

Syracuse Post-Standard Questionnaire

Biographical Info

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Experience: Active in movements for peace, justice, labor, and the environment since the late 1960s

Community Involvement: South Side Newsstand, South Side Coalition, Public Power Coalition, Syracuse Municipal Broadband Initiative, Social Economy Network

Endorsements: Green Party of Onondaga County, Socialist Party of Central New York

Campaign Message: Community Service and Positive Change

Campaign Questions

Q: Do you think the city should be more involved in the operation of the school district? If so, in what way?

A: I oppose mayoral control of the schools. Any move toward mayoral control will just start a turf war that will benefit nobody. The mayor and council should be cooperative partners with the school board.

For a common councilor, that partnership means taking care of the council's primary responsibilities with respect to the schools: first, fully funding the public schools and,

second, reducing the problems in the community that flow into the schools, namely, the unemployment, crime, low education, and despair in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty segregated by race and class.

With respect to funding for the city schools, the council should support regular planned increases at least equal to inflation in the city contribution to the school budget instead of making the school budget a political football every year. Let the school board deal with their constituents and the complications of state and federal funding without adding the city to their problems. I would favor financial independence for the school district like the rest of districts in the county.

The council should also push for the principles of sufficient and equitable funding of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity's successful lawsuit on New York City public school funding to be applied statewide by the state legislature.

Any additional funding we secure should go toward universal full-day pre-K, after school programs, reducing class sizes toward 15, teacher training and certification, and building and equipment upgrades.

I support Say Yes to Education, but also believe we need a strong vocational/technical school options as well, including the redevelopment of Central Tech. As someone who went to an Ivy League college but has preferred blue-collar work in construction and transportation to a desk job, I appreciate both types of education and both types of work. Our educational system should provide and value both.

With respect to reducing the community problems associated with concentrated poverty that flow into the schools, I discuss my anti-poverty and job creation proposals for a Community Hiring Hall, a Municipal Development Bank, and other reforms under other sections of this questionnaire.

Money alone will not solve the problems of the city's schools, which are rooted in concentrated poverty in the city that brings the problems that make learning difficult from the streets into the schools. Economically integrated public schools are single most effective way to improve the achievement levels of poor, middle, and affluent students alike. While improving school achievement is primarily the school board's responsibility, I believe councilors should be advocates in conjunction with the school board to expand Public School Choice so that all our public schools have balanced mixes of low-, middle-, and upper-income students from all ethnicities. I will discuss this more below under the question on bringing more middle- and upper-middle income families into the city.

Q: Can you describe a single creative idea you'd pursue to remedy Syracuse's problem of vacant homes?

A: No one magic bullet will solve the vacant homes problem.

First, the city must preserve the vacant homes' value by immediately boarding up and securing the property with the permaseal method before scavengers steal the copper piping, furnace, appliances, and so forth.

Then, we need to tackle one of the long-term root causes: discrimination, redlining, and disinvestment from minority and working class neighborhoods, which goes back decades to the Home Ownership Loan Corporation of the New Deal and the Federal Home Administration since World War II. The disinvestment from low-income and minority neighborhoods continues to this day, as evidenced by studies documenting predatory lending and mortgage and insurance discrimination against minority neighborhoods reported in the Post-Standard in recent years.

The city should establish a Municipal Development Bank with two departments: (1) A consumer loan department provide home mortgage and improvement and other consumer loans to neighborhoods that have been redlined and discriminated against for decades, and (2) A business development department to help plan, finance, and advise new community-owned businesses.

The consumer loan side of the bank can increase the investment in home ownership and improvement in the South Side and West Side neighborhoods where most of the abandoned homes are. The business development side can help aspiring contractors in these communities develop the capacity to bid on city and other government and private contracts for home rehabilitation and improvement.

The Living Wage Ordinance should also be reformed to include a Community Hiring Hall where city residents, particularly those in the neighborhoods with the most abandoned homes, can get training and jobs in the building trades, which will be a steady source of work as we retrofit the city's structures for Green Building standards.

Community Hiring Hall will also be a means of helping city residents and particularly ethnic minorities get into the labor market and particularly on jobs with city contractors. Data collected by the county Commission on Human Rights shows that African Americans and other people of color are getting consistently over many years one-half to one-third of the jobs with city contractors they would get if they got a share proportional to their share of the city's population. A reformed Living Wage Law would require contractors and city departments to hire qualified people from the Community Hiring Hall if they could not meet from their usual sources of labor equal opportunity employment goals updated from the 1970s goals to reflect the current proportions of ethnic minorities in the city. The Community Hiring Hall would also help individuals seeking work to get training and apprenticeship programs as well as jobs with private and well as city employers.

Good jobs for low-income people now un- or underemployed will help reduce home abandonment by expanding the number of inner city residents who can afford to buy and rehabilitate an abandoned home.

We also need to stop subsidizing upscale developments and large landlords with public resources. Housing funds should be targeted for affordable housing developed by non-profit organizations.

Another reform should be an ordinance for what is called Inclusionary Zoning or Fair Share Housing that requires developments above a minimum number of units to include a portion of low- and moderate-income units.

Q: What are some key decisions made by City Hall on Destiny USA that you'd agree with and what are some that you would've handled differently?

A: I opposed the Destiny USA project every step of the way.

It was a bad economic policy to bet the future of Syracuse on tourism and consumerism at a time when household and business debt and the US trade deficit were soaring to record levels, a bubble that was bound to burst, as we saw in 2008 (and as I predicted in my statement, Sustainable Syracuse: The Green Alternative to Destiny USA, during the 2005 mayoral campaign and have posted on my current campaign web site).

It was wrong for the city not to appeal the court decision that gave the developer a 45-year property tax exemption on the existing Carousel Mall. It was wrong for the city to give massive tax breaks to the Destiny project through a PILOT agreement. It was even more outrageous to do this through the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency to go around Common Council. SIDA agency should focus on its mission of industrial development. I am a strong supporter of targeting public economic development incentives to manufacturing. The high value-added nature of manufacturing creates wealth and serves as the economic foundation for the service, retail, and government sectors. Retail developers should be able to sink or swim on their own. Public resources should not subsidize them.

It was bad urban design to build a big mall that sucked away retail business from downtown and the neighborhood business districts with massive subsidies. The long-term plan for the lake shore should be a people's waterfront that takes advantage of the water for recreational purposes. The inner harbor area should be developed as a mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood that can model green, sustainable neighborhood development for the rest of the city, as envisioned in the Andres Duany plan on the display at the inner harbor. If the mall goes under and no other commercial real estate interest snaps it up, the city should commission some planners, architects, and engineers to explore how to retrofit it into a mixed-use, mixed-income development, with residences as well as retailers.

Q: Can you cite a specific example of a city department that could be eliminated through consolidation?

A: No. Not complete elimination. But I am open to proposals.

I believe that the city's and the suburb's problems and future are bound together and that we need countywide metropolitan coordination of policies. At the same time, we need town and neighborhood scale governmental institutions that enable people to participate in and feel ownership of their own communities.

So I think part of the road to consolidation of government functions and services is developing a federated metropolitan structure that both gives people a sense that the metropolitan government is accountable and also that they retain certain powers in their own communities.

I think the most promising areas in which we can begin to move toward this type of structure are (1) Metropolitan Tax and Revenue Sharing and (2) Metropolitan Public School Choice

Consolidating countywide progressive tax reform and revenue sharing would be a good first step that would help people see that they are bound together in one metropolitan economy and future. Expanding public school choice across the city-suburban border would improve public schools and thus be another confidence booster that could lay the ground for further cooperation and consolidation down the road.

In the meantime, I am open to any proposal for consolidation of a function or service on its own merits. But politics are the biggest obstacle to consolidation and I think that tax fairness and expanded public school choice are the best first steps in building a regional consensus for more comprehensive consolidation and modernization.

Specifically on Metropolitan Tax and Revenue Sharing, I think the city should initiate discussions of countywide property tax sharing and a progressive income tax coupled to property tax reductions. If that goes nowhere, I think the city should consider a progressive city income tax, including on the incomes of the over 40,000 commuters to the city. Serious consideration of that proposal might get the metropolitan tax and revenue sharing discussion going. The inequalities of municipal property tax bases and tax jurisdiction competition for businesses and residents undermine cooperation for effective, coordinated metropolitan policies, from quality schools to economic development. The regressive nature of the property and particularly sales taxes as the principal sources of local tax revenue makes the disparities between inner city and suburbs only greater, hence the need for progressive tax reform.

On Metropolitan Public School Choice, as I discuss under other sections of this questionnaire, I believe the city should initiate discussions for extending public school choice to suburban school districts and preferably countywide.

Q: Do you believe you can reduce the cost of city government? How would you do it?

A: Cut Tax Expenditures: I would propose a Tax Expenditure Budget to bring greater scrutiny and reductions of this substantial form of municipal spending. The budget

adopted annually by the city of Syracuse should include tax expenditures in addition to direct spending, as is done by the federal government, New York State, 40 other states, and Washington DC. Though often described as “tax breaks” to encourage economic development, tax expenditures constitute a major category of spending by the city. They are often open-ended, poorly understood, little-scrutinized entitlement programs that create fiscal problems. Indications are that they are comparable in size to direct spending by the city. For example, according to Forbes magazine (May 29, 2000), Syracuse gave away \$2 billion in tax breaks, grants, and other economic incentives over a five-year period in the late 1990s. That is \$400 million a year and close to the combined city and school direct spending budgets over that time period. This number does not appear to include most of the property tax exemptions for non-profit and governmental organizations in the city. Cutting tax expenditures is where we can cut the most fat and increase revenues to cover other expenses.

Demand New Federal Priorities and Revenue Sharing: We should also be getting back much more of our federal tax dollars. We should demand cuts in military spending and federal tax expenditures (i.e., Corporate Welfare) and greater revenue sharing. The city is incurring great future costs by delaying infrastructure maintenance. The cost of updating the city’s sewer and systems is estimated to be \$2.6 billion. The city cannot pay for this and other capital costs without getting back more of the federal taxes we pay. Too much of our federal taxes go to military spending (over \$650 billion a year) and individual and business tax expenditures (over \$1 trillion a year). The city should work with other municipalities across the country to demand that federal representatives cut military spending and tax expenditures and institute revenue sharing. The centralized collection of progressive and ecological taxes is more efficient and the decentralized administration of spending is more effective.

While I would not oppose such proposals as one recently introduced in Congress and endorsed by Mayor Driscoll for dedicated funding from special taxes on certain manufacturers to pay for water and sewer infrastructure modernization, I prefer the broader approach of new priorities (social investment over military spending and corporate welfare) and per capita revenue sharing for local decisions on spending priorities. In addition to water and sewer infrastructure, we have many other infrastructure needs (mass transit, clean energy, green buildings, etc.) and social needs (schools, child care, affordable housing, jobs for the unemployed, elder care, etc.). For reasons of fiscal prudence as well as political efficacy, I think we should advocate a broader approach of new priorities and revenue sharing rather than advocate for each need a new special tax that is not linked to cuts in military spending and corporate welfare.

Q: What specific initiatives would you implement to reduce crime?

A: I support four crime prevention initiatives:

1. After-school, weekend, and summer youth development programs in our schools, parks, and community centers. These programs should provide children with education

and tutoring, sports and recreation, and arts and technology programs in a safe, adult supervised environment. Numerous studies document that most youth crimes are committed between 3 and 6 pm.

2. Full day pre-K educational childcare programs. A 2007 Rand Corporation study of numerous early childhood educational programs showed that every dollar invested in pre-K educational child care programs has returned between two to seventeen dollars in savings to government due to reduced future costs of various forms of public assistance and incarceration.

3. Drug and alcohol abuse treatment on demand. A 1990s California study showed that every dollar spent on drug and alcohol abuse treatment saves the public \$7, largely through reduced crime.

4. Jobs for all through public works and services. A 1997 study in the Review of Economics and Statistics documents the strong correlation in the US of unemployment and low wages with both property crimes and violent crimes. The city should develop a public jobs program that can put unemployed and underemployed people to work at living wages fulfilling unmet needs in public works and services. It should fund what it can with its own resources and demand funding for a full jobs for all program from state and federal representatives.

I oppose two supposed anti-crime initiatives proposed by mayoral candidates: a youth curfew and surveillance cameras.

Youth curfews would just add more unnecessary work to a police force that already has its hands full catching people that commit property and violent crimes. The evidence abounds that youth curfews don't reduce other crimes. They only criminalize youth being out at night.

Surveillance cameras impart a false sense of security and violate such civil liberties and right to privacy and presumption of innocence without reducing street crimes. Most street crimes are crimes of opportunity, not the result of well thought out plans that take account of surveillance cameras. In England, the country with the most surveillance cameras, studies show better street lighting (which reduces opportunities for crime) works better than surveillance cameras, which only reduce traffic violations. A 2009 study by researchers at UC Berkeley on surveillance cameras in US cities found that they had no effect as a deterrent, no effect on conviction rates, and only displaced property crime near surveillance camera installations to other locations.

Q: How would you create trust and a productive relationship between police and residents of city neighborhoods, especially the neighborhoods that suffer from the most violence and crime?

A: Community Policing: The police department should prioritize community policing where officers walk beats, get to know their neighborhood's residents, and focus on

helping solve problems, abate nuisances, and resolve conflicts before they escalate. When the community sees the police as people helping in their neighborhood rather than strangers patrolling in high-tech cars and other equipment, relations should improve.

Police Athletic Leagues: The police should sponsor Police Athletic Leagues in several sports for children, youth, and young adults. With police officers serving as coaches, referees, and umpires, it will establish good community/police relations, as I experienced playing in PAL's in California as a youth.

Strengthen the Citizen Review Board: The longstanding incapacity of the CRB to deal with public complaints about police behavior has further undermined community trust in the police. It is long past time to reform the CRB law to strengthen its power and independence. It should have subpoena powers and the right to initiate legal action independently of approval by the city's corporation counsel. It should also cover complaints against state police and county sheriffs now patrolling city streets. Equally important, pursuant to previous court decisions, the city should insist on negotiation into the next police union contract a provision insuring police officer participation in CRB hearings.

Q: Would you continue the practice of awarding many engineering contracts without competitive bidding?

A: No. The \$8.1 million no-bid contract to C&S Engineers to design Hancock Airport renovations earlier this year reeks of the legalized bribery of pay-to-play campaign contributions. C&S may be the best firm for the job. But it should have won it by competitive bidding, not by its political connections and a mayoral-council deal to use a city charter loophole to get around competitive bidding. All but very small projects should be competitively bid.

Q: What will you do to bring more middle- and upper-middle class families into the city and its schools?

A: First, let's help the families already here become securely middle class. A number of reforms can help do this, including:

- Enforcing and expanding the coverage of the Living Wage law.
- Developing a Community Hiring Hall to help more of city residents get living wage jobs.
- Developing a Municipal Development Bank to extend credit to neighborhoods that have been redlined and discriminated against and to develop new jobs in community owned-businesses.
- Establishing a Public Power utility to reduce energy costs for residents and businesses,
- Establishing a Municipal Broadband utility (internet, cable, phone) to reduce costs and improve technology and programming.

To bring more middle- and upper-middle class students families into the city and its schools, improving the city's schools is the single most important thing we can do.

Middle- and upper class families, as well as new businesses, won't move into city in any substantial numbers until the public schools improve.

To improve the schools, the single most important reform is to integrate them by class (which closely overlaps with race and achievement levels). And to sufficiently integrate the schools by class, we must integrate them across the city/suburb divide.

Decades of research support these claims. Economically integrated schools bring the achievement levels of low-income students up without reducing the achievement levels of middle- and upper-income students. Such integrated schools enable low-income youth to learn the unwritten social and cultural codes of the middle-class world and enter the information networks and social contacts that provide further educational and economic opportunities. In economically balanced schools, the work ethic and achievement expectations of the middle class sets the norm for all students. In schools that have predominantly poor students, the codes of the street set the norm for all students.

Predominantly low-income schools depress the achievement of both poor and affluent students. Predominantly middle class schools raise low-income student achievement without harming the achievement of affluent students. Indeed, it can improve the achievement levels of middle and upper class students. In 2003 in Raleigh NC, where a countywide school district uses a public school choice plan to balance all its schools by class, race, and achievement, over 90 percent pass grade level reading and math tests. That beats the segregated Syracuse schools, both suburbs (70-85 percent passing) and central city (25 percent passing).

City councilors should make the case that economically balanced public schools is in the suburbs' as well as central city's best interests. The whole county rises or falls on whether the inner city rises or continues to fall. Improving inner city student achievement through expanding public school choice across the city/suburban border is a necessary condition for the economic and social revival of the region and its hub city.

A first step to build political support for further integration might be public school vouchers among cooperating school districts. The best solution would be a countywide public school choice plan, funded by sharing school taxes and revenues countywide and decentralized site-based management of each school.

When the city's schools are as good as the suburbs' schools, more middle- and upper-middle class families will move into the city to take advantage of its central location and greater cultural amenities.

Q: Do you favor keeping Interstate 81 as a limited-access, elevated highway through the city?

A: No. I favor replacing it with mass transit, parks, and mixed-use, mixed-income walkable neighborhoods, not just for the elevated sections but the whole highway through the city. I favor doing the same for at least the elevated section of Interstate 690. For

mass transit, we should look closely at a Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system where small cars run on elevated tracks based on rider demand. The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) has awarded a grant to study PRT for Ithaca and we should follow that closely. But above all, planning what replaces the Interstates should include 4th District residents who are most affected, including the residents of the old 15th Ward who were displaced by the Interstate 81 and many of whom now reside on the South Side part of the 4th District.

Q: Describe your favorite place in the city.

A: The park network on the South Side linking Kirk Park, Lower and Upper Onondaga Parks, and the Onondaga Creek Parkway.

Q: What previous Syracuse elected official provides the best example of how you'd perform on the Council?

A: Louis Will, third-party Progressive mayor of Syracuse, 1913-1915, who fought during his one two-year term in office for the Progressive Party's city platform on which he was elected: abolition of the state law capping municipal workers' salaries, decent pensions for all municipal workers, payment of municipal taxes by the many state and federal government properties in the city, municipal home rule, municipal ownership of public utilities, establishment of a City Planning Commission in 1914 leading to the first (and only, until 2005) Comprehensive Plan in 1919, and campaigning in favor of the 1915 state referendum for a women's suffrage amendment to the state constitution against the opposition of both the Democratic and Republican machines in the city.