITHER YES NOR NO. I agree that police officers who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 or who support white supremacist organizations like the Proud Boys or neo-Nazis should be terminated.

7. Do you support the legalization of overdose prevention centers?

YES.

8. How would you evaluate the City's response to the humanitarian situation at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard ("Mass & Cass")?

I think the City needs to do more for the people living around Mass and Cass, but that this is not only a problem the City should solve, since these people are coming from all over the region. I think the City must work with the State and other municipalities to find these people housing.

9. What would be your priorities in reducing gun violence in the city?

As the cousin of a student who survived the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas School in Parkland, Florida, and as a sensible human being, I would support any gun control regulation.

(F) Environment & Transportation

1. What steps would you take to reduce dependence on cars and better facilitate the ability of Bostonians to get around by walking, biking, or public transit?

Fix the MBTA and compel the City to honor its agreement to build more public transportation in JP and West Roxbury to offset the increased auto pollution caused by the Big Dig. In addition, I would support Vision Zero and improve the safety and access for pedestrians and cyclists in the City.

2. What are your top three policy priorities for making Boston a climate-resilient city, and how would you ensure that equity is at the center of any such efforts?

Promote net-zero new construction, hold existing building to the high retrofit standards of BERDO 2.0 standards, subsidize the environmental cleanup of gas stations as well as building of charging stations. I will also push to ensure that the City is investing in green infrastructure and urban forestry, with a

focus on environmental justice communities that suffer from heat-island effects and high rates of asthma.

3. Do you oppose the creation of new fossil fuel infrastructure in Boston?

YES.

4. Do you support expanding the fare-free bus pilots and making fare-free buses permanent in Boston? What steps would you take to achieve this goal?

YES. We should devote some of the City's remaining available ARPA funds to extending the pilot program.

5. Do you support the expansion of the City's curbside composting pickup program?

YES.

(G) Housing

1. How would you expand affordable housing in Boston and ensure development without displacement?

Increase the requirements for providing affordable housing in new construction, strengthen rent control, and provide more housing subsidies, including an expanded City voucher program.

2. What opportunities do you see for leveraging city-owned land for expanding affordable housing?

I approve of the City's work to determine and publicize every available site, and support community engagement across different neighborhoods to make sure that community needs are met with what limited land is available.

3. Do you support the City of Boston's Home Rule Petition to establish a small transfer fee on real estate transactions over \$2 million? If so, how do you plan to advocate for it at the State House?

YES. I am glad that Rep. Montañó is strongly supporting the petition, but I will reach out to all of my statehouse representatives to urge them to support this.

- 4. Do you support rent stabilization? Do you believe that the City of Boston's current Home Rule Petition goes far enough, doesn't go far enough, or goes too far -- and why?**

YES. I believe the current petition is a good starting point and that more protections can and should be authorized in the near future. However, I understand how difficult working to make change via the state house can be and we cannot rely on them to make these needed changes. I would explore an expansions to our condo conversion and rental registry ordinances.

- 5. Would you support a Tenant Opportunity to Purchase ordinance, enabling tenants to purchase a building if the owner seeks to put it on the market?**

YES.

- 6. Boston's inclusionary development policy (IDP) requires that 13 percent of the units in a building need to be affordable, and the City is currently considering increasing it to 20%. Do you support such an increase?**

YES. If the increase would not function to stop construction of housing altogether. We are in a crisis and need to find ways to build affordable housing and make existing housing more affordable without slowing the addition of more units.

- 7. Do you support requiring that a majority of new affordable units be built on-site, in order to ensure communities are diverse and integrated?**

YES.

- 8. Across the city, there are projects for large-scale supportive housing that are being fought by local communities, such as the Shattuck project in Jamaica Plain, the Comfort Inn development project in Dorchester, Charlestown's Constitution Inn project, and more. Do you support pushing forward with these specific projects and others like them?**

YES. I support projects like the Shattuck, but I want the State and City to seek public comment and provide more information to the community about why they are being placed in these neighborhoods and how they are going to mitigate the impact of these facilities on the surrounding communities.

(H) Economic Opportunity

1. What steps would you propose to reduce Boston's income and wealth inequality, especially the racial wealth gap?

Promote a pay transparency law and higher City minimum wage. I would also continue to support the City's investments in homeownership with its ARPA funds, I would make it a priority to find ways to extend homeownership programs after the federal funds run out, and I would have the City do more to ensure that a fair number of City contracts are awarded to minority-owned business.

2. Do you support requiring city contractors to give their employees at least two weeks' notice before changing their schedules and to compensate workers for late schedule changes?

NEITHER YES NOR NO. I need to learn more about this issue.

3. What steps can the Council take to achieve greater diversity in City contracting?

The City should invest in training programs for minorities working in the trades, but my understanding is that the City can now more easily enter into contracts under \$250,000 and the City should take advantage of that change in the procurement law to effect diversity in contracting.

4. The cannabis industry is expected to grow in Boston in the coming years. What steps should the City take to make sure that it grows in an equitable way, in which the communities most impacted by the drug war are able to benefit?

I support strong continued focus on equity in Boston's cannabis rollout decisions. It is also important to ensure that the industry has high-quality jobs available to all members of the community.

(I) Democracy

1. How can Boston increase turnout in municipal elections?

I support a stronger push for mail-in ballots, and promotion of early voting at a museum or Fenway Park.

2. **Do you support allowing non-citizens with legal status the right to vote in municipal elections?**

YES.

3. **Do you support allowing 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote in municipal elections?**

NO.

4. **Would you support Charter Change to allow for Ranked Choice Voting in Boston?**

YES.

5. **Do you support making hybrid access to public meetings permanent?**

YES.

(J) Additional Comments

(Use this space to make any final comments you deem important for progressive voters assessing your candidacy.)