

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 Bill Martin

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?

I think 4 areas need special attention, and the city council has effectively addressed 3 of them as follows:

- a. Acre. Because the Acre, among other reasons, is the historic landing spot for new immigrant groups, the Acre has always had a high concentration of low income people. Areas of blight also needed to be addressed. The city implemented a 20 year urban renewal plan that is years ahead of schedule. The city's projects like the Stoklosa School and the Senior Center, coupled with private development like the new Market Basket and Liberty Square housing development, have made the Acre a much better place and a much safer neighborhood. Growing up in this city I would never venture into the Acre at night, and now I do so without hesitation.
- b. Jackson, Appleton, Middlesex-Hamilton Canal-Lower Highlands Area. This area has been blighted for generations, in large part due to the lack of investment of major land owners. The city acted and is implementing a second urban renewal plan. Lowell is the only city in Massachusetts with 2 urban renewal plans underway. Unlike the urban renewal plans of the 1960's, the Acre and JAM plans sought input from citizens advisory groups, and a public charette process is planned for further citizen input in the JAM area. The city council has made a major investment in the new garage and in land acquisitions, and has designated Trinity Financial as the master developer for the JAM area. Major improvements are planned in this area and will be implemented in the coming term.
- c. Julian Steele. This state owned housing project was a major source of crime and contributor to social problems in southern Lowell. The reinvention of Julian Steele is the most significant public investment in that neighborhood in my lifetime, and will yield dividends for generations to come by improving the physical appearance of the neighborhood and providing home ownership opportunities for people of low and moderate income.

Local Business Districts. Areas like Bridge Street, Mammoth Road, Cupples Square, and Gorham Street need more attention from the city council. Initiatives have been tried but have not worked to the extent needed. I plan to focus on these districts next term, and we will make progress in at least some of the areas identified.

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 think the city council is taking and should take the city in a new direction. To me that “direction” emphasizes strong fiscal planning, more openness in government, and direct responsiveness to citizens. We have had a good beginning. City Manager Bernie Lynch, his team, and the city council resolved last year’s budget deficit, implemented new fiscal procedures and developed a 5 year financial plan. The city has made better use of the web site to post budgets and council matters to make them more available to the public, and is beginning to adopt a system to respond to citizen complaints modeled on Somerville’s 311 hotline. These initiatives are a dramatic departure from the past, and in my view constitute a new and better direction for Lowell.

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

Like most Massachusetts communities, Lowell has relatively high property taxes, though I think we have done better than most communities at holding the line, mostly due to generous state aid. The main thing we can do to keep taxes down is to expand our commercial tax base. The tax increment financing plan we adopted for Motorola is one example of this. By agreeing to limit the rate of future growth, we insured **additional** taxes to the city of over \$800,000 per year over the 10 year life of that TIF. Future business in the JAM plan area should lead to similar tax growth. Also, we need to hold increases in annual operating budgets to the 2½ increase allowed under proposition 2½.

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?

For a variety of reasons, I thought the city needed a change in city managers in April, 2006. This was a view shared by 6 of 9 city councilors. I, as mayor, and another councilor visited the city manager to inform him that the council wanted to make a change. This was the exact same process used with the prior city manager, and every other previous city manager in my memory. When most lead executives are dismissed, this is the process that is followed, and I believe it was in the best interests of the city to follow the process we did. The alternative was for individual councilors to itemize their particular reasons why they felt a change was needed. This would likely have occurred at televised city council meetings over a period of weeks. This would have been very unprofessional treatment of the prior manager in my view. I think he deserved the courtesy of being thanked for his work and given the time and opportunity to arrange for new employment. The alternative process would also have been bad for the City and been an even greater source of division than what actually occurred. I stand by the decision that it was in the best interest of the city to change city managers the way we did. In retrospect, I regret that the dismissal process of the prior manager became a public spectacle, but that was not my doing. We provided the opportunity for the prior manager to resign on his terms. As to the reaction that ensued, I was not part of that, and will leave for others to answer why they behaved as they did.

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

Manager Lynch has done a fine job managing the city during his first year. His strengths include a superior knowledge of municipal finance, many years of experience in solving municipal problems, financial and otherwise, and the ability to manage complex projects like that underway in the Hamilton Canal District. I have not observed any significant weaknesses, other than to note that the manager does not have much experience in dealing with the types of crime common to urban areas. In this regard he has gotten up to speed quickly by launching initiatives such as the monthly gang task force meetings.

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.)

Yes. The state funds the bulk of the school system budget under the Education Reform Act, and under that law the city is required to maintain a certain level of expenditures. The state sets a baseline budget, and the city must meet at least 95% of that baseline. If less than 100% is funded, the difference must be made up in the following year. It is difficult to always meet the baseline, especially since the state informs the city of the amount after the fact, not prior to setting the budget. We have not met the 100% level in recent years, but the gap is funded in the following year. Under the Department of Revenue's report of its review of city finances, the DOR recommended that the city fund 100% of its requirement under the Ed Reform Act. I am committed to reaching that goal, but it is difficult to do all at once, and may take a few years to reach 100%.

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)

I don't think city union contracts are out of line. As Mayor I chair the school committee and directly negotiate with school department unions. I am proud of the school department contracts entered during this term. I think they are fair to personnel, and do not unduly burden tax payers. There has been little public discussion about these contracts which I take as an indication that all parties are satisfied with them. I certainly do not support burdening future generations with obligations to fund current contracts. We have seen neighboring towns do this but we have not done so in Lowell. New accounting standards will soon require the city to fully fund its pension liability. This will be a challenge.

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 city manager has already begun to replenish the health insurance trust fund reserve by increasing premiums. Both the city contribution and the employee contribution went up 15% this year, compared with 2-3% for the last few years. The city council also adopted a budget this year that did not rely on so called "free cash," or money appropriated but not spent in the prior fiscal year. In the event there is "free cash" or unspent money at the end of this and future fiscal years, those funds will be used to rebuild city reserve accounts.

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? (waittlnextyr)

My target for the FY '09 increase is the same as FY '08, 2.5 to 3% growth. The primary actions to achieve that are to approve union contracts that do not require funding in excess of the target, to negotiate long term energy contracts that lock in annual increases, and receive modest growth of state aid. We have begun the first 2 steps and 3rd is beyond the council's control, but given past performance of the city's legislative delegation I am confident the state aid will continue to grow.

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)

I'd approve of selling these buildings for the most beneficial use. The Butler school site needs to be considered in conjunction with the former Prince Macaroni property, which is one of the largest industrial plants in the city but is not currently operating. We would not want to sell that site for a use that would prohibit future use of the Prince site. I am not aware of any similar impediment on West Sixth Street, but for both buildings and others like them I suspect that neither the demand nor market value of these properties is very high.

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

The city has gone about as far as it can on Mass Mills and has presented some options to the developer to allow 1 of the remaining buildings to be demolished and redevelop the other one. The developer needs to settle its dispute with an abutter and I think the residential market needs to improve for the developer to proceed with Mass Mills. As for the old post office, the city needs to identify some brown fields funds to clean the site so that it will yield full value when sold for redevelopment.

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

The city this year expanded the artist district overlay zoning to include Western Avenue, and Vespera last week announced a new affordable artist live work space at its Western Avenue building. The units will be deed restricted to limit appreciation and insure affordability for future working artists. The city can point to this development as an example to other developers and assist in speedily permitting these types of projects in the future.

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

The addition of Target and Lowe's in this area will help draw other development. We need to do more on Tanner Street, but our hands are somewhat tied until the federal Environmental Protection Agency needs to finish its cleanup of the former Silresim site before developers will seriously look at this area.

Infrastructure

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

The worst traffic problems are related to Merrimack River crossings. We need to work with the state to get the new University Avenue bridge rebuilt on time, then immediately thereafter begin planning to expand the Rourke Bridge to allow more vehicle capacity across the Merrimack.

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)

There are 2 possible solutions. The first is to add more personnel. In recent years the city added 8 firefighter's under the Department of Homeland Security SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) Grant. The federal government pays a portion of the salaries for the first 5 years, similar to the Department of Justice COPS program in the 1990's that enabled the city to add about 100 additional police officers. Unfortunately the SAFER program is not as generous as the COPS program and the new fire hires barely kept pace with retirements. It is a better situation, however, than we'd have without the SAFER program. The 2nd approach would be to combine some firehouses (like Lawrence and Gorham Streets) to one centrally located modern facility that would not impact response times. The city's new capital plan will begin to address the adequacy of firehouses.

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*)

Lowell has a long and proud history of welcoming new immigrant groups, and this contributes to the city's strength and character. Its part of what makes Lowell Lowell. The fact that many immigrants are poor with limited English skills presents challenges, particularly to our schools, but I don't think this harms the city or its long term viability. We need to seek job and education opportunities for all our citizens, including immigrants. Many of our most successful citizens have been first or second generation immigrants, and I am confident that this will be the case for generations to come.

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*)

No. Congress needs to address immigration problems in this country. The city cannot take on every problem that Congress refuses to deal with, and the city has enough on its plate without taking on national problems it is essentially powerless to address. I have been consistent in this view, and I thought it was a mistake for the city to pass a resolution concerning the Patriot Act. The city council should not insert itself in the middle of every dispute pending in Congress because it distracts the council from dealing with the local work it is elected to do.

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*)

I read 2 newspapers every day (*Boston Globe* and *The Sun*, and occasionally the *Boston Herald*), and listen to many radio shows on stations such as WBUR, WBZ, WRKO, WEEI, WTTK, WCAP and WUML. I subscribe to several national magazines including *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. I certainly speak with members of the community, but I rarely watch television news or visit blogs. Most of these sources are accurate, with the exception of some radio talk shows.

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

One official I admire is outgoing city councilor Eileen Donoghue. I think she is honest, hard working, fair, tough when necessary, trustworthy, and uses good judgment in reaching decisions. We have not always agreed on everything, but I respect her work on the city council and as mayor, and the city is better because of her service.

Another is former US Senator from New York, Daniel Moynihan. I admired his approach to government, his ability to work with both parties, his ability to see and analyze complex problems and to come up with practical solutions. I did not always agree with his views, but respected and admired his approach and thoughtfulness.

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

I want to work to get the JAM/Hamilton Canal District redevelopment underway and attract economic development projects like Target and Lowes because the city needs jobs and an expanding tax base will provide property tax relief for residents. I also want to continue to improve our school system, continue to redevelop aged housing stock with things like the 2 for Lowell and first time homebuyer programs, work with the police to reduce crime and gang violence, and continue to improve our parks and open spaces. I have a strong track record working on these issues and will continue to do so.