



THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Questions for 2021 City Council District 3 Candidates

Responses for Candidate (name): Erik Bottcher

1. Why are you running for City Council and what experience prepares you for this job?

I grew up in a small town in the Adirondack Mountains as the only gay person I knew. It was in New York City that I found myself, and I found activism. I have dedicated the better part of my life to fighting for progressive issues such as tenant rights, marriage equality, historic preservation and people living with HIV/AIDS.

Many of the challenges our city faces are not new, but circumstances have made them ever more urgent. I am determined to do everything I can to ensure that we not only save our city, but push progress forward on the major issues of our time.

In the richest city in the world, we have over 100,000 school children who are unhoused, abominable racial inequities in almost every measure of well being including healthcare, education, transportation, jobs and housing. Our criminal justice system continues to mass incarcerate young men of color at astonishingly high rates. Few New Yorkers are able to retire with a nickel in the bank.

I know we can prevail over these challenges, but it will take an activist City Council that is willing to shake up the system and make brave decisions based on the facts and data, not on the wishes of special interest groups, lobbyists or donors.

We will be able to achieve a city where your life expectancy is determined by your genetic code, not your zip code. A city where every family can live in dignity, with quality public education, universal health care, well paying jobs and affordable housing. A city fueled by renewable energy, not fossil fuels. A city with equitable transportation and streetscapes lined by successful small businesses, not corporate chains and empty storefronts.

This is what I will fight for as a member of the City Council. I am a longtime public servant and activist, and the only candidate with experience in city and state government and a proven track record of results throughout our entire district. I believe that together, we can build a city that works for everyone and make sure that New York City's best days are still ahead.

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

One of the ultimate powers and responsibilities of a City Council Member is to ensure that their constituents are brought to the decision-making table and have a voice at City Hall. As a member of the City Council, the residents of Council District 3 will be close partners in shaping my

legislative and oversight agenda and decisions on land use and budget matters. Advocacy groups, organized labor, and others representing the most vulnerable members of our society will know my door is open. Everyday residents will know that they can call our office to gain traction on projects that benefit our neighborhoods and residents. Council Members must recognize the awesome responsibility that comes with having been elected by their neighbors to represent them, and they exercise their powers for the benefit of all New Yorkers, not special interest groups.

3. What do you believe are the major issues facing this district and how would you address them?

As a City Council Member my top priorities will be helping New York City recover from the COVID-19 crisis, creating and preserving affordable housing, changing our approach to mental health, and addressing the continuing humanitarian crisis of homelessness.

With respect to mental health, I will fight for creation of neighborhood-based rapid response teams that respond to mental health crises in our community, build relationships with patients in need and connect them with care and housing. The number of New Yorkers with serious mental illness and substance abuse in our shelter system has increased significantly, as has the number of New Yorkers with serious mental illness in our jails. I will push for an expansion of behavioral healthcare services including the Fountain House “clubhouse” model that provides critical transition services for New Yorkers released from congregate care settings so they can successfully rejoin and sustain a healthier life within the community.

Addressing the homelessness crisis will require a creative hands-on approach and significant resources to fix a truly broken system. It is a disgrace that in one of the richest cities in the world, nearly 80,000 men, women and children are forced to live in shelters and temporary housing. Thousands more are living on the streets. This is a result of our city, state and country’s complete failure to address the crises of housing, jobs, education, systemic racism, substance abuse, criminal justice, mental health and more. I will fight to help individuals and families avoid the shelter system altogether by extending the moratorium on evictions, increase rental assistance, preserve NYCHA, expand legal representation for those facing eviction, and increase post-incarceration services to keep people off the streets when they are most vulnerable. For those experiencing homelessness, I will push to increase rental voucher amounts so that people can realistically rent apartments with them in New York City. We need to get serious about making our shelters safe, and outfit them with basic amenities like lockers, clean bathrooms, and washing machines as well as access to mental and physical healthcare services. We must change the way we approach transitioning unsheltered New Yorkers from the streets by creating more low-threshold safe haven sites, and build supportive housing for people who need mental health and substance abuse services to survive and thrive.

We must address the scarcity of affordable housing in the city. The glut of hotels and commercial office space created by the COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to create affordable housing. I’ll ensure that developers seeking land use approvals generate significant affordable housing and other benefits for the community. I will be a strong advocate for the residents of NYCHA, and will ensure that their homes receive the long overdue repairs and upgrades they need. I’ll push back forcefully against any attempts to weaken our rent laws, so that rent-regulated residents are protected. I’ll

fight to expand rental assistance vouchers, to extend the moratorium on evictions, and protect tenants who are subject to illegal harassment. As a Council Member, I will host monthly housing clinics in my office with free legal assistance for renters to help solve serious housing issues.

Last, but certainly not least, we need a strong and just recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. This begins with demanding widespread access to the vaccine, particularly for the communities most affected by the virus. In addition to new revenue, New York City is going to need billions of dollars in aid from Washington to prevent additional cuts to vital services, including subway service. Funding must also go directly to small businesses and cultural institutions that have been damaged by the pandemic. I will fight to fully restore, and increase, city services such as sanitation and subway service so that as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, we are primed for economic rebound.

I have a plan to establish a West Side Employment Network to ensure that the companies relocating to Council District 3 are hiring residents of our district. We have immense talent in our community, and I will create the infrastructure to match job openings with jobseekers, and prepare them with the skills necessary to get those jobs and thrive in those jobs. I will obtain funding for this program and partner with local organizations like Hudson Guild to ensure that economic growth in our district works for all of our residents, not against them.

4. What policies do you support to increase the supply of truly affordable housing in the district?

- What are your thoughts about changing the zoning in historic districts?

(Answer combined with below)

- Do you support adaptive reuse/conversion of existing offices and hotels (all or in part) to achieve affordable housing? If so, how would you implement and fund this?

In contrast to blanket up zonings in the Village, I would work with Community Board 2 to look at individual building lots at which there could be the potential for more affordable housing. Historic preservation is important to me. I am on the Board of Advisors for the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative, and I've been fighting for years for the creation of a new historic district on the historic blocks surrounding the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street. I'm proud to have helped achieve the extension of the South Village Historic District, as well as many individual landmarks throughout Council District 3. We are also in the process of advocating for a new historic district in Hell's Kitchen.

The glut of hotels and commercial office space created by the COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to create affordable housing, particularly Class B and C commercial office buildings and hotels that are older and less-amenitized. The city should rezone these properties as residential, and require that a large percentage of the units become affordable and supportive housing.

- Do you support using MIH with FAR incentives to create affordable housing stock? If so, where and how would this be implemented? If not, what would you do instead?

The MIH program has been a disappointment as it has generated only a fraction of the units that were anticipated. If there are lots that could accommodate affordable housing if they were allowed to build taller, the community needs to be involved in that process

from the very beginning. Community Board 2 has demonstrated the ability to work in good faith with the Department of City Planning, elected officials and other stakeholders to put together complex land use actions that create affordable housing and other benefits. Giving them a seat at the table at the very beginning of discussions is key.

- How would you determine affordability, AMI bands, etc.?

AMI bands, affordability and other details should be decided through a truly collaborative, community-based planning process.

5. Would you expand services for seniors? If so, what services would you expand, how would you fund them and who would provide the services?

Having worked very closely for years with Greenwich House, Hudson Guild, Encore Senior Services, Penn South Senior Services, and more, I have a deep understanding of the important role these programs have in the lives of our seniors. As a member of the City Council, I will push for an expansion of services that includes activities, performances, field trips, virtual activities, and more. The senior center of yesteryear involved serving food and putting our board games for seniors. That is no longer adequate. Seniors are active, vibrant, and they need good programming. I would like to work with Greenwich House to explore the possibility of a storefront senior center at street level, with cafe seating outside. The abundance of stores available for rent should make this an attainable goal. Our seniors literally built this city into what it is today, and we have a responsibility to care for them and ensure that they have what they need to live happy, healthy lives.

6. Would you change anything about public schools in the district? What are your thoughts on charter and private options, including funding, co-location, etc.?

Our schools suffer from lack of investment. Our schools have still not seen full funding from the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), a movement created by parents who sued the State of New York for disinvesting in public schools. The New York State Court of Appeals ruled in 2006 that New York State must increase education funding by \$5.5 billion. However, according to the CFE, New York State still owes our schools \$4.4 billion. I will fight for this funding and for additional investments in our schools.

Racially and socioeconomically diverse schools should be the norm, not the exception, as should teachers who mirror the diversity of our students. The current admissions system results in middle and high schools that are badly segregated, and this needs to change. All students in New York City should have access to free after-school programming and tutoring. I will also fight for smaller class sizes, better student-to-teacher ratios, art, music and health programs, and Community Learning Schools, which have the benefit of longer school days, provide 3 meals and wrap around services and programming to students and families.

I oppose the replacement of public schools with for-profit charter schools. Although specialized charter schools can play an important function in some instances, our public education system is the bedrock of our democracy and we must not abandon it in favor of charter schools that 'cream' students with the most engaged families from our public schools. Co-locating schools is problematic when there are two 'separate and unequal' schools within the same building and this should be avoided.

7. Would you seek to change policing in the district? If so, how would you enact the changes?

The police are currently asked to respond to incidents that are best addressed by civilian entities. For example, I can tell you as someone who works on this issue every day that in most instances, the police are not an appropriate or effective response to calls about people experiencing a mental health crisis. I will fight for funding for rapid response teams with crisis workers and medical professionals, on the ground in Council District 3. These teams should have a community liaison who attends local meetings and works with the community to connect people with care.

I will fight for a stronger and truly independent Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB). Currently, when the CCRB investigates allegations of wrongdoing and issues disciplinary recommendations, the Police Commissioner can choose to ignore those recommendations. In truth, the CCRB's disciplinary recommendations for police misconduct were ignored 70% of the time over the past two decades. Only one police officer was dismissed between 2014 and 2020. The CCRB should have the power to issue binding rulings on disciplinary actions.

I will fight for a residency requirement for new NYPD hires. Currently, the NYPD's civilian employees are required to live in New York City, but the NYPD's uniformed officers are not. In fact, a majority of uniformed NYPD officers do not live in New York City. Residency fosters a deeper connection to and understanding of the communities that police officers serve.

Reforms to policing should not be interpreted as attacks on all police officers. The police unions and others have characterized reform proposals this way for too long and this has held back constructive dialogue on this issue.

8. Will you be supportive of Community Board recommendations on issues such as land use, licensing, etc.?

Elevating the voice of the community and being responsive to community boards is key to being a successful Council Member. This is what I have done throughout my career, including in Speaker Johnson's office, and this is what I will do as a member of the City Council.

9. While recognizing the needs of bicyclists, what will you do to help ensure the safety of the public - especially our senior citizens? Would you be in favor of a licensing and insurance requirement for electric bicycles that can exceed NYC speed limits and why/why not?

As a Citibike rider, I am frustrated by people who ride dangerously. We need to create a culture of bicycle safety in New York City that includes enforcement and education. I will promote bicycle education in our schools, so young people learn the rules of the road at an early age and fund bike safety lessons for the community. We must also ensure that safety laws are enforced. I am open to licensing of electric motorbikes that cross the line from bicycles into motorcycles.

10. The next few years may see a drastic decrease in the amount of funds which the City Council will have to allocate. How will you ensure that constituent needs are met?

New York City needs billions of dollars in aid from Washington to prevent additional cuts to

vital services, and to restore services that were cut, including subway service. This is one of the reasons why I fought so hard for the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and for a Democratic U.S. Senate. We now have a fighting chance to get the aid we need.

Additionally, we need more revenue. I think it's very fair to ask the wealthiest residents to pay a bit more to help us recover from this pandemic.

I will fight to fully restore, and increase, city services such as sanitation and subway service so that as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, we are primed for economic rebound.

I support the creation of a New York City Public Bank to spur economic recovery. The City of New York deposits billions of dollars every year into Wall Street banks that are focused on profit, whereas a Public Bank would invest in communities, including small business owners and entrepreneurs. Private banks have historically denied people of color fair access to capital, and a public bank would help right these wrongs while spurring economic development.

I have a plan to establish a West Side Employment Network to ensure that the companies relocating to Council District 3 are hiring residents of our district. We have immense talent in our community, particularly in our public housing, and I will create the infrastructure to match job openings with jobseekers, and prepare them with the skills necessary to get those jobs and thrive in those jobs. I will obtain funding for this program and partner with local organizations like Hudson Guild to ensure that economic growth in our district works for all of our residents, not against them.

11. What are your positions on rent relief and considerations for landlords who are still paying the full amount of taxes owed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I'm extremely proud to be part of the tenants rights movement. Our successful fight to strengthen the rent laws in Albany was a game changer for over a million New York City tenants and stopped the hemorrhaging of tens of thousands of regulated apartments every year.

The moratorium on evictions needs to be extended. Allowing people to be evicted after they have been prohibited from working is unconscionable.

Many workers are months behind on rent due to the pandemic. The NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development's Housing Choice Voucher and the State Department of Homes & Community Renewal's COVID Rent Relief Program needs to be expanded to assist more New Yorkers who need rental assistance. We have to increase voucher amounts, which are currently too low, so that people can realistically find housing in New York City. We need to expand legal representation for tenants faced with eviction and increase post-incarceration services to help those exiting prison avoid homelessness, among other measures.

New York City needs billions of dollars in aid from the federal government to assist renters and small building owners. 'Mom and pop' property owners need to be protected from foreclosure, or their properties may fall into the hands of venture capital firms.

12. Please provide contact information for questions, to get involved in your campaign, etc.

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THE VRDC THANKS YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES.