

VID Candidate Survey: City Council

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Erik Bottcher

In which Council District are you running? *

City Council District 3 ▼

City Council District 1

Do you support SoHo/NoHo rezoning? Is there a version of it you would support? *

Do you support the borough-based jail in Chinatown? *

Do you support replacing the Elizabeth Street Gardens with the proposed senior citizen development? *

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Do you support the Two Bridges developments? What changes would you make to them? *

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City Council District 2

Do you support the phased closing of East River Park for the current coastal resiliency project? If not, how would you ensure LES and EV residents are safe from future storms and flooding? *

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Do you support the move and downsizing of Beth Israel by Mount Sinai? Have you considered the effect on your constituents and do you have a different proposal? *

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City Council District 3

Would you support upzoning parts of the Village to create affordable housing? What is your plan to protect existing affordable housing and create more, in the Village specifically? *

No. However, I would work with Community Board 2 to look at individual building lots at which there could be the potential for more affordable housing.

I know how to deliver constituent services and my City Council district office will work to protect tenants from landlord harassment and to prevent unlawful evictions. I will continue Speaker Johnson's monthly housing clinic that provides free housing attorney consultations, and continue to refer people to VID's housing clinic.

I will work with my state colleagues to identify units throughout the district that may have been illegally deregulated and fight to have them returned to rent stabilization or rent control.

As answered prior in the questionnaire, the glut of hotels and commercial office space presents a unique opportunity to create affordable housing, as do financially distressed buildings.

Many residents of District 3, particularly our elderly and people with disabilities, have complained that lax bike rule enforcement, increased outdoor dining, and other factors have made the Village less walkable and more dangerous for elderly and disabled pedestrians. What would you do to improve the situation? *

The city needs to do a far better job enforcing rules and regulations in the public sphere. For example, according to the guidelines that the Department of Transportation issued for its Open Restaurants program, restaurants must leave an 8 foot clear path for pedestrians in front of their businesses. This rule is not being enforced and as a result many older adults and people with disabilities are having trouble navigating our sidewalks.

I will hold city agencies accountable and, under a new Mayor, demand real interagency coordination and a 311 system that works far better.

As a Citibike rider, I am frustrated by people who ride dangerously. We need to create a culture of bicycle safety in New York City that includes enforcement and education. I will promote bicycle education in our schools, so young people learn the rules of the road at an early age.

There have been several clashes between NYPD and protesters in past months. How would you work with the NYPD to ensure that peaceful protesters are not subject to kettling and other police practices that are harmful to the protesters? *

The right to free expression is a cornerstone of our democracy. The unnecessary and violent actions by the NYPD against protesters in our district and across our city are completely unacceptable.

I will fight for a Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB) that can independently investigate incidents in real time. When troubling incidents or violent clashes occur, we are frequently promised investigations that seem to never reach a conclusion, if they happen at all. It is important for the public to know the facts about what happened and when, and for that we need a truly independent CCRB. Oversight of the NYPD is a critical component in keeping our communities safe and restoring trust.

To hold the police accountable, strong lines of communication are needed, and I have a good working relationship with each of our local precincts. I will continue to work with them to address public safety issues in Council District 3 while making it clear that our community has no tolerance for violence against peaceful protesters.

VID Candidate Survey: City Council

How would you use this position to improve policing in New York? Do you support cutting NYPD funding in order to reallocate funds towards needed services and social programs? Where would you reallocate the funds, if so? What concrete policies would you advocate for to improve policing in NY? *

Every public policy decision is an opportunity to dismantle institutional racism, and this includes reforms to policing.

I support reallocating resources from policing to programs that address the root causes of crime. The data have shown time and time again that poverty, educational inequities, youth truancy, chemical dependency, untreated mental illness, adverse health outcomes are the major drivers of crime. We cannot arrest our way out of these problems.

This does not mean we should spend less money on enhancing public safety. We should fight crime using all tools in the toolbox - not just policing.

The police are currently asked to respond to incidents that are best addressed by civilian entities. For example, I can tell you as someone who works on this issue every day that in most instances, the police are not an appropriate or effective response to calls about people experiencing a mental health crisis. I will fight for funding for rapid response teams with crisis workers and medical professionals, on the ground in Council District 3. These teams need to have a community liaison who attends local meetings and works with the community to connect people with care.

While the defund movement has taken up most of the bandwidth on this issue, other important reforms are needed.

I will fight for a stronger and truly independent Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB). Currently, when the CCRB investigates allegations of wrongdoing and issues disciplinary recommendations, the Police Commissioner can choose to ignore those recommendations. In truth, the CCRB's disciplinary recommendations for police misconduct were ignored 70% of the time over the past two decades. Only one police officer was dismissed between 2014 and 2020. The CCRB should have the power to issue binding rulings on disciplinary actions.

I will fight for a residency requirement for new NYPD hires. Currently, the NYPD's civilian employees are required to live in New York City, but the NYPD's uniformed officers are not. In fact, a majority of uniformed NYPD officers do not live in New York City. Residency fosters a deeper connection to and understanding of the communities that police officers serve.

Additional reforms I support include reducing the power of the police unions in disciplinary and transparency matters. Police should also be required to document the use of force.

Reforms to policing should not be interpreted as attacks on all police officers. The police unions and others have characterized reform proposals this way for too long and this has held back constructive dialogue on this issue.

How would you go about creating more affordable housing in New York? What about permanent housing for New York's homeless population? Where would you put it? How would you make sure it's actually affordable and sustainable? Would you ever support upzoning in order to create it? Will you accept money from real estate interests? Please be specific on your proposals. *

The glut of hotels and commercial office space created by the COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to create affordable housing, particularly Class B and C commercial office buildings and hotels that are older and less-amenitized. The city should rezone distressed commercial properties and create thousands of units of affordable and supportive housing.

Financially distressed residential buildings present another opportunity to create affordable housing. Government and nonprofits should jump at the chance to acquire buildings that can be converted to social housing. I support legislation that would give tenants and nonprofits the right of first refusal to purchase these properties before they are scooped up by hedge funds and private equity firms.

I will fight to increase pathways to permanent housing for the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who are languishing in the shelter system and on our streets. Above all, the city needs to aggressively build supportive housing, which is a proven solution to chronic homelessness. I will fight for larger budget appropriations and federal stimulus funds for supportive housing. Community opposition is a top cause of delays to supportive housing construction, and the city needs to create community engagement units who will engage with communities early in the process to address concerns and build support for these projects.

Our NYCHA housing stock must be repaired and preserved at all costs. It is our city's largest source of affordable housing. If just 10 percent of NYCHA housing was lost, 40,000 New Yorkers would be displaced and potentially pushed into homelessness.

I am not accepting contributions from real estate developers, people who work at lobbying firms, corporate PACs or the fossil fuel industry. Our campaign has been endorsed by Tenants PAC, one of the driving forces behind recent historic victories for tenants in New York State.

I'm extremely proud to be part of the tenants rights movement. The strengthening of the rent stabilization laws was a game-changer for renters in New York City. In 2015 I was arrested in the State capital alongside tenant activists for blocking the entrance to the Governor's chamber and demanding the rent laws be strengthened. Last year, with a true Democratic majority in the State Senate, we were successful. By removing the vacancy decontrol loophole, which allowed landlords to deregulate apartments that became vacant, we removed a powerful incentive for tenant harassment, and gave housing stability to nearly 1 million New York City residents.

Do you support taxing the wealthy? What specific tax policy changes would you support in New York State and New York City to increase State and City revenue? How will you, at the same time, restore NYC's economic health, employment, tax base, and small businesses, both short-term and long? *

The concentration of wealth among the richest Americans is at levels not seen since the Roaring Twenties. Meanwhile, middle class and working class New Yorkers are struggling to feed their families and pay their property taxes.

All New Yorkers must step up to help during this difficult time, and this includes millionaires and billionaires who can afford to pay more. I support Senator Robert Jackson's proposal to add new tax brackets for people making more than \$5 million, \$10 million, and \$100 million annually. I also support Senator Brad Hoylman's proposal for a "pied-a-terre tax" on second homes worth \$5 million. Other potential revenue ideas could include carbon pricing and a stock transfer tax.

I support the creation of a New York City Public Bank to spur economic recovery. The City of New York deposits billions of dollars every year into Wall Street banks that are focused on profit, whereas a Public Bank would invest in communities, including small business owners and entrepreneurs. Private banks have historically denied people of color fair access to capital, and a public bank would help right these wrongs while spurring economic development.

I have a plan to establish a West Side Employment Network to ensure that the companies relocating to Council District 3 are hiring residents of our district. We have immense talent in our community, and I will create the infrastructure to match job openings with jobseekers, and prepare them with the skills necessary to get those jobs and thrive in those jobs. I will obtain funding for this program and partner with local organizations like Hudson Guild to ensure that economic growth in our district works for all of our residents, not against them.

In addition to new revenue, New York City is going to need billions of dollars in aid from Washington to prevent additional cuts to vital services, including subway service. I will fight to fully restore, and increase, city services such as sanitation and subway service so that as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, we are primed for economic rebound.

How should we desegregate our schools? Do you support eliminating the SHSAT? Do you support admissions screens? What concrete changes would you make to our public school system? *

New York City has the most segregated school system in America, and that is something we should all be deeply concerned about. This segregation begins with the fact that most children attend their neighborhood elementary school in neighborhoods that lack racial diversity. Additionally, a two-tiered system of selective schools and non selective schools has, generally speaking, resulted in screened schools that are mostly white and Asian and non-screen schools that are predominantly Black and Hispanic.

This system is clearly not working, and needs to be reformed. While it makes sense for high schools with specialized focuses like the performing arts to screen students, screening is most problematic in the earlier grades. Our community needs to come together and develop a plan to address this issue with the input of key stakeholders, including parents, students, educators, principals, school administrators and experts. A top-down approach that doesn't have buy-in will not be successful. I will fight for world class schools that are racially and socioeconomically diverse and culturally competent in which all children are challenged to reach their highest potential.

Specialized high schools teach less than 5% of public school students, yet they have taken up a lot of oxygen in this conversation. We must maintain the top academic rigor of specialized high schools and we shouldn't eliminate the SHSAT entirely, but additional factors need to be considered in addition to a single test.

Our schools suffer from lack of investment. Our schools have still not seen full funding from the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), a movement created by parents who sued the State of New York for disinvesting in public schools. The New York State Court of Appeals ruled in 2006 that New York State must increase education funding by \$5.5 billion. However, according to the CFE, New York State still owes our schools \$4.4 billion. I will fight for this funding and for additional investments in our schools.

Currently, Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) that raise significant funds every year do not have a mechanism with which to contribute funds to PTAs that do not. This is an opportunity to assist many of our local schools that I will pursue.

I will also fight for smaller class sizes, better student-to-teacher ratios, art, music and health programs, and Community Learning Schools, which have the benefit of longer school days, provide 3 meals and wrap around services and programming to students and families.

What is the path forward on corrections reform? Do you support closing Rikers? Do you support constructing new, borough-based jails? In all boroughs or just some of them? Do you support bail reform? Did you support the recent partial roll back of bail reform? *

Unwinding hundreds of years of racial injustice in our corrections system will not be easy but we must dedicate our complete selves to this task. I strongly support the closure of Rikers Island, a terrible model that perpetuates racism and recidivism and human rights abuses. The Department of Justice documented a "deep-seated culture of violence" at the complex that continues to this day, partly because it is intentionally located in a remote location, out of public view. People detained on Rikers Island are warehoused there, far out of the public eye, virtually unreachable by their families or community support systems.

Our goal should be to close Rikers Island without rebuilding the jail capacity elsewhere, but our ability to do this depends on whether or not the jail population can be brought down to very low levels. If elected I will work with my colleagues in government to try to attain this goal. We must close Rikers Island and replace the current borough-based jails, which are also abysmal and inhumane. A key part of criminal justice reform is replacing old jails, when necessary, with modern facilities that include spaces for education and rehabilitation, psychiatric services, visiting suites for families, and offices for co-located nonprofits that deliver robust reentry services to prevent recidivism.

Over the years, I have worked with constituents who have been released from Rikers Island. I have gone with them to the Fortune Society offices in Long Island City and sat with them as they attempted to secure housing and employment. Rikers Island sets people up for failure, not success.

I support bail reform and believe that some of the recent adjustments to the law make sense, like adding certain crimes against children to the list of offenses eligible for cash bail.

How can New York lead on climate change? Are there any green energy projects we can pursue? Do you support any of the existing pipeline proposals? How can we leverage our financial and economic power to encourage other jurisdictions to be better on the climate? *

I oppose existing pipeline proposals and favor the decommissioning of existing fossil fuel infrastructure. Offshore wind power is our best opportunity to replace the energy currently generated by fossil fuels. On the City Council, I will fight to have these projects fast-tracked and sited off New York City's shores.

Additionally, I will work to solarize Council District 3. The city, state and federal government must incentivise solar collectors on the roofs of our district's apartment buildings and brownstones. This is the future; not fossil fuel infrastructure.

We must move forward with converting Rikers Island to a hub for green energy. What is learned there should be applied across New York City city, including in District 3.

We must create more microgrids in our neighborhoods. Penn South, limited equity cooperative, has its own cogenerator and operates its own microgrid. Neighborhood-wide microgrid electric networks have been established in other parts of the city and we should replicate their success here. We can make large scale blackouts and borough-wide power outages a thing of the past.

One of my longtime priorities in Council District 3 and as a member of VID's Environmental Committee has been increasing organic waste collection in our community. Organic waste in landfills generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas. After I arranged meetings with the Department of Sanitation and building managers from Westbeth, Penn South and Manhattan Plaza, we successfully signed up over 5,000 housing units for the curbside organic waste pickup. Additionally, we expanded compost dropoff at Hudson River Park and at transit hubs and parks throughout the district. This is something I will continue to grow and champion when the service resumes.

In 2016 I conceived the idea of using City Council capital discretionary funds to plant every empty tree pit in our district with a new tree. Since that time, The Speaker's office has planted 511 street trees across the district in previously empty tree pits. This has very positive environmental implications as street trees remove carbon and release oxygen, absorb stormwater, filter fine particulate pollutants out of the air, make our neighborhoods more liveable, among other benefits. I will continue this program and have new tree beds created throughout the district.

I will push the City to use its purchasing power to move away from industrial farming. Corporate industrial farming is the main cause of deforestation, a major polluter of waterways, a top source of carbon emissions, and known for highly inhumane practices. Additionally, New York City has phased out processed meat in public schools and is reducing beef purchases by 50%, but I favor phasing out beef purchases altogether in our public schools. The high carbon footprint of livestock is well established and these are the kind of actions we will need to take if we're serious about addressing climate change.

How will you improve procurement and contracting? How do we cut waste, and how do we make sure women- and minority-owned businesses get a fair shake in the procurement process? *

The city's use of "low bid" procurement for services, in which the city must choose the lowest bidder on a contract irrespective of other qualifications, is problematic and should be reformed. Oftentimes selecting the lowest bidder is chosen over an applicant who is better suited to the project. Time and time again, I have seen this result in the non-completion of projects and the need to issue new requests for proposals, therefore increasing costs in the long run.

To give women-and-minority-owned businesses a fair shake in the procurement process, the city needs to create a more streamlined and less onerous certification process and bidding process. In select cases, allowing for no-bid contracts would help encourage greater participation by MWBEs. Identifying criteria that needlessly exclude candidates from qualification would broaden the pool of potential MWBE vendors. We must ensure that entrepreneurs and independent workers have access to MWBE programs. Creating and expanding mentorship programs, outreach events, training programs and public advertising would also increase participation.

What is your plan to save small businesses? How do we make sure, when we come back from COVID, our local businesses are still here? And how do we make sure the enormous amount of commercial vacancies get filled, and not just by big chains snatching up cheap leases? *

During the COVID-19 crisis, many small businesses have gone deeply into debt and urgently need rent relief. I support the "Save Our Storefronts" (S.O.S.) legislation introduced by Senator Brad Hoylman and Assemblymember Harvey Epstein that would allow businesses that suffered a demonstrable loss of income due to the pandemic to receive financial compensation from the state and federal government.

A major cause of high rents and vacancies is the fact that some landlords cannot lower the asking rent on commercial spaces because of a 'minimum rent' that is written into their mortgage terms. If the landlord accepts a rent below that number, they risk defaulting on their loan. This has kept rents artificially high, even in a market with a glut of vacant space. Professor Tim Wu has highlighted this significant problem. I will fight for legislation that would prohibit minimum rent terms in commercial leases, so that landlords can lower rents without running afoul of their lenders.

I propose creating walk-in small business resource hubs in our neighborhoods. The NYC Department of Small Business Services, U.S. Small Business Administration and the Empire State Development Division of Small Business all have a variety of support offerings for small businesses, from free legal advice to mentorship. These agencies should move out of their office buildings and into street level retail spaces, offering walk-in services for small business owners, conveniently located in their communities.

There was an excess supply of retail spaces even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, and the city must consider creative zoning that would allow for the repurposing of retail spaces for innovative uses. I will highlight and support nontraditional business models such as worker cooperatives and employee ownership models.

Every day, I speak with small business owners across Council District 3 and the most frequent issue I hear about, aside from escalating costs, is the web of confusing regulations and bureaucratic morass that they face every time they interact with a city agency. There is no reason why someone should need to hire an 'expeditor' to get their government to process an application in a reasonable amount of time. People deserve competence from their government and I will use the City Council's oversight authority to demand it from the next Mayoral administration.

When landlords purposefully leave storefronts vacant for prolonged periods of time, they should pay a vacancy fee.

Is there anything else you would like us to know about you?

When I was a freshman in college in the late nineties, I wrote a letter to my hometown school district, the Lake Placid Central School district, about the anti-LGBTQ bullying I had experienced there. I had always kept this bottled up inside, and felt I had to speak up for other young people coming up behind me.

The letter was read aloud at the next meeting of the school board. So, I simultaneously came out as a gay man to the town, and came out about my experiences in high school.

Soon after, I learned that the school district made changes, including adding sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination policy of the schools. This taught me a powerful lesson that I carry with me today. Each of us has immense ability to create change.

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