

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 Rodney Elliot

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?

First I'd like to say that all neighborhoods in the City are important and if there is an issue that needs to be addressed it should be. Regardless of what it is or where it is. We all pay taxes and have a right to expect a certain level of service from our City government.

I drive around the City like everyone else does. It's easy enough to spot the blighted areas that need attention. There is a need for more code enforcement and a general clean up in the Lower Highlands section of the City. I have filed a motion asking the City Manager to reestablish the task force charged with this type of activity. There is also the issue of gangs tied to the area that the Police department needs to address in much stronger terms.

The Middlesex Street area is on the verge of a renaissance. It will not happen if something isn't done with regard to the behavior of some residents of the shelter. I have spoke to a number of police officers that can tie crime in the area directly to the shelter. That is the reality of the situation whether we want to face it or stick our head in the sand. Something must be done to curb the disruptive behavior of a few individuals that is emanating from the Shelter. We will never be able to make that area a destination point for business development until the situation is dealt with permanently.

The Bridge Street/VFW corridor in Centerville has a lot of traffic issues. It is a State owned highway but there needs to be synchronization of signals for better traffic flow. I would propose having the "breakdown lane" coming from UML on the VFW highway over the Cox Bridge as a right turn lane.

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 am satisfied with the direction of the City. That's not to say we should be complacent about our future. We need to keep moving ourselves forward. Create opportunities instead of waiting for them. I am confident that our new professional manager will continue to lead us forward.

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

I am a strong advocate of keeping taxes as low as humanly possible. There are only a few ways that a City can reduce the tax rate. We can either cut spending, find new revenue sources or a combination of the two. If you watch the budget deliberations you know that I

introduce specific cuts each and every time. Sometimes I receive support other times I don't. But that will not deter me from questioning and offering solutions. I think there are always places that can be cut. It's a balancing act of cutting expenses and maintaining services. Generating new revenue sources is difficult. We are constrained by Massachusetts General Laws as to what we can establish a fee for. The City can't just decide to create new tax, for example a local meals tax, unless it is allowed under state law.

I filed a motion to have the City recover all funds that it could under the new medicare prescription laws. The City was not requesting reimbursements we were entitled to from the federal government. That motion resulted in \$600,000 in new, non-tax revenue in our City coffers. It is a new line revenue item in the budget that was a direct result of my request that the City fill out the paperwork and go after the money. I will make sure we are requesting every type of reimbursement that is available to us.

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?

The former City Manager had stated to me that he was planning on vacating the office in the near future. I had heard the rumors as everyone else did they he was planning on resigning. He had been indicating for quite some time that he was planning to move on. The Manager had been losing support of the Council for a period of time. This was not something that happened overnight. He had been in the position for six years. That is a very long time. There were many issues that led to the loss of support. I think he was treated fairly by the City Council.

There were also problems with the Manager keeping Councilors in the dark on issues, for example the settlement with the General Contractor at the Stoklosa School. The City Council is elected every two years for a full two year term to guide and direct the City. Part of the responsibility includes hiring or firing the City Manager based upon his/her performance. I felt it was time for a change. I think it was done in a fair and professional manner. The Council allowed the Manager to pick his date of departure.

For some people to say that there was no financial problem under the prior administration is troubling. We received letters from the Department of Revenue warning that we would not be able to set our tax rate if certain benchmarks were not met due to mismanagement that were not forwarded to the Council. We went from a positive free cash position to a negative free cash position. There were a stack of utility bills that the City just did not pay from FY2006 to make it look like the ledgers were in balance. That is unheard of. Councilors are not at City Hall on a day to day basis. We have to trust the people we have managing the City and that is the "check and balance" government operates under. We have to believe that they're giving us all the information we need to make an informed decision. I did not feel that I was getting that information and felt I was in the dark trying to make important decisions on behalf of the taxpayers. That is not acceptable. No one wanted to embarrass Manager Cox but he has brought this to a point where the inadequacies of his tenure need to be brought to light.

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

Bernie Lynch has done an excellent job leading the City so far. I point to his FY2008 budget to begin with. The document was the highest quality budget I have received in my 10 years on the Council. Many of the questions I have asked over the years were answered in that document. There were historical analyses of revenue that I had asked for repeatedly in the past and never received. It was clear and concise. The fact that we have what we expect to be our tax rate (pending approval from Department of Revenue) set before the election speaks volumes as to the quality of the document and information contained in it. I feel the Manager has straightened out the ship and we're headed in the right direction.

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.)

There is a per pupil minimum that is calculated by the State that the City must fund or exceed. You must be within 95% of that number and be working towards 100%. The City needs to make progress towards the 100% funding requirement to be in compliance with State law and not jeopardize State aid for schools. We should do all that we can to ensure that our state aid is not in jeopardy.

My opinion is that money is important but does not solve everything. It is a component of better schools but not the save all. I am a strong advocate of parental involvement. Without involvement from parents you will not make progress with the most at risk youth. Requiring children to read a little every night and helping with there homework is critical. Leading by example can only be done at home. If the parents aren't interested the children aren't interested. Children need their parents to show them that education is the priority and they can and will excel.

Students who have parents that participate in their education do better than those that do not. If a child wants to learn there are so many opportunities available in the Lowell Public Schools. They just have to take advantage of what is provided.

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)

There are provisions in some Union Contracts that I do not agree with. For example a police officer receiving a stipend for wearing his/her name tag. It is said that after negotiations if both sides are unhappy with the deal then it probably is a fair deal. I feel that pay scales for rank and file employees are comparable to similar communities. We do need to pay a fair wage to retain a skilled workforce. However, we need to make sure we are not on the high end of the salary spectrum. I am more concerned with contracts of supervisors and how they compare to similar communities. As part of the contract ratification process I would want a comparison done by the Manager to verify that the pay scales are comparable. I would vote against any contract that I felt would unfairly burden future generations.

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)

The options are really pretty straightforward. We have to rebuild our reserves. To rebuild our reserves we must either reduce spending or increase revenue or a combination of the two. There is really no other way to do it. The only other way is to underestimate your revenue which will result in a natural buildup of cash reserves at year end. Currently the City is in a zero free cash position. That is far better than the negative free cash position we were in last year at this time. Should we have free cash at the end of FY2008 the Council could vote to place an amount in a stabilization fund. I would support an action of that kind. This type of action shows the Bond rating agencies that we have cash reserves and Management puts a premium on maintaining them by segregating them from the general operating budget. I have long advocated a 5 year capital plan. The City Manager and the Chief Financial Officer are putting that plan together. The rating agencies look favorably on long term planning.

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)

The target percentage should always be zero. The budget should only increase if absolutely necessary. If at all possible new offsetting revenue sources should be explored before a tax increase. That has always been my philosophy and it will never change. If we go in saying the target is 2-1/2% as a policy, there will be budget increases of 2-1/2% to reflect that policy. Again, there are only two things you can do, cut spending or increase revenue.

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)

The first thing that has to happen with old school buildings is that the School Committee must declare them surplus from a school perspective. After that the Council can take action. My personal opinion is that the buildings should be sold unless there is some other imminent public use.

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

The Post Office Garage site has gone out for a Request for Proposals in the past. It has not generated the type of interest we would expect. If the Arena brought in more shows that people wanted to attend I believe the parcel would generate more interest.

Mass Mills is a privately owned development. The City should offer any services it can to keep the project moving forward. There is an issue with fire protection that I would like the Manager to try and resolve. The problem is that when the Mills were constructed in the 18th century they didn't take into account modern fire permit requirements. We need to make sure any development is safe and would have fire department access if it was every needed.

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

This City has been on the cutting edge of Artist live/workplace development. Extending of the Artist District was one form of support the City Council took to entice Artists to live and work in our City. If this type of support would help in other areas of the City I would support it.

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

The Connector Corridor needs to be cleaned up. It is a gateway to the City and its condition is deplorable at times. The changes in the traffic pattern with Middlesex Street should help with access.

Infrastructure

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

Bridge/VFW; All of the Bridges to Pawtucketville; Pawtucket/Fletcher

Lawrence/Andover; Lord Overpass/Underpass; Chelmsford/Parker. There are more but these are just a few. If you put 106,000 people in 13 square miles there is going to be traffic. Wherever we can put traffic signalization we should. Wherever signalization can be improved we should.

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*)

Closing firehouses is a very difficult call. I would defer to our fire professionals. I have the utmost respect for our new Fire Chief. Chief Pitta is a seasoned fire professional. He understands the City's fire risk areas better than I. I would be inclined to follow his professional direction.

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*)

It depends on whether the immigrant population chooses to assimilate into the general population and the relative size of the immigrant population to the population as a total. An overwhelming influx of any immigrant population to one geographic area is challenging. A regular, systematic, sustainable immigration flow is preferable. We have seen the effects of large migrating populations from New Orleans to Texas and the effects this has had on entire communities. It's difficult to assimilate a large population all at once. Another downfall is that very cheap, sometimes inferior, housing is in demand. Lowell will always have low to moderately priced housing due to the stock of housing contained within the City limits. That does not mean that it has to be substandard. It's all in how we manage it and whether we receive assistance from our State and Federal governments.

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*)

I would not favor any sanctuary city or local regulations that would shelter illegal aliens. I am in favor of legal immigration to the United States. Coming into this country without proper documentation is illegal. As it is in every other country in the world. Terrorism is directly linked to border control and enforcement. All laws of the United States of America should be enforced and followed by all. Not just the laws we feel are just or that we think are unjust. That is not the way a country of laws works. We don't get to decide if we like the law in order to obey it. This is a national issue and one that is not under the purview of the Lowell city council. Our power in this area is limited.

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*)

All of the above with the exception of magazines. Part of my job at EPA is to review all of the regions newspapers on a daily basis for various types of news stories. I review local newspapers from Maine to Rhode Island to national papers such as the New York Times and Boston Globe. I also read the Lowell Sun and listen to the local radio station WCAP. I talk to people in the Community all the time. Whether I am out at the supermarket or I'm coaching one of my two soccer teams people always want to chat about community issues.

I find the local radio station to be highly inaccurate. They do not research their information. I have found that most of the stand alone stories in the local newspaper are based in fact but that the Sunday political column is based on fiction. That is from direct personal experience.

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

I understand he isn't currently in an elected position but he is running for President. I admire John Edwards because of the personal tragedy he endured losing his son and the way he has handled himself. If I lost one of my children I'm not sure I could keep going the way he has.

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

My greatest desire is to keep taxes as low as possible for our residents. I want to develop a solution to the flooding problem that has plagued residents of Pawtucketville. I want to see the odor control problem at the wastewater treatment plant resolved for the people in Belvidere and Centerville once and for all. I want to make sure the new University Avenue bridge stays on the current timetable and is not pushed back by the State. I would like to see the completion of the Hamilton Canal District with a nanotechnology component and a new courthouse.