



The Research Bureau

# Questions for the 2015 Candidates for City Council and School Committee in Worcester

Report 15-03

September 2015

Research in the Public Interest

**Questions for the 2015 Candidates  
for City Council and School Committee in Worcester**

*This publication is intended to provide candidates and residents in Worcester, Massachusetts with questions for consideration on key topics impacting the community and government. Elections represent critical periods for a society to set agendas and initiate new approaches to resolve community concerns. We offer the following to provoke discussion, debate, and potentially decision as the people of Worcester select their leaders for the 2016-2018 political cycle.*

## City of Worcester 2015 Municipal Election

*The 2015 Municipal Election is scheduled for Tuesday, November 3, from 7:00am to 8:00pm.*

*Positions marked with an asterisk (\*) require a Preliminary Election due to the size of the candidate field.*

*The Preliminary Election will be held on Tuesday, September 8, from 7:00am to 8:00pm.*

Worcester City Council—At Large\* (16 Candidates for 6 Positions)      Worcester School Committee (10 Candidates for 6 Positions)

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|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morris A. Bergman</li> <li>• Carmen L. Carmona</li> <li>• William S. Coleman, III</li> <li>• George A. Fox, III</li> <li>• Michael T. Gaffney</li> <li>• Juan A. Gomez</li> <li>• Khrystian E. King</li> <li>• Konstantina B. Lukes</li> <li>• Ronald L. O'Clair</li> <li>• Philip P. Palmieri</li> <li>• Linda F. Parham</li> <li>• Joseph M. Petty</li> <li>• Robert J. Sargent</li> <li>• Kate Toomey</li> <li>• Matthew E. Wally</li> <li>• Christina L. Zlody</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dianna L. Biancheria</li> <li>• Cotey J. Collins</li> <li>• Donna M. Colorio</li> <li>• Nicola J. D'Andrea</li> <li>• Jack L. Foley</li> <li>• Molly O. McCullough</li> <li>• John F. Monfredo</li> <li>• Tracy O'Connell Novick</li> <li>• Brian A. O'Connell</li> <li>• Hilda Ramirez</li> </ul> |
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District 1 Councilor (2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Tony J. Economou
- Cindy T. Nguyen

District 2 Councilor\* (4 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Jennithan Cortes
- Candy F. Mero-Carlson
- Ana I. Sequera
- Larry R. Shetler

District 3 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- George J. Russell

District 4 Councilor (2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Jacqueline Gisela Kostas
- Sarai Rivera

District 5 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- Gary Rosen

*Wednesday, October 14, 2015—Last day to register for the 2015 Municipal Election.*

## *Questions for the 2015 Candidates for City Council and School Committee in Worcester*

The City of Worcester, as established by the City Charter, is known as a modified Plan E form of government, which is a Council-Manager form of government with a popularly elected Mayor. The Worcester Public Schools (WPS) system is a quasi-independent department of the City.

The City Council is the City's legislative body while the City Manager serves as chief executive officer. The City Council is comprised of 11 members - six elected city-wide (or at-large) and five elected from districts. The Mayor is the candidate who receives the most votes in the mayoral election and wins an at-large City Council seat. In addition to his or her role as City Councilor, the Mayor serves as the ceremonial head of the government and chairs both the City Council and School Committee. The City Council hires the City Manager and can remove him or her by majority vote. The City Manager hires all City employees (except the City Clerk, City Auditor, and WPS employees), oversees City operations, and presents the City Council with an annual budget that must be approved by June 30th of each year. The City Council has the authority to reduce the City Manager's proposed budget, but not increase it. The approved budget must be balanced.

The Worcester School Committee is the WPS's legislative body while the Superintendent of Schools serves as chief executive officer. The School Committee consists of the Mayor and six elected at-large members. The School Committee sets district-wide school policies, votes on the district budget, and hires and removes personnel.

City Council and School Committee elections are held in odd numbered years.

### **Questions for Mayoral Candidates**

As chair of the City Council and the School Committee, Mayoral candidates should consider all of the questions outlined in this report, whether focused on the needs of the City or the WPS. There are some questions, however, that are pertinent directly to the role of the Mayor and the opportunities offered by that office.

*What is the role of the Mayor?*

Under the Worcester City Charter, the Mayor is the official head of the City for ceremonial purposes and chair of the City Council and School Committee. Under the rules of the City Council and the School Committee, the Mayor appoints the committees and committee chairs. While these formal powers are limited, the Mayor also has informal opportunity to highlight issues impacting the city and schools and form coalitions to address municipal challenges. What do you believe is the appropriate role of the Mayor as the highest elected office in the City of Worcester?

*What will be your priorities as Mayor?*

While the Mayor does not set independent policy for the City, he or she is able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward. What priorities will you have for the 2016-2018 term and how will you seek to accomplish them?

*How would you work to improve coordination between the City Council and School Committee?*

The Mayor is the only official to sit on both the City Council and School Committee, serving as chair of each. In this unique position, the Mayor links the municipal priorities of the City Council with the educational priorities of

the School Committee. While the School Committee oversees how the WPS allocates resources, the City Council determines how extensive, or how limited, those resources might be. How will you facilitate coordination between the City Council and the School Committee and balance municipal and educational concerns?

*What are your plans for committee appointments?*

A significant amount of City Council business occurs in Standing Committees, comprised of three Councilors appointed by the Mayor. The committees are outlined in the Rules of the City Council as the Committee on Economic Development, Committee on Education, Committee on Municipal Operations, Committee on Public Health & Human Services, Committee on Public Safety, Committee on Public Service & Transportation, Committee on Public Works, Committee on Traffic & Parking, Committee on Youth, Parks & Recreation, Committee on Rules and Legislative Affairs, and Committee on Veterans' and Military Affairs. Two additional committees—the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Ordinances—include all Councilors. Committee chairs, appointed by the Mayor, set meeting schedules and agendas and therefore wield considerable influence over the timing and approval of key items.

The Rules of the School Committee also identify Standing Committees: Accountability and Student Achievement; Finance and Operations; Governance and Employee Issues; and Teaching, Learning and Student Supports. Unlike City Council rules, however, School Committee rules allow for items to return to the full School Committee for consideration if a committee does not act on the item within two consecutive committee meetings.

How would you approach the appointment of committees and chairs and how would you make the committee structure more responsive and effective in addressing important issues?

## **Questions for City Council Candidates**

*What are your top priorities for Worcester? What will be your first item of business?*

Residents expect municipal government to address a significant number of issues—safety, education, economic development, the arts, health, transportation, housing, water & sewer, recreation, etc. The City stretches limited resources to maintain operations in all of these areas. What are your priorities for the City and how will you seek to implement them? Only one item can be the first order of business—what will be your first initiative as a City Councilor?

*What metrics will you use to measure the performance of the City Manager and Administration?*

One of the most important jobs of the City Council is overseeing the performance of the City Manager and thus the entire City Administration. Yet the City Council does not set out formal annual goals or objectives for the City Manager. As a result, there is little opportunity for the City Manager to proactively improve his or her evaluation based on measurable outcomes. What measures will you use to determine whether the City Manager is performing adequately and carrying out the priorities of the City Council? Would you advocate setting formal goals and objectives?

*How should the City engage more citizens in local government?*

Voter turnout in the City of Worcester is declining, with 86% of registered voters failing to vote in the 2013 municipal election. Worcester—both the City and its citizens—must find new ways to engage the electorate in local governance or the city will function more like an oligarchy than a democracy. In April 2015, The Research Bureau released a report highlighting options for educating and engaging the electorate, including citizen academies, neighborhood councils, and participatory budgeting. What would you do to promote citizen involvement in local government and increase resident participation in elections and on local boards and commissions?

*Should Worcester seek a single tax rate?*

Each fall, the City Council sets the tax rates for the fiscal year. Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 59 allows cities and towns to tax residential properties and commercial/industrial properties at different rates. This allows municipalities to shift some of the tax burden from homeowners to businesses. Almost a third of Massachusetts communities, including Worcester, tax commercial and industrial properties at a higher rate than residential properties.

Worcester implemented the dual tax rate in Fiscal Year (FY) 1984. Worcester's current residential tax rate is \$20.07 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation while its commercial/industrial tax rate is \$31.73 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. The Massachusetts median residential rate is \$15.69 per \$1,000 while the median commercial/industrial rate is \$17.30 per \$1,000. Since the implementation of the dual tax rate, Worcester commercial/industrial property owners have paid approximately \$625 million more in property taxes than they would have paid under a single tax rate, an average of more than \$20 million per year. The dual tax rate was established in order to lower taxes on residential properties, yet in FY15 Worcester has the 19th highest residential tax rate in the Commonwealth.

What would you do to address the disparity in residential and commercial/industrial property tax rates while minimizing the impact on Worcester residents? Would you approve a single tax rate?

*How should the City move forward on issues of race?*

During the spring and early summer of 2015, the City of Worcester hosted a series of dialogues focused on race and its community impacts. Issues of representation, bias, access, and racism were discussed in the areas of governance, public safety, youth and education, media, and economic development. What is your impression of the Worcester community's experience with race and what steps would you take to address concerns that were raised during the discussions?

*Should Worcester serve as a sanctuary city for undocumented immigrants?*

So-called "sanctuary cities" are municipalities that do not proactively assist the Federal government to identify or hold undocumented immigrants. While all cities are required to inform the Federal government if they have an undocumented immigrant in custody, sanctuary cities release detainees on schedule without regard to immigration status. As a result, Federal agents may not be able to arrive in time to take the individual into custody. Sanctuary cities argue that police departments are not responsible for enforcing all State and Federal laws, and that undocumented immigrants who are victims of crime may not reach out to or cooperate with local police forces if fearful of deportation. As an urban center undoubtedly hosting undocumented immigrants, should Worcester serve as a sanctuary city?

*How should the City balance the needs of the neighborhoods with the needs of the downtown?*

While a city of diverse residential neighborhoods, Worcester is often defined by its commercial downtown. The City has spent significant effort working to redevelop the downtown and bring new economic activity to the commercial center, primarily through the use of tax incentives. Simultaneously, the City has distributed significant Federal funds to neighborhood residential projects and lesser amounts to microloans and façade improvements for neighborhood-based small businesses. Some argue that the City's focus is too much on the downtown to the detriment of the neighborhoods. How should the City prioritize its economic development initiatives between the downtown and the neighborhoods?

*Should the City of Worcester require the hiring of current residents as a condition of its support for economic development initiatives?*

An economic development program generally includes efforts to 1) create jobs, 2) increase real estate investment, and 3) raise the tax base. Tax incentive programs minimize gains in the third category in order to maximize gains in the first and second categories. Increasingly, City Council has focused on job creation and local hiring over real estate development, and has sought to minimize impacts on the tax base through restrictions on the level of incentives and tax status of future owners. City tax incentive agreements now include language on local hiring, ownership tax status, employee benefits, and contractor suitability. This advocacy has extended to the sale of City property, as evident in discussions surrounding the disposition of the former Worcester County Court House in Lincoln Square. City involvement in real estate and business development projects is only necessary in a challenging marketplace. Too many municipal obligations have the potential of turning a development incentive into a disincentive. How should the City balance the need for private investment with the desire to achieve public goals?

*Should Worcester use eminent domain to acquire commercial or residential properties as part of its urban renewal initiative?*

The Worcester Redevelopment Authority and the City of Worcester are engaged in the development of an urban renewal project centered on the City's Theatre District and environs. An important tool of urban renewal is the ability to assemble land for development or redevelopment by eminent domain—government's ability to take ownership of property for fair market value regardless of the current property owner's interest in selling. In establishing an urban renewal project, the government must determine that an area is blighted and, but for government involvement, unlikely to improve. Do you believe that government should play an active role in the redevelopment of the Theatre District and do you support property acquisition, by eminent domain if necessary, as part of the urban renewal plan?

*Does Worcester have sufficient affordable housing?*

According to the Commonwealth's Department of Housing and Community Development, approximately 13.4% of Worcester's housing stock is "affordable," or government subsidized to ensure accessibility to those generally earning below 80% of the area median income. This amount of affordable housing exceeds the 10% minimum threshold outlined in Chapter 40B of the Massachusetts General Laws, exempting Worcester from State override of local zoning to allow the construction of new affordable units. Yet many in Worcester continue to pay 30% or more of their annual income toward housing costs. No community adjacent to Worcester has reached the 10% threshold. Should the City continue to subsidize the construction of affordable units or should it advocate for the expansion of affordable housing in surrounding communities? If Worcester continues to build income-restricted housing, should those units be consolidated in existing lower-income neighborhoods or distributed throughout the City? If the City continues to support the development of affordable units, how should it do so in light of stagnant if not declining Federal funding for such efforts?

*Should Worcester raise additional revenues by tapping into its excess tax-levy capacity?*

Over the years, the City of Worcester has not raised taxes to the amount allowed under Proposition 2 1/2 and Massachusetts General Laws. As a result, the City Council has the ability to increase taxes to take in approximately \$10 million in additional annual revenue without seeking a voter override. Should the City access this untapped tax levy capacity and, if so, how should it spend the new revenues?

*How should Worcester address its OPEB liability?*

Upon retirement, vested Worcester employees are eligible for both pension and certain other post-employment benefits (OPEB), such as health care. While the City has funded approximately 68% of its pension obligation, and expects to retire that obligation by 2032, it has only funded 1% of its OPEB obligation, and carries a liability of more than \$727 million. As additional employees join the ranks of the retirees, and costs increase, this amount will continue to expand dramatically—to more than \$2 billion in 30 years. What steps should the City take to address its OPEB costs and reduce this significant liability on the City's balance sheet?

*Should the City of Worcester work with tax-exempt organizations, such as educational institutions, churches, cultural organizations, and governmental entities, to secure Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILOTs)?*

State law exempts civic, charitable, educational, religious, and benevolent service organizations from State and local taxes. Approximately 29% of Worcester's land area is owned by tax-exempt organizations. Two-thirds of that amount is held by government entities (including the City of Worcester), with religious organizations and educational institutions rounding out the top three ownership categories. According to the City of Worcester assessor, tax-exempt property represents nearly \$5 billion in value. Eight not-for-profit organizations have negotiated PILOTs or similar arrangements with the City to compensate for lost tax revenue or for perceived impacts on public services. Yet many more have not. Should the City request that tax-exempt organizations contribute to the cost of government in the city?

*What should the City do to promote safe neighborhoods and address enduring criminal activity, especially the challenges of drugs, gangs, and illegal guns?*

While Worcester is safer than many cities of comparable size, headlines often highlight crime, violence, and drugs. 2014 was a record year for shootings in Worcester, with 38 incidents resulting in 47 victims. Murders were down, however, with 7 killed in Worcester that same year. 2015 looks to be a similar record-setting year with 19 shooting incidents and 27 victims in the first 7 months. In the headlines, Kelley Square was shaken by a daytime automobile shootout, a Flag Street home invasion shocked area residents, and a mother and 2-year-old child were shot in a parking altercation at Plumley Village. Crimes are most often targeted, but that does not eliminate the unease of residents. What steps can the City take to improve public safety and address the scourges of drugs, gangs, and illegal guns?

*Should Worcester police officers wear body cameras while interacting with the public?*

Across the nation, the media has highlighted tragic situations during which police and civilian interpretations of events differ. While often this effort is focused on identifying police misconduct, video and audio recordings have also been used to exonerate police behavior. Since many police-citizen interactions are one-on-one, body cameras are an opportunity to ensure more accurate information about events with conflicting accounts. Do you believe Worcester police officers should wear body cameras while on patrol and interacting with the public?

*Should the City of Worcester implement a civilian review board for police incidents?*

According to some estimates, civilian police oversight entities exist in approximately 80% of the largest U.S. cities. Yet their role and authority varies considerably. Some actively investigate allegations of police misconduct; others hear appeals from a police department's own investigation. In Worcester, the Chief of Police oversees police misconduct issues, subject to the oversight of the City Manager who serves as Chief Conservator of the Peace under the City Charter. In 2015, the City Council rejected a measure to explore the creation of a civilian review board to allow third-party oversight of police incidents. Do you believe that a civilian review board would be an effective tool to assist resolution of disputes between police and members of the public?

*Should the City of Worcester restrict panhandling on public ways?*

In January 2013, the City of Worcester implemented a series of ordinances banning aggressive panhandling and prohibiting individuals from occupying traffic islands and median strips. The ordinances were challenged in the courts and, following a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision remanding the cases back to the Appeals Court, may be overturned. The City argues that panhandling can be dangerous for drivers and panhandlers alike. Opponents of the ordinances argue that panhandling, as well as election campaigning and other fundraising efforts, are covered by freedom of speech protections. Do you think the City of Worcester should continue to find ways to remove panhandlers from public ways, or should it allow individuals to seek donations from vehicles traveling on public streets?

*Should the City of Worcester consider public-private partnerships in the management and maintenance of parks?*

According to the 2013 City of Worcester Open Space and Recreation Plan, 81% of respondents highlighted “parks, open space, and recreation” as very important, but 52% said they rarely use Worcester’s parks because of poor conditions. Over the past year, the City Manager has explored private redevelopment and/or management of certain public open spaces, yet in each instance plans faced active opposition and were eventually discarded. In a number of cities, conservancies or trusts are established to manage and program public parks. This sometimes requires trade-offs between public use and private fundraising opportunities. The Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy in Boston and the Central Park Conservancy and Bryant Park Corporation in New York are well-known examples. While the City of Worcester maintains its park system with public staffing (with the exception of the Green Hill Golf Course), it often relies on private entities to activate public spaces through youth programs, sports leagues, and cultural events. In order to secure sufficient revenues to manage park capital improvements, the City sometimes turns to private funders such as colleges and universities. Should the City look toward formal public-private partnerships, including the establishment of conservancies or trusts, to increase resources and improve the management and programming of key public lands, such as Worcester Common, Green Hill Park, Elm Park, or Institute Park?

*Should dogs be allowed in City of Worcester parks?*

Since 1997, dogs have not been allowed in City of Worcester parks. As a result, Worcester residents without yards have limited options in allowing dogs either on-leash or off-leash recreation. Recently, enforcement of the ordinances created tension at Boynton Park, a City of Worcester-owned park in Paxton that has unofficially served as a local dog park. Do you believe that the City should maintain the ban on dogs in public parks? If not, should the City lift the ban entirely allowing dogs free access to the park system or identify specific parks to accommodate canines?

**Questions for School Committee Candidates***What is the role of the School Committee?*

Under the Worcester City Charter, the School Committee has broad authority to take “general charge” of the public schools in the city. While the Superintendent of Schools is hired to manage the day-to-day administration of the system, the School Committee is charged with setting policy direction and, unlike the City Council, appointing officers and employees and defining responsibilities. What do you believe is the appropriate role of the School Committee vis-à-vis the Superintendent in the active management of school district concerns?

*What are your top priorities for the Worcester Public Schools? What will be your first item of business?*

In order to retain and attract a strong middle class, municipalities must provide a superior public school system with a diversity of educational options. While Worcester offers many educational alternatives, the WPS continues to struggle as a Level 4 (out of 5) school district due to the existence of individual Level 4 schools within the system. What are your priorities for the Worcester Public Schools and how will you seek to implement them? Only one item can be the first order of business—what will be your first initiative as a member of the School Committee?

*How can the Worcester Public Schools improve student achievement?*

In 2009, The Worcester Compact was established to improve student learning and track accomplishments through measureable gains. While the WPS has made significant progress with certain measures such as graduation rates and drop-out rates, academic progress has been unremarkable. How should the WPS Administration work to improve student achievement? What role should the School Committee play in evaluating academic programming? What role should public schools play in family and environmental factors (e.g., parental involvement, poverty, nutrition, crime) that influence student success?

*How should Worcester meet the needs of academically gifted students?*

Over the past few years, Worcester has explored ways of supporting academically gifted students, considering honors programs, advanced placement coursework, and academically selective schools. In December 2014, WPS announced that it is working to establish a pilot “Innovation Academy” for promising high school students based on the International Baccalaureate (IB)—an academic program founded in Switzerland that certifies schools to provide a structured curriculum to develop intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills. Admission to the Innovation Academy will be based on a range of criteria—not an entrance exam. Enrollment will be capped at 250 students, with no grade level exceeding 62 students. Do you believe that the WPS is doing enough to support academically gifted students and, if not, what more would you do?

*How should the Worcester Public Schools improve school safety?*

The 2014-2015 school year challenged the perception of safety in the WPS. In various incidents, violent threats were made, physical fights erupted, school officials were injured, and weapons were brought into school buildings. While the WPS Administration has taken steps at individual schools to address certain concerns, including an increased police presence, it has pledged to undertake a safety audit of the overall public school system. What do you think needs to be done to improve school safety? Should the Worcester Police Department be responsible for maintaining security in the public schools?

*What should be the role of standardized testing in the Worcester Public Schools?*

Standardized testing is often the subject of public debate. Yet under Massachusetts and Federal law, proficiency on standardized tests like the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is required for graduation from a publicly funded high school. Under the Race to the Top program, the Commonwealth adapted its educational standards to the Common Core, and is exploring the transition from MCAS to the Common Core-based multi-state Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Earlier this year, the School Committee passed a resolution calling for a freeze on standardized testing. While some oppose these State-mandated tests, others feel they are a necessary measure of performance and hold students and educators accountable. In your opinion, how important are standardized tests as a measure of student achievement? How well do they measure the effectiveness of a school system?

*What should be done to improve the physical condition of educational facilities in Worcester?*

The WPS manages 62 public buildings throughout Worcester consisting of 2.3 million square feet on 400 acres of land. Eleven of these buildings were built prior to 1900 and only four of these buildings were built or substantially renovated in the last fifteen years. An older building stock brings challenges of maintenance and modernization. While energy upgrades have been completed lately under the City's Energy Services Company (ESCO) contract, the City typically provides \$3 million annually for school renovation projects according to the WPS FY16 Budget. With capital projects like Nelson Place School and South High Community School in the pipeline, how should the WPS identify, plan for, and fund other major projects, such as proposed improvements at Doherty Memorial and Burncoat High Schools, necessary to ensure safe environments conducive to innovative learning?

*Should principals have more authority over hiring and firing staff?*

Under existing contracts, internal candidates with seniority have significant priority in hiring for open positions in the WPS. Removing ineffectual teachers is complicated due to an arbitration process that teachers may invoke upon dismissal. Recognizing that it is difficult to hold administrators accountable for student outcomes when they have limited control over the classroom experience, Innovation Schools (Worcester has 8) and Level 4 schools (Worcester has 2) do allow principals broader discretion in hiring and firing, conditioned on measurable improvements to overall student and school performance. Do you believe principals and school administrators should have greater flexibility over teacher assignments? How would you work to modify existing contracts to improve accountability?

*Should teachers be held accountable for student performance?*

Massachusetts regulations require that teachers be evaluated on competency and efficacy using metrics of student learning, growth, and achievement, judgments based on observations, and evidence of professional accomplishments. The Federal Race to the Top initiative requires that student achievement scores be an important measure of teaching quality. Yet students in Worcester often struggle against poverty, language, safety, and other external factors that are not as prevalent in suburban communities. As the Federal government debates its own approach to school and teacher accountability, how should the WPS measure teacher effectiveness? How should student test scores get factored into teacher evaluations? What types of measures should be included in contracts between the WPS and Educational Association of Worcester to improve student outcomes?

*Do you support shared administrative functions with the City of Worcester or privatization of non-core services?*

The WPS, like any large organization, maintains certain basic functions in areas such as human resources, finance, and property management. Currently, these functions are staffed internally by WPS employees. The City of Worcester also maintains a staff to handle similar responsibilities. Some have called for the consolidation of certain WPS and City of Worcester functions. Others have called for contracting out non-core functions. Should the WPS seek cost-savings by restructuring existing administrative operations?

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