

# 2023 Boston City Council Candidate Questionnaire

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

**Name:** Julia Mejia

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## PUBLIC SECTION

*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?

Civic engagement & government, accessibility, accountability, and transparency

Small business - creating avenues specifically around capital access and workforce development.

Public Education/Youth engagement - Specifically addressing the Opportunity Gap/School to Prison Pipeline, social-emotional wellness, and violence prevention

#### 2. What qualifies you to hold this office?

I ran for City Councilor in 2019 because I believe that our City's government should include people from all of the different walks of life that it represents. Like many residents in the City of Boston, I am an immigrant. I was born in the Dominican Republic and arrived in the neighborhood of Dorchester when I was five years old. I was raised by a single mother who was undocumented for most of my childhood. At a young age, I began advocating on behalf of my

mother and others who felt ignored and underserved by the very institutions that were supposed to serve them.

I am a proud graduate of the Boston Public schools and was the first in my family to graduate high school and college. I am also the first to purchase a home and live in Dorchester with my family. My experiences growing up in Boston led me to become an entrepreneur and a voice for social justice. I created and led a civic engagement group focused on voter registration, founded a nonprofit education network, and worked on national social justice campaigns as a producer for MTV.

As an incumbent city councilor and current Chair of the committees on Education; Labor, Workforce and Economic Development; and Government Accountability and Transparency, I have passed 13 pieces of legislation in the three years I have been in office. I have used my office as a conduit for our community in the process, having written much of my legislation alongside activists and members of the public. Some of the key pieces of legislation I have passed include ordinances on Language Access and Retail Residential Kitchens, the establishment of the Black Men and Boys Commission and the Taskforce on Reparations, and home rule petitions on lowering the voting age for municipal elections to 16 and establishing an elected School Committee. We have held over 1,500 community engagement events in all parts of the city and have held budget pop ups around the city to teach every day residents on the process and to incorporate their needs into the budget.

I am running because there is so much more to do to ensure a Boston where all really means ALL.

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

The City Council plays a strong role in our system, particularly with the enhanced role of the Council in the budget process. In this year's budget I am pushing hard for amendments to fund the participatory budget line item so the people can have a say in how their money is spent. As elected leaders from across the city, the Council is the voice of residents to ensure the Mayor listens to the people.

**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 expand voting access in municipal elections. I filed a home rule petition to enable Boston to determine for itself what voices we want to be incorporated in municipal policy making. We passed this home rule petition last year to lower the voting age to 16 for municipal elections and it currently is at the State Legislature. Our young people will be inheriting the city that we are creating now. They deserve to have a voice in shaping what that will look like. It is one of my top priorities to carry this measure through enactment and implementation.

**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

**(B) Racial Equity & Community Engagement**

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

I have focused most of the work we have accomplished on advancing racial equity and justice. A few of our biggest accomplishments include passing the Language Access Ordinance in my first term to make city services more accessible, the Taskforce on Reparations to address our complicated history with slavery and the effects still felt by our black community, and the Black Men and Boys Commission to search for ways to support black men and boys in our society and workforce.

**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?**

This is one of my biggest strengths. Most of the legislation we have passed has been community led. Our Retail Residential Kitchen ordinance for example was written alongside an activist who wished to expand economic opportunities. I will continue to engage residents in the legislation making process since it is the best way to ensure that historically marginalized communities feel their voices are heard. My office also focuses on community engagement - having held over 1,500 community events since I have been in office and have held budget pop ups at hair salons, barber shops and other

institutions that are not normally engaged in the budget process so every day residents can understand and give input into how their tax dollars are spent.

**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 have always recognized that the youth are not our leaders of the future - they are our leaders of today. This has been a guiding principle of my career since I worked at MTV. On the campaign side, I have always hired younger staffers and allowed them to grow into their power and have focused on outreach that reaches youth - whether through social media or specific youth focused events. I have done the same in my council office and have fought for more youth voices in government. I pushed for the student representative of the Boston School Committee to be paid as well as including a youth representative on every task force or commission that I have established. Our office also held mental health check-ins with youth throughout Covid as well as established a Mental Health Ambassadors program for Boston Public School students.

**(C) Budget & Revenue**

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

YES. I support more than 1% and have pushed for more funding through the budget process.

**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 have been a leading voice on the Council for pushing the administration for a commission or advisory board made up of regular people to hold us accountable. Currently there is no accountability in the process, and we need to strengthen the Pilot Advisory Board to ensure we create a stronger PILOT program.

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

We must be intentional in the methods of revenue raising so that we are not burdening communities but there are opportunities to raise more revenue in an equitable way. I have supported measures to bring accountability to the PILOT Program and the transfer fee. I also believe if you are a large corporation and do business in our city you need to pay your fair share. I also believe we have been too lenient with developers, we need stronger enforcement and penalties for developers who are not adding to our community. For example, I held a hearing to bring accountability and develop long term economic opportunity for small businesses around long term commercial vacancies which led to the Space Grant, which provides financial support for small businesses through the Mayor's office.

**(D) Education**

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

As chair of Education and Workforce Development, I straddle both. As Chair of the Committee on Education, I introduced a resolution last year in support of a Green New Deal for BPS, in order to look at our school infrastructure as the city plans its capital investments so our kids can go to healthy schools. We know the effects of the climate crisis are felt most in our black and brown communities, and we have seen record numbers of black and brown youth affected by asthma and other health effects along the 93 corridor and in Chinatown. As the Chair of Workforce Development, I joined the Madison Park Program Advisory Board to leverage my networks and support the creation of a solid pipeline for career explorations for students. My goal is to increase paid internships for students as a pathway to build their skills and portfolios. This includes ensuring that we are building with black and brown students in mind. We have heard from the community that there is a serious need to invest more of our city's dollars into services for students with special needs and students who are English Language Learners. We have also heard directly from the community regarding the need to invest more funding for

school infrastructure. I believe we need to expand access to vocational-technical education at every school. I will also continue the work I have spent years championing expanding parent engagement at every school in Boston. Our office secured \$500,000 to support the Parent Mentors Program. We hope to make sure that parent meetings are more accessible to low-wage workers and that translation and child care are provided as well as ensure that parent voice is integrated into school and district-level decisions.

**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. I was a leading voice as the Chair of the Committee on Education. I held a hearing on the effort, passed a resolution opposing, organized through social media with community partners, and testified in front of DESE.

**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?**

YES. Our office was a leader in the efforts to pass the ballot question and subsequent home rule petition to allow for an elected school committee. I support a fully elected committee with a youth representative so we can give power back to the voters in figuring out how to improve our school system, which has disparately left so many black and brown children behind.

**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?**

Safety is beyond physical, it needs to include psychological safety. I have worked closely with the district mental health and wellness program at the Burke school. I agree with this proposal. I have long advocated that we should not be placing police in schools, as it teaches our kids (predominantly black and brown) that the world only sees them as criminals. We also know the over

disciplining of children at that age has a drastic impact on their future lives. We should be building safe and healthy schools that maximize the potential of our students.

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

We need to be looking at education as a continuum and work collectively with the various levels of government that oversee the pre-k - college education in Boston. For pre-K, this is primarily the realm of state legislators to fund and oversee early childhood education. I will continue to advocate for funding more pre-K seats for our Boston children and working with legislators to remove barriers that exist for our providers. In addition, I secured over \$1 million to expand early childhood education in Boston through Care that Works.

**(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.

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

YES.

**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 have called for a reduction in the police budget so we can fund proven violence prevention and other community growing programs. In 2021, we filed an ordinance to divert non-violent emergency calls to other agencies instead of the police. I would like to see a continuation of this process and for the city to get a handle on overtime costs the city faces. Our office in particular has looked really hard at the overtime costs. Too often we look at police officers to be our law enforcement, case managers and social workers. It's too much for them to handle so I would like to see budget alignments that allow for more help for the benefit of our residents and the police officers.

**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. I view it as an opportunity for returning citizens and for our underemployed to secure and maintain meaningful employment.

**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?**

YES. This is a difficult conversation to have but an important one. Our police need to be open to supporting the full community, and these sympathies are proof that some officers are not. We need to invest in cultural competency training and teach how microaggressions affect residents of Boston. We also need to ensure accountability to the people so we all can have confidence in the police.

**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")?**

Needs improvement. The situation at Mass and Cass is a very complex issue that requires deep investments in many areas - preventative treatment, housing, mental health services etc. We need to move with urgency. One thing to note is we cannot legislate away violence and human behavior, we need to get at the root causes of these issues. So while we are investing in fixing the current situation, we need heavy investments in methods to ensure others are not faced with the same situation as those suffering at Mass and Cass.

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



We need to look at the great work many of our nonprofit and community leaders have done in this space. Too often we push off the work of government to these leaders, and it's time for the government to do its job. In particular I would look for investment in proven anti-violence measures that are already being used in the streets. I also have fought hard for more funding for youth jobs and programming to help alleviate the gun violence we see in our streets. Finally we need real gun reform so we can get guns off the street.

## **(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?**

I believe we have to continue to explore where, when and how public transit is provided across the city. In my first term, we held a hearing on bringing back the late-night T service, which would greatly eliminate a lot of the third shift working class's reliance on cars. I will continue this work to fight to have expanded service at night. I also support the pilot programs the city started to allow for free bus fares to help incentive bus use. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the T is not accessible for many people in certain communities due to lack of service or just the transportation time residents face. I will continue to advocate for expanding service to neighborhoods such as Mattapan, whose residents are forced to rely on less frequent service.

### **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?**

All of my work has equity at the center. #Allmeansall permeates everything we do. As Chair of the Committee on Education, I held a hearing on the Green New Deal for BPS, and it's a top priority of mine to fully implement the recommendations we received as we explore BPS's capital management plan. I have fought continuously in the budget process to ensure that our climate resilience contracting goes towards Black and Brown firms because climate resilience needs to include racial resilience as well. We have shown vocal support for communities fighting back against projects that don't respect climate resilience nor the communities these projects are being built in (i.e. East Boston Substation) as well as organized black and brown small business owners who are feeling the effects of climate change currently to include them in the climate discussion. I also plan to fully implement BERDO 2.0.

### **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. I will work with Mayor Wu and the administration on securing more funding and will be an outspoken advocate on the benefits of fare-free busing in Boston at the statehouse..

**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?**

Currently, Impact Advisory groups are composed of people well connected to the development process. Community groups are engaged after decisions are made and information is presented but not negotiated. If we are to address the growing displacement and gentrification happening across the city, we do that by ensuring that those most directly impacted by planning and development are involved in decision-making from the beginning. We are working with Councilor Lara on a Tenants Bill of Rights that centers the voices of those who are directly impacted by the planning & development policies. As the Mayor invests more in planning, we hope to see returns for those most impacted. We are also working with the Boston Jobs Coalition and their efforts to ensure that our Boston-based workforce can afford to live in the city they keep running. In addition, we have partnered with groups like City Life, Dot Not for Sale, Right to the City and others to bring them into the conversation around affordable housing. Finally, we need to increase the IDP percentage. I turned some heads when I called for 50% IDP in my first campaign, but I stick to that number. We are light years away from what the recommended amount (33%) should be so we need to be bold in our work.

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

There are vacant, city-owned lots across the city. These lots are concentrated in Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury. These open lots are the results of redlining, white flight, and arson during the 70's that many blocks are struggling to recover from to this day. We can make intentional policy

decisions that will help slow gentrification and expand access to housing for people currently at risk of displacement. There is an opportunity to engage residents in these communities, where housing is becoming increasingly out of reach for our low-wage workers, to envision and build housing resources based on the needs of current residents, not just developers and speculative buyers. I also am a huge supporter of land trusts and love the work they have done. The land belongs to the people. We need to create infrastructure to educate the people on their power when it comes to their neighborhoods.

**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 supported then-Councilor Edwards proposal for this transfer fee. I will use my public position and reach out to allies in the State House to keep pressuring them to vote for the petition.

**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. The Home Rule Petition doesn't go far enough. We are not meeting the moment with the housing crisis. I also want to be super cognisant of small mom and pop homeowners that need support as we talk about rent stabilization. We need a deeper dive into the targets of rent stabilization.

**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.

**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. It is a tough decision as we want to incorporate community input in the decision making process. I always want to ensure the community has input but one thing we know, supportive housing works and we have seen several times where the community opposed projects like these, to come around and support these same projects such as the enVision Hotel.

## **(H) Economic Opportunity**

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

I am proud of the work that our office has done to advance the important work of closing the racial wealth gap. We passed our retail residential kitchen ordinance, which will help individuals generate income and eliminate the massive barrier of access to capital to open commercial kitchens. We are working with Madison Park High School to develop a career exploration pipeline for students to secure paid internships throughout the city in their area of interest. We have launched a literacy task force to explore ways to expand literacy in adults and students to ensure that those struggling with literacy can still achieve economic prosperity. Our work passing both the Black Men and Boys Commission, and the Taskforce on Reparations, is also aimed at closing the economic gaps that communities of color face.

- 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?**

YES.

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

As the sponsor of the Fair Chance Ordinance, I believe strongly in ensuring our city both contracts with, and hires, a more diverse workforce. I believe enforcement requires both creating a more transparent reporting system and

enforceable penalties for failure to adhere to the hiring goals we have set. The Council needs to be an active participant and monitor of our city's hiring practices to ensure an equitable hiring process.

**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?**

We are finalizing an ordinance, working with newly opened dispensaries and legacy market candidates to help us look at how we can diversify the industry. As member of the board of trustees on the Neighborhoods Jobs Trust, I have been working to explore how the city can invest in the cannabis industry by diversifying and strengthening its workforce. The wealth gap in Boston means that white applicants have far greater access to both personal wealth and greater access to capital. The city needs to take an active role in expanding the availability of capital to potential owners from communities that for generations have been impacted by the "war on drugs." We must ensure there is true accountability and transparency in regards to access to capital so that Black and Brown owners are the true owners of their establishments and predatory loan agreements from large multi-state organizations are prevented.

**(I) Democracy**

**1. How can Boston increase turnout in municipal elections?**

Turnout increases as more people can see themselves in their elected officials. We have come a long way to ensure our elected leaders are representative of our city. The next step is to engage our residents, and not just those who can show up at City Council hearings. In every campaign I make it a priority to hit up barber shops, hair salons, bodegas, small businesses and even bus stops to engage voters. Finally, we need to focus on improving access to the democratic process. I have sponsored legislation to lower the age of voting in municipal elections to 16 so we can get younger voters engaged in the process. In this year's budget I advocated to provide a food stipend for poll workers, and for funding to support building the capacity of our civic associations.

**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?**

YES.

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.)*