

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 Joe Mendonça

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?

Each neighborhood has one or two gateway streets that are used to enter and leave the city. In most cases these streets are also neighborhood business districts. As we improve our infrastructure these gateways need to be a priority. They need to be welcoming to visitors and a source of pride to the neighborhood.

Even the downtown has several gateway streets that lead out in several directions from the hub. We need to make the downtown more welcoming by converting the one-way segment of Merrimack St to two-way traffic. Hopefully, this would also make it easier to attract new businesses to the downtown area.

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 believe the city is now headed in the right "direction". We are headed in the right direction financially as we stop relying on one-time "free cash" to fund our on-going operations and with improvements to blighted areas like the JAM plan area. The Hamilton Canal development will be a big step forward in this area.

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

No. Lowell's property taxes are among the lowest in the region. The average FY2007 single family tax bill in Massachusetts was \$3,962 – in Lowell it was \$2,858, Chelmsford \$4,966, Dracut \$3,092, Tewksbury \$3,742, Tyngsboro \$4,245, Wilmington \$3,871.

Even though the taxes may not be high, any increases must be small and manageable for our residents.

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?

From my vantage point, it appeared that the Council majority attempted to inform the Manager in a discrete manner in order for the Manager to decide on a course of action. The Manager ultimately decided to resign. That is behind us - now we need to focus on creating a better future for this City.

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

I believe the City Manager provides the professional leadership that we need at this time. He has a long history of municipal leadership that can only benefit Lowell as it recovers financially from a difficult period for any municipality. The City also needs stable leadership through the completion of the Hamilton Canal development. We should also see the completion of the Acre and JAM plans in that timeframe.

The Manager's greatest strength is his experience.

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.)

Lowell needs to meet the net school spending requirement as established by the state. Most suburban school systems exceed the requirement and are recognized for the quality of their education system. We are fortunate that the state provides nearly 90% of our school departments funding. The city should do its part given that it would still be far less than the \$25 million that the city provided to the schools in 1991. Given the proper resources we could then hold the school department accountable for results.

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 believe the current contracts are generally fair on the wage side and generous on the benefit side. In the past, the generous benefits compensated for low wages. Now that the wages have risen to private sector levels the benefits seem overly generous. Future negotiations should compare the total compensation to other municipalities and the private sector to determine an appropriate adjustment to keep the compensation at a fair level.

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)

Adding to our reserves is the most direct way to improve our bond rating. We will need to craft a budget that does not spend every available penny, but rather leaves some small amount (less than 1% of the budget) to be appropriated to a stabilization fund or to become free cash at the end of the fiscal year.

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)

After several years of large tax increases, we need to hold the increase to 2.5% or less. I believe it is better for the community to have stable revenue growth than to have erratic changes that result from having no tax increase one year only to have a subsequent year with a huge tax increase. To keep the tax increase as low as possible, we will need to control spending and work to minimize any increase in our operating costs.

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)

If the City does not (or no longer) has plans for the re-use of buildings, it should move quickly to move them back in to the private sector where it will generate new tax revenue for the City. The School Department recently declared the old Butler School site as surplus allowing the city to sell the property into the private sector – that should happen soon. Unfortunately, the current slump in the real estate market will likely prevent a quick disposition of the property.

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

The Mass Mills project is involved in a dispute in the courts that will need to run its course. Having the city intervene is more likely to cause further delay than to speed up the project.

The old Post Office garage site is now being used to house the Police vehicle maintenance facility so that the new 911 center could be constructed on the previous police maintenance site – so for the time being the site is not available for development.

On the positive side, work should soon begin on the Tremont Powerhouse site that will remove what is now a dangerous eyesore from the area.

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

The City will need to do what it can to foster the “Creative Economy”. We as individual residents need to be more supportive of the arts. The City has already facilitated the development of the Artists’ Lofts overlay district to attract artists to the City. The City also provides support through COOL.

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

There are already a number of projects that are attractive in part due to access from the connector. The Lowe’s and Target projects are both examples of that. The Hamilton Canal district will also benefit from easy access to the connector.

Infrastructure

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

The most pressing bottlenecks in the city are the Rourke Bridge, the Textile Memorial Bridge (University Av), and Bridge Street at VFW Highway. We need to make sure the replacement of the University Av Bridge is not delayed and we need to begin the planning process for the replacement of the Rourke Bridge with a much wider bridge. Unfortunately, these are not short term solutions.

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)

I don’t see a short term solution to this problem. We would have to add several personnel to prevent the daily closings – this would involve a substantial tax increase.

A long term solution would be to replace the existing firehouses with new firehouses at locations that would be more strategic through-out the city – providing better coverage with one or two fewer 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 viability can only be helped as long as there is employment for the new immigrants. However, I doubt that new immigrants would choose to come to Lowell or stay in Lowell if there were no employment opportunities.

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)

I believe immigration is in the area of foreign affairs and per the US Constitution is the purview of the Federal Government. We should not attempt to regulate immigration at the local level.

However, we do have a duty to protect the public and should notify the federal officials when a non-resident alien is arrested for criminal activity.

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 the local paper, listen to the local talk radio in the morning, and monitor the local blogs on a daily basis.

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

I generally have respect for all our elected officials. I cannot say that I admire any specific individual. It is my personal philosophy not to place anyone "on a pedestal". I find that doing so usually leads to disappointment. As an elected official, I expect to interact with other elected officials as an equal and not subservient in any way.

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

My goal is to keep the city moving in the current direction. We need to begin rebuilding our reserves and complete the projects that are already under way as quickly as possible. We need to make infrastructure improvements as soon as we have the resources – until then we need plan for those improvement by preparing a Capital Plan for the City. This will allow us to properly prioritize the improvements.