

Questions for 2021 City Council District 3 Candidates
Responses for Candidate
Marni Halasa

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

I am running for City Council because our city is in crisis and we will not recover if business as usual continues at City Hall. Even now, when our city and district are experiencing a multitude of crisis — public health, homelessness, small business closures and thousands of jobs lost, our City Council sits shockingly inactive. It's almost as if they have abdicated responsibility, kicking the can of our city's recovery down the road to the feds, the state — anyone but themselves. This is unacceptable.

Take a walk down any street in our district and it is evident that city government policies have failed us. We need representatives who understand the district's priorities. As a lawyer, former small business owner and community activist — outside the political establishment — I am championing policies that will keep tenants in their homes, save our small businesses and jobs, as well as help people in need.

I am and have been a **tenant organizer** of NYCHA tenants fighting RAD. And I was a small business owner who lost her coffee shop due to rent-gouging. These experiences have taught me the advocacy needed for the Council position. It has also taught me how view policy through a critical lens, helping me to understand which policies (and their implementation in the real world) are best for regular working people, tenants and small business owners, instead of the real estate industry. I have been pushing for the passage of the **Small Business Jobs Survival Act** for the past four years to save small businesses and I am still pushing.

My campaign is also here to support the idea that the **community should have final say in land use decisions** — and that means residents, not folks with a financial interest to gain, or others appointed by elected officials. Residents. Far too often I have seen fierce community opposition to development be ignored by the Council. That will not happen if I am elected.

I am running so **regular people can take back our city**, and most importantly, have the final say when development and other important issues affecting our district are concerned. I am running because I want to make a difference, and make a transformative difference to people who truly need it. There is another path for voters to take, and I encourage voters to join my people-powered, grassroots campaign to put our community first.

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

To solve the crises in our district — such as homelessness and the small business closures and job loss crises. To put forth genuine long-term solutions and introduce legislation to help people. To respond to constituent concerns in a substantive way. To personally know my constituents. To have a hands on approach and take this position of being a public servant very very seriously because people in your district are counting on you.

I also believe that land use decisions should be deferred to the District's councilmember, and that the decision of the councilmember must reflect the decision of the community. Additionally, I do not believe the Council Speaker should take a more active role in land use decisions.

I also support a reform of the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (the "ULURP Process") that would give communities final say in matters on land use. Right now, communities are able to participate in a limited basis (and only in an advisory capacity) in a Community Board determination that is non-binding. Instead, I advocate that the ULURP Process should end with a binding vote at the Community Board level, where the residents have final say about land use decisions in their neighborhoods. How that will look like will take robust public input, which I will welcome.

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

a) An Economic Recovery to tackle our District's Housing Crisis with Rent Vouchers

Currently, I have an economic recovery plan to get us through this pandemic. I offer solutions like rent vouchers for tenants and small businesses that been hit hard by the pandemic, so people can stay in their spaces. The rent voucher — if accepted by a landlord — would then become the new legally-regulated rent, which in turn, would reset market rents. This system would eliminate any trigger for eviction.

b) Repurposing Vacant Buildings and Hotels to House the Homeless and the Low Income, with Supportive Services in the Building

I also want to repurpose abandoned hotels and empty buildings into permanent housing for the homeless. We can do this through single room occupancies (SROs) with permanent leases and supportive services in the building for people in need. With a new paradigm of people working from home, and 20% of hotels never coming back, our district has an abundance of vacant space ready to be repurposed for low-income housing. This would take care of people's housing (and other needs) and allow them to live in dignity. I have had two press conferences with shelter residents on W. 36th Street because they need the city to step up to help them get permanent housing with their vouchers.

Instead of displacing the homeless, from hotel to hotel, which is akin to trauma (especially since many lose their belongings during the transfer), we need to stop this policy of displacement and house shelter residents permanently, with supportive services in these buildings. These services also, I believe, must meet a quality standard that the city ultimately should set so nonprofit providers are also held accountable. Every agency involved with the homeless must do better or else face consequences.

c) Solve Small Business Closure Crisis and Save Jobs

I also want to solve the small business closure crisis that has decimated our neighborhoods and the thousands of jobs of New Yorkers. Like stated before, my coronavirus recovery plan calls for

the issuance of rent vouchers that would keep small businesses in their spaces. With up to 1 million New Yorkers unemployed, we can address half of this unemployment loss under my small business and jobs recovery plan by saving the 520,000 small business jobs that have been lost. This would also allow people to return to their jobs once the pandemic is over. This plan allows people to at least make ends meet whilst waiting for the pandemic to end — which is the least we can do.

In addition, once elected, I would reintroduce the Small Business Jobs Survival Act, which would give all small business owners a long-term affordable and renewable lease. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, small businesses had been in a crisis, with over 1,200 to 1,400 businesses closing each month, taking 8,000 jobs with them. I'm told half of these businesses were immigrant-owned. The SBJSA would have given all small businesses in the City a long term affordable and renewable. This would be the solution to the closures and job loss because landlords could then not hike up the rents once the lease ends.

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

(a) Preserve and Protect NYCHA, Stop RAD and the Privatization of Public Housing, Keep Public Housing Public

Firstly, I believe in protecting and preserving NYCHA, the last bastion of deeply affordable housing in New York City and keeping public housing public. I stand with the tenants at Fulton, Elliott-Chelsea and Harborview, who are against the Mayor's plan to privatize 62K apartments and have come out publicly against, RAD, Rental Assistance Demonstration, which reports show to evict tenants, hike up the rents and get rid of the deeply affordable Section 9.

The tenants have stated publicly in the Mayor's Chelsea NYCHA Working Group that they want NYCHA to be fully-funded and are against RAD, Blueprint, infill, sale of air rights, and all privatization schemes to give public housing to private developers under the guise of capital repairs. Those tenants have also endorsed Fight for NYCHA's People's Budget that find different sources of funding to give billions to public housing for capital repairs, like assessing a 1% tax on then largest corporations doing business in New York City, repealing the stock transfer tax, etc.

(b) Repurpose Empty Buildings for Housing for the Homeless and Low-Income

Secondly, we need to repurpose and convert empty buildings and hotels for genuine low-income housing. This can be done to build more low-income or public housing for the majority of New Yorkers. This means removing political barriers to building such housing stock, such as repealing the Faircloth Limit, which capped the number of public housing units in 1999. But with the Democratic majorities in Congress, the Presidency, and a supermajority in Albany, we control the entire government and we could do actually solve this crisis.

(c) Fight Against MIH: A Failed Housing Policy of Gentrification, hurting Low-Income New Yorkers of Color

I do not support the Mayor's MIH plan, which is a housing doctrine of gentrification, exacerbating the homelessness crisis. MIH never creates the amount of units truly needed to impact the housing crisis. In addition, it is never truly affordable for those who need it. More than not, MIH buildings accommodate for-profit developers, prioritizing the needs of lower middle-income families, developed for households at 50-80 percent AMI (between 34,360 - \$68,720 for a household of three).

The MIH rezonings all over the city have had a disparate impact on neighborhoods with the majority lower-income people of color. This disparate impact is illegal, violating the 1964 Fair Housing Law. Currently, the City Council has introduced a bill so that new development must do a study on the racial implications that development has on a neighborhood. Studies are fine, but we already know this exists. I propose a moratorium on all development until after the pandemic is over, since rezonings and NYCHA's RAD displaces communities of color.

In addition, I do not support MIH because it makes housing largely out of reach to New York City households most severely at-risk of displacement and homelessness. Moreover, building the 80/20 luxury high rises only gentrifies an area, causing the secondary displacement of tenants and small businesses when rents inevitably spike. One tragic example of this is when the iconic Chelsea neighborhood bar, the Half King, closed its doors after 20 years. Their rent tripled after luxury hotels and the High Line were built in near proximity.

(d) What are your thoughts about changing the zoning in historic districts?

One of the problems with rezoning historic districts is that it does not preserve the unique, historic character of that neighborhood — since developers can demolish buildings, and essentially have carte blanche to do what they want with the area since community input is unfortunately advisory. Another problem is again, the secondary gentrification a rezoning can bring that will lead to displacement.

There should be a moratorium on the Mayor's rezoning plans in historic district for a number of reasons. First, developers push plans through without studying the impact of such development on the environment, whether the neighborhood could handle additional population, traffic, etc, as well as its impact on racial groups in black and brown communities. In addition, there is no real community input with hearings on Zoom. Many older residents who would like to participate cannot take part of because they do not have WIFI, computers and zoom technology.

I also stand with residents of Soho against the Soho rezoning. The Mayor decided to push this rezoning through because Soho is white, affluent area "already gentrified." But this is not an accurate portrait of that area. The Mayor does not take into consideration the many affordable Loft Spaces that artists bought together decades ago, and the many rent-stabilized units where long-term residents live. A rezoning should not even be considered if it will adversely affect residents of the area, and if the residents do not want it. Again, my plan for community control of land use would give residents relief in these situations.

(e) 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 I do. I think it is good idea to explore since such a plan was successful after 9/11, when many of the older buildings in the Wall Street area were converted into housing. Currently, the financial district now houses 60,000 residents. My plan is to tackle the homelessness crisis head on and house the homeless and low-income residents in Midtown West with permanent housing. I do not believe in relocating residents from hotel to hotel because according to the residents themselves, they feel displaced, their clothes and belongings are lost in the transfer, and feel a lack of worth and dignity since they have no control of their surroundings.

(Just fyi, one candidate in District 3 has had a hand in displacing shelter residents, from the Washington Jefferson Hotel in Hells Kitchen to the Lucerne last July. And another candidate aligned with the Hells Kitchen Neighborhood Coalition, with a PR firm funded by REBNY, had a hand in moving the shelter residents from a hotel on W. 36th Street to W. 40th Street due to 'density issues.' As far as I'm concerned, displacing people should disqualify a candidate from leading our District).

Permanent housing could be achieved with Single Room Occupancies, with permanent leases. To fund this, I would assess a very reasonable 1% tax on large corporations doing business in New York City. Such a tax on the top 25 corporations with over 1,000 employees would yield \$12 Billions dollars.

(f) 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?

No. MIH is failed policy. As of December 2019, only 2,000 "affordable units" of the 80,000 promised units were built. And 90% of the community boards rejected it, but it was railroaded through city government anyway. Instead of its promise to create a decent supply of genuine affordable units the city's population really needs, it mostly enriches developers and real estate speculator while inflicting real harm to the neighborhood it is supposed to help.

In the 80/20 split, some new units are created — but often only affordable to middle income residents. And although that can give middle income tenants some respite from the limitless rent hikes, the Mayor's strategy is not intended to rapidly assist those New Yorkers most violently affected by the housing crisis. But what is worse is that such luxury development, especially in poor neighborhoods, will drive gentrification and displacement.

The next Council and Mayoral administration must develop less destructive alternatives. Many interesting ideas are being discussed. To start, we could freeze the rent for 5 years, like the City of Berlin has done. We could automatically give rental vouchers to everyone who is homeless, and increase the amount and assist in the process of finding an apartment to fight rampant landlord discrimination. Like I said before, incentivize the return of single room occupancies (SRO) and protect the category from gentrification. Nearly 200,000 SROs were lost during the Koch administration due to gentrification, so this needs to be rectified. Create incentive for owners of single-family homes to create granny flats, which if done properly, could create

200,000 new housing units dispersed around the city. Reintroduce more apartments into rent-stabilization. Create more Mitchell-Lama housing, make it 100% permanently affordable and build with public money. Our city can emerge from this pandemic a fairer, more equitable place.

(g) How would you determine affordability, AMI bands, etc.?

Right now, AMI is not a good metric because it prices out most New Yorkers. Everyone has seen this in papers advertising affordable housing lotteries, where the “affordable unit” ranges from an income making between \$88,000 to \$125,000. We cannot fix the AMI standard. We need another mechanism that is not anchored in concessions to developers, is easier to understand and more fair for the majority of New Yorkers who desperate need permanent housing.

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?

Yes, I would definitely want to expand services for seniors. Many of them in NYCHA that I speak to are lonely during this pandemic. Others who I know that are disabled would like to go out for walks do not since they do not have people to accompany them. I would love to create programs that foster community and communication so they do not feel so left out of the world. In addition, once the pandemic is over, I would like to explore incentives for supermarkets and stores that hire seniors to get a benefit, such as a longer lease term. Again, many of the funding streams I speak about are (1) taxing large corporations with over 1,000 employees with a 1% tax on corporate income taxes (\$10 Billion), (2) repealing the co-op and condo tax abatement for the top 10% (\$170 Million), (3) stop refunding the stock transfer tax (\$16 Billion), (4) reallocating the \$10 Billion from the 4 new jails, etc.

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.?

Yes. Funding our public schools is a top priority. But also, I believe we need to solve our segregated schools because all children deserve a quality education within diverse environments. I would introduce policies to require diversity, and tie diversity to school funding. But a number of mechanisms need to happen. First, I would get rid of screening tests so everyone has opportunity to go to better schools — such tests require a parent to spend thousands of dollars on test prep, and not everyone has the economic means to do that. Second, we need to invest in public schools, based on need, and create schools with superior resources so all parents will want their children to attend those schools. Third, schools need to be accountable for enrollment based on percentages of racial and economic groups, students with disabilities, etc., and tie that to funding.

In addition, the mayor should have controls of the NYC public school system, but I believe that the City Council should exercise checks. For example, the schools chancellor must be subject to the consent of the City Council. I believe that the Mayor should not make material changes to the NYC public school system without the consent of the City Council. For example, the mayor's inconsistent decisions about school closings and reopenings during the Coronavirus pandemic – and at which COVID positivity threshold – should be subject to the approval of the City Council,

so that major changes in the operations of the NYC public school system can be made as democratically as possible. More generally, I believe that when the City Council has more power over the NYC public school system, issues like segregation in schools can finally be dealt with.

I have not yet researched my position on charter schools. But I support funding and strengthening our public schools.

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

a) Create Public Safety Agency

Yes I seek to change policing in the district. Our district has had it's share of the NYPD pushing, shoving, abusing peace protesters during the Black Lives Matter movement and other incidents. If elected, I will introduce legislation to create a Public Safety Agency, independent of the NYPD, which would be staffed with mental health professionals and social workers, who have an expertise in handling non-life threatening situations and people in distress. The fact that these calls have more than doubled from 2009 to 2018 to nearly 180,000 calls means that we need to address the issue of mental health city-wide and in our district.

b) Strengthen CCRB

In addition, I do support many of the reforms to strengthen the Civilian Complaint Review Board and give it teeth. Right now, it does not even have the authority to conduct a thorough investigations, with officers skipping interviews with CCRB investigators, body-worn camera footage withheld, and access to case evidence often denied. I believe we need to take final say out of the police commissioner's hands, make the CCRB's recommendations binding, expand the jurisdiction of cases, ensure that body cam evidence must be handed over to the board when requested. Elected board members would also help.

c) Create a Public Commission to Investigate the NYPD's Misconduct and Corruption

But with the public still frustrated with the lack of reform in the New York Police Department that has grown increasingly more violent and militarized, I believe it's time to create an independent public commission to investigate NYPD misconduct and corruption a la Mollen/Knapp Commissions.

There are many ways to do this. As a candidate for the City Council, one method would be for the next Speaker to use their power and discretion to appoint a commission chair. This model was used by then-Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to recommend the closure of the jails on Rikers Island. If elected, I would withhold my vote for a Speaker unless the Speaker candidate made a public promise to appoint a commission chair to investigate the NYPD.

With the Council's support, we could confer onto the public commission the power of issuing subpoenas, compelling public testimony, and deputizing prosecutors to bring their own cases. I can envision a commission that has the power to arrest officers engaging in police brutality once

there is evidence to establish probable cause. Video footage of an officer who ran into peaceful protesters, or engaged in violence against a citizen, would be such probably cause to bring an arrest. A public commission with these powers would be an extra layer of public protection to hold the police to account.

In addition, the public commission could investigate and enforce new policies that would prevent the NYPD from engaging in data collection and other unauthorized creation or uses of databases, which would violate due process rights and that would serve as biases against communities and groups protected against discrimination under Federal civil rights laws.

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

Yes, I will because community boards reflect the needs of people in the community. But I also want to hear from residents who are directly affected.

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?

Yes definitely. Right now I am hearing from the seniors in Penn South and NYCHA Elliott-Chelsea that they are very afraid of electric bikes because of their speed, as well as the fact that the seniors themselves often have mobility issues.

We must prioritize the safety of our pedestrians and that starts with a safety infrastructure plan that prioritizes pedestrians, but gives enough bike lanes for cyclists and space for drivers so everyone is operating safely. This is something that I have been thinking about quite a lot because everyone, in all modes of transportation, should be safe when they are out and about in our city. I, myself, as well as other friends I know have been hit as pedestrians by cars and bikes. I also want to enforce the 25mph speed limit, since traveling at slower speeds helps avoid accidents. Creating safer streets helps the entire public.

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?

If budget funds are low, we need to prioritize what we spend money on — and that money needs to be prioritized to solve crises plaguing our District. Voters that I speak are compassionate and want to see the homeless and low income New Yorkers secure permanent housing, instead of skyscraper gentrification that only benefits the wealthy. Voters also want to have safer sidewalks, free MTA public transportation, less construction, less noise pollution and a cleaner greener city.

To get there, I believe that we need to prioritize budget spending. We do not need to spend the city's money on the 4 new jails and gentrifying development that will displace and make an area unaffordable. We also need to do an audit of all our city agencies to get rid of inefficiencies and

taxpayer waste. We also need to defund the police, since recent reports state their budget is more like \$10 Billion, not \$6 Billion. But we as city council candidates and the Council itself also need to push our state lawmakers to pass legislative-ready proposals that can tax corporations and the wealthy to get our city more revenue. Invest in NY has some good proposals to do this.

The money is there. The question becomes — do we have the political will. And if the powers that be do not have the political will, what can we do to push them to have it. Many people are counting on us.

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 have been advocating for rent relief, such as cancelling the rent for tenants and small businesses hit hard by the pandemic. But the homeowners who are smaller landlords also need relief. I also stand the New York's tenant movement to push for a state bill that would create a hardship fund for homeowners and some small landlords, often referred to as the "cancel rent bill." Although it is not certain how much traction it will get in Albany, the idea that one's rent/mortgage could be cancelled (even perhaps a substantive percentage) is now something part of the tenant relief vocabulary, which can grow. Julia Salazaar's bill: <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/s8802>.

12. Another note: I am very interested in **Universal Basic Income** for the many New Yorkers who need this to live. Mayoral campaigns Carlos Menchaca, Diane Morales and Andrew Yang are all talking about it. I have supported UBI with a federal (or state) jobs guarantee since my days protesting at Occupy Wall Street.

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

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