

**2005 LeftinLowell.com Lowell City Council  
Candidate Questionnaire  
Kristin Ross-Sitcawich**

- 1. Identify the specific sections of the city that you consider "problem areas".**
- 2. What are "the problems" with those sections of the city and what specifically do you propose to correct them?**

"Problem areas" could be defined as high crime, quality of life and density issues. Many of these issues are problematic to specific areas of the city such as the Lower Highlands, the Acre, Lower Belvidere and Centerville. The problematic issues associated with these with these sections of the city would be best addressed through police deployment changes, proactive law enforcement, community education, zoning changes and a significantly increased effort to involve the residents of Lowell in the decision making process year round, not just at election time.

- 3. What specific plans do you have to attract major business/industry into the city?**

More resource within the Planning & Development Office must to be channeled in the direction of expanding our commercial base. Over the past several years, the city of Lowell has taken the avenue of "least resistance" in terms of development. As a city, we have been shortsighted in our goals, in capitalizing primarily on the booming residential real estate market. We have sought out residential tax base gains through residential development and in doing so, have "given away" much of our valuable commercial space to residential development.

There are many creative avenues we can take as a means of attracting business & industry. But first, we must figure what exactly we need/ have to attract. The types of businesses we should be seeking to attract are bio technical/ research industries. We have to capitalize more effectively are partnership with UMASS Lowell.

Other businesses we should be looking at our back office operations for larger companies such as utility companies, mutual funds & banking industries.

We have the labor pool to accommodate this need and with our proximity to Boston we are in an ideal spot for operational costs that are significantly lower relative to operational costs in the Boston area.

Of course, we can offer the tax incentives (federal & state), but I'd like to see the city of Lowell allow private businesses to piggy back onto the municipal health insurance plans for their employees and seek out other creative incentives.

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

The City of Lowell is rapidly heading in the direction of becoming a bedroom community. Bedroom communities have one thing in common - High Taxes.

The City of Lowell just can't seem to help themselves in giving up valuable commercial property. The significant residential development in this city has come at a price for neighborhoods. This price has been the decimation of many of neighborhoods, quality of life

issues within our neighborhoods and an increased burden on our public services (ie: fire, police & public schools).

Our downtown area, while the progress has been tremendous, truly needs to be more diversified in its offerings. Offering more venues for all socioeconomic levels, from pricier higher end boutiques to more moderately priced establishments where a resident can purchase a simple item, like a sweater without having to go the Mall. I say this after having a conversation with an elderly woman (lives downtown) who wanted to purchase sweater and could not locate one that was moderately priced without having gone to the Mall or surrounding communities to shop.

We also have to plan farther into our future in regards to adequate elderly housing for our baby boomer generation. We will not have the affordable housing units available for these folks when they reach that point in their lives.

**5. Do you support or oppose the suggestion that the planning and zoning boards should be elected, not appointed positions? Why?**

I absolutely support the notion that our Regulatory Boards should be elected. At the minimum, it opens up our regulatory boards for fresh perspective every few years. Elected offices are good, it makes those that serve more accountable to the residents/tax payers. The decisions these boards render have a very direct and life long impact. By all rights, the residents of Lowell deserve the opportunity to render change amongst its regulatory boards. This would force term limits and **would allow public review** of sorts. Too much power is given in the appointment process, in this city. Appointments are typically given to those that are "friendly" with the city administration, not based on qualifications such as education and/or professional experience.

Our city administration has historically utilized these boards for the best interest of few, not to the benefit of the majority.

This would entail some type of change to our Plan E charter. I do believe charters are meant to be amended as times change and as needs change.

I do believe, at the minimum, residents should be allowed to speak their peace regarding confirmations and appointments. If we can put this public review directly in the laps of our city councilors, we hold councilors directly responsible for their confirmation votes.

**6. What will you do to improve Lowell's image to people living outside the city who still consider it a crime ridden drug haven?**

Lowell's image is largely discolored by gang activity, crime. In terms of crime and gang issues, the city council, the police and neighborhood groups can work together in being more proactive.

The Police could take a hard look at deployment issues, focusing on areas where crimes occur at their highest numbers. Introduce new initiatives related to neighborhood watch groups, to assist the police in being proactive in regards to street crime issues.

In terms of gang activity, we can address this from several angles. First, work with our delegation in introducing a 3 strikes initiative for gang activity with sentencing enhancements, taking the more violent & habitual offenders off of the streets.

**Secondly**, increase education and awareness within our schools, Boys & Girls Clubs, to our families through neighborhood action groups, City wide Parent Council. Our children and our parents need to be educated in terms of gang activity recognition and legal ramifications.

This is an unfortunate reality within our school system, but we have to face it head on.

**Thirdly**, UTEC, is an invaluable, underutilized resource within the city. The work that the folks at UTEC have accomplished is nothing short of amazing. They have a direct connection to the teens of this city and have their fingers on the pulse of what is happening on our streets. We should be drawing UTEC into the fold by asking to make presentations to the Police Dept, community groups, and neighborhood groups about programs and initiatives that provide alternatives to gang involvement. The Police Department, if possible, should have a Gang Unit, assigning a small group of officers to work closely with UTEC in identifying gang activity & taking a proactive approach to crimes committed by those gang members.

**Fourthly**, I would suggest City Administration, the Police Dept and UTEC work closely together through frequent meetings, addressing issues of importance in a timely manner (teen & police relations) and look into using a portion of the Law Enforcement Trust Fund as seed money for after school and summer jobs programs for our teens. Our streets have to be safe for our families and visitors. Residents, particularly, should not be held hostage in their homes because gang activity on their streets. In being proactive in our approach we have a great opportunity to lessen crime and improve our image.

**7. John Cox has been Lowell City Manager for over 5 years. What are his assets? What are his liabilities?**

John Cox is first and foremost, a professional politician. He is very well liked in this city, in large part, I believe due to the number of individuals that have benefited from his administration. He appears to be able to negotiate well with unions. **His liabilities:** Transparency issues in regards to our regulatory boards. Extremely cozy relationships with a handful of real estate developers who have made fortune over the past 5 years. Developers who have run rough shod through this city with obscene development practices. His style of management is autocratic in nature. He does not take well to individuals who question his policies. He manages in the style of a strong Mayor, rather than a manager who is employed by the City Council on behalf of the residents of the City of Lowell.

Based on information I have received over the past few years, he has retaliated with holding back information to councilors and/or pushing aside constituent requests that have been put forth by those councilors who oppose him. He brings a style of management to City Hall that is not dissimilar to the style of management within the Massachusetts Legislature. This type of management runs counter productive to our long term success.

**8. If a motion was made to vacate the office of city manager would you support/oppose it? Why?**

Like any employee, whether it be in the public or private sector, an employee is held to a standard of integrity and performance. He/she should be given the opportunity to improve on deficiencies within a given time frame. If these deficiencies have not been improved upon, then I would move to vacate the position. Our City Administrator is too valuable to the overall function of our city in the day to day operations. If an administrator is not performing, then he/she would need to be asked to vacate and replaced with a Professional Manager

with a solid educational background in municipal administration and solid professional experience (preferably someone from outside of the city with no life long ties to the city).

**9. *Is/should John Cox be an issue in this campaign? If so, how will you take back policy decisions that have been preempted by the city manager?***

To some degree, the City Manager is an issue as he holds one of the most important positions in this city. His actions are answerable to the City Councilors and ultimately answerable for his actions to the residents of Lowell. Our regulatory boards are too often used to benefit a very small minority of developers and business owners in Lowell. In truth, our regulatory boards are working for the residents of Lowell, not for the City Manager. Our tax dollars pay the yearly stipends and for the health insurance offered to our Board appointees.

**10. *Other than you (if you are a present councilor), who is the most effective/hardest working city councilor?***

I believe that all of the councilors work hard, they all love this city. I believe that Dick Howe is more likely one of the hardest working councilors. He has been there the longest (testament to the integrity and commitment he brought to the job as a city councilor). The second councilor, who honestly tries to get to every neighborhood meeting, responds immediately to constituent concerns and truly committed to the residents of this city is Jim Millinazzo.

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

Yes, I do believe that property taxes are high, but not nearly as high as many of our surrounding communities. Our residential tax rate has actually been lowered, but the market value of our homes has increased, thereby nullifying any tax savings. The only real means we have of lowering our residential tax burden is to obtain cash flow from the expansion of our commercial base and seek out alternative means of cash flow and wiser spending.

**12. *Where do you feel the budget could possibly be reined in, regarding spending?***

Areas that may reign in spending:

**Revisit our Waste Management Contract and Mandatory Recycling:** These two go hand in hand as our current recycling rate is less than 8%. If we increase or mandate recycling to well over 50%, this city will save well over a million dollars per year in disposal costs. Recyclable materials are in high demand, particularly overseas. The taxpayers are paying to have their waste disposed and then the waste management company turns around and sells the recycled goods on the market. As an additional source of revenue, we should be demanding a portion of the proceeds in the resale of our recycled materials from the Waste Management Company.

**Centralizing Supply and Service Procurement** for the city's operations (i.e.: office supplies, services and fuel). In centralizing the procurement process, each department orders only what they require and central supply has greater leverage in negotiating bulk pricing. Furthermore, if we were to enter into collaborative purchasing agreements with

surrounding cities and towns, we lower our purchase prices to a greater degree because our purchase power has increased.

**Re-Examine Health Care Service Procurement.** The City of Lowell pays an extraordinary amount of money each year to provide health insurance to municipal employees. We should take a hard look at how we can lower our costs and meet or exceed the quality of healthcare services that are delivered.

Perhaps we could bring our municipal health care insurance under the umbrella of the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) or partner with surrounding cities and towns in a health insurance collaborative. This collaborative could be called, The Merrimack Valley Group Insurance Collaborative. Again, the more units (people) we have to negotiate, the lower the cost of healthcare insurance. Additionally, as a means of attracting small businesses/start ups to Lowell, we can offer this collaborative health insurance to them.

**13. Do you feel televising the Planning and Zoning board meetings a good idea? What about subcommittee meetings?**

Yes, I believe all Planning, ZBA, Conservation Board, Historic and Subcommittee Meetings should be televised. We are far behind in terms of access. Televising meetings, posting agendas & transcripts of our meetings online can only open access to City Hall and make city government more transparent.

**14. Where do you stand on the 4 and 4 plan? Do you feel this issue is getting a fair hearing in the media? If you are against the 4 and 4 plan, what other solutions would you implement to increase the police presence downtown at night?**

*Did Not Answer*

**15. Do you feel there is a conflict of interest with the city boards and developers? If so, what would you want to see happen to correct this?**

Yes, I do believe that there is a conflict of Interest with our city boards and developers. Many of the developers, builders and suppliers sit on our boards and do a great deal of business amongst themselves, creating a significant monopoly in the development industry in this city. Furthermore, when a builder or developer does not perform as he/she is supposed to, they are not reprimanded nor are they held accountable for their actions.

I believe, if one is an active builder or developer in this city, they should not be serving on our regulatory boards. They will not regulate each other.

**Measures to correct the Problem:**

- a.) Replace every last board member, some have been on these boards for as long as I have been alive. Not only do taxpayers pay the yearly stipend and the health insurance, but I do believe their service ties into pensions (at taxpayer expense, of course)
- b.) Do not allow holdover appointments. This puts board members in the position of pushing a certain agenda in order to keep his/her appointment. This points back to the issue of accountability to the residents of the City of Lowell.

c.) Post all board openings in the local paper and online, accepting applicants with educational and professional experience

d.) Seriously look at amending our charter, to allow our regulatory boards to be elected.

The distinction has to be made, that our regulatory boards are present to look after the interests of the residents as a majority and answerable to that same majority.

**16. Do you think the following is a good idea: getting the tax rate projection for budget increases proposed in the spring before approving new budget?**

Absolutely! Then we know exactly how much we have to spend the following year.

**17. Will you support the next phase of the School Building Plan (two new elementary schools; one to replace the old Morey school, and one to replace the Varnum and Moody schools)?**

Yes, I support the next phase of the School Building Plan. I support plans to enhance our children's education. Our education is instrumental to our economic success.

**18. Do you feel a recycling plan for the downtown area (businesses and residential) is needed? What steps what they take to implement such a program?**

Yes, I do feel that a plan for downtown recycling efforts is needed. Provisions should be incorporated into the planning process for space for recycling by downtown residents. The City should be expanding efforts to work on behalf of the downtown residents in procuring a cost effective and efficient waste disposal process.