



THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Questions for 2021 Comptroller Candidates

Responses from Candidate: Brad Lander

1. Why are you running for Comptroller and what experience do you have that prepares you for this job?

Even before COVID-19, our democracy was in peril. Gaping inequalities in the economy, housing, education, health care, and policing have left us fractured, and far from the ideals of equal justice or opportunity. People doubt that our government will do what it promises, that it will spend our money wisely, that it will tell the truth, that it can serve as a vehicle for people to come together with their neighbors, across lines of difference, to confront our problems and make our life in common better.

The COVID-19 crisis has both revealed and exacerbated those flaws in our governing institutions and society.

Our next Comptroller will be in office through a once-in-a-generation test of our city's ability to govern: Helping to control and end the COVID-19 crisis. Bringing our city back to life. Supporting millions of struggling families to get back on their feet. Responding to an overdue reckoning with systemic racism. Investing in a long-term rebuilding that provides a platform for thoughtful growth, shares the benefits far more equally, and implements a green new deal to mitigate and prepare for the climate crisis. Rebuilding trust in government will be necessary to do any of those things.

I'm running for New York City Comptroller to help our city rise to meet those challenges.

In my decade in the City Council representing the 39th District and serving as the Council's Deputy Leader for Policy, and in 15 years leading nonprofit organizations before that, I've made government work better by listening to the voices of the community, demanding that we live up to our values, understanding that budgets are moral documents, taking a good hard look at the data, and building lasting partnerships for meaningful change.

Since joining the Council in 2010, I have led innovative work to intervene in the city's economy in ways that have delivered for working New Yorkers and expanded democracy and transparency in city government. My work to raise the floor in the gig- and contingent-work economy has delivered for Uber and Lyft drivers (who are now earning on average \$5000/year more thanks to the living wage law I passed), fast-food workers (who have stable schedules and a path to full-time jobs), and freelancers (who have the strongest protections in the country against wage theft). I understand how to

make the economy work for working people, in ways that strengthen our city's ability to flourish overall.

I've also worked successfully to expand transparency and democracy in New York City, by launching and expanding participatory budgeting, strengthening our campaign finance laws to prohibit dark money, and establishing the NYPD Inspector General's office. During my tenure in the Council, I've also led efforts to keep tenants in their homes, integrate our public schools, confront abusive policing, and combat climate change. [More on my track record can be found on my website.](#)

Before running for City Council, I served as executive director of two nonprofit organizations, both of which grew and had strong track records under my leadership. As executive director of the Fifth Avenue Committee, I oversaw the development and preservation of hundreds of units of affordable housing, and launched innovative community organizing, workforce development, and criminal justice programs. As director of the Pratt Center for Community Development, I helped provide planning and organizing assistance to grassroots community-based groups in every borough working for housing, economic, and environmental justice, and led successful campaigns to reform New York City's tax and zoning policies.

Finally, I know that change doesn't happen by elected officials acting alone, even with the best economic analysis, investment plan, or audits. I am proud of the organizing and movement-building I have done in my district and beyond, helping to launch the New York City Council's Progressive Caucus, Get Organized BK (a grassroots network of thousands of Brooklynites working to defend democracy during the Trump era) and Local Progress (a network of over 1000 local elected officials advancing a racial and economic justice agenda through all levels of local government). I will bring the perspective of "co-governance" to the New York City Comptroller's office, which means that the tools of the office must be used with unstinting integrity and independent analysis, but also in partnership with New Yorkers working for sustainable and livable neighborhoods for everyone, reckoning with issues of racial, gender, and economic inequality, and fighting to build a more genuinely inclusive democracy.

2. What do you believe are the most important responsibilities of the Comptroller?

The Comptroller's office has the tools and the responsibility to ensure that we are budgeting wisely, investing strategically, governing democratically, and living up to our commitments to each other and to future generations. As both the city's Chief Financial Officer and its Chief Accountability Officer, the Comptroller leads a staff of over 700 employees to oversee the City's finances, audit City agencies, review City contracts for integrity and accountability, underwrite municipal bonds to invest in the city's physical and fiscal future, enforce prevailing wage and living wage laws, and serve as a fiduciary to the City's five public pension funds.

The tools of this office can and must be put to work to help NYC recover from one of its most daunting crises, and to help build a better, fairer, more resilient city that is more prepared for coming crises. The Comptroller's fundamental responsibility is to instill and maintain public confidence in the workings of government. Toward that end, I will focus the responsibilities of the office on the following priorities:

- Telling the truth about our finances so we are informed to make difficult but necessary fiscal choices that lie ahead (with an eye toward Keynesian solutions, rather than austere ones).
- Making city government work better, and more in sync with our values, by auditing city agencies using new tools and partnerships (e.g. equity and sustainability audits), improving City contracting and procurement, and engaging communities in strengthening the work of local government.
- Investing the city's pension funds wisely and consistently with our values, to guarantee city workers have the full pensions to which they are entitled, and to help ensure a more equal and sustainable future for them, their families, and their neighbors.
- Taking the long-term view on our city by accounting for our future. That means supporting economic policies that help our city thrive more equally and evaluating and preparing for the major risks facing our city (especially the climate crisis).

3. If elected as Comptroller, how will you safeguard the City's financial future, and what creative fundraising in addition to floating bonds could you envision overseeing?

The first responsibility for fiscal relief belongs to the federal government, which has the power to enact a bold and far-reaching stimulus package that would provide COVID-19 relief to all who need it (including undocumented immigrants), enable people to stay home to slow the spread of coronavirus, prevent evictions, save small businesses, invest in a just and sustainable recovery through a green new deal, and pay for these investments through a combination of federal borrowing and new progressive wealth and income taxes. I fought hard for Democrats to win back the White House and the Senate, so they would be in a position to deliver the relief that the moment demands.

On the State level, I support the Invest In Our New York campaign to bring additional revenue to New York in order to shore up our finances and make the investments needed to restart New York's economy. I will lend my voice and analysis as the city's Comptroller to make sure New York raises the needed revenue to avoid harmful austerity policies. I have a deep knowledge of tax policy, and I support creative solutions such as conforming New York State to GILTI (global intangible low-tax income) rules, limiting certain itemized deductions, restoring the capital base alternative, decoupling from federal opportunity zone tax shelters, and increasing tax enforcement.

It is also important to have a Comptroller who can manage New York's investments, especially our pensions. I have established a reputation throughout my long career in politics and policy as careful and responsible and I will bring those skills to my management of New York's assets.

While the City of New York does not have the power of the federal government to borrow to close a budget deficit, we are not helpless. We can adopt smart Keynesian strategies like investing in infrastructure, affordable housing, climate resilience, and job creation. That's why I led efforts to push back against Mayor de Blasio's short-sighted cuts to this year's capital budget, which ultimately won a \$466 million restoration in affordable and supportive housing.

Currently, interest rates are at historic lows, so I believe it is an excellent time to refinance our bond obligations to save money. Through my work in the Council, through research, and through many conversations with experts, I have developed an understanding of municipal finance and debt markets. I will hire a first-rate Deputy Comptroller for Public Finance, and work with their expert team to consider the advantages of fixed vs. floating bonds, to which indices floating rates might be tied, the timing for refinancings, and the most efficient ways for the city to maximize both our resources for capital investment and for the current needs of our operating budget.

One important point with respect to municipal bonds: The New York City entities that issue municipal bonds for city agencies have a history of applying ethical screens for underwriting work, including the MacBride Principles regarding employment discrimination in Northern Ireland, as well as refusing to do business with Wells Fargo after they fraudulently opened accounts without their customers' permission. I would work to expand these screens to cover other areas of corporate responsibility, including mortgage lenders that refuse to negotiate loan modifications with borrowers. It is important to note that (a) the comptroller generally has only one appointee on these boards and so does not make these decisions unilaterally; (b) these decisions are covered by New York City procurement rules, which are constrained by New York State's general municipal law (which generally requires selecting the lowest responsible bidder); I would be glad to push as far as we can within these laws, and also join efforts to change them at the state level to allow us to responsibly align our interests and our values; and (c) while we should not live in thrall to bond traders, New York City needs to remain competitive in our bond issuances, since getting a good rating on our bonds is critical to our ability to build schools, hospitals, affordable housing, transit and water infrastructure.

4. Considering the effects of COVID, how would you deal with the reluctance that individuals and corporations may have to relocating back to NYC or maintaining/renewing leases, and the resulting loss of revenue? How will this affect taxes and budgets?

The loss of revenue if individuals and firms do not continue to locate and grow in New York City would be significant. We stand to lose substantial income tax revenue if individuals leave New York City, or if those who previously lived outside the city but worked here (thus paying NYC income tax) cease to do so. New York City's property tax income has taken a large hit, due to reductions in value to commercial property. Corporate tax revenues are apportioned based on revenue, so they are less likely to be affected. We have not yet seen serious losses in residential property taxes, but those could fall over time without a strong recovery.

We do, however, have some tools to minimize the impact. For small businesses, I have proposed a "[Small Business Recovery Lease](#)" program, introduced alongside State Senator Brian Kavanagh, Assembly Member Yuh-Line Niou, and Council Member Keith Powers. The program would provide a 10-year property tax break for commercial landlords who restructure leases with small business tenants to settle past rent arrears and enter into a new, long-term, affordable lease. Commercial vacancy taxes will

encourage commercial landlords to rent out office space at lower rates, encouraging businesses to bring workers back into the office. This will allow us to tax their income.

More importantly, we need to make New York City a place where people want to be -- whether they left and come back, whether they never left, or whether they come in the future to make their mark as so many past generations have. The future for New York City must be as a city that thrives for everyone. I have a vision for a diverse New York, with abundant small businesses, restaurants, and arts. People live in New York, and companies bring their offices here, because people want to be here. We need to make sure that remains true after COVID-19, and we have a real opportunity to ensure that as we rebuild New York City, we do so in a way that is more equitable, sustainable and just.

More on my vision for a just recovery for New York City [can be found here](#).

5. Do you see any need for increasing oversight of the budgets of any specific city agencies and/or departments, especially in light of decreased tax revenues due to COVID?

There are a number of city agencies and processes that, with focused analysis, a keen look at the data, and commitment to reform could see cost savings that would help improve New York City's fiscal situation.

First, I will audit policing strategies by the NYPD that fail to make us safer and amplify racial inequality, with a focus on reducing payouts for police misconduct (the largest single area of claims against New York City) through stronger and more proactive accountability measures. The Comptroller, who settles claims for the city, can play a strong role in providing, through a more transparent and proactive database that links claim settlement data with 50-A police discipline records. In this vein, I have put forward a strategy for [transforming traffic safety](#), including reducing crashes caused by City drivers, the second-highest area of claims against the City.

Second, I have worked for years to reform the city's capital projects management system, an area long overdue for savings and improvement. Fully half of the city's capital projects are over time and above budget, and yet the city does not even maintain a tracking system that would allow the Mayor, the Comptroller, the City Council, the press, or the public to review the status of projects. Earlier this year, I passed legislation that will create an online public capital projects tracker, giving the public and budget watchdogs a better understanding of the spending and timelines. As Comptroller, I will establish an audit team dedicated to capital projects management reform across agencies, which I believe can save billions of dollars.

As the City's largest agency by far, the NYC Department of Education demands extensive oversight, as was shown just a few years ago when a billion dollar contract turned out to be inflated by hundreds of millions of dollars. The actions of a citizen investigator, working together with elected officials, saved the City \$727 million. Far too much is spent on a wide range of outside consultants.

Finally, as a Council Member, I have co-sponsored legislation that strengthens the requirements on the NYC Economic Development Corporation to report transparently and in detail on all economic development subsidies, through the Annual Investment

Projects Report (AIPR), as well as legislation that requires the Independent Budget Office and the City Council to collaborate to annually review subsidy programs. As Comptroller, I will continue this work. Each year, when the AIPR is published, my team will review and analyze the economic development deals that were completed in the previous year (with a particular eye to the resulting jobs created, wages paid, benefits provided, and New Yorkers who gained access, with an eye to racial equity). I will audit any subsidy deals that look problematic.

6. What role should the Comptroller play in addressing the issues of cost overruns, inflated overtime, and inefficiencies in some city agencies and/or departments? What measures can you suggest for various city agencies and departments – for example: MTA, Police, School administrators, etc. – to economize that can be implemented now? In the near future?

As noted above, I believe it is critical for the next Comptroller to dive deep into the budgets of the NYPD, DOE, EDC, and capital projects management. In all of those areas, and many more, the Comptroller can identify waste, mismanagement, and inefficiencies that can save the city money at this urgent moment.

The Citizens Budget Commission has researched the ways in which overtime -- especially, but not solely, at the NYPD -- has grown out-of control, both as an unchecked administrative strategy (it is well known that there is little consequence for the agency blowing past whatever number is in the budget) and as part of an effort by individuals to increase compensation in their final years in order to boost their pension calculation. We need new policies to hold agencies accountable to their overtime projections, and I will make this part of my work as Comptroller.

One large area of inefficiency that I will focus on at the DOE is the dramatic growth of “Carter Cases,” the provision for paying for the education of students whose needs are found not to be able to be met by our public schools. At \$220 million is by far the largest non-Covid area of increased spending proposed in this year’s preliminary budget, and yet families report a system that is tremendously inefficient.

While the MTA is a State-level agency, the New York City Comptroller can still play a strong and critical role investigating bloated contracts, auditing cost overruns, and taking a close look at both finances and operations. My work investigating signal failures in the subway system was an important part of winning major new investments in signal modernization.

Lastly, many of our agencies, especially MTA, NYPD, and DOE are too top-heavy. As Comptroller, I will audit these agencies and others to ensure that staffing is matching the agencies needs, with recommendations on how to change internal incentives to ensure efficient staffing without necessitating layoffs.

7. Do you see any possibility for the city to deal with the loss of tax revenues that would not result in massive layoffs and tax increases? What specifically?

As noted above, the first critical steps in balancing New York City’s budget in the wake of the economic and fiscal devastation of the pandemic are (a) fighting for adequate fiscal relief in Washington DC, where we now have a fighting chance thanks to

Democratic control of the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives; and (b) pushing for new, progressive revenue in Albany by taking billionaires, closing the carried interest loophole, and other steps that will allow us to invest in New York.

However, even with those steps, New York City will still need to make hard choices to balance our budget in a way that does not fall on the backs of low-income and working families, cut public education and human services, and impose austerity on our future. Here are the municipal fiscal tools I would use:

Reserves: New York City used most of the reserves built up in recent years (in meaningful part due to the advocacy of the City Council) to fill gaps in the FY20 and FY21 budgets, accounting for over half the resources used to offset the budget gap caused by the Covid-19 recession. However, we have over \$2 billion remaining in the RHBT, and it would be appropriate to use these reserves if necessary, as part of a long-term plan.

Savings/Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG): Even with the other strategies outlined here, it will be necessary to achieve additional savings in the FY22 budget. Here are several areas where savings can be realized:

- NYPD hiring freeze/cuts: I supported the effort to cut \$1 billion from the NYPD, and voted against the FY21 City budget because it did not come anywhere close to this. In April, as the Covid-19 fiscal crisis became clear, but still two months before George Floyd was killed, I was the first elected official to call for an NYPD hiring freeze (as is being applied to the Department of Education, the Parks Department, and most other City agencies). That hiring freeze is still not in place. We can also reduce payouts for police misconduct through stronger and more proactive accountability measures (which the Comptroller can assist on, through a more transparent and proactive database that links claim settlement data with 50-A police discipline records). We must shift away from policing to achieve public safety in a wide range of areas including school safety, people in mental distress, domestic violence, and traffic enforcement (I have proposed a detailed plan for the last one, as a model, at www.landerfornyc.com/traffic-safety).
- Refinancing municipal bonds: Interest rates are at historic lows, and the City can continue to save money by refinancing municipal debt as bonds become due.
- Suspending organics collection; considering pay-as-you-throw: While I have been one of the most supportive elected officials of the City's composting program, it had not been implemented in a cost-effective way, so needed to be suspended. Now, we should consider moving to a "pay as you throw" program, with a base allowance to make sure it is not regressive, that provides an incentive for New Yorkers to recycle and reduce waste.

End 421-a: The time has come to end the 421-a tax exemption program. We are not getting anywhere close to the benefits we would need to justify more than \$1.5 billion annually in foregone revenue, and this problem is exacerbated by rampant cheating within the program, as uncovered by Housing Rights Initiative.

Debt: In times of fiscal crisis, Keynesian economics instructs us to utilize long-term debt to invest in infrastructure, affordable housing, economic development and job creation (e.g. in sustainable urban innovation, technology, mobility, manufacturing the care economy, etc), and in climate resilience through a green new deal. New York City has substantial room to increase our Capital Budget by several billion dollars, while still keeping debt service below the 15% of revenues threshold (we are currently at 11%, according to analysis by the Citizens Budget Commission). A stimulus package of this type will prompt job creation and economic stimulus, create tens of thousands of jobs, and provide the platform for sustainable economic growth.

We should strive to avoid short-term borrowing for operating expenses, especially with so much uncertainty about when or how we will be able to pay back debt. With the strategies outlined above, I believe we can balance the FY22 budget without short-term borrowing for operating expenses.

The New York City Comptroller has the responsibility to tell the truth about our finances, to make sure that our budget is balanced, and to find ways to make our agencies work more effectively with the resources we have. I've made those hard choices in the past as a member of the City Council. But that does not mean supporting austerity, or ignoring rampant inequality. Investing in better-shared, more-sustainable prosperity, and working hard to strengthen the capacity of city government to help deliver it, is the best way forward for our city. As New York City Comptroller, that will be my north star.

Rainy Day Fund: Unfortunately, while New Yorkers voted by referendum in November 2019 to establish a Rainy Day Fund, we did not establish and create it prior to the Covid-19 crisis, so it is not an option at this time. As soon as we emerge from this crisis, we should begin funding the Rainy Day Fund on an annual basis, so it will be available in the next crisis.

8. "Affordable housing" is becoming exceedingly rare, especially in Manhattan. How would you address this?

The current model for developing and preserving affordable housing falls far short of producing enough units affordable to low- and extremely low-income New Yorkers. For years, the city has granted private developers zoning bonuses, tax breaks, and subsidies in exchange for commitments to set aside a percentage of affordable units (often for a limited duration). While this model has created below-market units, most are not affordable to the lowest-income households who need them most urgently. A 2020 report by the comptroller's office found that the affordable housing developed under Mayor de Blasio is too expensive for 435,000 of New York's lowest-income households.

To address this gap, I propose [a new generation of social housing](#) -- community land trusts, limited equity cooperatives, and mission-driven nonprofit rentals -- which is permanently affordable, immune to the speculative pressures of the real estate market, and can be targeted to those who need it most. My plan would double the footprint of social housing in NYC by establishing a new New York City land bank to acquire distressed properties, requiring that all city-owned land that is disposed for housing go to social housing entities, shifting city subsidies for housing development from for-profit

developers (who currently receive 80%) to an even split with nonprofit developers, and launching a major new “shared equity homeownership” program.

Regarding private sector development, I have been one of the leading voices for comprehensive citywide planning, with a strong role for communities, grounded in values of equity, affordability, sustainability, and preserving what we love. A comprehensive citywide plan would guide the creation of new affordable, supportive, and social housing, shelters, schools, social services, and infrastructure in ways that minimize displacement risks and maximize access to opportunity. This long-term strategic vision, informed by real public input, would help ensure fair distribution of development and resources throughout the city and prioritize resiliency, fairness, equity, and access to permanently affordable housing. We have tried to model this approach locally through the community process for the [Gowanus Neighborhood Rezoning](#), which would generate 3,000 units of affordable housing, preserve and strengthen the neighborhoods mix of uses, and invest in sustainable infrastructure to create a more equitable and sustainable neighborhood.

9. Landlords cannot currently evict tenants for non-payment of rent due to the COVID-19 pandemic and are still required in many cases to pay real estate taxes, sewer and water fees to the city. What are your thoughts on this?

The burdens of COVID-19 are heavy, but they must be shared. While landlords should be asked to bear a part of the burden, it is not fair to ask them to bear the entire burden. When landlords do not receive full rent, they should not have to pay full mortgage payments, full property taxes, and full fees. At least some of their lost income must be able to be recouped. I have proposed an innovative model for “[Small Business Recovery Leases](#),” under which landlords would receive a 10 year property tax break to cover some of the rent relief that their tenants will require.

10. What considerations on investing city funds do you have related to social issues, fossil fuels, climate change, etc.?

As Comptroller, I am committed to working with the trustees of the five pension funds, who make the decisions around investment directives, to guarantee the retirement security of public sector workers while better aligning the investment portfolio with the values of their members, families, and neighbors. I support the decisions those boards have made to divest from fossil fuels, private prisons, and handguns, to invest a portion of the funds in affordable housing, and to take shareholder activism for boardroom diversity and climate progress.

To thoughtfully take this work to the next level, I will undertake an inclusive and proactive process to produce a Strategic Plan for Responsible Investing. This planning process will engage workers, retirees, unions, trustees, community members, and other stakeholders to balance and adopt strategies for proactive investments (e.g. clean energy, housing, development), divestment from unsound and irresponsible investments (e.g. fossil fuels, private prisons, handguns, etc), and shareholder activism. I would evaluate other assets, including private equity/real estate funds, predatory subprime lending, and corporations with excessively poor labor histories. I commit to working with the trustees, members, and our labor partners to make responsible investments that build an economy that works for all of us while generating responsible returns for our

retirees. In that process, I would create opportunities for union retirees and members to whom the pension funds belong to meet with union construction workers to talk about shared goals and values for the future of our city -- including responsible contracting and good jobs -- which their elected pension fund trustees should consider in making investment decisions.

11. If our members have any additional questions or wish to get involved, what is your campaign contact information?

I welcome any additional questions from your members. I can be reached directly at brad@landerfornyc.com or 917-822-4584. Folks interested in volunteering can check out our website (landerfornyc.com) or reach out to our Organizing Director, Steph Silkowski, at organizing@landerfornyc.com.