**2021 Cambridge City Council Questionnaire – August 10, 2021 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**1. Housing is an important issue for the City of Cambridge.**

**a. How would you describe our housing challenges?**

It feels that creating enough affordable housing, along with tackling rising rents have been top issues in Cambridge my entire life, and yet we continue to struggle with them. The last 20 years has led to an even more pressing need to meaningfully address these issues. Prosperity has come to Cambridge, but it has not lifted all its residents. Cambridge has long been recognized by the values ascribed to its residents. We claim to champion equality, diversity, and justice. While we have made mistakes in their practice along the way, we continue to espouse these values in our public discourse. We now face another challenge, one based on the city’s recent economic success, which threatens to displace current residents and become a barrier to new residents. We also face the challenges of human caused climate change. We know that the wealthier nations and wealthier individuals have done more damage than poorer nations and poorer individuals have. This creates an obligation to do all we can to create a climate resilient city, one that will do all it can to prevent displacement and continue to welcome those who wish to come here. How we address these challenges will determine whether Cambridge will continue to be a community that values equality, diversity and justice.

**b. What do you think are the major factors causing our housing challenges?**

The rising wealth gap. Cambridge has a gini index higher than the US average, and the US has a higher index than the rest of the western, industrialized world. As prosperity has come, property values have skyrocketed, preventing younger families from buying homes here. It has also displaced lower income earners. I recognize that this gap is created, in the most part, by the success of our local biotech, high tech and innovation companies. However, these companies have been the reason that our city’s coffers are brimming, giving us the opportunity to address this issue

**c. What do you think is stopping us from addressing those challenges?**

It is understandable that property owners, who have benefited from the recent success, would be reluctant to make changes that may negatively impact those assets. But I think a major reason why we continue to struggle with solving our housing crisis is the reluctance of our landowners, and their effective stalling of meaningful projects that would alleviate the issue. While we have the means to address housing challenges, we seem to lack the will, despite it being a top priority of Cambridge residents. I believe that we must cooperate in good faith with the different stakeholders who state their desire to create a more equitable city. The current public discourse seems bent on discrediting those that disagree on how to overcome the housing crisis rather than working together to create actionable, equitable solutions.

**d. Describe concerns you might have about existing and needed infrastructure to serve our present and future housing stock, for example: aging sewer lines, electrical grid and most importantly water.**

Climate change will certainly make much of our city’s aging infrastructure obsolete. While this will be costly in replacing, it also gives us opportunities to create a more resilient city, and a city that can be home to the generations that will inherit a world far different from the ones we grew up in. The generations who own the land and hold the reins of power must recognize their culpability in climate change and meet the obligations owed to future generations, by fulfilling the ideals they so proudly proclaim as residents of Cambridge

**2. Climate Change is real. What changes would you like to see the city undertake to  address these concerns locally? How do your views address environmental equity? How  do you reconcile the issue of tree conservation and the environment when discussing development?**

Climate change is real, and so is the culpability of the fossil fuel addicted consumers, which include our nation and city. We must make every effort to mitigate the impact of our own actions, since we have so dramatically failed in our stewardship of our environment. We must become advocates for the unrepresented future generations as well as the inhabitants of our planet who will never be able to advocate for themselves.

I support the ideas of getting Cambridge to net zero carbon emissions as soon as possible. Due to our city’s historic prestige and its current financial resources, I believe we should be a leader in the region and an example for other communities to emulate. This means we must take a holistic approach to our climate policies, and take into account how our actions will affect the world beyond our borders.

I believe that we must make every effort to retain our green canopy as it exists now, and further develop canopy in areas of the city that lack green canopy. We must reconcile the fact that our canopy is now primarily benefiting less densely populated parts of our city, which also have our highest rates of impervious surfaces per capita. At first glance, this seems counterintuitive, but it is nonetheless true. As we rebuild our city to meet the challenges of climate change, we must make smart, equitable decisions on increasing our energy efficiency. This means we increase density near mass public transportation.

I support smart, locally sourced, self-sustaining infrastructure that helps increase green transportation, while also feeding the economy of Cambridge. We have some of the best technological firms in the country right here in our midst. I would love to see initiatives that encourage modern, climate-equitable, and modern transit technology development that can be designed, engineered, and implanted in-town. This could be achieved through subsidies and/or bid contracts, and would be a great way to produce modern, good-paying jobs, encouraging our best and brightest to stay here in Cambridge.

**3. “Development” is a commonly used term of public policy. Notions of economic development evolve over time. In the current moment, ideas about development must address concerns about climate change, global capital flows and rapidly growing economic inequality.**

a. The City for decades developed commercial property to increase taxable income that allows residential tax rates to remain low compared to many other cities. Has that strategy reached its limit? If so, what should replace it?

I do not have the expertise to answer whether the strategy’s limit has been reached. It has led to an increase in services offered by the city while increasing the value of properties. I recognize that there are complexities that have no simple answer. But I will say that those actions that have enriched our land owning class and have created services that have benefited our residents who have not been displaced cannot now be denigrated as being the root of our problems as well. While Cambridge is a wonderful city, we have to continue to evolve in ways that keep intact our ideals. Our city is bettered by being inclusive, diverse and vigilant against injustice. It may well be that we have reached the limit, but that decision should be based on whether we will continue to have the resources necessary to

uphold our long held common core values.

**b. What is your view on economic development for the City of Cambridge in 2021? What kind of economic development do we need or not need?**

I believe that we should attempt to attract light industry that could help support local efforts to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels to deliver emerging green solutions. One example would be encouraging a company like Kaffeeform, a company that uses coffee grounds to create compostable coffee cups to set up shop here. Such a strategy has the benefits of reducing the need to deliver sustainable products via fossil fuel driven transportation and creating local jobs.

Furthermore, we must remember our small, locally owned businesses, While larger, high tech, biotech and innovative companies may be the ones who garner the most attention due to how much they add to our bottom line, we must recognize that the local businesses are what makes our city so livable in so many ways. We should focus on retaining as many as we can, and supporting new locally owned businesses, and support those who have historically been denied opportunities. We must recognize that locally owned small businesses create a unique and authentic community. We should strive to redress the injustices of past policies and lift up marginalized communities as we strengthen one of our best assets, even though they do not have the same impact on our city’s revenue.

**4. In recent months the Cambridge Historical Commission, Conservation Districts and Neighborhood Organizations have been criticized as obstacles to more affordable  housing as well as to racial and economic diversity. Do you agree with this criticism?  Please explain why.**

I do. Perhaps these are well intentioned without realizing the end results of displacement. I understand the fear that often accompanies change. And change is most apparent in a city by seeing the physical changes to its skyline. But I believe that Cambridge is not defined by its skyline, which has forever been changing. We are at risk of turning our city into a museum, with a very high entrance fee. Worse than that, by limiting the ability to zone for more density in areas that make sense, we are limiting ourselves from addressing the real need to create more affordable housing and more energy efficient housing. At some point, most of our housing will need to be replaced due to the changing climate and the age of many of our housing stock. We must be innovative and bold if we are to retain the most important aspect of our community, which is not found in our buildings but in our commonly held progressive values.

**5. In recent months there has been an upsurge in citizen petitions (including the Donovan petition supported by the CCC and the Missing Middle Housing (MMH) petition supported by ABC) that attempt to formulate zoning, housing and related public policy. Developer upzoning - also known as contract zoning - has also been in regular use.  Please describe your opinion about governing through the use of citizen petitions and contract zoning. Are there changes to the petition process that should be introduced?**

I have yet to see the Donovan petition. My apologies. I am 100% behind public participation in local governance, and applaud such actions. I do not support contract zoning. However, I do think we must examine our zoning process which is why I support a change to our ZBA.  I believe that members of the Zoning Board of Appeals should be paid. The role of the ZBA is unbelievably important, and changing the structure from a volunteer to a paid position would acknowledge this importance. The ZBA should be able to review projects more regularly and more quickly, which would avoid the monthslong delays that can be created by a mistake on the height of an adjacent building. A ZBA that works quicker and meets more often I believe would make projects like 2072 Mass Ave more likely to succeed.

**6. Members of the Cambridge Planning Board have expressed frustration with existing constraints on their ability to plan. As volunteers meeting several times a month to process individual cases, members have little time and resources to engage in planning. The absence of planning guidance from this committee is likely related to the increased use of citizen petitions. How should this problem be addressed?**

One solution would be to allow for as-of-right development of residential and mixed use properties, allowing for increased density and freeing the CPB to spend their energy elsewhere. Allowing the conversion of single family detached homes to be converted to multi-units, up to 4 or 6 units, as-of -right would no doubt go a long way towards solving this.

**7. Cambridge has long been celebrated as a city that promotes racial and economic diversity. Do you believe this reputation is currently well deserved? If not, what measures would you take to promote genuine racial and economic diversity? How would you address recent issues of youth gun violence?**

I believe that most of my fellow residents share similar core values such as racial and economic diversity. But I also recognize that we often fail to live by them. One way to resolve that is by actually listening to the communities affected by the recent spate of gun violence. It gives all of us warm feelings to see  Black Lives Matter signs all over our city, but it is also disheartening to see these signs in neighborhoods that historically have benefited from redlining. While I laud our residents who seek to ensure justice enacted across the globe, I would ask them if they can take a moment and see how our housing and policing policies locally have impacted lower income residents, who are disproportionately BIPOC. While national police reform is something that I have advocated for, I recognize that my neighbors who are experiencing gun violence are asking for a higher police presence in their neighborhoods. It is possible to do both. We must listen to those local communities who are directly impacted by gun violence while we seek justice and law enforcement reform in our larger society.

**8. How would you increase transparency both by the City Manager and departments that report to her/him? How would you increase transparency by City Councilors?**

This is not something I have given much thought to. I can say that I support transparency in government as well as in public discourse. I believe that if there is an issue with transparency, the most effective way of dealing with it is casting votes for candidates who practice transparency. As seen in my answers, I will not deceive people by telling them what I think they wish to hear. Instead I will say what I think, and invite them to a constructive discussion to come to a resolution that is fair and acceptable.

**9. Cambridge is about to hire a new City Manager. Describe your ideal City Manager for this time in Cambridge history. What qualities will you look for?**

It seems that the current fashion is to lay blame on the form of our city government as to why certain actions are taken or not taken in our city. It also seems that most candidates run campaigns that use the office of the city manager as their opponent, rather than talk about how they are different from other candidates. I think it is a bit more complicated. I think having a historical context of why we have a city manager is important. While I am sure that none of our more recent and current councilors would behave in the ways that led to the adoption of the Plan E form of government, at one time the elected officials did not act in ways that were in accord with the best interests of the residents.

I will look to hire a city manager that has the requisite skills to run a city like Cambridge. Fiscal responsibility is obviously needed. While we currently have a large amount of free cash, we must continue to be wise about how we allocate our resources, as we cannot be certain of what the future holds, especially as we face the impact of climate change. But I also hope to hire someone who recognizes the long held values of the city and will act in accordance with the wishes of the city as communicated through the city council and through public involvement. I especially hope that we can find someone who will not simply do the bidding of those who hold more influence through the power associated with money and the leisure time to make their voices heard, but will take into account those residents who have less sway and power, who nonetheless should have equal consideration by our manager and city council.

**10. Recent estimates declare that over 60% of Cambridge residents are renters. How should Cambridge government address the needs of renters?**

I am a long time renter and so I have spent considerable time thinking about this.

As City Councilor I would push to create a universal housing voucher program in Cambridge. All renters not already receiving government support for their housing who are earning less than 60% of the AMI (conservatively 12,400 households, or 40% of all renter households) would receive support every month from the City to help pay their rent to their landlord. These renters would pay 30% of their income on rent every month, and the City would pay the difference between the renter’s share and the fair market rent for their apartment based on the apartment size and location (by zip code). This program, the first of its kind in Massachusetts, would truly ensure broad market affordability for all in our City.

I believe that the universal housing voucher would have a significant impact on protecting tenants against displacement. This strategy could be created within municipal authority, and I estimate that this program would cost ~$25 million annually, which is less than an eighth of the City’s certified free cash and less than 5% of the City’s annual budget. This is clearly a good investment given the relatively low-cost of a program that would guarantee affordable housing for all low-income residents in our City.

In addition to the universal housing voucher, I would push to create an Office of Tenant’s Rights. This office would:

Manage the funding for legal support for tenants fighting displacement and eviction

Create and manage a landlord licensing program

Perform regular audit checks to ensure that landlords are abiding by fair housing law

Serve as an oversight body for landlords, collecting tenant complaints and issuing annual landlord report cards similar to the grading system used in restaurants.

I also would like to recognize the role of landlords who rent their apartments below market rate. While this is beyond the scope of our municipal government I would advocate for the creation of a state income tax credit for individuals (not corporations) who rent their unsubsidized properties below market rate. This proposal would provide an income tax credit of $1,500 for each unit rented below market-rate. Market-rate would be determined by the “HOME rent limits” as determined by HUD. The credit would not be available for landlords who rent to family, and would be prorated by the number of months the unit is rented to a qualified tenant. This credit would not be refundable, but would be eligible to be carried over to subsequent years. To qualify, the property must be an unsubsidized 2-4 unit residential rental property.

**11. There is always room for improvement however senior citizens in public housing receive reasonable public support. What is your plan to enable and support seniors living independent of public senior housing settings?**

As I am uninformed on this topic, I will not answer this question. My apologies. I freely admit that I have much to learn to be an effective public servant. I hope that I can be an advocate for all Cambridge residents, especially those who are most in need.

**12. What question do you wish we had asked you but did not? How would you answer it?**

I do not have a question but I do have a statement.

I read the CCCs recent Op-Ed in the Cambridge Day about the AHO. The values your organization espouses therein do not align with mine. Had your group been around in 1938 when my immigrant grandmother sought to make her home here, (and who then helped build the Cambridge that you now claim to seek to protect,) she would not have been welcome. I choose not to seek your endorsement, despite the hours of work I spent answering your survey, because an endorsement by the CCC would be antithetical to my values, as well as the values of the city of my birth. I hope that you will recognize that the ideas expressed in that Op-Ed do not align with the majority of people who call, and have called Cambridge home. One cannot paint Black Lives Matter on a fence or hang a sign saying All Are Welcome while building a wall made of money around our city to prevent lower income people from moving here, as well as displacing lower income people who already call Cambridge home. The folks who clean your houses, serve you your food and drink, educate your children, keep your streets clean and your homes safe are as essential as every other resident, despite our lower income. My hope is that the members of the CCC will amend their values as stated in the recent Op-Ed and work towards creating inclusive and just policies that reflect the long held values of this wonderful city. Be well.

Sincerely,

[Joe McGuirk](mailto:popsmcguirk@gmail.com)