CCC Questionnaire 2021

**1. Housing is an important issue for the City of Cambridge.**

**a. How would you describe our housing challenges?**

Cambridge is quickly becoming a community made up of the wealthy and the

subsidized poor. Working class families are being priced out every year and would-be

middle class residents can’t afford homeownership or rent. We allow uncontrolled

commercial and luxury development which skyrockets rent and cost of living and pads

the pocket of developers who influence the agenda of the council.

a. What do you think are the major factors causing our housing challenges?

Insufficient supply of permanently affordable housing to meet regional demands.

Unregulated commercial and luxury development which prices our residents and

enriches developers. Lack of robust tenant protections to prevent displacement. Zoning

laws that prevent increased density in transit corridors. Undemocratic form of

government and unresponsive City Manager.

**a. What do you think is stopping us from addressing those challenges?**

Our form of government often prevents us from taking direct action in response to the

most pressing challenges that we face including the climate and housing crisis. We

have to be creative to find ways to respond to self-identified resident needs within

municipal authority and often against a resistant City Manager. Many of my colleagues

also fund their campaigns largely through contributions from for profit developers

seeking to influence them to vote in certain ways that often don’t align with the real

needs of our community.

**a. Describe concerns you might have about existing and needed**

**infrastructure to serve our present and future housing stock, for example:**

**aging sewer lines, electrical grid and most importantly water.**

We are actively doing sewer separation but it’s way too slow. Our electrical grid is not

being updated (still can’t do solar panels in Central Square!) while at the same time

being expanded (I led the charge to avoid a new 150 foot tall transfer station on

Fulkerson Street!) without any consideration for how to limit growth in our energy

demands. I’ve introduced the Green New Deal zoning petition to help reduce energy

demand and emissions even as we add new buildings. You can read more at

cambridgegnd.org.

Don’t even get me started on our corrosive water supply laced with PFAS and

unsustainably sourced from inside the Rt 128 urban core! I helped ensure that CIPP

plastic lining is not used to deliver water to Cambridge residents but it is an endless

battle to protect the safety and health of our water supply. And we could be getting

clean, pristine water from the Quabbin reservoir, but no, because the City Manager

claims it’s cheaper to generate our own water, despite the private costs borne by

consumers because of the extra corrosiveness, and despite the health risks of PFAS

and other contaminants!

**Climate Change is real. What changes would you like to see the city undertake to**

**address these concerns locally? How do your views address environmental equity?**

Climate change is certainly the most pressing issue facing our civilization. We need to

drastically cut back our greenhouse gas emissions. This term, I introduced the Green

New Deal zoning petition to more strictly regulate greenhouse gas emission from

commercial developers.

We need to center equity in all of our policymaking and understand that the worst

impacts on climate change are felt first and worst by low-income people and people of

color. The Green New Deal zoning petition contains a specific focus on creating green

jobs and economic opportunity for our most vulnerable residents. I’ve also worked hard

to improve the quality of parks in areas with urban heat islands like the Port and

Wellington-Harrington. We’ve fixed water play features, secured new water fountains,

planted new trees, and much more in an effort to make these neighborhoods and

communities more resilient to the impacts of climate change. I’ve also worked with my

colleagues to safely improve accessibility at Jerry’s Pond and block a 150 foot tall

electrical substation from being built across from the Kennedy Longfellow school in East

Cambridge.

**How do you reconcile the issue of tree conservation and the environment when**

**discussing development?**

I led the charge on strengthening the Tree Protection Ordinance to strike a better

balance and finally require a permit and mitigation for tree removal on private

property. Here are some of the key changes to the TPO:

● Cements key provisions of the interim moratorium, including broad applicability to trees

on private property and the fundamental requirement that a permit must be obtained

before any Significant Tree can be removed. Previously, the city had no jurisdiction over

trees on private property except for large projects greater than 25,000 square feet.

● Redefines what it means to be a “Significant Tree” so that more trees fall under the

protection of the ordinance. The ordinance used to apply only to trees measuring 8

inches or more in diameter at breast height (DBH), but that threshold has now been

lowered to protect any tree that measures 6 inches or more at DBH. According to the

Urban Forest Master Plan (page 133), this change will increase the number of

protected trees by 49%.

● Expands the Tree Replacement Fund so that it can be used for tree planting and

maintenance throughout the entire city instead of just along the public right of way. We

need to plant many thousands of trees, but most of the city’s plantable area is on private

property. This new language will hopefully allow us to scale up our planting efforts to the

degree that is necessary to curb canopy loss by unlocking new opportunities across the

city.

● Adds a “duty of care” provision which requires property owners to take care of Significant

Trees and replacement trees on their property. This ensures that replacement trees are

cared for and allowed to thrive as we incentivize replanting on private property.

**“Development” is a commonly used term of public policy. Notions of economic**

**development evolve over time. In the current moment, ideas about development must**

**address concerns about climate change, global capital flows and rapidly growing**

**economic inequality.**

**a. The City for decades developed commercial property to increase**

**taxable income that allows residential tax rates to remain low**

**compared to many other cities. Has that strategy reached its limit? If**

**so, what should replace it?**

This strategy was never a good idea and has been a driver of gentrification and

displacement. One of the ideas I’ve proposed as an alternative is to assess a local

income tax on the highest incomes, as is done in New York City and San Francisco, for

example. As a city we need to stop adding millions of square feet of commercial and

biotech development each year. A more progressive property tax system would also be

good, but we are largely blocked from modifying property taxes by the state.

**b. What is your view on economic development for the City of**

**Cambridge in 2021? What kind of economic development do we need**

**or not need?**

We need sustainable economic development grounded in eco-socialism, prioritizing

racial and economic justice, resilience, and protections from climate impacts.

**In recent months the Cambridge Historical Commission, Conservation Districts**

**and Neighborhood Organizations have been criticized as obstacles to more**

**affordable housing as well as to racial and economic diversity. Do you agree with**

**this criticism? Please explain why.**

The main obstacles to racial justice and equity are a lack of sufficient spending on

affordable housing, especially homeownership to make up for anti-Black housing

discrimination, undemocratic processes including Planning Board and BZA

appointments by the City Manager leading to a conservative approach on

affordable housing development (I voted for the charter reforms now on

November’s ballot to give the council a vote on certain appointments), and a lack

of proper planning including a zoning code that does not mandate affordable units

for projects below 10,000 sq.ft. or 10 units (I’m proposing to change that!), still

includes parking minimums and disallows multi-family housing in parts of our city.

In recent months there has been an upsurge in citizen petitions (including the

Donovan petition supported by the CCC and the Missing Middle Housing (MMH)

petition supported by ABC) that attempt to formulate zoning, housing and related

public policy. Developer upzoning - also known as contract zoning - has also

been in regular use. Please describe your opinion about governing through the

use of citizen petitions and contract zoning. Are there changes to the petition

process that should be introduced?

The zoning petition process is largely governed by state law and not easily

changed. While contract zoning is abused by for profit developers, citizen petitions

are an underutilized tool for making changes to our zoning code to do more justice.

Unfortunately both tools are variations of the same underlying petition mechanism

and so there is no easy way to change one without affecting the other. I do not

think any major changes need to be made to the petition process although I wish

the city would spend as much time with citizen petitioners as they do with large

developers.

**Members of the Cambridge Planning Board have expressed frustration with**

**existing constraints on their ability to plan. As volunteers meeting several times a**

**month to process individual cases, members have little time and resources to**

**engage in planning. The absence of planning guidance from this committee is**

**likely related to the increased use of citizen petitions. How should this problem**

**be addressed?**

I don’t see citizens' petitions as the issue here. The Planning Board and the council

have been mired in proposals from for-profit developers more than anything else. This

also has a lot to do with how these boards are structured, which is also largely governed

by state law, and our charter which gives the City Manager complete control over who

sits on the board. Zoning petitions submitted by commercial developers have bogged

down the Planning Board more than anything. The planning board is misnamed; their

job is not to plan the city, their job is to determine whether certain proposals (special

permits, etc.) are compliant with the zoning laws. If we want different outcomes we need

to petition to change the zoning law to require what we want. One example of this is the

Green New Deal zoning petition I’ve introduced: cambridgegnd.org

**Cambridge has long been celebrated as a city that promotes racial and economic**

**diversity. Do you believe this reputation is currently well deserved?**

No.

**If not, what measures would you take to promote genuine racial and economic**

**diversity?**

We need to invest in our Black community and provide reparations for slavery and

restition for housing discrimination and the war on drugs. A few examples include:

Issue the $500 million bond I proposed to build more than 1000 units of affordable

limited equity homeownership over the next decade with a focus on first generation, first

time home buyers who grew up in Cambridge so as to maximize the potential for

redressing past anti-Black racial discrimination in our housing polices.

We need to expand our education and youth support systems through Universal Pre-K,

expanding our after school and youth programs, expanding RSTA, and expanding post

secondary education support. Despite years of conversation and committee hearings,

the city has yet to commit to a full universal Pre-K program for every child in Cambridge.

We are constantly told that classroom space is a limiting factor, but there are vacant

storefronts all over the city that could be rented out at any point.

We need to create an alternative crisis response. I could not be more enthusiastic about

the HEART program, which stands for Holistic Emergency Alternative Response Team.

This program proposes a community based response to mental health, domestic

violence, substance abuse and other crises as an alternative to the current option of

calling 911 and summoning the police. Police are not the right people to handle the vast

majority of these situations, and their very presence can lead to violence, incarceration,

and trauma. It has been a privilege to be a witness to the birth of this very promising

alternative approach to public safety that seeks to provide compassionate care to those

in need of support in the most difficult moments of their lives.

**How would you address recent issues of youth gun violence?**

This is not a recent issue! We have to dismantle the racist systems in our city that

continue to drive this cycle of violence as outlined above. We do not provide adequate

economic opportunity for our students of African descent.

We need to provide a 21st Century Public Education by investing in the Young People’s

Project and other efforts that help Black students succeed in school and in life, while

supporting their efforts to eliminate institutional obstacles to their success.

We need to provide additional career and secondary education support to our young

adults after they graduate highschool, including jobs training programs, professional

certificates, internship programs, continuing education and more to help our students

transition from highschool into the workforce if they are not immediately going to

college.

We should expand the Mayor’s basic income pilot to permanently provide a basic

income to people who make less than a certain amount of money so they can sustain

themselves and their families while getting further education and training or starting their

next business venture.

**How would you increase transparency both by the City Manager and departments**

**that report to her/him?**

The council has disempowered itself by not holding the city manager accountable over

a 40 year span. It’s critical that we change that with the hiring of the next city manager. I

voted against extending the contract of the current City Manager in an undemocratic

vote that took place in the dead of the night amidst threats that he would walk from the

table if the contract was not signed on the spot. We need a national search for our next

City Manager, instead of just going with an internal candidate again. Longer term we

desperately need charter reform. I support the November ballot question that would give

the city council more control over board appointments and create a review process for

the City Manager. Ultimately I support moving towards an elected Mayor as our

executive branch instead of an unelected City Manager.

Transparency on the part of the city really became an issue as we virtually navigated

the COVID-19 pandemic this past term. I led us through these uncharted waters with a

relentless insistence on prioritizing public health, protecting our most vulnerable

residents and addressing racial disparities in case rates, testing and vaccine access. I

demanded clear accountability from our City Manager on the city’s COVID response,

never shying away from asking the tough questions and giving honest feedback. I

maintained covid.quintonzondervan.org with charts that analyze the latest Cambridge

data, providing insights on the pandemic not available from the city’s website.

**How would you increase transparency by City Councilors?**

One of the many challenges we face is the open meeting law which limits our ability to

cooperate or discuss policy issues outside of official meetings. I made some

improvements by successfully increasing committee quorums to a simple majority,

making it somewhat easier for us to collaborate on issues that are in committee.

**Cambridge is about to hire a new City Manager. Describe your ideal City Manager**

**for this time in Cambridge history. What qualities will you look for?**

We need a city manager who will be more responsive to the council and the direction it

sets by implementing its priorities and using the city’s vast wealth to enact justice-driven

policy. We need to look at different types of professionals instead of just limiting our

search to executives. We need someone who will face the music and move away from

decades of oppressive fiscal conservatism. We need someone who will be more

transparent and with a capacity for self-criticism and self-improvement. And we need

someone who reflects the diversity of our community and ideally someone who has

experienced discrimination and structural disadvantages and is passionate about

dismantling the systems of oppression that continue to hold people down.

**Recent estimates declare that over 60% of Cambridge residents are renters. How**

**should Cambridge government address the needs of renters?**

We need to implement rent control and strong tenant protections. We need to pass a

stronger condo conversion ordinance, tenant right to purchase, just cause eviction

protection, and more. In 1994, Cambridge landlords banned rent control statewide via

ballot referendum. Practically this means that the city council no longer has the ability to

regulate the landlord-tenant relationship, which makes absolutely no sense. We are

best suited at the local level to regulate this relationship in a way that makes sense for

our community which is overwhelmingly renter.

We also have an opportunity to use more than $60 million in direct aid recently received

from President Biden as part of the American Rescue Plan to expand our financial

support for renters facing eviction due to the economic impact of the COVID pandemic.

That money is not subject to the anti aid amendment.

There is always room for improvement however senior citizens in public housing

receive reasonable public support. What is your plan to enable and support

seniors living independent of public senior housing settings?

Making housing more affordable and public transportation more convenient, accessible

and free would go a long way. We also need to invest in mental health support which is

critical for seniors. The Cambridge Health Alliance has been divesting from mental

health service delivery for years. It is time to provide free mental health services to

anyone who needs them, for any reason, through a direct contract between the city and

the CHA. An infusion of cash from the city would increase the number of people who

receive the mental health support they need and could even expand options beyond

group therapy, which does not meet everybody’s needs.

**What question do you wish we had asked you but did not? How would you answer it?**

What can/should be done to alleviate the challenges faced by the unhoused

community?

● Extend funding of the Green Street shelter and make the Spaulding facility a

permanent institution.

● Work with MIT to renovate 240 Albany Street so it better meets the needs of the

community including additional height for more support services and low

threshold housing.

● Develop some city-owned parking lots into low threshold non-congregate housing

options for unhoused people. Knock down the Green Street Garage and build

dense affordable housing which includes units specifically set aside for people

who have recently experienced homelessness.

● Pilot a safe consumption site in Central Square.