



THE VILLAGE REFORM DEMOCRATIC CLUB

Questions for 2021 City Council District 1 Candidates

Responses for Candidate (name): Jenny Low

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

I have spent my whole life helping Lower Manhattan, empowering women, immigrants and people of color, and fighting for our progressive values. People have been asking me to run for years because I've been a District Leader for 25 years, served for 30 years on the board of the East Coast's largest Asian American multi-social service organization, and for 10 years, I serve on the board of the Eleanor's Legacy. I am currently the Director of Administrative Services at the City Council in the Office of Speaker Corey Johnson.

Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, I saw our communities facing economic stress and neglect from our City officials. The pandemic only magnified these problems along with rising xenophobia that troubled me greatly. I decided to get off the sidelines and put my skills, experience and passion to work as our next Council Member to:

- Fight for working families
- Get small businesses the support they need
- Address our affordable housing crisis
- Demand real reforms at the NYPD
- Improve the public schools that opened opportunities for me, and
- Help seniors and families with food insecurity

2021 will be a huge turnover for the City Council but more importantly, our City will be facing a dire economic downturn. Our District needs a Council Member who has a full understanding of the needs and concerns in the community, solid experience in the budget process and can work with colleagues to deliver fair recovery for all the residents. With my demonstrated track record in the private, public and nonprofit sectors, I will hit the ground running on day one as a Council Member representing Lower Manhattan.

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

The main responsibility of City Councilmembers is to approve the City's budget and serve as a check against the Mayor's agenda and budget proposals. Councilmembers monitor city agencies, make land use decisions as well as legislating on a variety of other issues. In addition, one chief responsibility is to represent the interests of their constituents.

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

There are three major issues facing District 1 - Recovery from the COVID pandemic, Affordable Housing and Education. Below is an outline of my plan to address these three priorities when I get to the City Council.

HELPING WORKING FAMILIES RECOVER by addressing unemployment, food insecurity, housing, and healthcare access.

The COVID pandemic caused a dramatic increase in unemployment among New York workers whose job cannot be done from home. A majority of these workers are Black, Brown and Asian Americans. According to

a recent study by the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI), the employment rates for New Yorkers who are Black was 13%, for Asians - 16% and for Latinx - 19%, compared to 10% for Whites. Workers in leisure and hospitality industries such as accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment and recreation have significant job loss. Many of these workers are immigrants who do not have unemployment insurance and health care coverage. For those workers who retained their job during the pandemic, they are essential workers in grocery stores, pharmacies or healthcare facilities where they encounter much higher health risk.

According to the same FPI report, about 20% of undocumented immigrants work in the leisure and hospitality industry. These workers did not have unemployment insurance or health care coverage when they lost their jobs due to the COVID pandemic. Among its recommendations, the FPI supports a New York State Excluded Workers Fund weekly unemployment payments to workers who are excluded from the NYS unemployment insurance system. I join other advocates in support of creating a \$3.5 Billion New York State fund to reach excluded workers and families.

As an immigrant, who came here with my family when I was 12 years old, I have struggled along with my family to become financially secure – while attending public schools to learn English, I worked in the evenings and weekends to help my parents. After graduating from Yale University, I worked in the private sector, and volunteered for 30 years on the board of the largest Asian American multi-social service nonprofit organization on the East Coast, the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) with an annual budget of \$190 Million. Among the success programs that CPC provides are its workforce development programs, training low-income and immigrant workers with skills and subsequently placing graduates in living wage jobs with union benefits that protect their families. It is in my DNA to bring my passion to enable working class families to be economically self-sufficient and protect workers' rights. In my private sector career and my leadership role at CPC, I have seen and supported successful workforce development programs created through collaboration among the private, public and nonprofit sectors. As Council Member, my priority will be to continue championing such collaboration to train unemployed workers with skills for the 21st century work paradigm. And to partner and strengthen relationships with labor unions, so we can ensure that workers are protected with benefits that include access to health care and unemployment insurance.

The COVID pandemic revealed that food insecurity among New Yorkers is deep and pervasive. Since early April, I have been volunteering with the nonprofit, ReThinkFood NYC, delivering free culturally sensitive meals to seniors and families in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. I am really proud of being part of the volunteer crew who have delivered over 2.5 million meals in the city and specifically 860,000 meals to the Chinatown/LES community. More importantly ReThink partners with local restaurants to provide these meals so these struggling restaurants can remain open and keep workers employed.

We know there are food deserts throughout the City. We need leaders who will unapologetically fight to expand SNAP benefits and reduce barriers for those who are eligible for the program. We should allow SNAP recipients to use EBT cards to purchase meals at restaurants during the pandemic, which will help bolster local businesses. Supporting programs like Health Bucks through GrowNYC will go a long way in bolstering local farmers as our economy continues to struggle and allowing families to prepare meals of their own choice. The City must do intentional outreach to every corner of our communities to ensure that families know about take-out and community meals distributed at their schools, regardless of whether they are learning remotely. It will be a priority for me to elevate these programs citywide to help sustain local restaurants and grocers so workers continue to be employed. We need to also put more resources into the city's Restaurant Revitalization program to subsidize unemployed and underemployed restaurant workers. I've also urged the Governor to allow restaurants to keep their quarterly sales tax and turn the funds into grants. This will not only keep restaurants open it will add capital dollars for the owners to use for workers.

We must also improve access to affordable healthcare particularly during the pandemic. It is important to retain Medicaid expansion in NYS. Medicaid expansion covers over 2 million low income New Yorkers and expanding Medicaid eligibility cut the number of uninsured dramatically. But more must be done as workers lost employer based health care coverage when they lost their jobs during the pandemic. Without Medicaid expansion and the ACA, many of these unemployed families would not be able to afford health care. We must

fight against changes to Medicaid expansion as they could increase the uninsured rate, emergency department visits, and uncompensated care.

DEFENDING AFFORDABLE HOUSING by opposing overdevelopment, reforming NYCHA, investing in truly affordable units, and supporting homeownership for low- and middle-income families with Community Land Trusts.

Overdevelopment is an issue in many parts of NYC but it is plaguing District 1. I support smart development where there is complete transparency from proposal, to planning to implementation. Each step must have real input from impacted stakeholders, especially the residents of the neighborhood of the proposed project site. In order for the community to have full participation, we need to modify the ULURP process, providing more time for the residents and local the community board to review and weigh in. Any new development should include at least 40% affordable units.

NYCHA housing accounts for over 6,300 affordable units in District 1, but they have to be safe, with working plumbing, free of lead paint, mold, and water leaks. We must reform NYCHA with a priority to repair the units into livable conditions. I support the Public Housing Preservation Trust, a bold idea to leverage federal government subsidized vouchers to finance and manage NYCHA's extensive repair work. It would be an opportunity to clean up the current NYCHA contractors system that has a backlog of repairs and maintenance with union labor that can fix up the dilapidated units.

One other proposal I'm in favor of to address the lack of affordable housing is to expand the City's Community Land Trust (CLT) programs, nonprofit entities that become stewards of land or properties for public and community benefit in perpetuity. Instead of allowing distressed properties to be gobbled up by speculators who want to build condos, the City should step in and help CLTs acquire the properties and allow current tenants to purchase their units for an affordable price. CLTs create homes that remain permanently affordable, providing successful homeownership opportunities for generations of lower income families.

We should also turn empty hotels into permanently affordable rentals or cooperative housing so families who remain in New York can have a chance at owning property.

The affordable housing crisis is deepening during the pandemic. Expanding affordable housing will be a priority for me at the City Council.

INVESTING IN EDUCATION by restoring gifted and talented programs, eliminating the digital divide, and expanding STEM opportunities.

Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza announced a few days ago that this will be the last year providing tests for the Gifted and Talented (G & T) program. I believe this is a mistake. Chancellor Carranza says that the program disproportionately favors White and Asian students within schools, but we have over 60% Black and Latino students in District 1. These students deserve an appropriate education and a path to excel. We should be expanding opportunities for students, not limiting them. I'm in support of restoring the G&T program in every school across the system. For generations, the G&T program had enabled countless students of all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds to take on vigorous curricula and excelled in NYC's top high schools.

With the restoration of the G&T program, the natural progression is to expand the STEM curriculum throughout the school system, providing opportunities for students to pursue the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics like it did for me when I attended Brooklyn Technical High School. Public education opened many opportunities for me and my siblings and we have paid it forward by sponsoring scholarships for immigrant students. Improving the public education system and fighting for free tuition for CUNY students will be my priorities when I get to the City Council.

The COVID pandemic lifted up a veil that may have covered the education disparity in District 1. Many students in low-income families and in homeless shelters had difficulty accessing remote learning due to lack of devices, access to the internet or inability of parents to help due to language barriers. Sadly, the digital divide is not unique in this district as we heard so many similar issues across the city. As an immigrant who didn't even know the alphabet when I arrived in this country at age 12, I know the importance and value of education. I vow to work hard with fellow Council Members to fight for equitable access to broadband for all public school students regardless of the neighborhoods they live in.

One other area I want to focus is to increase STEM education, particularly for young Black and Brown students. STEM continues to be in high demand and STEM employment is growing at a much faster rate than non-STEM employment. We must prepare more students for these higher wages positions. I want to establish more STEM internship, mentoring and leadership programs for Black and Brown students interested in science, technology, engineering and math.

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

The affordable housing crisis is deepening during the pandemic. Expanding affordable housing will be a priority for me at the City Council.

Any new development should include at least 30% affordable units. I support smart development where there is complete transparency from proposal, to planning, to implementation. Each step must have real input from impacted stakeholders, especially the residents of the neighborhood of the proposed project site. In order for the community to have full participation, we need to reform the ULURP process, providing more time for the residents and local the community board to review and weigh in.

It is the local Councilmember's responsibility to (1) ensure that the entire process is transparent from proposal, to planning, review, and final recommendation; (2) seek and facilitate real input for stakeholders, especially residents of the proposed project site; and (3) ensure that the final plan reflects the collective objectives of community and the sponsor.

One other proposal that I'm in favor of to address the lack of affordable housing is to expand the City's Community Land Trust (CLT) programs, nonprofit entities that become stewards of land or properties for public and community benefit in perpetuity. Instead of allowing distressed properties to be gobbled up by speculators who want to build condos, the City should step in and help CLTs acquire the properties and allow current tenants to purchase their units for an affordable price. CLTs create homes that remain permanently affordable, providing successful homeownership opportunities for generations of lower income families.

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

New York City must adopt proactive policies to maintain, preserve and expand affordable housing units. Any zoning change regardless if it's in a historic district, must have full transparency in each step of the process, and real input from the stakeholders in the community. Rezoning proposals cannot be rushed.

- 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 fully support converting empty office buildings and hotels into affordable housing. The hotel industry is the most stressed industry in the commercial property sector due to the evaporation of revenues since the start of the pandemic. With no prospects of revitalization for a few years, we should provide subsidies for developers and operators of hotels to maximize the value of their negative assets and flip them into affordable housing. The City will need to rezone areas like Midtown. This economic downturn has provided an opportunity for the City to reimagine our spaces and convert them into affordable housing for working and homeless families.

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

I support Mandatory Inclusionary Housing, which is the strongest affordable housing program in any major city in the United States. And using MIH with higher FAR is a good way of providing space to accommodate greater affordable housing units.

Here is my proposals on increasing affordable housing and creating permanent housing for homeless individuals and families:

- Increase capital spending and invest in Community Land Trusts
- Increase operating subsidies
- Mandatory inclusionary zoning with required 30% affordable units

1. (a) Increase the City's capital budget to expand subsidies for construction of affordable housing and to purchase land while prices are dropping during the pandemic economic downturn. Invest in Community Land Trusts across the city that would prioritize affordable units in perpetuity; (b) increase incentives for owners of vacant hotels to convert to permanent affordable housing; and to provide subsidies to landlords who carve out existing housing for homeless individuals and families.

2. The City must expand operating subsidies that complement capital subsidy programs. This will ensure new construction and preservation of affordable housing to serve low-income New Yorkers.

3. Any development project that seeks any form of government subsidies or zoning variance must have a minimum 30% of affordable housing units. We must expand and create permanent affordable housing to end homelessness. One major concern is the effect of the 2017 tax overhaul passed by Republicans that has negatively impacted low-income housing development. I will work with our Congressional delegation to amend or repeal sections that undermine the construction and repairing of affordable units. Washington must do its part to provide incentives for developers to take on affordable housing projects. In addition to the above strategies we must also: (a) extend eviction moratorium; (b) expand State's renter assistance program and change eligibility criteria so more renters can qualify; (c) expand voucher programs to enable homeless individuals and families find permanent homes; (d) provide legal assistance and right to counsel for tenants who face harassment and eviction; and (e) work with developers who are seeking subsidies to include units for individuals and families who are transitioning out from homelessness. The bill passed by the City Council in December 2019 that required a minimum of 15% units set aside for homeless individuals and families is a good first step.

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

Average Median Incomes are skewed as affordability is determined by region rather than actual affordability. For example, my district has very different socioeconomic neighborhoods ranging from tenement walk ups, to senior housing, NYCHA complexes, and even luxury condos. For housing built on public land, we should target rental expenses to be below the "normal" 30% household income for the lowest income NY residents this will help ensure that the units that are created are actually affordable for the lowest income residents.

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

I can't support the rezoning proposal as it is now. I wholeheartedly support additional affordable housing in Noho/Soho but my concerns are: 1) 800 units of affordable units are not enough; 2) additional tenants with children would stretch already overcrowded schools; 3) additional families would stress social services networks; 4) additional residents would increase crowding on sidewalks and make area less safe for all pedestrians; and 5) removal of restrictions on ground-floor use may open space to big box retail stores. We can achieve a better zoning proposal where we aren't just looking at the addition of

affordable units and retail space. We need to be mindful of what the additional density would mean to all the City services required for this neighborhood.

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

Community Boards are vital to support an area's growth which is why they are written into the City's charter and are there to advise elected officials on the important issues in our neighborhoods. I would take in serious consideration the Community Board's recommendations before making my decisions on land use and licensing.

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?

We need to completely prepare our City for the worst effects of climate change, including creating a resiliency plan for all five boroughs and the hundreds of miles of coastline that we have. Resiliency is a priority in District 1, where rising sea level, based on current projections, will submerge parts of Lower Manhattan on a regular basis and put critical infrastructure and jobs serving all of New York City and the region at risk. This plan will include creating new infrastructure as well as retrofitting existing infrastructure to better handle the coming effects of climate change.

The current Army Corp of Engineers' designs address only storm surges. They would not counter two other climate-related threats – flooding from high tides and storm runoff. I believe this was the most expedient solution to the problem rather than looking at the entire communities' needs holistically to enhance resiliency. The failure to address tidal flooding is a problem. Anyone walking along Pearl or Water Street during exceptionally high tide events, such as at full and new moon, will be inundated with overflowing seawater. I support the City Council's resolution adopted last year asking the Army Corp of Engineers to reframe the resiliency project to include preventing flooding from rising seas. There's no silver bullet plan but I want to see more layered solutions.

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.?

I believe in adding a directly elected Board of Education, a reconstituted Board of Education with a majority not appointed by the Mayor, but a Board of Education members with set terms, who cannot be fired at will by the Mayor and that the City Council would create to have checks and balances over DOE policies as they do with other city agencies.

I also believe in a teacher evaluation system not linked to test scores, requiring that the DOE communicate to parents that they have a right to opt their children out of standardized testing without penalties to the students or their schools and prohibit the use of State standardized test scores as the sole factor for high stakes decisions on individual students.

Federal and state governments must step up and fully fund public schools that are facing devastation from the pandemic-induced fiscal crisis. Cuts to Fair Student Funding formula allocations hurt all students but in particular immigrant students. This funding is typically higher at public schools with large numbers of students with English language learners, low-income students, disabled students, and students performing below grade level. State elected officials must stop any drastic cuts in the budget. We must continue to provide the highest quality education and services to our students, especially during the pandemic.

We have observed the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of Mayoral control of the NYC public schools in the last two decades. The current mayoral control framework lacks input from key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and the City Council. I believe the governance of NYC public school system should be shared between the Mayor and the City Council with input from parents and teachers. DOE is the largest City department and the City Council should have more oversight and authority over a department whose budget is about one third of the City's entire budget.

I support the City Council to have advice and consent power over the appointment of the chancellor. The appointments of members to the Panel for Educational Policy should be balanced with appointments giving the Mayor ability to choose five members of the, with the remaining picks going to each of the five borough presidents, the city comptroller, the City Council speaker and the public advocate. Their terms should be staggered, three-year terms with an option for renewal, rather than at the pleasure of the chancellor. This would be a true representation of stakeholders who are involved with the education of the future generations' leaders in our great City.

I would ensure the state legislature passes and the governor signs legislation that requires charter school operators to be more transparent about their finances and are held accountable on their student enrollment practices. We have had layers of secrecy and avoidance from charter school operators for too long. Charter schools should be fully transparent with their finances, enrollment practices and curriculum.

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?

The city is now home to a record 1.6 million New Yorkers aged 60 and over. This rapid graying of the population is presenting an array of new policy challenges and opportunities for the local government.

One of the biggest issues that continues today is a lack of accessibility to city services for immigrant seniors, and this is grossly demonstrated in the current pandemic. Given the nature of COVID-19, seniors are especially vulnerable, and are rightly prioritized to receive vaccines. However, it has been difficult for immigrant seniors to schedule appointments or receive vaccinations because the City has not adequately prepared to serve its vast immigrant population. We know that more than 60% of seniors do not have access to the internet and yet the main point of contact for appointments is via the internet. And even when calling to schedule appointments, constituents are presented with only two options: to schedule in English or Spanish. According to a 2019 DOHMH report, approximately 25% of seniors in the city do not speak English or Spanish at home. It is a serious disservice to ignore such large contingents of this vulnerable population in a time like this.

As a private citizen, I already help seniors access these services by translating for them publicly available resources on scheduling vaccination appointments, helping them locate close and accessible vaccination sites, and helping them secure transportation there. As a Council Member, I aim to advocate for policies that increase education and awareness campaigns for non-English speakers, especially seniors, that help them access the city services they sorely need.

The City also needs a bold new investment in older adult services to meet the growing needs of the largest population of older adults in the City's history. We must increase funding to the Department of Aging (DFTA). DFTA's current budget does not support the overwhelming needs of the aging population, including delivered culturally nutritious meals, digital literacy and expanding NORCs. We must increase the budget to support these and new innovative initiatives that address wellness, social isolation, intergenerational programs and support for caregivers. I am committed to work with colleagues to make this budget upgrade a reality.

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?

I would not be in favor of a licensing and insurance requirement as it would largely discourage potential bicyclists from keeping themselves healthy, along with contributing to the fight against pollution. There is little evidence in suggesting that bikes are a threat to public safety. However, I do support the mayor in his crackdown of cyclists who break traffic laws.

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 is facing the worst financial crisis of our lifetimes. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers have lost their jobs, more than a quarter of tenants are struggling to pay rent, and beloved neighborhood businesses are shutting their doors. We know Black, Brown and immigrant communities are hit the hardest.

My budget priorities include:

1. An equitable and just recovery for COVID-19 that prioritizes the communities that have been hardest hit by the virus and by its economic impacts.

2. Fight for working families that includes saving jobs and strengthening safety nets for those struggling with paying rent and providing food for their families.

3. Get small businesses the support they need. We need legislation that provides a roadmap for rental assistance and true hope for small businesses. I support the Small Business Recovery Lease Act and invest more in the Restaurant Revitalization program to subsidize restaurants and workers. And support for small businesses must come with protections for workers, including passing the Essential Workers Bill of Rights.

4. Address our affordable housing crisis by restoring HPD's capital budget that will fund infrastructure and create jobs. We need to prioritize affordable housing to help alleviate homelessness and help families teetering on the verge of eviction. NYCHA will be a funding priority for me as we need to get lead paint out of units, fix elevators and boilers and keep properties safe. We should invest in Community Land Trusts that will create affordable units in perpetuity.

5. Demand real reforms, accountability and racial justice at the NYPD. First, we need to institute a hiring freeze. If we are not hiring new teachers, social workers and mental health counselors for schools when they are needed most then we should not be hiring new police officers or paying hundreds of millions in overtime. I will take a scalpel to the NYPD budget to save resources and divert funds for youth development and jobs, social and community services.

6. Improve the public schools that opened opportunities for me. We desperately need to close the digital divide that keeps poor and homeless students from getting valuable remote learning lessons. We must keep teachers, students and workers safe including providing adequate PPEs, cleaning material and new ventilation systems in schools. In addition we should provide trained nurses, mental health counselors and social workers in every school.

7. Help seniors and families with food insecurity. Food insecurity has always been a rampant issue in New York City due to poverty and the pervasiveness of food deserts, and, unfortunately, it's gotten worse with the pandemic. We need to do more to help families and seniors suffering with food insecurity by adding funding for fund pantries, elevate programs like ReThinkFood to deliver culturally sensitive meals to families in need, and strengthen food programs with farmers and grocers that have excess capacity.

Our District needs a Council Member who has a full understanding of the needs and concerns in the community, solid experience in the budget process, and who can work with colleagues to deliver fair recovery for all the residents.

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've been calling for rent assistance and aid to small property landlords since last March. I wrote to City, State and Federal officials seeking focused aid and property tax relief for mom and pop landlords as I saw the immediate struggles in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Since then, I've participated in programs to help renters apply for state rental assistance programs and joined a chorus of elected officials including the NY Attorney General in calling for cancellation of tax lien sales. And, I fully support property tax relief to landlords who renegotiate existing rental leases to ease the economic pain of renters who can pay a portion of their existing rent. Finally, I have also called for the State to turn sales taxes from restaurants into grants so the revenue can be used to keep businesses opened during the pandemic.

THE VRDC THANKS YOU FOR YOUR RESPONSES.