

2007 LeftinLowell.com Lowell City Council Candidate Questionnaire

Attach additional pages as needed. If a question is reader-contributed, it is noted in parenthesis.

Responses from candidate David Koch

General Questions

1. Identify the specific sections of the city that you believe require special concentration of the city's efforts. What are the issues unique to those neighborhoods and what specifically do you propose to correct them?

I believe that the Acre, Back Central, Centralville and the Lower Highlands areas are most in need of the City's efforts. Gang activity, predatory overdevelopment, jobs and economic opportunity are the biggest issues facing these areas. I believe that these areas have been neglected by our city government for too long. An approach where the neighborhood groups, city government, and police department work together will be necessary to tackle these persistent problems. Neighborhood leaders must work with the police to curb gang activity and create safe streets. The Planning Departments and Zoning Board must respect the neighborhoods and ensure that development does not exceed what the infrastructure can support. Attention must be given to those developments that bring economic opportunity to the neighborhood rather than those that only take from the neighborhoods.

I believe that approach will work because it was successful in my own Back Central Neighborhood back in the mid-nineties. We had open drug dealing, prostitution and nightly arson in the crack houses that lined our streets. A group of committed neighbors working with the police and the city saw a hard-fought turnaround. I fear that work is in jeopardy again because of the neglect over the last several years by our city government. I am hopeful and will fight to make clear to City Hall that sustained cooperation is necessary for the viability of our neighborhoods and our City.

2. A lot of talk circulates about the "direction" of the city. If you agree, define that "direction". Are you satisfied with it or would you take it in a different direction? If different, how and where?

When Lowell's residents speak about the "direction" of the City, they are speaking of their concern about whether the quality of life for the average citizen is improving or falling behind. Essentially, is it becoming harder to raise your family in Lowell or are things getting better. I believe that Lowell has begun a positive movement towards accountable and professional city government that will result in progress for the City. Projects like the Target, Lowes and Hamilton Canal projects, as well as increased involvement in the Neighborhoods by the City Manager and Police Superintendant are a very good start but there is much to be done. Electing people to the City Council who will work tirelessly to build on this momentum is essential to continue moving forward in a positive direction.

3. Do you feel that property taxes are high? If so, how would you start the process of lowering them?

I believe that property taxes for Lowell's residents have increased too much in too short a period of time. Too often, past administrations have relied upon the tax payers to bail them

out of their poor decisions and lack of forethought. The recent budget for 2008 made a good start by containing increases for residents to an average of about 2 1/4 % after years of increases over 5%. Moving forward, an increasing and thriving commercial tax-base will be necessary to control the burden on the City's residents. We also need to plan during good economic times by building a responsible "rainy day" reserve for leaner times. Because a substantial amount of the City's budget comes from State local aid, the tax burden on its hard working residents rises unfairly when that local aid gets reduced. A combination of a broad commercial tax-base, reserve funds and responsible planning for the future will help see the City through the tough times.

4. There is still a lot of discussion regarding the dismissal process of the previous City Manager. What is your opinion of the course of events that took place in April 2006?

There are many differing versions of the specifics surrounding that dismissal and it does the City's residents a disservice to continue to dwell on the "he said/she said" aspects of those events. What should be clear, however, is that when the City Manager loses the confidence of 2/3 of the City Council, that person can no longer effectively serve as the chief executive of the City. The City Council chose to move in the direction of a professional executive with a more open and accountable city government. I believe that has been a good decision for the citizens of Lowell.

5, What do you think of City Manager Bernie Lynch's leadership of the City? Name specific strengths or weaknesses. (Anonymous)

I believe that City Manager Lynch has been a tremendously effective leader for our City. In his first year he has worked through a very difficult fiscal situation encountered when he first took office. He has also brought substantial projects to the City that will move Lowell forward and help create a climate of fair and responsible development. He has the vision necessary for continuing Lowell in a positive direction. His strengths lie in his ability to understand and deal with complex fiscal issues while also understanding that Lowell is really the people that live here, and that those people are more than numbers on a page of the city budget. He has brought professionalism and accountability and I believe that with a City Council united in moving Lowell forward he will accomplish great things for Lowell.

Budget

6. Do you think the city of Lowell funds its public schools adequately? (Explain why or why not, and what, if anything, you would do about it.)

No, I believe that Lowell must plan for committing more funds to our public schools. This will be difficult due to the ongoing budget concerns in Lowell. But as we begin to work our way into a system where recurring receipts can meet and exceed recurring expenditures, we must plan to slowly but regularly increase funding to our schools. Lowell also needs to live up to its responsibilities so as not to risk the state Chapter 70 funding which makes up the largest part of our school budget. In addition, spending on administrative issues needs to be more efficient so that the funds get to the classrooms.

Lowell has built some fantastic new buildings, but we must ensure that they continue to be filled with quality teachers and that they are equipped with the tools and supplies necessary for educating our children. I have had seven children in the Lowell school system and they have all been fortunate to work with very talented teachers who have shown true care and concern. We owe our children the resources they need to succeed.

7. What are your thoughts on the City's union contracts? Are they out of line? Would you commit to rejecting contracts that burden future generations? (Eleanor Rigby and Right in Lowell)

Contracts must be sustainable for the life of the contract. The City cannot sign contracts which will put us in fiscal jeopardy. It does no-one any good to have contracts that may be short term benefit to one party or the other but end up being unaffordable. Look at cities in our state that have been mismanaged into a state takeover and had all contracts voided.

We do need to be fair to our City's workers and they deserve to work under a contract. They are to be respected and appreciated for their service; especially our police and firefighters who literally put their lives on the line. I believe that the City Manager and the unions should work hard to come to fair and equitable contracts which do not put our future in peril.

8. What do you see as our options and what do you recommend with regard to improving our bond rating and our reserves? (Mr. Lynne)

Making sure that our budget is balanced and eliminating structural problems with recurring receipts vs. expenditures will be key to improving our bond rating. There must also be confidence in the accounting used by the City. The new Administration has moved a long way towards improving both of those. Additionally, the City must sign contracts which are sustainable moving forward, from a budget standpoint. Reserves must be gathered during good economic times. When revenue is coming in, we must resist the urge to spend every available cent, and require that a portion be allocated towards a responsible "rainy day" reserve.

9. What is your target percentage increase in the tax rate for the upcoming FY2009 budget, and what are the primary actions required to achieve that? (waittlnextyr)

The FY2008 budget limits the average residential increase to about 2 1/4% after several years of increases averaging over 5%. It also speaks of trying to keep it below 2 1/2% moving forward. I believe that this is a good target. I would like to see a year or two of no increase to make up for the some of the large increases we have had in the past. Many tax payers I speak with tell me, "I'd just like to see it stay the same for once." The way to achieve this is by diversifying our property tax base. Because Lowell has a large number of responsible home owners, they end up carrying the load. A growing and thriving commercial tax base with diverse components, including office, retail, restaurant, industrial, etc. is the way to keep residential property taxes in line. In addition to taking some of the direct burden off of the residents by paying a larger share of the tax total, they also place less of a burden on high priced city services such as schools. The City has relied too often

on short term quick fixes like condo developments which bring in a quick tax dollar but result in additional spending for city services resulting in little actual gain.

Economic Development

10. The city owns several buildings which are long vacant, in poor condition, and blighting influences in their neighborhoods, such as the building behind the playground on West Sixth Street and the Butler School on Gorham Street. The City has allowed these buildings to stand vacant for years, in the hope of renovating them for public uses sometime in the future, but has not been able to secure the funds to do so. Should the City continue to maintain the buildings as they are, or sell them on the private market? (joe)

I do not believe that the City should sell off its buildings simply because they have no short term use for them. These buildings in many cases are important parts of the city's history as well as well as valuable assets. One thing that should be done is the creation of a detailed "mothballing" procedure and ongoing inspection and maintenance schedule for all buildings that are vacated but kept by the City. This will keep the buildings from getting into a deteriorated state that is overly expensive to fix and a blight on our neighborhoods. The City should look at selling buildings where they can be developed into uses that are beneficial for the City. Transferring ownership to Neighborhood groups or other charities that can make beneficial use or selling to developers that can bring responsible job producing development, for example.

11. What do you plan to do to facilitate development at Massachusetts Mills and the old Post Office garage sites? (waaitilnextyr)

In order to build confidence with potential private developers it will be necessary for the City to demonstrate successful completion of the current slate of projects. The Target, Lowes, JAM and Hamilton Canal projects must demonstrate steady and efficient progress. As these are completed and come on line, the City will be able to lure better development proposals for other areas, including the Old Post Office and Massachusetts Mills. As frustrating as it is for these areas to sit undeveloped, the worst alternative is for the City to accept bad proposals that we all will have to live with for the next 30-50 years. Success is the only option for bringing in quality development.

12. What else can we do to support the growth/recruitment and retention of more artists in the city? (Jason)

I would like to see the city work with existing local artists and businesses to promote and create new exhibitions and art shows which can draw from beyond the region, create opportunities for artists to exhibit work in local businesses and public areas. I would also like to see increased partnership with art schools throughout New England. If we can create a climate where local artists can exhibit and sell their work, more artists will come to our city and more will stay. The City will also benefit from the revenue that these visitors bring.

13. How can better use be made of the Connector Corridor and its access to the highway system? (Jason)

I think that area may one of the most underutilized resources of our City. The proximity to the road infrastructure serving the state and region is a valuable asset that we must use to entice development. I think that a "Lifestyle Center" similar to "The Loop" in Methuen and "Wayside Commons" in Burlington would be a great development for that area that would draw commerce from throughout the neighboring towns. The Connector is also one of the gateways to our City and I believe that Zoning which encourages cleanup and redevelopment should be a priority for the City. One thing we should consider is an economic development overlay district, along each side of the Connector, which allows a period of commercial property tax breaks for developments that bring the type of office, retail, restaurant, nano-tech and bio-tech industry into the area which will provide decades of benefit to Lowell's residents. This will also require a close partnership with our state leaders to pass necessary legislation, secure funds to assist with any necessary cleanup, and help with necessary infrastructure improvements.

Infrastructure

14. What do you consider the most pressing traffic bottlenecks in the city, and what would you propose to alleviate them? (waittlnextyr)

There are several areas of congestion in our city, including the river crossings and the downtown. Many of these are the result of our city being built around the horse and buggy. But the single clearest example of our State and Federal government's failure to meet our transportation needs, is the Rourke Bridge. With the "Big Dig" using up the vast majority of the Federal and State transportation funds, this "temporary" bridge has been an undersized fixture in our city approaching a quarter century of use. While the Congress is busy funding \$120 million "bridges to nowhere" in Alaska our city has been neglected. We must demand that our next Congressional Representative and our two Senators move forward with securing the Federal dollars necessary for a permanent solution that serves the City's needs for the next fifty years. The City government must do its part to ensure that the funds secured will be well spent.

The congestion downtown is a danger to future development. One approach we can look at is to develop additional commercial enterprise along the Route 495/Route 3/ Connector for industries and uses that are better served by direct access to the higher capacity road system. The recent Motorola re-location to that area is a prime example but is just the beginning of what we can do.

15. What would you propose to stop daily firehouse closings? It has been 15 years with no reasonable solution that protects all neighborhoods safely, fairly and equally. (Jason)

The solution lies in creating greater revenue to pay for a fully staffed and equipped fire department. We must create a stronger and more diversified commercial tax base to obtain this revenue. In addition to being taxed at a higher rate, commercial developments typically use less City resources than residential development because they do not directly increase population. The city has relied too heavily on residential developments during the recent housing boom. The increased tax money that comes with these is offset in large part by the

increased staffing needed for things such as schools, police, and fire department. Focusing on obtaining commercial development will allow a greater share of future revenues to go towards maintaining the proper level of firehouses and staffing. We owe our residents the protection their families and homes deserve and our firefighters a level of staffing and response time to not make their already dangerous job more perilous.

Residents of Lowell

16. Do you think Lowell's long term viability is helped or harmed by being a gateway city for immigrants? Conversely, is the prospect of gentrification a subject of concern? (*Jason*)

I believe that Lowell's viability has not only been helped, but it's character shaped by the role it has taken over its history as a gateway city. Starting with my forefathers who came here to build the canals and mills and continuing over the years with the many ethnic groups that have shaped our city, including the Portuguese such as my wife Dina, Lowell has served as a foundation for many to begin the American Dream. At times, the resources of the City have been stretched by the numbers of new residents, but this City has always come through and flourished. It's amazing that within about a single a generation's time, a group of people with little or no knowledge of our culture can assimilate into our unique American culture while also contributing new customs and perspective to it.

Gentrification has been a problem in many Cities throughout our nation and is sometimes an unintended consequence of redevelopment of our neighborhoods. I believe that Lowell has in large part not been subject to gentrification because much of the development has been infill rather than wholesale redevelopment of blighted areas. It will be a potential concern that must be considered with larger projects such as the Hamilton Canal development coming on line. One thing we should consider is incentives for developers who provide opportunities for Lowell residents to remain in their neighborhoods.

17. Because Congress has not passed any immigration reform measures, cities around the country have begun passing their own regulations. Would you consider measures related to undocumented immigrants, and if so, would you be in favor of measures intended to shelter undocumented immigrants from the current anti-immigrant climate or measures intended to force them out of our city? (*Victoria*)

Immigration reform is an extremely sensitive issue. Most of us are a product of immigration at some point in our family's history. I believe that immigration reform is an issue that must be addressed by the Federal government. I do not feel it would be productive and certainly not efficient (or fair) for each municipality to have its own immigration policy. Therefore I do not believe that Lowell should become a so-called "sanctuary city" for undocumented immigrants. I believe that enforcement of immigration laws is primarily a federal responsibility and our local police should in general be focused on local issues. However, I want our police to be equipped with the most effective methods and I believe that they should use immigration enforcement as a tool where it is effective in making our streets and homes safe, including gang activity, violent crime, and domestic abuse.

About You, the Candidate

18. How do you keep up with local or regional news? A television program? Radio program? Newspaper? Magazine? Blogs? Talking with members of the community? Which programs or print media do you read? How frequently do you do this? How accurate or inaccurate do you rate these sources? (*TooJohn*)

I read the Lowell Sun and listen to WCAP radio regularly to keep informed on local events and get a feel for the climate in our city. I also watch the local news stations. However, I believe that I am best kept informed by talking to my neighbors and the many people I meet each day throughout our City and the region. I make a point to talk with as many people as I can every day and to listen to what they are concerned about. I have also found that my 8 children have been a valuable resource for gauging the mood of the city's residents. I learn a tremendous amount about what the parents of their large circle of friends are concerned about and discussing over the kitchen table.

19. Could you name one or two current elected officials - at any level of government - that you admire and why? (*TooJohn*)

Two local examples would be State Senator Steve Panagiotakas and Senator Ted Kennedy. I admire Sen. Panagiotakas because he has not forgotten his roots. In his role as Chair of the State Ways and Means Committee, he has never forgotten Lowell's importance to the state and equally important the support that it is entitled to in order to meet that role. I admire Senator Kennedy because he has always stuck to his principles even through changing times. He has also never been afraid to be a lone voice when necessary to stand up for those who need a voice.

20. What specifically do you hope to accomplish as a councilor? (*Anonymous*)

If I am privileged to serve as one your nine City Councilors, I will work tirelessly to continue the progress that our City has just begun to make. I believe that for too long, our City has settled for "good enough" instead of attaining the excellence it deserves. This City was once the cradle of the Industrial Revolution in our nation. I believe this City still possesses many of the same ingredients that gave it that prominence. If we only have the courage, the vision, the unity, and the perseverance, we can restore it to its rightful place as a model for what our nation can be. I believe in setting goals and in getting results. I will work to make our City a safe place to live and to visit. Build an economic climate that creates jobs and commerce and broadens our tax base to keep our residents from carrying too heavy a burden. Because the City belongs to its people, I will speak up so that the voices of our neighbors are not drowned out by those of the powerful, and so the good of the many is not cast aside for the benefit of the few and the privileged.