



THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Questions for 2021 City Council District 1 Candidates

Responses for Candidate (name): Christopher Marte

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

Our community is at a crossroads and we have two paths that we can take: we can continue to foster a strong sense of community for seniors, families, and small businesses, or we can follow its current path where we see neighbors and people who built this community get displaced. I have been on the frontlines of the major issues in my district for the past 5 years, especially when it comes to overdevelopment and displacement. I have worked with my community to stop the development of luxury towers, which could displace thousands of tenants and small businesses. I have built coalitions to stop the building of a new jail, and push for restorative justice reforms. I have worked with parents and students to prevent illegal and toxic contamination from dangerous construction sites. Since COVID started, I have worked to create a network of donors and volunteers to distribute food and PPE to homebound seniors and low-income families. I believe I am the right person to represent this community because we need a representative who meets people where they are at. I have supporters who are community organizers and policy wonks, and I have supporters who didn't know what the City Council was until I knocked on their door. The district has extreme wealth disparities, and different neighborhoods have different needs. But I have a track record of bringing these isolated communities together with a common purpose, and I will continue that mission in the City Council.

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

Land use is the biggest responsibility of a Councilmember. What gets developed and where can affect the affordability of the neighborhood for tenants and small businesses, the property taxes for landlords, what kinds of businesses are opening or closing, and access to green and open space. Our city is always changing and growing, but the Councilmember can control who it is changing and growing for.

An equally large responsibility is providing thorough constituent services. This can range from promptly returning emails and phone calls, to connecting residents with critical social services, to ensuring all votes and major decisions are made with community input and not special interests. I do not have any conflicts of interest coming into this position. I have never worked for a sitting Councilmember, nor a massive nonprofit. My experience is in community organizing, which hinges on having face-to-face conversations, building personal relationships with my neighbors, and providing not just constituent services but also helping organize against larger and systemic issues.

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

One of the major issues in our district is the affordability crisis. People are being kicked out of the neighborhoods they've lived in for years, or even their whole lives. This is why land-use is at the center of my platform. I will put comprehensive community-based zoning into place, to protect residents from displacement and ensure that the people who actually live here have a say in the plans for their neighborhoods. The Village is a vibrant part of this district and this city, and if we don't have a Councilmember who takes a strong stance against irresponsible development, like NYU's superblock, then we risk losing this neighborhood for good.

Another major issue is our small business crisis. Outdoor dining is only a short-term solution for the financial stress many of our businesses are under, and for many restaurants, even this additional income is not enough. We must provide direct financial relief to restaurants and workers, and reform property taxes which are often paid for by commercial tenants. I will work with BAMRA to identify what we need to do to help these small businesses stay alive and thrive.

In addition, I often hear from neighbors about their concerns about homelessness. During the pandemic, many of the facilities that once provided shelter and services have had to close. This leaves many people out on the street, no matter if they are suffering from mental illness or addiction. If we had more community health clinics, we would have more capacity to help patients socially distance while receiving the treatment they need. The pandemic has been de-stabilizing even for those who are financially secure and healthy, but the lack of routine, transparency, and care being provided to our most at-risk New Yorkers is a gross oversight of the current administration. We have many nonprofits locally who should have help from their Councilmember in responding to community concerns about individuals in crisis. This will not only keep our streets safer, but also get care and services to those in need. For a longer-term solution, we need to invest in real social housing, and not just hotels. Social housing can place nonprofits that offer job training and placement, substance abuse counselling, social workers, and healthcare clinics on-site, so tenants live in the same building as the services they need. While we have some social housing already in this district, we should be converting hotels into more long-term care sites for those experiencing homelessness.

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

When a developer comes to the table to build affordable housing or take advantage of the City's MIH program, they often need the Councilmember's approval in order to build. All the leverage is in the hands of the Councilmember to negotiate how affordable the new development is because the developer won't be able to build otherwise. This is a powerful position to be in as a negotiator, but only if the Councilmember prioritizes truly affordable housing. I have worked on the frontlines of the housing crisis for years, and will not allow new development that doesn't meet the affordability levels of the neighborhood's residents. In some cases, like the SoHo/NoHo plan, developers have large loopholes they can exploit to avoid creating any non-luxury units whatsoever. The current system is completely broken, and results in giveaways to developers with nothing in return. It's time to completely rethink our approach to increasing affordable housing supply. We can do this by demanding many more affordable units at a much lower percent of AMI during every rezoning process, as well as by converting empty offices and hotels, which I talk more about below.

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

Historic districts are one of the most protective types of zonings, and if we allow them to be undermined for the profit of developers, then zoning will start to lose its meaning and purpose. We're seeing this fight play out right now in the South Street Seaport. I've been working with parents, activists, and local tenants and co-op residents to fight against the proposed luxury

towers at 250 Water Street, and I'm the only candidate who has testified publicly at all of the hearings.

- 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?

Yes, this is one of the core elements of my affordable housing plan. There's a lot of empty office and hotel space in Lower Manhattan that should be rapidly converted to affordable housing. This is something the City can do right away, but there's been a lack of political will. We have precedent for this in Lower Manhattan, as many empty office spaces in the Financial District were converted to partially affordable housing after 9/11. There are many existing state and city subsidies that could fund these conversions, and by eliminating subsidies for weaker kinds of affordable housing development (like Mandatory Inclusionary Housing), we will have additional revenue to use for these more sustainable projects. In addition, we can fund new affordable housing by taxing corporate stock buybacks, which NYC did in the 1980s. This can give us new revenue for new affordable developments.

- Do you support using MIH with FAR incentives to create affordable housing stock? If so, where and how would this be implemented?

No. MIH has failed to create affordable housing at the levels of affordability that we need the most. While de Blasio has hit his goals of building new middle income housing, he is still trailing behind the amount of low-income housing he promised to provide. Providing these kinds of tax breaks to some of the richest corporations for such a small set aside of affordable units is not worth it, and is a proven failed policy.

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

When we build affordable housing, it has to be affordable to those who need it most. I have spoken with tenants in public housing who want to transition to living in other kinds of apartments, but they can't meet the income levels of new affordable development. The City's SoHo/NoHo plan sets income levels for affordable units at the absurdly high level of 130% of AMI. In other words, the so-called "affordable" units created under the current plan would be available to individuals making a six figure salary with no family members in their household. I would bring down the percentage of AMI so that it meets the needs of low-income surrounding neighborhoods. If we convert new buildings in SoHo to affordable housing, it should be affordable for people who were priced out of the neighborhood but want to move back. New affordable housing is essential to helping us maintain our sense of community downtown, and provide new opportunities to those who want to live here.

- What is your position on the City Planning proposal for SoHo/NoHo?

I am completely against the City's SoHo/NoHo plan. After years of envisioning events open to the public, and smaller meetings open to stakeholders, it's clear that the voices of the artists and residents that made SoHo and NoHo a desirable neighborhood and live on fixed incomes were entirely ignored. There is no plan for the protection of current JLWQA tenants in SoHo and NoHo, nor the preservation of the historic districts. The current proposal even gives a loophole to developers who are facing financial hardships to apply for an exemption to Mandatory Inclusionary Housing. During a pandemic, even luxury developers can claim financial hardship and will likely exploit this language to build 100% market-rate housing. I support the community's alternative rezoning plan, to protect loft tenants and ensure that many more units of

affordable housing will be built, and that these units will be truly affordable at a much lower percentage of AMI.

5. Will you support Community Board recommendations on land use, licensing, etc.?

Yes. The primary reason I'm running for office is to give our communities decision-making power in the land-use process. I will work collaboratively with the Community Board, as I already often have, to demand more accountability from agencies, and will gladly take their counsel and recommendations on land use and licensing. I will make appointments that are balanced and truly representative of our community. Community board members dedicate so much of their time to helping their neighborhood and I will treat their expertise with the respect it deserves. When recommendations are near unanimous, I will not go against these community leaders and advocates and when resolutions are contentious, I am committed to build coalitions to find solutions.

6. What is your position on the new environmental plan to build a sea wall along the east side of Manhattan extending from Montgomery Street to East 25th Street to offset flooding threats? Do you feel this plan will adequately protect your district and the services citizens rely upon, including the Battery and Wall Street areas and East Side hospitals?

Just a couple years ago, the City spent millions of dollars renovating East River Park. Now, the plan of the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project is to completely destroy the park and raise it up by 8 feet to prevent storm surges. The East Village and the Lower East Side need protection from storm surges, but the current plan would destroy the entire park all at once, leaving it inaccessible for the next several years. For many residents, East River Park is their only accessible open green space. The community is hoping that the renovation can happen incrementally, so that residents can still use most of the park at any one time, rather than ripping up the entire park all at once and leaving the whole thing unusable for years. If the implementation of the current plan is delayed, I will advocate for returning to the initial plan that had support from the community, scientists, and was supported by relevant city agencies. Choosing between coastal resiliency and our beloved park is a false choice.

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

We absolutely need amnesty for the debt that our public schools will owe the Department of Education due to loss of enrollment during the pandemic. I recently wrote an op-ed in the Village Sun about this issue. Additionally, I will continue to work with parent leaders and education advocates to make sure that NYU delivers on the school they promised the community before the deal expires. We need to fully fund the Summer Youth Employment Program, so that even when schools end for the summer, our children have what they need to succeed. I'm against the co-location of charter schools and am sympathetic to parents who feel that they need to put their children in charter schools instead of public schools because our public schools are not well-funded or resourced. I will advocate for greater technology upgrades and defend cuts to afterschool programs so parents can feel confident in the high quality education public school students receive from their teachers. and co-location.

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

Many seniors that I have spoken to during this pandemic have told me programs have had their funding cut. New nonprofits that have emerged during this pandemic to help seniors have mostly

had to fundraise from their own networks and received little city assistance. Since the outbreak, I have delivered tens of thousands of meals with my campaign volunteers and staff to homebound seniors living on fixed incomes. Even seniors whose income was not affected by the pandemic have been so grateful to have access to fresh and free food. I hope that even after COVID, we can keep this assistance going as it is clearly a need that was being unaddressed. I would work with senior centers to set up technology help for seniors so that they are able to keep in touch with their families even if they cannot visit. I would also expand access and awareness of social and cultural programs that seniors can participate in remotely to help combat the loneliness and isolation that so many are feeling. When it is safe for us to gather again, there will be a lot of grief that we will need to share together. We should get ahead of this by making sure that senior centers are ready not just with resources for the physical health of their members, but the mental health as well.

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

Our streets are so unsafe because cars, bicyclists, and pedestrians are all competing for the same space. This is the result of a policy failure. I believe that truly protected bike lanes will help ensure bicyclists remain off the sidewalk and on the street. I have heard concerns from both families and seniors who cycle that sometimes they are driven onto sidewalks because there is no bike lane on the street, or cars and delivery vans pull over and block the bike lane altogether. However, there are also reckless bicyclists who use the sidewalk for convenience or to avoid traffic. Even if they do not hit anyone, bicyclists must be fined. My understanding is the Governor's e-bike law has speed limits for electric bikes, however if the e-bikes exceed these limits then they should be fined just as cars are for going over the speed limit. I will also work with the Department of Transportation to ensure that bike docks and Citi Bike docks are responsibly sited. In some parts of the district, there are docks that require bicyclists to ride onto the sidewalk in order to reach the dock. This is irresponsible and dangerous, and is within the City Councilmember's power to fix.

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?

Before entering politics, I spent years managing pension funds and helping people plan for their retirement. I have experience in finding cost-effective solutions to big problems and ensuring that even a little money can go a long way. Facing a budget deficit, the salary of Councilmembers should decrease to, at the least, what they were paid in 2016, and the difference (\$36,000) should be allocated to discretionary funds for in-district nonprofits. I will implement Participatory Budgeting so that constituents can vote on what the priorities of our district's funds should be spent on, and I will ensure that funding distribution is equal according to need across this diverse district. Constituent services is something I have been passionate since before I knew what it was called. As a child of immigrants, I was often helping my family members translate and gain access to job and education opportunities. As an active member of my community, I have become a resource for many families, seniors, and immigrants for advice and services. When one of my neighbors was detained by ICE, I organized a letter writing campaign and he was released to his family. I have helped formerly homeless people find jobs that helped them secure affordable apartments, and connected domestic abuse survivors with precincts and community services to help their families get safe. Even on our campaign, we have been delivering thousands of meals to seniors and people who are immunocompromised, and have sourced and distributed tens of thousands of free masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer. With the

power and budget of a Council office, I believe this service work can go much farther, no matter how reduced the funds are.

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?

This is an issue at the State level, but I support the Relief for All legislation which helps homeowners and small property owners. The City should also use this crisis as an opportunity to overhaul the way it calculates property taxes. Property taxes should be frozen so there is no year-over-year increase. We must ensure that small property owners receive relief, as we continue to fight for aid for tenants. If we lose our small property owners, then they will be bought by large developers who will destroy the unique character of our neighborhoods.

THE VRDC THANKS YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES.