

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 Kristin Ross-Sitcawich

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?

In particular, the areas of the city of Lowell that require more of our attention are areas that have been long neglected, while investment has been focused in the Downtown. Meanwhile, Centralville, Back Central, South Lowell and the Lower Highlands have been left to decline with a lack of attention paid to maintenance of infrastructure, poor enforcement of city inspectional code and significant public safety issues. Many of the properties located in these neighborhoods are owned by individuals who live outside of Lowell. The lack of owner occupancy makes a big impact in a neighborhood.

Issues that affect each of these neighborhoods are similar, if not the same:

- Public Safety is basic need in all of these neighborhoods
- Proper Inspectional Code Enforcement or lack thereof
- Owner occupancy or lack thereof
- Lack of investment in infrastructure maintenance

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?

I believe that the City of Lowell is headed in the right direction. Having run for City Council two years ago, I have a unique perspective in that, many of the issues I ran on previously have been addressed or are in the process. Examples of this direction;

- a. The Council hired a professional city manager. A manager with a firm grasp on the importance of fiscal accountability and eye toward improving the quality of service delivery in the City of Lowell
- b. Our regulatory boards have been completely turned around. No longer do the developers with an obvious conflict, rule our regulatory boards and more of our community has been invited to participate in this component of our government
- c. Our financial "house" is in much better order. As a city we have a greater understanding of our resources, a better handle on our expenditures and a financial planning process that is in place that will serve the purpose of enabling our City Council to make better, more informed decisions with tax payer dollars and set policy accordingly.
- d. Accessibility to our government has been much improved by enhancement of our city's website, the enhancement of our Neighborhood Services division and a reorganization of systems within City Hall to improve communication for folks within and outside the walls of City Hall.

- e. Accountability to the tax payer in the form of data collection as a means of improving service accessibility and service delivery within the City of Lowell.

My goal in running for City Council this time around is to work to ensure these initiatives are continued and that we as a City continue to evolve in the right direction, maintaining focus on our neighborhood voices, and the concerns of our taxpayers.

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

Personally, I feel that my taxes are appropriate considering the services that are available to Lowell residents. Neighboring communities have the misfortune of having to pay higher taxes, with prop 2 ½ override requests almost annually. Many of our neighboring communities consistently face the prospect of having to pare down the number of municipal employees and cut services. In contrast, the City of Lowell has a great number of resources that are residents may draw. So far, we've only had to eliminate unfilled, previously funded positions and combine departments with similar missions to streamline services and make city government for efficient in the delivery of services.

In speaking with folks, there are concerns that our assessment and taxation procedures deserve to be evaluated to ensure that our taxpayers are being taxed both adequately and fairly. For instance, just recently, there was a home in Pawtucketville that was far undervalued for a number of years. My response to that issue is how many more properties throughout the City are similarly undervalued. In the areas of taxation, I'd like to see a couple of areas addressed;

- a. Address apparent disparities in taxation. A property owner may be assessed and taxed fairly; the process by which one accesses the framework by which they are taxed is confusing. I believe this is a great project for the Assessors Office, the Tax Collector's Office and the CFO to undertake. Something to the effect of Taxation 101, an explanation of the parameters by which a property is assessed.
- b. The Abatement Process is another area of concern. Taxpayers, in general are vaguely aware that there is an abatement process. It would be very useful for taxpayers to know exactly who would qualify, what type of documentation/information is required, how much one might qualify for depending on the exemption and what their rights are under the law. Again, making this a user friendly and accessible system.
- c. A complete review to ensure that instances of inadequate assessment (as happened in Pawtucketville), never happen again.

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?

I would agree that there continues to be a discussion about the previous city manager and for good reason. When it was determined by the Council majority that he did not have their support for his continued employment, he was advised and asked to make a decision about his continued employment.

In the two weeks that followed this meeting between the former city manager, the Mayor and the Vice Mayor, the rumor mill in this city worked at warp speed, with two weeks of "mourning" and demonstrations from a group of individuals calling themselves, "People For Lowell". If you recall, "People For Lowell" was formed to, among other things, oust the six City Councilors who forced the departure of the previous city manager. The three city councilors who were in the minority over the decision to seek out a more capable City Manager, expressed their outrage with a lot of very public, nasty name calling of the majority of six. These two weeks culminated with a large group of individuals bearing signs that said, "I'm For Cox", standing en masse at a downtown location on a Saturday morning with thousands of pieces of paper that bore a photo of a rat and had written on it, "Remember the Rats" and listed out the six city councilors names. Interestingly enough, this particular Saturday was Earth Day and I happened to be downtown with hundreds of other clean up volunteers, to clean up the garbage that litters our streets and here is this group (under the guise of doing what is best for the City) that added thousands of pieces of trash in one fell swoop. Ultimately, this group did clean up the litter that they themselves had created, nevertheless, not a pretty sight. Up until this very day, a small, very vocal faction of supporters (developers who benefited from lax oversight by the administration and Inspectional Services, towing contracts that were awarded that had the appearance of collusion, boards that worked for one another and not for the residents of Lowell) maintain that we should go back to what we had.

In interviewing prospective city manager candidates, one candidate (Mr. Lynch) advised the City Council of the down graded Moody's bond rating, information that had been shared with the prior city manager, however, the prior city manager didn't feel that information was important enough to share. Nor did he feel compelled to share with his employers that the City of Lowell had received, not one, but two letters from the Department of Revenue about their concerns for the City of Lowell's financial stability. Upon arrival of the current City Manager, it became very clear that our administration practices required a systems overhaul. Compound these financial issues with the fact that the forecasting that was done for the FY07 budget was woefully inadequate. As a means of generating revenue the City Council voted on "fee" changes for the first time since the mid 1980's. In addition, other, very difficult decisions had to be made about how we as a City conducted our business.

Quite frankly, it is frightening to think, should a few candidates who are running for city council, actually become successful and get elected, they will work every single day to exploit power, increase the benefits to their friends and families and bring us all back to the Dark Ages. These folks are running with a clear purpose to remove our latest city manager and replace him with a manager of the same ilk as our former city manager.

It is no secret in this city that the former manager and I didn't see eye to eye and I did not appreciate the style by which he ran the business of our city.

April 2006 was a horrible time for a lot of folks in this city. Folks were afraid to speak out, neighborhoods were divided and lines were drawn. It has taken a little more than a year, for the current city manager to prove himself capable of managing all aspects of this city and these same folks are back with a sneaky agenda to pull us all back into the gutter. These candidates will say publicly that they deny that this is their motive and I know in fact that they are less than truthful with residents of the City of Lowell.

I am not interested in going back. I am fully on board to move the City of Lowell forward where everyone is held to the same standard, everyone serves to benefit equally and everyone benefits from a level playing field when dealing with our government.

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

My response to Question #2 will appropriately answer this question.

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.)

The City of Lowell is extremely fortunate to be on the receiving end of a large portion of State Education Funding and reimbursement for School Building Projects. I'd like to see us fully fund our obligation to our students as the overall, direct impact to our property taxes for each child is quite low. Unfortunately, our school funding in this City becomes a highly politicized process, with concerns over wasteful spending. I'd propose we settle that argument with an annual independent audit of our school budget that is made public, to settle all concerns of wasteful spending. Once again, accessibility to that data and transparency in the process leaves little to the imagination. And as a result we might not wind up with such a fight each year around budget time about what and how much we are going to fund our schools and we keep our focus on educating our children.

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)

In negotiating contracts, I feel it is important that we have a capable manager doing the business that elected officials cannot do, for fear of alienating constituencies and who is capable of being able to appropriately forecast over number of years revenue that will be available for pay raises and payment of benefits.

Every couple years, union negotiations get a hold of the entire city and the larger majority of folks who work in the private sector and/or small business owners are not privy to these benefits.

While undoubtedly, not every government employee makes a lot of money, the upside to government employment is the benefit entitlement that employee receives upon retirement. The costs associated with government employment go far beyond the years of service. It is the continued cost of providing healthcare insurance and providing pension benefits.

With that said, I feel that the union contract process should be as public and transparent as possible, settled in a timely manner and as fair as possible for both sides.

All our City Unions ask is fair consideration. All the taxpayer want from government is fair consideration in how we spend their money.

Many of the benefits provided are quite lucrative and increasingly burdensome to municipalities across the Commonwealth. I anticipate this will come to head in the next decade as communities across Massachusetts work to fully fund their health care trust funds (by 2010) and fully fund their pension funds (by 2028). The potential liability is daunting, running in the 100's of millions of dollars.

Yes, I would reject contracts that were not based in reality and unfair to the folks paying the bills. Union contracts have to be equitable for both parties involved; the employee and the taxpayer.

The other reality is that, all of the services in this city are provided by hard working individuals, who deserve a decent salary, health insurance, etc. If we as residents want services we have to pay for them.

Interestingly enough, our city unions have already made their determination as to who they would be supporting in the City Council elections and can say unequivocally, that I was not solicited by anyone of them for my opinion regarding union contracts or our City's Unions.

On a personal note; my husband is a 19 year veteran of the Department of Correction and an active member in the Massachusetts Correctional Officers Federated Union and am fully cognizant of the struggles faced by folks who are members of unions.

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)

In my mind, improving our bond rating and increasing our reserves go hand in hand. My thoughts on improving our reserves thereby increasing our bond rating;

- a. Forecast our revenue adequately and correctly.
- b. One time cash payments should not be used to offset tax rates, instead should be put into reserves or used for a planned or even unanticipated capital expense.
- c. Identifying avenues for growth and generating revenue streams.

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? (waittillnextyr)

Typically, when anticipating expenses in budgeting, the norm is to budget an increase of 2.5% to 3% to pay for the business of government. In my opinion, any thing over that would be the direct result of inadequate forecasting of revenue and expenditure and or the unanticipated increased expenditure (health insurance) or loss of revenue from another source that would ordinarily offset our cost as a community.

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)

First and foremost, these types of buildings only serve to pull our neighborhoods into a downward spiral. The buildings become blighted, vandalized, overgrown with vegetation, they run the risk of being broken into, someone could get hurt or set of fire, etc... Over the past year, the City of Lowell has pulled together a full accounting of all properties owned by the City of Lowell. We have already started to sell some of the properties off; however, there are many remaining. I think it prudent, particularly when looking at buildings with large and small footprints, to first consider the zoning that is in place on each of the properties to ensure that their zoned use is in line with the character of the neighborhood or in keeping with a long term planning strategy. While I'd like nothing better than to see blighted buildings torn down, mainly for safety and aesthetics; the cost of dismantling and disposing of the waste and potential site clean up can become quite costly.

As an overall issue to address all properties that have been formerly housed city services and/or have been taken through tax title, I'd be given to advocate for the Department of Planning and Development aggressively address this issue, but first, a Strategic Development Plan has to be compiled where we anticipate our future capacity needs and again ensure that zoning is in keeping with the neighborhood. With this assessment in place, this process will move swiftly and the properties would go out for bid for private development and/or recycled for public use.

By the way Joe, I drove by that building on West Sixth, just this afternoon and was appalled to see how deteriorated and dangerous the structure appears. My first thought, on what could be done with that site, given its' proximity to the park that is located behind it, was to rehab it into a community center for Centralville (for children's and community meeting events).

Additionally, a couple weeks back, I was in the Back Central neighborhood canvassing and happened to drive by the rear of the Butler School. I found it disturbing that this structure looked as terrible as it did and set in the midst of some gorgeous homes. I can only imagine the crime that this building attracts to that neighborhood.

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

I would support our Department of Planning and Development in formalizing a long term strategic planning and short term strategic goals in reenergizing these sights.

In the short term, the priority would be to appropriately develop the post office square site, due to its visibility and proximity to the Tsongas Arena, Downtown and UML. I'd like to see good planning for the remainder of Massachusetts Mills. Hopefully we can facilitate a good plan before the rest of the building falls in on itself. Right now, with the real estate market being what it is, it obviously wouldn't be prudent to build more condos. Another option, why

not create student housing for individuals and/or married student graduate housing for students who attend Middlesex Community College and Umass Lowell. Great way to fill those units, bring students downtown, be part of the process of building up our downtown with an eclectic mix of retail shops and services. We've been talking about how ways we can attract our college students to the downtown and capitalizing on the assets that we possess, which are MCC and UML.

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

The concept of a Creative Economy is a reality. Recently, Western Avenue Studios was able to extend the Artist Overlay District. As a result, more artist work space will be created where they may operate their small businesses affordably and additionally, live and work space will be incorporated into space currently being developed. If we are able to piece together, developments that are carefully sited (with proximity to public transportation and a walking neighborhood (perhaps, another option for the remainder of the Massachusetts Mills), we could continue to support our artists and attract other artists for live/ work space. Relative to Downtown, the Ayer Lofts were initially marketed as such, and apparently the property covenants were not in place which allowed many of the artists who initially purchased property in Ayer Lofts, to later sell it at market rate.

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

The Connector Corridor is a tremendous asset to Lowell. There is a great deal of potential to this corridor, particularly with the addition of Target, Lowe's, Motorola and the increased commercial activity at Cross Point, we have an excellent opportunity to completely revitalize the Connector Corridor. To be honest, I would rather have seen the Target developers work with Mass Highway to create an exit access directly onto the site, rather than further burden the ancient road infrastructure that is currently in place (Plain St.).

Instead of folks driving to NH to save a few dollars in sales tax, I'd rather we be the last stop. As gas prices continually fluctuate, it just isn't worth it to drive an extra 10-20 miles just save a couple of dollars (on sales tax).

Of particular interest is the Tanner St. corridor. The potential in this stretch is incredible. However, the costs to clean up many of the sites will be extreme. As I recall, some of the sites along Tanner St. qualify as Super Fund sites. It will be interesting to see how the plan for Tanner St. evolves, as we must also be aware that there is a neighborhood that we must take care to listen to their input as to what occurs in such close proximity to their homes.

Infrastructure

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

Waittilnextyear, I can only speak to what I am directly familiar with on a daily basis;

- a. Wood St to Rourke Bridge – On a number of occasions, it has taken me 20-25 minutes to get from Westford St. to the lights at Brunswick Bowling Alley. This area is so very congested with 31,000 vehicle trips per day and being touted as one of the worst intersections in the Commonwealth.
- b. Pawtucket St to University Ave Bridge – Traffic flows well, once you are actually on the bridge, getting to the bridge is another matter, because we have traffic rolling in from Pawtucket St, Salem St., Merrimack St. Father Morrisette Blvd and from UML (Fox Hall area), with thousands of vehicles merging into this traffic pattern from 5 different routes, it creates a terrific bottleneck.
- c. Aiken St. Bridge
- d. Bridge St. Bridge
- e. **Solutions –**
 - i. Absolutely, 100% enforcement of the ordinance that prohibits drivers from blocking an intersection. Quite literally, you need to have an officer(s) on foot, handing out citations as folks sit in traffic (in the middle of the intersection).
 - ii. One way bridges out of the downtown at peak times (particularly as we go into construction on the new University Ave Bridge.
 - iii. Construction of a new University Ave. Bridge, which is slated to occur in the next couple of years.

Begin the planning process now, for the eventual construction of a bridge to replace the Rourke Bridge. Considering the number of drivers that use that bridge each day to get to their homes, go to work, attend river festival events, access to Lowell General Hospital, patronize businesses that are located on the Pawtucketville side of the bridge, actual thought and planning must go into this process starting now, not five or ten years from now.

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*)

Jason, I appreciate where you are coming from and realize that our Fire Department does wonders with the funding it has available. One issue that concerns me and I am quite sure this is addressed logistically, is that an engine would have difficulty traversing one of our many bridges, in an effort to assist another company and because of the traffic bottleneck(s), response times have the potential of delay.

I would hope that closings are based on calls for service in a particular neighborhood. A higher percentage of calls would deem that a station remains open all of the time, versus a neighborhood that has a far lower rate of calls, would open less.

My response may not be popular, however, if we can continue to reinforce the education that the Fire Department provides (my daughter just received a fire safety presentation from Chief Pitta), the diligent inspections by the Fire Department of fire systems within housing

complexes and business, I think we can operate efficiently. I admire what fireman and policeman do for us each day to ensure that our community is safe.

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*)

Lowell has been a gateway for immigrants for decades. History has proven that being a gateway has spawned prosperity and then these same folks move on, out to the suburbs (Dracut, Chelmsford, etc.). Gentrification is not so much a concern, as immigrant communities move in, prosper and then move on.

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*)

Many communities around the US have put in place anti immigrant language and the results have not been what were anticipated. After these communities had flushed out undocumented workers, the outcome was a severe impact to their local economy with the end result of loss of revenue for the municipality. Many of these folks work for local companies (even though they're undocumented), own homes (also undocumented) and they in turn generate their monies back into the local economy and pay property taxes and so on.

Our Federal government has to step up and provide a workable plan. When I hear that there are 12 million undocumented workers in this country, I picture every single person living in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine being removed and then what do we have? As a country we should be enforcing our own laws, creating a system that effective and accountable.

However, as far as local enforcement, we already have on hand, laws on the books that prohibit the employment of undocumented workers. The downside is that they are not enforced. Up until recently, there was no way to verify a workers assertion that they were in fact a documented worker. Recently, Homeland Security has implemented a feature on their website which allows employers to verify a persons' legal status.

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)

On a daily basis, I read blogs, national, regional and local newspapers. TV news is generally sensationalized, more like tabloid TV.

I listen to local radio in the mornings as it does provide a perspective I might not ordinarily explore. Also, it's nice to know what they are saying about you, so I can address it then or at a later date.

As far as accuracy, I rate it within the context of the organization that is providing the information. Unfortunately, it forces you to listen and read between the lines and more often, particularly as it pertains to local issues, many of the issues become "insider issues" and less germane to the greater population, which in turn, forces these folks to seek out information elsewhere, which breeds a certain level of contempt and apathy for local politics.

Right, left or moderate in thinking...It really does not make one whit of difference as it enables me to exercise my brain and view issues from all angles prior to coming to any conclusion. I respect each one of these mediums for the folks that take the time to contribute to public discourse as we are all entitled to a position on any given issue.

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

Declined to answer

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

I wish to accomplish:

- Improvement of our neighborhoods
- Continued accessibility and transparency, with an eye toward continuous quality improvement.
- Continued financial accountability, transparency and sustainability
- Definitive outcomes in terms of service delivery
- Strong economic development
- Enhance public safety, which underscores a great deal of what we are trying to achieve as a city.