



The Research Bureau

QUESTIONS FOR THE 2023 CANDIDATES

FOR CITY COUNCIL AND
SCHOOL COMMITTEE IN
WORCESTER

REPORT 23-08

September 2023





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS PUBLICATION IS INTENDED TO PROVIDE CANDIDATES AND RESIDENTS IN WORCESTER WITH QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION. 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 voters of Worcester select their leaders for the 2024-2025 political cycle.

The City of Worcester operates under a Council-Manager form of government with a popularly elected Mayor, known as a modified Plan E form of government. 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 made up of 11 members—six elected citywide (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. All at-large candidates are automatically entered into the mayoral race, and have the option of withdrawing their name from consideration for Mayor. This year’s deadline for withdrawal is September 12. 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 30 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. In 2024, the School Committee will consist of nine members, two at-large members and six district committee members. The Mayor serves as the Chair. The School Committee approves the district budget, and has authority to transfer within line item accounts, so long as the overall amount remains within the City’s appropriation. Additionally, the School Committee may hire or remove by majority vote the Superintendent and may establish and appoint the following key positions by recommendation of the Superintendent: Assistant or Associate Superintendent, School Business Administrator, Administrator of Special Education, School Physician, Registered Nurses, and Legal Counsel.

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

2023 MUNICIPAL ELECTION | TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, POLLS OPEN FROM 7AM-8PM

Positions marked with an asterisk () required a Preliminary Election due to the size of the candidate field. The Preliminary Election was held on Tuesday, September 5 in City Council Districts 1, 2, 4, 5, and School Committee District E. Mayoral Candidates are italicized.*

- Worcester City Council—At Large
 - ▶ *Bill Coleman*
 - ▶ Domenica F. Perrone
 - ▶ *Donna M. Colorio*
 - ▶ *Guillermo Creamer, Jr*
 - ▶ Johanna Hampton-Dance
 - ▶ *Joseph M. Petty*
 - ▶ Kate Toomey
 - ▶ *Khrystian E. King*
 - ▶ Maydee Morales
 - ▶ Morris A. Bergman
 - ▶ Thu Nguyen
- District 1 Councilor (*)
 - ▶ David C. Peterson
 - ▶ Jenny Pacillo
- District 2 Councilor (*)
 - ▶ Candy F. Mero-Carlson
 - ▶ Roberta A. Bilotta
- District 3 Councilor
 - ▶ Feanna Jattan-Singh
 - ▶ George J. Russell
- District 4 Councilor (*)
 - ▶ Katia Gisela Norford
 - ▶ Luis Albizu Ojeda
- District 5 Councilor (*)
 - ▶ Etel Haxhijaj
 - ▶ Jose Antonio Rivera
- School Committee—At Large
 - ▶ Laura B. Clancey
 - ▶ Maureen F. Binienda
 - ▶ Susan M. Mailman
 - ▶ Tracy O’Connell Novick
- School Committee District A
 - ▶ Molly O. McCullough
- School Committee District B
 - ▶ Vanessa Zuleyma Alvarez
- School Committee District C
 - ▶ Dianna Biancheria
 - ▶ Jermoh V. Kamara
- School Committee District D
 - ▶ Alejandro Guardiola
- School Committee District E (*)
 - ▶ Kathleen L. Roy
 - ▶ Nelly Medina
- School Committee District F
 - ▶ Jermaine Lamont Johnson
- *Eliminated in Preliminary Election*
 - ▶ Larry R. Shetler (District 1)
 - ▶ Philip Paul Palmieri (District 2)
 - ▶ Maria V. Montano (District 4)
 - ▶ Maureen Schwab (District 4)
 - ▶ Theodore A. Kostas (District 4)
 - ▶ Edson Montero (District 5)
 - ▶ John Patrick Reed (SC District F)



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 Worcester Public Schools. There are some questions, however, that are pertinent directly to candidates for 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. As such, the Mayor has no executive powers, but has the 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?

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES FOR THE CITY OF WORCESTER?

While the Mayor does not set independent policy for the city, they are able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward.

What priorities will you have for the 2024-2025 term and how will you seek to accomplish them?

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES FOR THE WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

As Chair of the Worcester School Committee, the Mayor is able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward for the School system.

What priorities will you have for the 2024-2025 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 WPS allocates resources, the City Council determines how extensive, or how limited, those resources might be from both an operating and capital perspective.

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 Economic Development, Education, Municipal & Legislative Operations, Public Health & Human Services, Public Safety, Public Service & Transportation, Public Works, Traffic & Parking, Urban Technologies, Innovation & Environment, Veterans' Memorials, Parks & Recreation. 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 same can be said of WPS Standing Committees, of which there are four: School & Student Performance, Finance & Operations, Governance & Employee Issues, and Teaching, Learning & Student Supports.

How would you approach the appointment of committees and chairs? How would you make the committee structure 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. The City stretches limited resources to maintain operations in a variety of areas.

What are your legislative 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 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 policies and legislative priorities of the City Council? Do you think performance evaluations can be used to improve public outcomes?

IN WHICH STANDING COMMITTEES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SERVE?

While the Mayor is responsible for appointing three councilors to each of the 10 Standing Committees, he or she may take individual councilors' qualifications and preferences into account when assigning seats. Committee members have the ability to drive the conversation in a variety of subject areas, and can more easily prioritize their chosen causes. All councilors chair at least one committee, and sit on at least three.

On which Standing Committees would you like to serve? What makes you qualified in those areas, and what policies would you emphasize?

WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE LEVEL OF TAXATION?

The City requires tax revenue to pay for services for its residents. The extent of those taxes is hotly debated. Many of the issues with city infrastructure or services could be mitigated with more money, among other solutions, but overburdening residents with higher taxes could lead to a lower quality of life or even displacement.

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 raise approximately millions in additional annual revenue without seeking a voter override. Should the City access this untapped tax levy capacity by raising taxes and, if so, how should it spend the new revenues?

The City could also choose not to raise taxes on residents, or even reduce the tax levy. How big of a cut would be needed to satisfy the real or perceived needs of taxpayers, and which areas of the budget could be targeted to ensure that the budget remains balanced?

SHOULD WORCESTER SEEK A SINGLE TAX RATE?

Each fall, the City Council sets tax rates for the fiscal year. Worcester taxes commercial and industrial properties at a higher rate than residential properties, creating conflict between residents and businesses as each tries to prove they would be overburdened by proposed tax rates. Worcester's current residential tax rate is \$14.34 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation while its commercial/industrial tax rate is \$31.26 per \$1,000. The Massachusetts median residential rate is \$13.20 per \$1,000 while the median commercial/industrial rate is \$16.26 per \$1,000.

How will you approach the annual tax rate decision? Do you support moving toward a single tax rate?

HOW SHOULD WORCESTER BE ADDRESSING HOUSING CONCERNS?

With Worcester reaching a population of 206,000 and having been identified as one of the most competitive housing markets in the country, there are growing calls for further attention to housing affordability, such as The Research Bureau's report *Static Income, Rising Costs*. There have been a number of housing policies debated during this last City Council term including, the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Community Preservation Act, Inclusionary Zoning, Accessory Dwelling Units, Rental Registry, Rezoning, the conversion of commercial property to residential, and more.

How do you think Worcester should address housing affordability? Are there other policies not yet arisen that should be debated?



WORCESTER HAS SEEN AN INFLUX OF REFUGEES RECENTLY, IS THE CITY APPROPRIATELY RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THIS POPULATION?

There is a declared state of emergency due to the shortage of available shelter for refugees in Massachusetts. Worcester is a refuge for many in these communities due to the availability of resources. With the influx of refugees, the City has formed a New Arrivals Task Force that will work to address immediate and long-term solutions. Initiatives are underway but many are still in hotels, intended to be temporary housing.

Do you think that the City is doing enough to support refugees? What policies or practices would you support to ease the transition for these individuals and alleviate the impact on existing infrastructure and resources?

AFTER A COUPLE OF SEASONS AT POLAR PARK, DO YOU THINK THAT THE CITY'S INVESTMENT HAS BEEN WORTHWHILE?

This year marked the third season of the AAA Worcester Red Sox playing at the \$160 Million publicly-owned Polar Park. Paid-Ticket Attendance has remained high over three seasons, surpassing 540,000 for the 2022 season, ranking second amongst the 120 teams nationally in Minor League Baseball. Detractors cite recent studies claiming that the project could ultimately cost the city more than it will make but supporters will maintain the intangible benefits of the stadium outside of financial impacts. Additionally, following inquiries by City Council members, the City Manager has proposed eliminating the Worcester Ballpark Commission, originally tasked with oversight of Polar Park, in favor of management within the City Administration by the Department of Public Works & Parks.

Do you think that the investment is paying off? How would you ensure that the project is ultimately a success? What is your position on the proposal to eliminate the Ballpark Commission? Do you have any concerns regarding businesses in the area and ensuring appropriate economic spinoff?

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES FOR THE CITY'S FEDERAL RELIEF FUNDS? WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON HOW THE FUNDS HAVE BEEN SPENT ALREADY?

The City received approximately \$146 million and spent roughly 20% on 46 specific projects within core areas of affordable housing, social services, mental health, business assistance, and arts & culture, according to the City of Worcester's *ARPA dashboard*. With over \$65 million still left to be obligated, the deadline to do so is the end of calendar year 2024. This deadline will arrive under this City Council's term.

What are your priorities for these funds? Do you think that the current plans are addressing the right issues?

DO YOU SUPPORT THE CONTINUED SUSPENSION OF FARE COLLECTION ON THE WORCESTER REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY? WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN WORCESTER?

Since March 2020, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority has suspended the collection of fares. The Advisory Board has voted to extend the fare collection until June of FY2024. The Research Bureau has been an active contributor to the discussion around fare policy in Worcester through multiple research reports, most recently *Resurging Regional Ridership* and *All Aboard*. Those reports noted the speedy ridership recovery at the WRTA and an update on the WRTA's finances with 3-years of suspended fares. While the WRTA is not a city agency, the majority of routes, trips, and riders are city residents.

Do you support the permanent extension of fare free service on the WRTA? How else should the City attempt to improve service and ridership?

WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES FOR THE WORCESTER MOBILITY ACTION PLAN?

During the development of Worcester Now|Next long-range plan, transportation was a key concern. As such, the City is engaging in a Mobility Action Plan, managed by the new Department of Transportation & Mobility, with a draft plan estimated for public release in Winter 2024. This plan might address issues of traffic congestion, walkability, and infrastructure. In 2023, a Prioritization Plan for the Complete Streets Program was approved by MassDOT which identified 22 specific projects that will be addressed over the next 3-5 years.

What would you like to see highlighted in the Mobility Action Plan? What would you like to see addressed from the Prioritization Plan?

DO YOU SUPPORT THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION?

In February 2023, the City Manager proposed a significant restructuring of the EODEI after turmoil in the position of Chief Diversity Officer and a particularly divisive equity audit. These changes would establish the position of the Chief Equity Officer and would establish three divisions with the Office: Human Rights, Investigations, and Training & Development.

What other policies or actions would you support for the EODEI? Are there other elements of the equity audit that should be addressed?



HOW SHOULD THE CITY PRIORITIZE ITS DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS DOWNTOWN AND IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS?

Some argue Worcester focuses too much on the downtown area, through large-scale economic development projects, fearing those large downtown projects are coming at the detriment of other types of smaller, more targeted development projects in the downtown and the neighborhoods. Others see these as a broader investment, key to the city's future.

How should the City prioritize its economic development initiatives? Are there some new neighborhood initiatives that the City should undertake? Is the City focusing on the right projects?

HOW SHOULD WORCESTER DEAL WITH TRASH AND RECYCLING?

The Keep Worcester Clean Program is a city-wide effort to address litter and debris in the city. Additionally, the City Manager established his Clean Team, an extension of the Quality of Life team, to address nuisance complaints and areas of blight. These programs are in addition to the Comprehensive Clean City Plan, which includes new litter reduction initiatives, expanded hours at yard waste drop off sites, and a flat fee for bulk waste drop-off, while relying on a 25 cent increase in trash bag fees. However, complaints around cleanliness continue to persist, particularly in neighborhoods not in the downtown. While the Worcester Business Improvement District employs individuals to address litter in its catchment area, the downtown, there is no comparable entity for the neighborhoods.

Do you feel the City is doing enough to address concerns around litter? Do you feel further measures are needed, and if so, how should they be funded?

SHOULD THE CITY DO MORE TO ADDRESS BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS?

During the pandemic, internet access was highlighted as a key issue to Worcester residents. The City of Worcester has been working to address this issue in the short-term through hot-spots and public Wi-Fi, but also long-term through the Municipal Broadband Taskforce and the State's Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. According to Census data, access to the internet has been steadily increasing in Worcester. Additionally, Verizon is implementing a multi-year plan with the intention to build out a citywide fiber network that provides broadband and voice services.

Do you support municipal action on broadband access? Do you see other opportunities to improve internet accessibility?

HOW WOULD YOU ENSURE A SMOOTH RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND THE REST OF THE CITY?

Worcester is home to nine colleges and universities, with an estimated 35,000 students. Surveys have shown that these students are generally not venturing beyond their campuses as much as city leaders would like, and retaining graduates after school ends has been an enduring challenge, as the expansion of an educated workforce would be a boon for attracting businesses. But colleges also have their own needs and challenges, some of which are seasonal as the student body comes and goes, and there is sometimes friction between colleges and the neighborhoods that host them.

Is Worcester a "college town?" How would you accommodate students and colleges to capture the most benefit from their presence, and how would you mitigate any resident concerns? Are there City-led initiatives that could be undertaken relative to retaining college graduates in the workforce?

WHAT POLICIES WOULD YOU SUPPORT TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS IN WORCESTER?

Homelessness is on the rise in Worcester with a reported spike of 30% from 2022-2023 to approximately 810 individuals, according to data from the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance. There is a shortage of shelter beds to accommodate this increase and additional temporary shelters, such as at Blessed Sacrament or Zion Lutheran, have had and continue to face resistance from their neighborhoods. As part of the conversation around homelessness, the City Council debated a moratorium on sweeps of the encampment camps. The Standing Committee on Public Health & Human Services directed the city manager to "explore solutions" for homelessness.

Do you think that the efforts underway to address homelessness have been enough? What policies would you support?



WHAT CAN WORCESTER DO ABOUT TRANSPORTATION CONNECTIONS TO THE REST OF THE STATE AND COUNTRY?

Leaders in the city have consistently called for better rail service to Boston, arguing that a convenient, accessible option to get to the state's capital is important to maintain economic growth in the area. But control over key factors such as infrastructure investments and scheduling lies with the state, the MBTA, and the commuter rail operator. Likewise, the state, through Massport, owns Worcester Regional Airport. While the pandemic dramatically impacted both commuter rail ridership and airport service, both are coming back. The regional airport reported stronger numbers after the pandemic but has also faced airlines pulling specific destinations from the airport during the pandemic. Commuter Rail faced a similar issues with a decrease of service due to construction projects on the lines.

How important are these connections to Boston and beyond? What is the City's and a Councilor's role, if any, in working with the legislative delegation and state officials to improve these options?

HOW SHOULD WORCESTER ENGAGE MORE CITIZENS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Turnout in the City of Worcester is low, with 83 percent of registered voters failing to vote in the 2021 municipal election. This is part of a trend; in municipal election years, Worcester hasn't broken 20% turnout since 2015. In the 2023 Preliminary Election, city-wide turnout was only 9% for registered voters. Additionally, Worcester has 34 boards and commissions with a range of time commitments and responsibilities. However, these are rarely at full capacity, per a WRRB report, as of April 25, 2023 there were 49 vacancies.

What would you do to promote citizen involvement in local government and increase resident participation in elections and on boards and commissions?

HOW SHOULD THE CITY ADDRESS THE RECENT RISE IN OPIOID-RELATED FATALITIES?

The state's Opioid Recovery & Remediation Fund will result in over \$900 million in opioid settlement funds. 40% of the settlement will be distributed to municipalities, with Worcester being amongst the highest recipients—only Boston and Cambridge rank higher. These funds must be used for Opioid Use Disorder Treatment, Support People in Treatment and Recovery, Connections to Care, Harm Reduction, Address the Needs of Criminal-Justice-Involved Persons, Support Pregnant or Parenting Women and their Families, Including Babies with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome. In Worcester opioid deaths are on the rise in the City of Worcester, up nearly 40% since 2022.

How would you prioritize the use of these funds? What should the City do to address the alarming rise in opioid-related fatalities?

HOW WELL DOES THE CITY HANDLE SNOW?

Every year, the City is criticized, on social media and elsewhere, for its snowplowing efforts, with residents singling out untimely trucks or incomplete plowing. While City officials have admitted room for improvement in some cases, they have also argued that public perception differs from reality, and that unreasonable expectations or a lack of communication may be to blame, instead of haphazard plowing. The City Council approved a rate hike in 2022 for the snow removal contractors that are used, and the current budget is at \$6 million for snow removal.

Are the city's snow removal efforts better than public complaints allege, or are additional funding and/or major improvements necessary? What, if anything, would you change about winter storm operations?

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. This can be a recruitment strategy for employees as an additional benefit for municipal employees. However, as additional employees join the ranks of the retirees, and insurance costs increase, this amount continues to expand dramatically— as of June 2022, it reached \$1.2 billion and is expected to exceed \$2.5 billion in 30 years. To respond, the City has established an OPEB Trust Fund with an accompanying Board of Trustees, while making ongoing contributions. In the current budget, the City invests \$974,359 towards the OPEB Liability Trust Fund. As part of the City's Financial Integrity Plan, thirty percent of the City's 'free cash' will likewise be invested once certified in the fall.

Should additional steps be made to address its OPEB costs and reduce this significant liability on the City's balance sheet?



SHOULD THE CITY COUNCIL ENGAGE WITH THE WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO ADDRESS SCHOOL FACILITIES NEEDS?

The Worcester Public Schools has its own governing body, the Worcester School Committee. But given the outsized importance of good schools on quality of life, property values, and economic success—not to mention their impact on the City budget—Councilors have in the past debated or questioned school policies. One of the major discussion points between the public schools and city council is the significant facilities needs at the Worcester Public Schools, such as the proposal to build a new Burncoat Middle/High School. It is estimated to cost approximately \$500 million with the City of Worcester expected to cover a significant percent of the cost. Even with an increase to the reimbursement rates provided by the state, inflation continues to impact school construction, such as at Doherty which needed an additional \$23 million dollar loan from the City Council. Governor Healey has approved additional funds to help offset these cost increases for existing building projects. However, with over 44 schools in the district, there are many buildings in need of renovation or complete rebuilds.

Should the City play a role in addressing these needs? If so, what should be the magnitude of the role? Where would you find the funds to do so?

HOW CAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE CITY BE MOST EFFECTIVELY BALANCED WITH THE GREEN WORCESTER PLAN’S IMPLEMENTATION?

In 2021, the City Council endorsed The Green Worcester Plan, which is “a strategic framework for an integrated and systematic approach to making Worcester one of the most sustainable and climate-resilient mid-sized cities in America by 2050.” The Plan calls for municipal goals such as by 2030, a hundred percent renewable energy for city facilities; by 2045, a hundred percent renewable energy in all sectors, including heating and transportation; and a reduction of waste through a Zero Waste Master plan. The Plan is intended to align with new state policies and is integrated into the annual municipal budget.

How can the City balance the needs of businesses, residents, and the economy, with the sustainability goals of the Green Worcester Plan? Are there other steps the City should take on these issues?

DOES WORCESTER HAVE ENOUGH PARKING?

Parking is of frequent debate in Worcester with many residents and business owners claiming that parking availability is a hindrance for economic development and access to community assets. However, the Parking Reform Network performed a parking audit and found that an estimated 35% of the developed land downtown is

dedicated to parking. While this does not include the Canal District, Shrewsbury Street, or many of the neighborhoods, it does illustrate that there is a significant amount of parking in Worcester.

Does Worcester have enough parking? What do you plan to do about the perception of parking availability? What zoning reforms would you propose to balance the needs?

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE RESULTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE’S INVESTIGATION INTO THE WORCESTER POLICE DEPARTMENT ?

In 2022, the United States Department of Justice and the Office U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts announced a “pattern-or-practice” investigation into the Worcester Police Department to determine if the WPD engaged in excessive force or discriminatory policing based on race or sex. The investigation will dive deep into WPD’s policies, procedures, trainings, accountability systems, and more. As explained in the WRRB Bureau Brief on the DOJ Investigation, these investigations typically take years to complete. Additionally, there has been another investigation into specific allegations of abuse, harassment, and pattern of bullying toward a subordinate by the Chief of Police.

What will you do with the results of these investigation? Do you feel that there are specific policies needed to ensure accountability at the Worcester Police Department?

SHOULD WORCESTER DO MORE TO ADDRESS FOOD SECURITY?

Food security rose to one of the top concerns for during the pandemic, with the federal government issuing an extra allotment through the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps. In 2023, the emergency allotments ended and many individuals experiencing the economic uncertainty were left with a gap in their now-normal food budget. To combat this, the City of Worcester directed \$2 million in ARPA funding toward food security efforts distributed to local providers and food pantries. There have been additional community efforts toward addressing the issue of food access in Worcester.

Is the City doing enough to support those that need it? Is this a concern for a municipality?



WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES FROM THE WORCESTER NOW|NEXT CITYWIDE PLAN?

The citywide planning process is a two-year long effort to engage the community and lay out a series of priorities and frameworks for the future of Worcester. Topics included in the effort include land use, housing, transportation & mobility, economic opportunity, natural & cultural resources, open space & recreation, and service & facilities. The report will be finalized in fall of 2023 and will serve as a roadmap for the next City Council.

How do you feel about the planning process? Are you committed to following through with its recommendations?

DO YOU SUPPORT THE CITY ENTERING THE PAID FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE PROGRAM?

In 2018, Massachusetts passed a law providing PFML benefits to state and private sector employees, however, municipal employees were not included. Some municipalities, including Worcester, have debated joining the program as a way to support municipal employees, providing additional workforce benefits. Simultaneously, the City of Worcester has been facing a workforce shortage in many departments. However, with thousands of employees, it would be a significant expense for the municipality to join the program. The City Manager will submit a proposal for consideration in September, 2023.

Do you support the City joining the PFMLA program? How would you plan to fund it?

WHAT ARE YOUR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES?

Worcester has long been known as a manufacturing and industrial city. In recent years, Worcester has created a foothold in the life sciences industry, becoming a true hub as a more affordable alternative to Kendall Square. As noted in the WRRB's report *Reinventing Worcester*, Worcester has seen major economic and demographic shifts over the last few decades. Following a few high-profile economic development projects, the City will need to prioritize new projects to continue this progress.

Which development projects have you watched most closely? What do you envision economic development to look like in the next 5, 10 years?



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 some 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 build an informed community and support greater educational attainment, municipalities must provide a superior public school system with a diversity of educational options. While Worcester can claim many positive education metrics, it also struggles with challenges common to urban school districts, and many in and outside the system see room for improvement.

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 would be your first initiative as a member of the School Committee?

IN WHICH STANDING COMMITTEES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SERVE?

The Mayor is responsible for appointing three committee members to each of the School Committee’s four Standing Committees. The Mayor may take individual members’ qualifications and preferences into account when assigning seats. Committee members have the ability to drive the conversation in a variety of subject areas, and can more easily prioritize their chosen causes.

On which Standing Committees would you like to serve? What makes you qualified in those areas, and what policies would you emphasize?

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE ROLE OF A DISTRICT SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBER AND AN AT-LARGE MEMBER?

Following a lawsuit and corresponding consent decree, the City and plaintiffs drew school committee districts in order to better represent people of color on the School Committee. This new model will have six districts and two at-large seats. The 2024-2025 School Committee will set precedent for the roles of a district and at-large member. A

district member is elected by voters in the six districts. Districts will not necessarily have the same amount or types of schools. Some districts will have multiple high schools and some do not have a high school. Each district is distinct but will have many of the same concerns or areas of attention.

What do you see as the role of District school committee member? Who do you represent—schools in your district, students, voters?

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO ADDRESS THE FACILITIES NEEDS OF THE WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Worcester Public Schools 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 a handful of these buildings were built or substantially renovated in the last 15 years. A significant amount of pandemic relief was spent on building upgrades, particularly HVAC. However, there are significant facilities needs. Even with an increase to the Massachusetts School Building Authority reimbursement rates, inflation continues to impact school construction, such as at Doherty which needed an additional \$23 million in city capital funding. Governor Healey has approved additional funds to help offset these cost increases for existing building projects but, with over 44 schools in the district, there are many buildings in need of renovation or complete rebuilds, such as Burncoat which is estimated to cost approximately \$500 million.

How should the WPS identify, plan for, prioritize, and fund other major projects necessary to ensure safe environments conducive to learning?

WHAT METRICS WILL YOU USE TO MEASURE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT AND ADMINISTRATION?

One of the most important jobs of the School Committee is overseeing the performance of the Superintendent and the administration. At the Superintendent’s last evaluation, she received an overall proficient rating on goals and standards from the sitting School Committee.

How do you feel that the Superintendent has performed? What measures would you use to determine whether the Superintendent is performing adequately and carrying out the policies and legislative priorities of the School Committee?



WERE ESSER FUNDS DISTRIBUTED EFFECTIVELY?

Federal pandemic relief funds, officially known as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Funds, have been disbursed and must be spent by September 30, 2024. Thus far, the funds have been largely used to forward fund Student Opportunity Act initiatives, school bus purchase for in-house service, expanded summer & afterschool programs, technology, maintenance, and HVAC upgrades.

Do you feel that the funds were used effectively? As Student Opportunity Act funds are being received, do you have other priorities for the state funding?

WHAT METRICS DO YOU USE TO MEASURE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS STRATEGIC PLAN?

The Worcester Education Collaborative and The Research Bureau partnered with the Worcester Public Schools in 2017 and 2018 to develop a community-led strategic plan. That plan's term ended in 2023 and the Worcester Public Schools is engaged in developing a new updated plan to reflect current needs and priorities.

What are your priorities for the update to the strategic plan? How do you plan to measure its implementation?

HOW SHOULD THE SCHOOLS ADEQUATELY MANAGE THE TECHNOLOGY NEEDS OF THE DISTRICT?

Worcester Public Schools invested significant funds into technology needs through the pandemic, due to remote learning and the serious needs of students accessing the internet. With the importance of technology and internet access beyond the pandemic, it is imperative that the Schools continue to innovate and meet the needs of their students across changing circumstances. This involves integrating technology into classroom learning and continuing to find the funds to maintain these investments.

How will you ensure that these technology innovations continue, and receive adequate funding and support? How else should the Schools respond and integrate technology into curriculum across all grade levels?

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE FROM THE SPARK ACADEMY?

The FY24 Budget included funds for the new Spark Academy at Wawecus Road School. The Academy will be a "hub of innovation where we will train, deliver, and monitor a future-ready school with elements of advanced technology and experiential project-based learning." Performance assessments from Spark Academy will be integrated into the district's Vision of a Learner framework.

What would you like to see from these performance assessments? What else from the Spark Academy would you like to see scaled up?

WHAT NEW RESOURCES ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT A DIVERSE STUDENT BODY?

As a large urban center, and a Gateway City community, Worcester is home to a diverse array of students and families from all backgrounds. But school systems often struggle to find the financial, human, and educational resources to properly educate these students. In the WPS, one-third of the students are English Language Learners and more than 90 languages, representing a variety of different cultures, are spoken in homes. More than 70 percent of the student population is low-income and over 20 percent of the student body has a disability.

Is WPS doing enough to serve an increasingly diverse student body? What would you do to improve the school experience for English Language Learners, Special Education students, and others who need extra attention?

HOW WOULD YOU IMPROVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM?

While WPS has its share of problems and challenges, there are some who believe negative coverage of the district is disproportionate to the actual hardships the Schools face. Negative reviews of a school system can have a real effect on a community, as the quality of a school system is an important factor for new or relocating homeowners and residents. On the other hand, overlooking negative aspects of the School system could lead to apathy when it comes to fixing problems, and constituents want their elected officials to be honest and straightforward about any issues.

How accurate are the perceptions of WPS? What steps can be taken to improve the district's public image?

DO YOU SUPPORT A REVIEW OF THE CELL PHONE POLICY?

On the state level, cell phone usage at school has been of increasing interest with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education pushing for cell phone restrictions at school, even allocating approximately \$800,000 toward pilot programs addressing cell phone usage in school. Worcester Public Schools' policy allows each school's principal, or individual teachers, to make decisions regarding their school, or classroom respectively. Worcester is reviewing its Acceptable Use Policy which will include a review of cellphones, earbuds, and other electronic devices.

What policies would you support? Should the Administration have one clear policy or a flexible policy that adjusts with each school or classroom?



WHO SHOULD 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. Federal and state policies promote the use of student achievement scores as 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.

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 the teachers union to improve student outcomes?

WHAT POLICIES WOULD YOU IMPLEMENT TO ENSURE STUDENTS ARE SUPPORTED ACADEMICALLY, SOCIALLY, AND EMOTIONALLY?

The pandemic and resulting shift to online learning had significant impacts on students, both in Worcester and statewide. Extensive studies have shown that remote learning and the pandemic has increased students' social and emotional needs across grade levels. To address this, WPS invested funds into wrap-around coordinators and Social Emotional Learning resources.

How else should the Worcester Public Schools respond to the pandemic's impact on students' academic performance and social/emotional needs?

DO YOU SUPPORT THE USE OF STANDARDIZED TESTING AS A GRADUATION METRIC?

Massachusetts is one of eight states that requires students pass a standardized test in order to graduate from high school. There is a proposed ballot question that would eliminate MCAS as a graduation requirement.

Do you support the use of MCAS as a graduation metric? What other metrics would you use to measure academic progress?

HOW WOULD YOU ADDRESS CONCERNS OVER SCHOOL SAFETY?

In 2021, a school safety taskforce recommended a shift from the School Resource Officer model to the School Liaison Officer model amidst calls for policy change to school safety. Additionally, Worcester Public Schools is undergoing a safety audit to provide a comprehensive review of its safety plans and policies. Concerns about student safety remain top of mind, with many criticizing the removal of resource officers from the school buildings.

Do you support the current school safety strategy? What would you like to see from the Safety Audit?

HOW CAN WORCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS ADDRESS STUDENT BEHAVIOR?

The Worcester Public Schools have devoted a significant amount of resources toward mental health and student wellbeing. However, there are reports that students continue to struggle, resulting in behavioral issues. Since the pandemic, teachers have been facing mounting pressure to combat learning loss and address the social and emotional needs of students. When compounded by the increase in behavioral issues, teachers are juggling quite a bit.

How would you propose to manage student behavior? How do you think WPS can better support teachers?

HOW WILL YOU ENGAGE PARENTS?

Parent engagement in the education of their children is critical to their success. WPS has a Parent Information Welcome Center and many of the schools have site councils. However, not every school has one and the levels of activity vary by school. However, parent involvement needs to be balanced as it can sometimes impact educational progress and access to information.

How will you plan to engage parents? Do you think that parents should play a role in curriculum?

ARE THE SCHOOLS DOING ENOUGH TO IMPROVE WORKFORCE DIVERSITY?

The Worcester Public Schools is nearly 75% non-white, however, the vast majority of the teacher workforce is white at approximately 82%. WPS has created programs to strengthen its workforce pipeline, working with local universities and restructuring the diversity and equity office with the appointment of a Chief Equity Officer.

Are the Schools doing enough? Should WPS undertake additional diversity initiatives as an employer?



The Research Bureau

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MECHANICS HALL
AN ACOUSTICAL MASTERPIECE

2023 CITY OF WORCESTER

MUNICIPAL ELECTION CANDIDATE DEBATES

AT-LARGE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Wednesday, Sept. 27
7:00PM
Mechanics Hall

CONTESTED DISTRICT SCHOOL COMMITTEE

Wednesday, Oct. 4
7:00PM
Mechanics Hall

AT-LARGE CITY COUNCIL

Wednesday, Oct. 11
7:00PM
Mechanics Hall

CONTESTED DISTRICT CITY COUNCIL

Wednesday, Oct. 18
7:00PM
Mechanics Hall

MAYOR

Wednesday, Oct. 25
7:00PM
Mechanics Hall

still time to
REGISTER TO VOTE



Last Day to Register to vote is October 28
Elections will be held on November 7



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