



QCDC Candidate Questionnaire 2020

Thank you for applying for the Queens Central Democratic Club (QCDC) endorsement. If you have any questions about this document or the endorsement process feel free to email us at qcdcny@gmail.com. Please email us the completed questionnaire by Friday January 17.

Full Name: Costa Constantinides

Position: Queens Borough President

The Candidate

1. Do you identify as progressive?

Yes.

2. Why do you identify as a progressive?

Because I believe in a government that creates a more equitable system – one in which we get justice for generational wrongs as well as create a better, fairer system for the entire public we're entrusted to concern. Because we cannot go back in time and fix historic wrongs, we must move forward to ensure communities marginalized because of the color of their skin or their income level finally get the opportunity to dictate their own fate. I believe strongly in that principle, especially when it comes to environmental justice. We, as progressives, must work toward a greener future in which dirty power plants and other polluting infrastructure are taken out of black and brown neighborhoods. For too long, environmental racism made these communities sick so other, more affluent parts of our city could live comfortably. That paradigm must shift.

3. What is the single most important issue to you as a candidate for elected office and why?

I am running for Queens Borough President to fight climate change. This is the greatest existential threat of our lifetime. Because Queens is the largest borough geographically with nearly 2.4 million people, we will arguably be the most impacted by climate change in the future. Every climate report warns that everything we do or don't do to fight this existential threat over the next decade will determine what our borough looks like in the next century. I believe the next Borough President, who stands to potentially hold this office for 10 years, can uniquely combat this crisis through their land use, budgetary, and advocacy powers to give our children a stronger, better future.

4. What endorsements do you have from elected officials, political organizations, unions and community leaders?



I was proud to receive the first and second union endorsements in the Queens Borough President's race: IBEW Local 1500 and IUOE Local 94, respectively. The Forest Hills Green Team has also expressed its support.

Pledges

1. Will you pledge not to take any campaign contributions from for-profit corporations, for-profit corporate PACs, real estate developers, corporate lobbyists, and professional landlords?
2. Are you willing to sign the QCC4All Accountability Pledge?
Yes.

Housing

1. Do you believe housing is a human right?
Absolutely.
2. What do you believe are the causes of the housing crisis in New York?
First, the grasp Big Real Estate has held over the state legislature since the Fiscal Crisis of the 1970s has created a housing nightmare. Developers constantly fought any effort to protect tenants so that they may inflate rents for gentrifying neighborhoods, speculating beyond what is reasonable. They have thrown money, fear, and lies at any attempt to protect hard-working New Yorkers. Until recently, they were successful at keeping Albany in check, but thankfully we have a new State Senate what will not waver. Second, the City and State for too long thought it was enough to provide lucrative tax breaks like 421-a to get a small percentage of affordable housing. Policymakers for some reason cheered when they gave a piece of public land away and get just a piece of it back in units that are simply below market rent. Why are we giving away what is ours and not getting hardly enough back? Lastly, many leaders have bemoaned efforts to undermine the labor movement but have done little to preserve good union jobs. We must find solutions to help workers in new, leading industries so they make a good salary and their entire paycheck doesn't go to rent.
3. What is your vision for addressing the housing crisis in Queens?
For all the reasons above, and more, we must think creatively on how and where we secure housing. We need to look at under-used City sites to determine what their value would be as housing for a certain community that needs it most. We're doing that right now in Astoria, where a City-owned lot on 31st Street will become more than 100 units of affordable housing explicitly for seniors. These units will also accommodate the needs of getting older, because no senior should have to trudge up four flights of stairs with a bag of groceries to get home. As Borough President, I'll commission my land use team to sweep all of Queens for other City sites that might be better suited as senior, low-income, or middle-income housing. I'm also committed to making sure any housing development on City-owned land is 100% affordable with a major sustainability component. Everyone deserves to live in clean, energy efficient homes. And as Queens'

chief executive, I'll work with the borough's state legislature delegation to ensure we pass the most stringent rent laws possible.

Labor

1. What is your relationship to the union movement in New York State?

I have proudly fought alongside the men and women of union labor my entire career. Over the last three years, I have rallied with IBEW Local 3 as Spectrum has tried to undercut its ability to fight for its 1,000-plus members on strike. I went as far as boycotting going into NY1's studio for several months between 2018 and 2019 to take a stand against Spectrum's anti-union stances. And I am currently working with UFCW Local 1500 to save dozens of union supermarket worker jobs in northern Astoria, where a developer is trying to close a Key Food and replace it with a Target. I was also among the first Council Members to support efforts by the legislature's staff to unionize, having served in their capacity for seven years and with the full understanding of the sacrifices they make.

2. What would you do to support the rights of workers to form unions, and to expand unionization in Queens County?

Absolutely. In December, I unveiled a union plan to support broader unionization throughout Queens. Workers have a right to organize and collectively bargain for fair wages, good benefits, and a safe work environment. That's why I want to commission a study that would examine the benefits of a four-day work week both for employees and the environmental savings it might create. I would also use the Borough President's ability to introduce legislation to create a bill that would establish a City office that explicitly investigates work-place harassment. Last, I'm committed to creating 50,000 union jobs over the next decade in solar installation, retrofitting, and other green industries.

3. If elected Queens Borough President what would you do to ensure union labor is used in all building projects?

The Borough President has immense land use powers, whether through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure or appointing a members to the City Planning Commission. My labor plan also committed to blocking any land use proposal that does not have a labor component. That is a tangible, immediate action we can take to ensure the so-called "merit shop" model doesn't exploit workers with subpar salaries or dangerous working conditions.

Education and Higher Education

1. Do you believe that Central Queens should have more public K-12 schools?

Students should not have to learn sitting on top of one another, which is why I'm committed to ensuring class sizes are down. It is morally imperative we end the practice of teaching students in classroom trailers. These were supposed to be temporary fixes to school overcrowding, but some continue to operate 20 years after they were installed. As Borough President, I want to secure new school opportunities that allow us to close every trailer in Queens. This would build upon the success we've had in Council District 22,

where every trailer will be replaced by an annex, extension, or mini school. I want to form funding partnerships with local representatives and the Department of Education to do the same thing boroughwide. We must also work with the respective principal, superintendent, PTA, and CEC to make sure opportunities for new schools reflects the needs of the community. I'll personally make sure our classroom space is optimized to the best of its ability.

2. What is your K-12 vision for public education in Central Queens?

I want to secure a hydroponic science or STEM lab for every single school in Queens. These are cost-effective investments that give students hands-on lessons in biology, technology, agriculture, nutrition, and mathematics. These are integral to preparing our students for careers in leading industries, which increasingly put a premium on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education. I believe we need to install these labs in every school, so students can have programmed education that expands as they grow. I've seen the success of these first hand: a group of first graders expertly walked me through how composting is done. Every student, especially those visual learners, now has the capacity to better understand the basics of science throughout their studies. This type of interactive learning is crucial to how we prepare students for the future. As we solarize the roughly 250 Queens schools that can support panels, we must make sure the infrastructure serves as a high-tech textbook. I want to expand the New York Solar Schools program, which teaches students how the panels on their school roof works, how much energy they generate, and the share of greenhouse gases were averted.

By the time students are in high school and considering a career, we have to give them the guidance and exposure to good-paying jobs. Career and Technical Education is vital to that and something I'll fight for as Queens Borough President. This program should function as a 21st Century shop class. Students who may not want to go to college should be able to learn how to install solar, wind, or geothermal technology. I want to make sure the DOE partners with unions so we can make sure that training eventually leads to an apprenticeship.

3. What is your view on the lack of diversity in public schools? Do you believe the DOE's approach, particularly regarding D28, is the current one? If not, how would yours differ?

School segregation is illegal, immoral, and something we still face in the New York City public school system. The current situation we're in reflects generations of policies that kept some schools underfunded while others flourished. We will not be able to solve this problem overnight – let alone with a single policy. As we're launching our campaign, I'm monitoring the D28 diversity issue closely, speaking with stakeholders, and will weigh the merits of the program.

But I know we must do something to make sure every Queens student has the same opportunity. We cannot put a Band-Aid on the gaping wound that is our inequitable education system. I'm focused on investing in every Queens school, especially in marginalized communities, so all our students have the same opportunities. When it comes to the budget, I'll invest in infrastructure like science labs as well as create funding mechanisms that allow us to combat school overcrowding. With my land use abilities, I'll

ensure development in dense area also comes with the infrastructure to address the needs of more people – especially when it comes to school. And as the county’s chief advocate, I’ll fight to end policies that have created two education systems.

4. Do you believe there should be more CUNY or SUNY schools in Central Queens?

I certainly believe there should be more access to CUNY and SUNY schools in Central Queens and would be interested in securing a new one in the area if it makes sense. I’m a proud product of Queens College and wouldn’t be where I am were it not for the quality, affordable education CUNY provides. One thing I think we deserve somewhere in Queens is a CUNY or SUNY school focused on careers in technology. There should be a public, affordable equivalent to the Cornell-Technion campus on Roosevelt Island.

5. What is your vision to have more access to public higher education in Central Queens?

We certainly have to guarantee public higher education remains affordable for Central Queens families. I understand the rigors of both working and going to school full-time, having managed a KB Toys store while attending Queens College. It’s incredibly difficult to manage tuition, pay rent, and afford school so you can focus on class instead of your growling stomach. First, I’ll use my role as county advocate to push Albany to fully fund the CUNY and SUNY systems. We cannot have a future New York City or New York State without a fully funded public higher education system to better prepare tomorrow’s leaders. The Excelsior Scholarship program has its merits, but it’s still difficult for students to secure. We have to find new stipend opportunities to provide a safety net for recipients, so they can focus on seeing their education through.

The Environment

1. Central Queens is home to some of the largest parks in Queens; from Forest Park to Flushing Meadows Corona Park. What is your vision to invest in our parks? Do you support the QueensWay plan?

I’m committed to doubling Queens’ greenspace over the next decade. Not only do we need park space as a respite from the grind of living New York City, but as the front line of defense against climate change. Trees serve as “carbon sinks,” which absorbed emissions that otherwise go into our lungs, erode our infrastructure, and make our planet hotter. I’ll continue investing in making parks greener by ripping out asphalt in favor of actual green space, something we’re accomplishing with the historic \$30 million renovation at Astoria Park. But we must also green our sidewalks by investing in street trees, bioswales and other natural plantings. These relatively small physical investments can make a big impact on street flooding, which only gets worse when we don’t have natural absorbents.

2. What are your views on vertical farming & having more locally grown foods in Queens?

I am a big supporter of vertical farming as well as agricultural education. I’ve proudly funded a hydroponic science lab in every school in my Council District. These are cost-effective, hands-on ways for students as young as first graders to learn what goes into growing tomatoes, cucumbers, and other fruits, vegetables, and herbs. An entire

generation of western Queens residents will come of age now with an instilled value of locally grown food and the skillset to undertake such an effort.

3. What is your environmental plan for Queens?

As I've said, Queens will be the borough most impacted by climate change – no matter what. We must mitigate the already evolving effects of this phenomenon as well as adapt to cut out the root issues that spur this threat. I first believe we must close the dirty power plants sited in black and brown Queens communities in the early 2000s. These were built under the promise they'd only operate for three years, but they kick on two decades later without any solution to close them in sight. Rikers Island can solve this problem by using part of these vacated 413 acres for solar panels with large-scale batteries to store the power, which could provide enough energy to closing these plants. I also want to solarize and green roof every City building to reduce our demand for fossil fuels. The solar panels we've installed at P.S. 171 in Astoria will generate half the school's annual baseload energy, which will be a major boon for that facility. There are about 250 schools throughout the borough that can right now support panels, and I want to export that success to those facilities. The Borough President also gets up to \$70 million in capital funding every year, which we should use to making our communities more resilient, and we should partner with City and State entities to create unique funding mechanism. I'm also looking at every aspect of City life through a climate lens, which is why I want to appoint a Deputy Borough President for Sustainability who will work every day with a mandate to making our borough stronger against this threat.

Transportation

1. Many parts of Queens are a virtual Transit Desert, and even those areas with good mass transit options are experiencing regular delays and overcrowding, particularly in areas seeing significant development - including here in Central Queens. What is your vision for expanding and improving Transit services for the residents of Queens?

First, the MTA board structure of appointment gerrymandering has created a disorganized authority in which Westchester County has more of a say on Queens' transit system than the borough itself does. I believe all five borough presidents should have an appointee to the MTA board. We in Queens deserve a representative who knows where the transit deserts are and which signals on the 7 line need work, who will fight for subway and bus riders at every single board meeting. That's a topline issue we need addressed, and I'm committed to working with my partners in Albany to get an equitable transit authority. But we also too often allow the MTA to come up with a plan and then dictate it to us with limited time for meaningful feedback. While I applaud the MTA's once-in-a-century look at our entire bus network, the proposal the authority dropped in the waning days of 2019 has left us with more questions than answers. There should be a community-led process that focuses on neighborhood-to-neighborhood transit. I'm committed, as Borough President, to leading that study.

2. Does your vision for improving transportation options in Queens include making the use of bicycles more practical and safer? How, if at all, would you work to improve and

expand Queens' bike lane network and how might we make our streets safer for cyclists and pedestrians.

Queens deserves a holistic transit that makes it as easy to get around for pedestrians and cyclists as it is right now for cars. The longer we kick the can on a full bike lane network or pedestrian-focused policy, the more people we put into single-occupant cars. I am in favor of a network that encourages fewer people to drive, which leads to more congestion and thus toxic exhaust in the air. The Borough President's urban planners would work with our community leaders to create a comprehensive transit plan full of tangible things the Department of Transportation can do to make our streets safer and more navigable.

3. Access-A-Ride provides a critical service to those of us with mobility issues, but it is a source of many complaints. What, if any, reforms and changes would you advocate for the Access-A-Ride system and how would you work to make existing Transit, particularly subways, more accessible for those facing mobility challenges?

For a long time, Access-A-Ride seemed to be the only successful arm of the MTA, but even now we're seeing severe cracks in that system. It shouldn't take someone with mobility issues four hours to get from Point A to Point B in our city. Access-A-Ride needs to adopt better practices that get those with mobility issues to their destinations at the pace they deserve. I again support a top-down approach of reforming the MTA so that we have leadership asking real questions on why Access-A-Ride drivers take convoluted routes, why our signal system still isn't upgraded, and why our buses never seem to come on time. Should the Queens Borough President have an appointee to the MTA board, I will task her or him with voting against any capital or strategic plan that doesn't make our entire mass transit system more accessible. In Astoria, the N/W line was ripped apart over nearly two years to add stained glass and wood to the stations. But, because the City has a limited voice on the MTA board, the authority ignored our pleas to install elevators throughout the line. Now, after all the work is done and the neighborhood was disrupted, they're going to install them at a higher price tag. There must be sanity in the system and I believe a stronger City voice in the planning process is the best pathway to that – short of municipal control, which I believe is the best long-term solution. Until we have some sanity on the organization, I'll use the loud megaphone that is the Borough President's Office to hold decisionmakers accountable.

Rikers and the Kew Gardens Mega-Jail

1. What was your position on the plan to close Rikers & create the Kew Gardens mega-jail?

As the City Council representative for Rikers Island, I knew the existing jails there needed to close as part of greater reforms to the criminal justice system. Looking through an environmental lens, a vast majority of Rikers' 413 acres is landfill – mostly ash and garbage – that emits methane and makes every person on that island sick. The ground collapses to disrupt the foundation of buildings, activating idle asbestos to create a public health nightmare. The isolation of Rikers Island has fostered an unsafe, violent culture for both detainees and guards. We've consigned too many people to solitary confinement there or forced them to spend up to half a year behind bars there without

being convicted of a crime. I voted to close Rikers Island because it was the right thing to do. I did this in consultation of the #CloseRikers coalition and the Lippman Commission, who presented what I thought was a morally right pathway. And I was ultimately glad the Mayor's Office agreed to reduce the size of the detention center in Kew Gardens, which is on the footprint of a longtime similar facility. We currently spend more than \$30 million on average every year on transporting detainees from Rikers to their respective courthouse, which is money that would be better spent in our schools or over-policed communities.

2. How will you use the land use process to put forward your vision of the future of Rikers and the new jail in Kew Gardens?

I have embraced the proposal by a growing coalition to use a vacated Rikers Island for renewable energy and waste treatment. This has the potential to justify the closure of every dirty secondary power plant built in the last 20 years as well as up to four crumbling wastewater treatment plants. These were overwhelmingly built in black and brown communities in the early 2000s – in spite of community protests – and have made a generation of Queens residents sick. We know Rikers can never be used housing for environmental reasons. Another runway for LaGuardia Airport creates more problems than its proponents say it will solve. The best, morally right use for the land is to close the polluting infrastructure located in the same communities long marginalized by a criminal justice system emblematic in Rikers Island. We can create tens of thousands of good union jobs in the process, which should go to the people of those communities. The best way to keep someone from getting people wrapped up in the criminal justice system is with a good job, and we have a real opportunity to create those on these 413 acres.

3. A new city council and mayor in 2021 could change the outlook of the Kew Gardens mega-jail and Rikers. What would be your vision of Rikers and the mega-jail in Kew Gardens as Queens Borough President from 2021 and beyond?

Last June, my colleagues and I introduced three bills that would kick-start the Renewable Rikers process. One requires a study to determine how much renewable energy can be created on the island; a second will assess how much wastewater can be diverted there for treatment; and a third will transfer control of the island to the Department of Environmental Protection. This is how we can start guaranteeing Renewable Rikers is a reality – one that, again, creates thousands of jobs. By creating those opportunities and making over-policed communities healthier, we can help neighborhoods long left in the shadow of power plants thrive.

Community Boards and Land Trusts

1. Do you have any plans to increase the voice of community boards in Queens?

The process in which we appoint people to community boards is broken. Too often, it's operated under a system of who knows whom. The first thing we have to do is make the board appointment process more open and transparent. I want to create an Office of Diversity & Outreach that consolidates and expands upon how the Borough President's Office interacts with our neighborhoods. Staff within this office will lead a proactive campaign to notify the public when a seat is open, how interested parties can

apply, and what the process is like. Next, we have to be transparent about the appointment process as well as ensure the boards better reflect the respective neighborhoods they represent. We need both more diversity in terms of background along with diversity of thought. The latter is especially important given the role Community Board transportation committees can play in laying out our streets; we need members who can have a robust discussion that protects cyclists and pedestrians. I've also committed to appointing public housing residents to their respective community boards, because too often their needs or perspective goes unheard.

2. If elected, do you envision your relationship with community boards being different or like any of your predecessors?

Just as I have as a Council Member, I will continue to listen to the community board's concerns, support, or opposition. But I believe Borough Presidents should lead, so that includes engagement with all key stakeholders in a process, weighing its merits, and making a final decision. That's a precedent I established in the Astoria Cove rezoning nearly six years ago, and it's something I've should to follow through with ever since. I will certainly count Community Boards as partners and an integral voice, but I know that there will be times we may disagree.

3. Will you use Community Land Trusts as a tool to give communities a stronger voice in community developments?

I will certainly see where we can optimize Community Land Trusts, especially in environmental justice neighborhoods. As we close the power plants sited 20 years ago in black and brown neighborhoods, CLTs can be a useful tool in guaranteeing they finally have a say in how that land is used. Just as I've pledged to ensure City land is used to for City benefit, I also want neighborhoods to work constructively with a long-term vision for how we can use land in a way that best benefits the greater good.