



THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Questions for 2021 Manhattan Borough President Candidates

Responses for Candidate: Mark Levine

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

Manhattan and New York City as a whole face a multi-front crisis: the pandemic, an economic shock, and a long-overdue confrontation with racial injustice. I am running for Borough President to fight for our future and to ensure we come back as a stronger, healthier, and more just borough and city.

I have been working on behalf of New Yorkers for decades, first as a public school teacher and then while leading local community organizations. I have served in the New York City Council for seven years, where I have a proven record that shows I can organize for change. I passed legislation making New York City the first place in America to establish the right to counsel for tenants facing eviction in housing court. This has already been a lifesaving game-changer for tenants, bringing evictions down 40% as of early 2020. As chair of the Committee on Parks from 2014-2017, I worked to help fully fund and unlock essential greenspace in New York City, and saw the important role that access to parkspace (or lack thereof) plays in communities—especially communities of color. Finally, as this pandemic has harmed our City's economy and as we have lost far too many lives from this dreadful disease, I've been chair of the Council's Committee on Health, leading my colleagues as we worked to hold the administration accountable, provide fact-based information to the public, and worked to get frontline workers the support, equipment and protection they needed to keep our city healthy, tested and vaccinated. All of these experiences—legislative, oversight, budgetary, advocacy in the community—translate directly to the role of Borough President.

Borough Presidents have immense power to do good in our communities. I would be honored to serve Manhattan and fight with the Village Reform Democratic Club as an advocate for affordable housing, workers' rights, better health outcomes and a just recovery for every New Yorker.

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

The Borough President's powers are truly unique, comprising substantial land-use, budgetary, and legislative powers; community board appointment and oversight responsibilities; as well as an important advocacy platform to raise important issues, advocate for communities, and stand for what needs to be done.

With these powers, I'll work to address the needs of the borough—from COVID-19 recovery and supporting our small businesses to ensuring that our streets are safe—and will serve as an organizer of advocacy. This office needs a person who is a creative thinker with a track-record of listening to the community and deploying the power of government to fight for issues that are otherwise overlooked or deemed too hard to confront. This office also needs someone who can bring a holistic approach to governance, taking into account the macro needs of the entire Borough while also understanding the micro needs of every neighborhood and community.

3. What issues do you feel will merit your attention and why?

- **Affordability:** Much like the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, Manhattan is in the throes of an affordability crisis. Whether you are a tenant in a rental unit in Washington Heights or a small business owner in the West Village or the Lower East Side, New York City is an increasingly unaffordable place to live, work, and raise a family. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this crisis by increasing unemployment, decimating entire industries, and putting incredible psychological, economic and health strain on New Yorkers everywhere. Meanwhile, the pressures of real estate continue to press upon the backs of low and middle-income families. The rent is still due at the end of the month. As Manhattan borough president, I'll have the opportunity to address this challenge using the office's power in land-use, focusing on job creation and supporting labor, protecting tenants, and creating increased access to financing and capital.
- **Responding to and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic:** As Chair of the Council's Committee on Health, I have worked closely with health advocates, healthcare professionals, and everyday New Yorkers to ensure that the City is doing everything in its power to protect lives and keep New Yorkers as healthy as possible. The next borough president will need to put forth a bold agenda to support the New Yorkers who have been hardest hit by the pandemic: low and middle income New Yorkers, frontline workers, immigrants, communities of color, and our seniors. We need to invest in our small businesses; support the arts, including a robust recovery plan for Broadway; and help industries that have been hard hit to re-open.
- **Building environmental resiliency and sustainability in New York:** The health of everyday New Yorkers is jeopardized by dangerously low air quality. Every policy—be it housing, education, transit, or health—should be considered through an environmental lens. The climate crisis is too dangerous and pressing to be ignored; we need climate justice education, green buildings, green schools, green jobs and green transit in this borough. As Borough President, I will continue to support aggressive policies to rein in greenhouse gas emissions and build greater resiliency in neighborhoods across our borough, all while creating green jobs that employ people in low- and middle-income communities.
- **Protecting and creating affordable housing and combatting homelessness:** I will expand my Right to Counsel legislation and fight to expand supportive housing, which provides housing and wraparound mental and physical healthcare services for homeless New Yorkers. We must also work to raise the cap on the city's voucher program, which is an extremely effective method of helping families get out and stay out of the shelter system.
- **Holding large developers and land-owners accountable:** All too often in New York City, large developers and land-owners put their own motives and self-interests above the communities they call "home," failing or refusing to recognize exactly what makes the neighborhoods they are in unique, diverse, and special. As they develop and expand for their own reasons, they dilute and choke out our neighborhood vibrancy. As Borough President, I'll work with large land-owners like NYU, Vornado, Tischman, and others to

impress upon them the need to be positive members of their communities.

- Supporting our seniors and elders: The COVID-19 pandemic has had an undeniably profound impact on the elders and seniors in our community, but the city's work with the elderly community was problematic far before then. We need to do a better job of meeting people where they are and where they have trusted relationships—at community health centers and senior centers. We also need to do a better job of creating public spaces for New Yorkers of all ages and a city that everyone can enjoy. As Borough President, I'll use my ULURP and land-use powers to ensure that the needs of our elder community are not ignored during public design processes—from street construction, to park design and access to and use of the sidewalk—and my legislative powers to ensure that for-hire-vehicles are meeting their commitments to serve the elderly and mobility challenged travel across the city.

4. What will you do differently from your predecessors to represent the voices of Manhattan residents more equitably and effectively?

I can only hope to be as effective of a borough president as Gale Brewer. If elected, I will use her tireless work ethic, understanding of policy, and attentiveness to the needs of every corner of Manhattan as a model for my time in the borough president's office.

My administration will make decisions with an educated understanding of the diverse needs of Manhattanites. I will ensure that all levels of my staff (including interns) reflect the diversity of Manhattan. I will strive for community outreach that equitably includes the voices of New Yorkers of all races, and that especially focuses on the voices of often-underrepresented communities of color.

I will focus on policy areas that have historically been underrepresented due to disparate racial impact and particular impact on communities of color. Such issues include tackling the tragically high rates of infant and maternal mortality among Black women and children; addressing the prevalence of asthma and other pulmonary diseases resulting from particulate exposure that disproportionately affects communities of color; supporting and enforcing housing code standards that emphasize environmental safety and preventing hazards that disproportionately burden Black and Latinx communities, including lead and mold; and raising awareness about racially-influenced differences in diagnoses between white people and BIPOC, which are especially prevalent when it comes to mental health and chronic pain issues.

I will also fight for broader economic justice policies to better support low- and middle-income families in New York. My work so far has emphasized the importance of access to financial services (especially via a public bank) and housing security (recently, by rolling out Right to Counsel legislation that provides legal representation for residents facing eviction proceedings). These challenges and many others fall especially hard on New York's communities of color and it is important that the solutions to these challenges are inclusive of the needs these communities have and the hurdles they face.

5. Regarding the Borough President's role in the Community Board system:

- How will you make the appointment and reappointment process fair and transparent?

Too often, Community Boards don't reflect the makeup of the communities they are supposed to represent, nor do they always have the expertise or resources they may need to make important decisions that influence the future of their communities. We need to take a serious look at the manner in which community boards are being filled, and as Borough President, I'll work hard to improve the appointment process. We need standardized applications across the city, we need to end auto-reappointment policies, and we need to help actively recruit new members that have diverse experiences and expertise. We need racial and ethnic diversity and more union members, individuals with disabilities, teenagers, NYCHA residents, and small business owners—a true representation of our city. Let's involve community boards in member recruitment by requiring that every board has a new member and public engagement committee tasked with identifying board shortcomings and focusing on addressing them. That will make the recruitment process proactive, not a passive or reactive collection of applications sent to an online portal.

- What is your plan to educate new and existing Community Board members on such matters as conflict-of-interest avoidance, land use education, parliamentary procedure, how to effectively use their collective voice, etc.?

If I'm elected Borough President, one of the first things I will do is conduct a thorough review of the current Community Board member training process and develop new ways to encourage members to attend, including taking into account their attendance at B.P.-sponsored trainings when they apply for reappointment. If New Yorkers are going to take on the important responsibility of serving on a community board, we must ensure they have the resources they need, and they must also take on the responsibility of attaining the necessary skills to do it well.

- How will you help Community Boards do their work?

I'm committed to making the Manhattan community boards the best in the city, across the board. In order for community boards to function, they must rely upon professional staff to administrate, inform, guide and coordinate their activities. While in office, I'll prioritize ensuring that our community boards and their district managers have access to the technology, programs, and resources they need, especially as remote attendance takes on an increased role in board activity. I'll also work to fund a full-time urban planner and in-house legal expertise for every community board.

- Will you seek to be supportive of Community Board recommendations?

Community Boards are vital voices in policymaking in New York City. Seeking Community Board input is one of the best ways to assess public opinion on new policies and land-use decisions. I understand the importance of Community Boards, having served on Community Board 12 for five years, two and a half of those as Chair of the Traffic and Transportation Committee. As borough president, I will regularly reach out and seek Community Board input.

6. What land use policies do you support to increase the supply of truly affordable housing in Manhattan below 14th Street?

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

AMI is clearly an ineffective way to determine affordability. In some neighborhoods, 50% of AMI is still far too high, yet developers are rarely incentivized to finance projects below 100% AMI. Additionally, the current measure of a rent burden, 30% of income for rent, is not specific enough, as different neighborhoods and different families have different essential spending obligations that make even 20% too much. A family of four will have higher costs of healthcare, transportation, food and child care, for example. Clearly, this system needs to be entirely reformed and replaced with a much more targeted measure. Census tracts are one option for this, especially since the federal government already collects detailed information at this level. We also need to expand voucher programs that have a record of successfully keeping people out of the shelter system. Given the diversity of Manhattan, where we have new luxury buildings next to rent-stabilized ones, we need to ensure deep affordability in all developments, so families earning minimum wage can still afford to live in our city.

- 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?

I definitely support adaptive reuse and conversion of commercial spaces and hotels to achieve affordable housing. Manhattan has dozens of empty office buildings that can be used for affordable housing, and many hotels have permanently closed. The hotels in particular already have much of the infrastructure necessary to be adapted into housing, and given the lower cost of converting a building as opposed to constructing new ones, the units created should be rented well below market-rate.

- Do you support using MIH with FAR incentives to increase affordable housing stock? If so, where and how would this be implemented? If not, why and what programs would you seek to implement?

My highest priority in increasing affordable housing will be to seek a doubling of HPD's capital budget (currently \$3.5B) to dramatically expand the production of buildings which are 100% affordable. I support Albany enacting a millionaires/billionaires tax to make this possible. Under no circumstances should developers who benefit from rezonings be able to build housing without a significant amount of affordable units—as routinely occurred prior to enactment of MIH in 2016.

- What are your thoughts about zoning changes in historic districts?

Zoning changes, whether neighborhood or spot rezonings, can provide an important mechanism for addressing a myriad number of neighborhood concerns, including building affordable housing, preserving small businesses, and upgrading public spaces. But rezonings must preserve the integrity and livability of communities. And any zoning changes in historic districts absolutely must respect the legacy and character of their neighborhood.

7. Please provide contact for additional information, if our members wish to get involved with your campaign, etc.

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THE VRDC THANKS YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES.