

2020 Newport RI City Council Candidates Questionnaire

TO: 2020 CANDIDATES FOR NEWPORT CITY COUNCIL
FROM: ALLIANCE FOR A LIVABLE NEWPORT
SUBJECT: ONLINE COUNCIL CANDIDATES QUESTIONNAIRE
DATE: July 29, 2020

As ALN has done for every local election since 2008, a City Council candidates' questionnaire has been created as a means of assisting Newport voters in making their election choices. The accompanying Word document contains questions for this year's City Council candidates selected from submissions ALN has received.

At Large candidates are asked to respond to six (6) questions and Ward candidates to the same six (6) plus a seventh (7) Ward-specific question. Candidates are urged to limit their response to each question to no more than five hundred (500) words (unless otherwise specified) and to enter those responses online via Google Forms. Candidates can either enter their responses directly on Google Forms or formulate responses first using the Word document and then transferring those to Google Forms.

Responses must be received no later than the end of the day on August 8, 2020. As soon as possible after that date, all responses will be uploaded at the same time to the ALN website (www.newportalliance.org) and made available for public viewing with accompanying notifications to the public through ALN's email subscriber list (approximately 600 subscribers) and through advertising and promotion on local radio, print, and online media.

This year ALN is delighted to be joined with our 2020 Election partners, Newport This Week, The League of Women Voters, The Newport Chamber of Commerce, WADK Radio, Newport Buzz, and Channel 18 Community Television. This collaborative will be conducting live "Zoom" public forums to which you have already been invited.

If you have any questions about the questionnaire or the Google Forms procedures, please send an email to info@newportalliance.org and you will receive a quick response by email or phone, depending on the nature of the question. Do you still need help with the form or process? Contact Chip Leakas ALN board advisor (401)339-0777 mobile generally 9am-9pm

ALN commends each of you for choosing to run and serve for the Newport City Council and looks forward to hearing from you as to the pressing issues and challenges Newport faces today.

2020 CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES QUESTIONNAIRE
Questions For All Council Candidates (At Large and Wards)

Email address *

justin-at-large@cox.net

First Name, Last Name *

Justin McLaughlin

Elected Council Office you are seeking: *

Council "At Large" ▼

1.) Do you support the November ballot question for Newport to issue more than \$100million of bonds to be used to expand The Pell School and replace Rogers High School? If no, explain your reasons. If yes, what do you say to Newport residents and business owners concerned about the impact on their property taxes? If yes or no, what action(s) would you promote if the ballot question is defeated? *

The ballot question combines two projects, something that I did not prefer, but I voted to allow it because it was the only way the matter was going to get before the voters. I would have trusted the voters of Newport to have been able to evaluate each of these projects on their individual merits and to have voted accordingly.

The scope, cost and timing of the Pell School expansion provide solid reasons to support it. Increased enrollment at Pell, as well as the likely need for additional space when the State moves to universal kindergarten, make this a prudent investment. If the bond does not pass, I would support taking all available actions to expeditiously move forward to fund that project.

The question of whether to build a new high school at this time, at this place and at this price is on the ballot because it is a community decision, a decision that transcends the authority of both the school committee and the city council. The residents of Newport have to decide if this is what they want for Newport. I hope that this process will result in a robust community discussion of the pros and cons, the strengths and weaknesses.

There is no doubt that this is something that needs to be done, but it is fair to ask if it must be done now. As I have pointed out, the current RHS will need to be used for at least four more years, so the need to replace an aging building does not necessarily create a need to do it this year. If RHS can be used for four more years, there is no reason to think that it could not be used for six years (to allow for a bond question to come before the voters on 2022).

The Newport faces significant educational challenges: our test scores do not seem to reflect the level of investment being made and many high school students are chronically truant or absent. Bond proponents of passing the bond argue that a new school will address those issues. I believe, however, that you don't need a new school to do that: that investing in the quality of education is even more urgent than building a new facility. I share the concerns of residents who believe that the school system should address educational before building a new building.

I have been a proponent of a regional high school system for over 15 years and have been involved in efforts to achieve that. Newport residents have supported investigation of regional school options in the past. It is my belief that the benefits of a regional system merit greater effort than was invested in pursuit of that paradigm during the new high school development process.

If the school bond is not approved by the residents of Newport, I will support immediately looking at all options available to Newport, including a possible bond vote in 2022, but with greater emphasis on pursuit of a regional high school, with a new school located closer to the North end of Newport, including possible sites in Middletown.

2.) Traffic and parking problems in Newport persist and seem to be getting worse despite being the subject of countless studies and ad hoc committees. What specific measures (other than forming more committees and conducting more studies) would you promote to alleviate the problems? *

If we could coalesce around a common understanding of the causes and manifestations of the problems, it would be easier to identify investments needed to resolve them. Unfortunately, the problems are transitory, both with respect to time and place. There are no traffic or parking problems in January nor in the middle of the night in July, nor usually during the week during the summer. These are problems that are generally present only during the day and early evening on weekends from May to September and occasionally during the week in the summer.

So, the challenge is designing solutions whose cost are reasonable and sustainable in relation to the scope and nature of the problem. And which align with the natural tendencies of American tourists to drive as close as possible to one's destination. Remote off-site parking with alternate means of transportation to get downtown will only work if it is affordable (allowing for the variability in demand) and if it is reliable, predictable and dependable during the period of operations (an advertised scheme has to be available for the first and the last customer of the day, not simply for the crush of people at certain times). If these requirements could be easily satisfied, I suspect they would have been implemented a long time ago. Admittedly, such paradigms have been implemented during special events (Tall Ship visits and the LPGA tournament stand-out), but the processes put in place during those events would probably not be cost effective on a long term basis.

Nonetheless, the Transportation study will hopefully identify some viable opportunities. Requiring hotels (both those already built and those that are planned) to have parking capacity that matches their operations is essential. Off-site parking and alternative transportation schemes should be explored and implemented where feasible. Parking regulations including fines-that-make-a-difference together with aggressive enforcement are necessary.

The use of dynamic parking pricing should be investigated as well as expanded use of paid parking. The use of parking meters contributes to turnover and, in combination with dynamic pricing, can contribute to increased control of parking in business zones.

The City has explored deploying a parking app – we need to make that a priority.

Ultimately, elevating this problem to where it receives continuous attention by the City Manager and City Council is important. I would support the creation of a Business/Tourism focused city commission that would be given a significant role in advising the City on these problems.

3.) Newport's economy is closely tied to tourism. The risk of that dependence has been made abundantly clear by the COVID pandemic. What, if any, alternatives do you see to the reliance on tourism? Based on your answer, what specific actions should be taken to further promote tourism and/or what specific actions should be taken to expand the economy beyond tourism? *

We need a better understanding of our day-to-day relationship with tourism. Tourism has allowed Newport to sustain the full-service level of government that Newport residents have come to expect (which includes police, fire, schools, roads, trash collection, recreation, etc.). Without it, our property tax rate would need to be dramatically higher.

It's been almost 200 years since the first "tourist" per se arrived in Newport from Southern plantations to escape the hot summers in Georgia and South Carolina. Those early visitors stayed in hotels which over time became grand buildings, eventually built summer homes, and which led to the Gilded Age mansions. Today there are many summer residents from various places who are essentially descendants of those early tourists. These seasonal residents pay a substantial proportion of Newport's property taxes while making minimal demands on city services. Newport's hotels, which generate lodging tax revenues, are also among the most valuable properties in the City and, consequently, pay a significant share of commercial property tax revenue. The same is true of restaurants and businesses; Newport gets meal and beverage tax revenues generated by restaurants, while they also are the source of significant commercial property tax revenue. Most would not survive if they had to rely solely on the year-round residents. So, in addition to the employment that hotels and restaurants and tourism-related businesses create, they generate lodging, meal and beverages taxes, and pay substantial commercial property taxes, which together with the property taxes paid by summer residents, has allowed Newport to have what is effectively the lowest property tax rate in the state. And they also contribute to the quality and vitality of life we enjoy in our community.

We derive important benefit from tourism, but we should work harder to control the tourism environment where it has created problems for full time residents. The City has consistently failed to invest the resources and imagination needed to effectively deal with it. In general, we have the regulations needed, we simply haven't effectively enforced them. Roughly 20 years ago the City changed its tax paradigm such that it raised significantly more in taxes from commercial property; yet it has failed to intelligently invest some of that money in ways that might mitigate the downsides of tourism (e.g., tourism activity in residential neighborhoods, noise, parking, zoning compliance, etc.). We can do a better job. Transportation and parking are perennial problems and provide significant opportunities for improvement. Creating off-site parking and implementing reliable transportation alternatives are critical steps. Enforcing our laws, including our noise ordinances, is probably the most critical.

The greatest opportunity for economic expansion will be in the North End Urban zone (formerly the Innovation district). But even there, one project that has been proposed includes two hotels, so the impact of tourism is likely to be found in that area as well. Ultimately, there are three things that are likely to influence the appeal of Newport to outside investors: (a) the quality of our schools; (b) the cost of housing; (c) and communications/transportation (fiber optic internet and robust means of traveling to Newport). These are areas that need to be worked on to increase our attractiveness.

4.) The closure of the Visitors Center was announced recently. What do you propose should be done with the property? *

The Gateway Center has provided important tourism support services for many years in conjunction with its co-location at Newport's transportation hub. It has provided an opportunity to make a first impression for many visitors to Newport and to inform them about its extensive history and the many attractions the City has to offer. While there is an opportunity to make more money at the Gateway site than we have in the past, in the short-term the primary focus of the City should be on providing tourism and transportation-related services at that site. The City should explore options to continue the tourist information function while concurrently investigating how the space could be integrated into expanded transportation services in conjunction with the proposed off-site parking in the North End and alternative transportation services in the City (hop-on-hop-off services). The City is conducting a transportation study and that study will provide an opportunity to identify longer-term transportation-related uses. The City should also be open to integration of other civic and community uses that could be included in any repurposing/redesign of the building.

I would invite organizations in Newport to provide suggestions on how the Gateway space could improve its messaging about Newport's history. The Loeb Center provides an example of how such messaging could be repackaged.

At some point the City should re-imagine that part of the City to maximize its economic benefits while minimizing its impact on the Point neighborhood. Anything done at the Gateway site should include community input.

5.) A Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) template is being considered as part of the North End Urban Plan (NEUP). What would you like to see included in the CBA template? What measures will you promote and support to put the NEUP on a clear path to implementation?" *

A CBA involves negotiation between a municipality and developer. Usually the developer wants variances that allow intensification of allowed uses or relief from zoning that limits what can be done. The benefit is what the developer is willing to give the community such that the municipality is willing to grant relief from the zoning. While such benefits might normally be located in the vicinity of a project, to offset its impact on the neighborhoods directly impacted, it is also possible that the benefit might be located other parts of the city, such that it would have a broader benefit for the overall community. A benefit could be very specific to the impacted neighborhood (e.g., jobs, training, investment in workforce housing) or more general (e.g., a branch library, swimming pool, skating rink, or other recreational facilities).

In order for such CBA negotiations to take place, the municipality needs to have zoning code that allows flexibility; without that "flexible zoning" there is no basis for such negotiations. Newport currently does not have flexible zoning (something that has limited its options in the past with respect to development, most notably in the waterfront area) but as of August 2020 zoning changes that would allow flexible zoning are on the verge of being brought to the City Council for consideration and adoption. The drafting of these zoning changes is an outgrowth of the development moratorium that was imposed on the Innovation District in 2019.

I expect that CBA negotiations will be conducted by the city staff (e.g., the City Manager, City Solicitor and Planner) in accordance with guidance provided by the City Council, and that any CBA developed will be subject to community review, including public hearings, prior to a vote of the City Council. In that such negotiations will need to achieve the greatest benefit to the community at large as well as districts of the city most impacted by development, it is important that specific benefits be identified based on the opportunity provided by each project.

At this point in time the North End Urban Plan is not complete. The overview provided by the consultant on July 30, 2020, revealed a wealth of possible options; the next step is to bring the final plan to the City Council and the community, and thoroughly vet it before it is adopted and merged with the Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Concurrently, the City Council needs to review the proposed zoning changes for the NEUP area, and following public review, adopt them. At such time the building blocks will be in place to begin the process of considering specific proposals. The City will need to advertise that it is ready to work with developers to develop the North End in accordance with the adopted plan and zoning. This is the critical step: there must be developers with interest and capital who want to invest in Newport.

6.) What do you most want Newport voters to know about you? (Limit response to a maximum of 250 words.)

I am running because I believe that I have made a difference in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Prior City Council service and profession career experiences have prepared me to do that. I believe I have earned the respect of the councilors with whom I have served, not because we always agreed with each other, but because I was prepared to address the matters that came before the Council and thoughtfully articulate my position. My perspective is frequently different from that of the majority's, but I believe it contributes to the overall understanding of issues the Council deals with and causes the Council to work toward better and more collaborative outcomes.

I am a firm believer in the City Council-City Manager form of government. I believe that the strength of our government derives from the council acting together in mutual support of one another other in council rather than as individuals.

I have been a consistent supporter of the schools and an advocate for a quality education for all students. I have also asked for fiscal accountability so that the tax payers know how the funds provided to the schools are spent.

Served for four terms as Second Ward Councilor from 2007 to 2014 and as an At-Large-Councilor from 2014 to 2016. Re-elected in 2018 as an At-Large Councilor. I had the honor being the only man on the council in this term.

Husband of Cris Cobaugh, father of Dave McLaughlin (RHS '89) and Frances; resident at 3 Kay Terrace for 35 years, homeowner, tax payer; graduate of Boston College, U.S Navy veteran, retired from NUWC in 2004; dahlia gardener, traveler, opera lover.

7a.) Question For Third Ward Council Candidates ONLY ::: Ocean Drive is the scene of traffic problems, speeding, illegal parking, and (primarily at Bretton State Park) loud noise and trash. Although these problems are at their worst during the summer months, they persist to some degree throughout the year. What specific measures would you promote to deal with these problems?

7b.) Question For Second Ward Council Candidates ONLY ::: The intersection of Rhode Island Avenue and Memorial Boulevard is the scene of congestion and multiple accidents every summer. The traffic overflow from the north to Memorial is now affecting Red Cross and Gibbs as well. What measures should be adopted to handle this problem?

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7c.) Question For First Ward Council Candidates ONLY ::: The preferred plan for the Pell Bridge Offramp Realignment is now known. What measures should the City of Newport plan and enact to minimize disruption to the surrounding neighborhoods both during construction and, more importantly, after project completion?

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