**2021 Cambridge City Council Questionnaire – Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler**

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1. Housing is an important issue for the City of Cambridge.
   1. How would you describe our housing challenges?
   2. What do you think are the major factors causing our housing challenges?
   3. What do you think is stopping us from addressing those challenges?
   4. 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.

**According to City data, the median-rent for a 1-bedroom apartment in Cambridge is $2,250/month, the median cost for a condominium is $805,000, and the median single-family costs more than $1.7 million. All of those costs are out of range for far too many Cambridge residents and thousands of people with jobs like social workers, teachers, and custodians are being pushed out of the city.**

**To create more affordable housing in the city, Cambridge should expand the Affordable Housing Overlay, increase the commercial linkage fee, and utilize our prop 2 ½ levy capacity to put millions more toward affordable housing each year. Cambridge should expand the Affordable Housing Overlay to allow for more units and diverse types of affordable and public housing throughout the city, especially on major corridors and near transit. Raising the commercial linkage fee from its current amount of $20/square foot to at least $33/square foot would generate millions of desperately needed additional dollars for affordable housing. And unlike many other municipalities in Massachusetts, Cambridge is more than $150 million away from our annual Prop 2 ½ levy limit. Even a modest increase would generate millions more dollars of revenue in the annual budget, a large portion of which would come from levies on corporate landholders and asset management companies. Ensuring that whoever the Council hires next as City Manager is willing to prioritize affordable housing and infrastructure that will allow us to better prepare for climate change over narrow fiscal conservatism will allow us to generate millions more dollars and address these causes with the urgency they demand.**

1. 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? How do you reconcile the issue of tree conservation and the environment when discussing development?

**Municipal Green New Deal policies like improving public transit and transportation are key to addressing climate change. Making it easier to get around by bus, subway, bike or foot both reduces emissions and makes it easier for residents who can not afford a car to get around the city. We can do this by adding bus and bike lanes, eliminating fares that add burdens for low-income residents and delay travel time—especially for bus travel where fares are collected as riders board, and investing in municipal sidewalk snow removal.**

**Cambridge should address the loss of our tree canopy through implementation of the Tree Protection Ordinance that the City Council passed this term, which provides protections that did not exist a few years ago for trees throughout the city. We should also expand resources for the planting and care of new trees, especially in neighborhoods where studies have shown the amount tree-cover is significantly below the city as a whole, like the Port, East Cambridge, and Alewife.**

**We must also work to ensure that environmental justice sites are restored to provide habitat and green space for residents. One such site is Jerry’s Pond in North Cambridge, which is currently fenced off and contaminated with asbestos next to one of the largest sites of affordable housing and immigrant populations in Cambridge. With the recent sale of the site to a new owner, there is a significant opportunity to push for restoration.**

1. “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.
   1. 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?
   2. 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?

**Cambridge’s most pressing economic needs are addressing the large income inequality gap in the city. Too many residents do not have access to the wealth or jobs that have been generated in Cambridge in the past few decades. The recent Cambridge Community Foundation report “Equity and Innovation: The Case of Cambridge” makes clear that there is a wide gap between the wealth that has been generated by burgeoning industries in the city and the communities at their doorstep. Cambridge can address this economic inequality by raising our commercial linkage fee, taking advantage of our levy capacity, and demanding more in PILOT contributions from our two universities with multi-billion dollar endowments and putting that funding towards job training and affordable housing.**

1. 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.

**Too often, neighborhood and historical preservation—not just in Cambridge but nationally—has unfortunately been used as a tool by appointed bodies that are less representative than the community as a whole in terms of racial and economic diversity to block housing, including in areas near public transit like we’ve seen recently in Harvard Square. While there is important work for historical bodies educating and passing on the unique legacy of Cambridge, that goal can be achieved without preserving in amber areas of the city that are currently among the most expensive and exclusive. For hundreds of years, Cambridge has evolved and changed to meet the needs of residents. A pressing need now is for housing that people can actually afford, and we need to ensure that enabling legislation for preservation doesn’t block that goal.**

1. 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 City Council, City Manager, and staff should lead in pursuing comprehensive planning and re-zoning to better address the needs of affordable housing, small business support, and climate change among others. Compared to other municipalities, the City Council spends an outsize amount of time responding to outside zoning petitions, in part because of the understanding that our current zoning is out of date in large parts of the city. The Council should reform the existing petition process and act on the planning goals that residents have elected them to pursue so that petitions are less necessary.**

1. 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’ve proposed that multi-member bodies including the Cambridge Planning Board move away from the all-volunteer model and receive stipends for their many hours of work and important contributions to the city, which is a practice implemented in other cities in Massachusetts. This would both help compensate members for their labor and ensure diversity by encouraging residents to apply who would otherwise be unable to make a significant commitment of time and effort as an unpaid volunteer. This would be in addition to the City Council, Manager, and staff partnering to invest more time and energy into comprehensive planning and re-zoning.**

1. Cambridge has long been celebrated as a city that promotes racial and economic diversity. Do you believe this reputation is currently well deserved? If not, what measures would you take to promote genuine racial and economic diversity? How would you address recent issues of youth gun violence?

**Cambridge’s capacity to be racially and culturally diverse will go hand in hand with its ability to remain economically diverse. Too many residents, particularly Black and Brown residents, are being pushed out of the city because of the high cost of housing or left out of the economic opportunities in Cambridge. Cambridge must invest in keeping and expanding this diversity by ensuring that residents can stay and thrive in Cambridge with universal pre-K, municipal broadband, and a Cambridge Community Land Trust. Cambridge can address youth gun violence by ensuring that residents have a trusted alternative public safety response like the HEART proposal and by ensuring that we address the underlying causes of public safety in Cambridge with mental health and healthcare services, affordable housing, and job opportunities.**

1. How would you increase transparency both by the City Manager and departments that report to her/him? How would you increase transparency by City Councilors?

**I’ve advocated for an end to the strong-City Manager/weak-City Council form of government to give the Council more power over the budget, approval of appointments, and the ability to contract for its own legal counsel. That also means moving away from an unelected City Manager to a directly-elected Mayor so that Cambridge’s chief executive—who oversees the implementation of city policy, including hundreds of staff, and $700 million+ budget—is accountable to voters. Along with Mayor Siddiqui and Councillor Nolan, I’ve been advocate for charter change in Cambridge. The charter is the City’s constitution and while many cities do regular charter reviews every 5 or 10 years, Cambridge has not done a review since our charter was adopted more than 80 years ago. The City’s strong City Manager-weak Council form of government has not brought the urgency the city needs on housing, traffic, or climate change. The Council absolutely must take more action under our current form of government—and I’ve repeatedly pushed for that urgency on housing, transportation, municipal broadband and more. But we also need to give the City Council, which is subject to greater transparency requirements in its decision-making than the City Manager under Massachusetts’ Open Meeting Law, more power to enact change. And we need to move to a government with a directly elected Mayor who is accountable to voters, rather than a City Manager system, which too often favors fiscal conservatism, the well-connected, and a go-slow approach to Cambridge’s most pressing issues.**

1. 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?

**Unlike many other municipalities in Massachusetts, Cambridge is more than $150 million away from our annual Prop 2 ½ levy limit because of our larger commercial tax-base. Ensuring that whoever the Council hires next as City Manager is willing to prioritize pressing city needs like affordable housing, reducing traffic and responding to climate change, over fiscal conservatism and keeping rates low for corporate landholders and well-off property owners will allow us to generate millions more dollars for affordable housing that we can put to use. I’m also a strong supporter of municipal broadband in Cambridge to end the virtual Comcast monopoly on broadband internet in the city. Nearly 50% of low-income households do not have access to broadband and all of us are stuck with too few options for internet, with inadequate service and high costs. The City Manager has been the main obstacle to municipal broadband in Cambridge, which was one of the reasons I voted not to extend his contract. With the hiring process for a new City Manager on the way, we must make sure they have a clear plan and commitment to implementing municipal broadband.**

1. Recent estimates declare that over 60% of Cambridge residents are renters. How should Cambridge government address the needs of renters?

**I’m a renter, like 2/3 of Cambridge residents, and have done tenant organizing with groups like Boston DSA and City Life/Vida Urbana. But tenants are severely underrepresented on the Council. We need better tenant protections like rent control and right to counsel; the need for more housing in areas that have denied it with exclusionary zoning; a Cambridge Community Land Trust to take housing off the speculative market and make it permanently affordable; and tenants unions to organize for better living conditions, against displacement, and to effect policy.**

1. 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?

**Some of the ways that Cambridge can better support seniors including by providing a municipal version of the MBTA’s The Ride service to better serve seniors who can’t drive or don’t have access to a car and by expanding the home energy retrofits program to assist seniors on fixed incomes with repairs and energy costs. The City can also expand municipal sidewalk snow removal, which would both make it easier to get around in the winter for seniors with mobility issues and reduce the burden on seniors who are property-owners and are currently responsible for clearing their own sidewalks each time it snows.**

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

**What can Cambridge do to reduce traffic and improve public transit?**

**Cambridge should fund fare-free buses and bus-priority lanes to help speed up bus travel, ensure it is consistently on time, and reduce the cost. Improving bus service and reducing fares is a way to improve racial and economic equity and reduce emissions. Studies have demonstrated that bus riders are disproportionately likely to be low-income or people of color compared to the general population. Because bus fares are collected as passengers board, fare-free buses help speed up bus service in addition to improving equity and boosting ridership. Boston’s fare-free bus pilot for the #28, as well Lawrence’s fare-free service, provide examples that Cambridge can adapt here.**

**Bus lanes also help boost ridership by reducing commute times, especially on streets like Mt Auburn Street, where studies have shown that more than 50% of commuters travel by bus but more than 90% of the traffic is cars. Bus-priority lanes would make a huge difference for routes like the #1 bus, which has both among the highest ridership and highest delays in the whole MBTA system.**