



**Queens Central Democratic Club  
Candidate Endorsement Questionnaire 2021  
New York City Council District 29**

**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 [qcdcnyc@gmail.com](mailto:qcdcnyc@gmail.com). Please email us the completed questionnaire by Friday, March 12.**

**Full Name: Aleda Gagarin**

- 1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of businesses closed their storefronts in our district. As Council Member for CD29, what is your plan to bring back businesses to our storefronts? Additionally, how do you plan to support the storefronts that already exist?**

We shouldn't let this commercial space stay vacant; we need to get creative. Ideas such as using vacant commercial space for civic uses like libraries, childcare centers or art venues all are great ways to use this vacant space.

I also believe we need to waive all permitting and licensing fees over the next years for businesses that move into vacant space. This will provide an important incentive for new business owners to act fast to move into vacant storefronts. This should be coupled with a requirement for the city to create a public facing inventory of vacant storefronts, so would be business owners have an accessible tool to find spaces quickly, without having to rely on brokers.

As for supporting small businesses that already exist, the two biggest things I would like to see happen are commercial rent control and the small business job survival act. The Small Business Jobs Survival Act (SBJSA) is a bill that would give commercial tenants a guaranteed minimum 10-year lease along with the right to renewal. It would also implement negotiation terms during the lease renewal process with the potential for binding arbitration if fair terms cannot be found.

As for Commercial Rent Control, any commercial rent control bill I would sponsor would need to include long term leases, eligibility for creative venues and a rent guidelines board (the body that decides upon rent increases) that is made up of small business owners, community members, immigrants and people of color.



**2. The Mayor and DOE Chancellor just announced that they will be disbanding the gifted and talented program in NYC Public Schools. Do you agree with this cut? Why or why not?**

There is no doubt that New York City is one of the most segregated school districts in the nation, and that we need to do better, for all our kids. Reports do show that gifted and talented programs further segregation. Data from the School Diversity Advisory Groups study showed the racial breakdown of NYC Kindergarteners are: 41% Latinx 24% Black %18 Asian %17 white, whereas the racial breakdown of kindergarteners who receive offers to attend a G&T are: 10% Latinx 8% Black 42% Asian 39% white. This degree of school segregation does not sit well with me. Instead, I am interested in school enrichment models that benefit all children.

I know that some folks are in favor of putting G&T in all schools as the answer, but studies show that this creates segregation within school buildings themselves as well. Our kids deserve fully funded, holistic learning environments across the board, and there are ways to achieve that. We've worked out our education platform with a diverse group of local parents, educators, PA reps, afterschool administrators and groups like the Alliance for Quality Education and RJPS. I also encourage you to read my recent Op-ed on culturally responsive education: <https://queenseagle.com/all/aleda-gagarin-opinion-cultural-responsive-education>.

**3. We have seen our neighbors suffer from food insecurity unlike any other point in recent memory. How will you work with NYC to provide emergency food services to our neighbors (particularly seniors) and support to our food pantries such as Masbia, Queens Community House, and Commonpoint Queens?**

I believe fresh, healthy, affordable food is a fundamental human right. We need to work to end food insecurity, prioritize workers' rights and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in our food system. On this front, I believe we need to:

- Aggressively ensure that schools throughout the city are providing breakfast to students, and fully fund senior centers to expand weekend and holiday service so hot meals are provided year-round.
- Support bodegas, small grocers, variety marketplaces and other small vendors in the FRESH program, all of whom may be more successful in expanding food access than large grocery chains (who are currently the only recipients of FRESH subsidies). As it stands now FRESH subsidizes supermarkets more than it subsidizes poor people. We need to change that.



- Invest in community gardens and urban farms - There are over 596 acres of vacant land in NYC. This could be used for food producing lots, helping expand access to healthy local food while also providing jobs.
- Study the effect of creating caps on the number of fast food restaurants in a given zip code - Too often our food deserts are the same location as food swamps (an area with an overabundance of fast food and other high calorie, low nutrition food options).
- Provide seed funding for food cooperatives in neighborhoods that lack access to healthy food. Food cooperatives are a great way to provide healthy, affordable food in a democratic fashion.
- Increased housing costs mean less money for food for families. We need to address the affordability crisis to work to end hunger. We also need to ensure all workers are earning at least minimum wage. This includes gig economy workers (whom I believe need to be legally classified as employees not independent contractors) and restaurant workers.

**4. We have a couple of citywide races coming up - if a citywide candidate wanted to see some of the best food and shops CD29 had to offer, where would you take them on a tour?**

I live in Kew Gardens. I love it here. All my local stores know my kids. I'm 3 blocks from Forest Park. We aren't overrun with chain stores. It has small town vibes with so much access to the city. But the essence of my district may lie in MacDonald Park in Forest Hills, on Queens Blvd., where folks from all across the district go to hang, elders play chess, shoppers take a break off of Austin Street, and families play with their kids after visiting the Green Market.

If I were taking someone on a tour of the district, some other highlights of the district for me are Kew and willow books, Gray's bicycles, Bakers Dozen bagels, Eddies Sweet Shop, Dani's Pizza, Kew Gardens Cinema. I would take them around Austin Street and to the Forest Hills green market. I'd take them to Alfie's Pizza and Mi Casa in Richmond Hill. The food under the J is heavenly. I'd also take them to Abuela's empanada cart, to Nick's and Dee's for such differently dope pizza, to Spy C Cuisine (soup dumplings forever), the Bund, Dirty Pierre's, Andre's Hungarian Bakery, and Cheburechnaya. Ateaz in Kew Gardens, and the Austin Ale House. Oh! Also, Nick's Bistro on Metro, and Paratha Wala.

(Apologies for the tangent, I am very passionate about food!)

**5. Business is a lifeblood to any community, and that also translates to jobs. If a major commercial business (i.e. Target or Key Food) wanted to come and open**



**shop in CD29, what requirements would you ask of them in order to bridge them into our community?**

I think before even getting to the point of negotiation with a large corporate retailer, I would want to study if it was possible to fill whatever need that chain would fill with small, locally owned businesses. When a Target comes in, the majority of profits made leave the community and get sent to corporate headquarters lining the pockets of wealthy CEO's. Even if that chain does employ from within the district (something I would work to ensure) the jobs they create are low wage, non-union and often provide no benefits. Every study I have seen has shown small businesses do far more to shrink wealth inequality and provide a ticket into the middle class than corporate chains. Folks often forget that when we endured the financial crisis of 2008, it wasn't big box chains that saw us through, it was our mom and pop shops. The diversity of their stores, their hiring of local folks, and their ability to keep dollars in our communities were the lifeline we needed then, and the lifeline we need now. The increased foot traffic makes neighborhoods more vibrant, and create a much more diverse local economy. We need them now more than ever, and I will fight tooth and nail to help them help us.

This is not to mention the benefits in terms of character of a neighborhood and local culture. Finally, for the stores already present, a place like Target provides downward pressure on prices and wages, and ultimately forces many small businesses already in the district to close. For these reasons, my first step would likely be to find ways to incentivize small business creation to fill in any service voids as opposed to working with large corporate retailers.

**6. In your view, what are the biggest criminal justice concerns in CD29? What changes, if any, need to be made, and how?**

The borough-based jail in Kew Gardens, which I absolutely do not support, and will fight tooth and nail.

I also think it's important to have hard conversations about what makes communities safe. Is it hyper-policing and incarceration? I do not think so. I believe that healthy communities are safe communities, and that deep investments in healthcare, mental health services, permanent supportive housing, substance abuse disorder treatment, workforce investment, parks, safe streets, small businesses, and a thriving workforce make our communities safe.

[According to data from CPR](#), for every \$1 we spend on policing and incarcerating our neighbors, we only spend \$0.01 on workforce investment. For every \$1 on policing and incarcerating our neighbors we spend \$0.12 on youth & community development. For



every \$1 spent on policing and incarcerating our neighbors, we spend \$.25 on the Department of Health and \$.19 on Housing Preservation and Development. **If a budget is a statement of priorities, ours are off.**

We also need to acknowledge that in the city's budget, a yes to one thing is a no to something else. We are not the federal government; we do not print money. That means that when we're at risk of laying off 22,000 municipal workers who keep our city running, we can't untie that from a bloated policing budget. They are, in fact, entirely related. NYPD's budget is SO BIG that NYPD budgetarily qualifies as the [33rd largest military](#) in the world. We can't afford PPE for teachers, but we spend a quarter of a billion dollars a year on misconduct lawsuits. We are at risk of firing 400 EMTs in the middle of a pandemic but adding new cadet classes. And we need to have a good, hard look at our priorities, and what actually makes our communities and our city thrive. We need to right-size our policing budget. Because at the end of the day, if spending the most money per capita on policing was the solution to our problems, they'd be solved by now.

**7. Forest Hills Hospital provides front line, life saving work on a daily basis, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. What reforms need to be implemented for our healthcare workers, and what recommendations would you provide to help streamline vaccine distributions?**

I support having mandatory PPE standards and infection control protocols. I also believe the city needs to do an audit to consider where the critical shortages of supplies are throughout our hospital system, and then work to obtain those needed supplies in advance of the next pandemic.

Also, NYC has lost some 20,000 hospital beds since the year 2000 due to hospital closures. I believe a moratorium on hospital closures combined with using the land use process to assess hospital capacity are the first places to start with that issue. In addition, for hospital workers I believe we need to:

- Expand hazard pay legislation for the duration of the pandemic to ensure frontline workers are properly compensated.
- Require minimum staffing ratios in health care institutions to provide adequate care for patients and protect our health care workers.
- Plan in advance - NYC should have a plan in place that addresses critical shortages of staffing and supplies so that we are better prepared for future epidemics.

In terms of vaccines, as vaccines have rolled out, we see the inequities that have plagued NYC for far too long are all too present in who has been vaccinated. White New Yorkers,



who represent  $\frac{1}{3}$  of NYC residents, currently represent  $\frac{1}{2}$  of those who have been vaccinated. Black New Yorkers, who represent roughly a quarter of NYC, are at about 11% vaccination rates. Compounding this is the fact that Black and brown communities disproportionately suffered from Covid in the first place.

There are a few central ways I see at alleviating this issue and getting the vaccines equitably distributed to all New Yorkers.

- While it is great to have mass vaccination sites like the Jacob Javitz center or Yankee Stadium, the vaccine needs to be rolled out into the hardest hit communities directly.
- Begin phasing out appointment based registrations for vaccines, which require internet, computers and technical proficiency, and switch to walk up appointments, to better serve hard hit neighborhoods and populations.
- Ramp up vaccine outreach and support. This includes appropriate language targeting, phone banking, door to door, and partnering with CBO's to ensure all community residents are reached.

Obviously, all of this is premised on having an increased supply of vaccines, which we will continue to put pressure on the federal government to deliver on.

**8. CD29 has a large senior population, and Queens as a whole has one of the fastest growing senior populations in NYC. How would you work with the Department for the Aging to provide more resources to our district and support our seniors?**

There is so much we can do to provide more resources for our seniors and better support them. I believe we must reprioritize our budget, to ensure that senior services receive the funding they need. I also believe in participatory budgeting as a way to support our community, but think the current system puts funding projects that benefit seniors at a disadvantage. One of the most obvious ways I see to rectify this is by expanding participatory budgeting to include both capital and expense budget projects. This would go a long way to helping our elders and the organizations here who care for them.

As for best ways to support seniors in our district, some of the things I would like to do are:

- Allow older adults to apply for affordable housing for seniors at age 50 - Often affordable housing lists take more than a decade, yet people cannot apply for SCRIE or put themselves on a waiting list until age 60. By reducing the application age to 50, we allow more New Yorkers access to affordable housing before they are in a housing crisis.



- Support more Seniors by expanding the SCHE income limits - Certain Seniors are eligible for a property tax exemption called Senior Citizen Homeowners' Exemption (SCHE). It is only eligible to seniors who earn a combined family income of under 38,000. Expanding that income limitation to 50,000 would support more low-income seniors and families.
- [Provide funding for Age friendly home renovations](#) - Allowing Seniors to age in place benefits everyone. Providing funds for renovations such as ramps or wider doors for wheelchairs is far cheaper to taxpayers than to pay for costly nursing homes. I wrote a Letter to the editor on this topic (linked to above), which ultimately was covered by [The Forest Hills Post](#)
- Require landlords to make age friendly renovations for seniors - NYC requires landlords to install window guards in units that house young children, the city should seek to require landlords to make age friendly renovations for senior renters. Any modifications should not qualify for major capital improvements that would be used to increase rent.
- Increase funding for senior centers and provide non-English and culturally competent programming for Seniors around the city.
  - Expand senior centers services to provide evening and weekend meals for seniors. For seniors on a budget, often senior centers are the most reliable accessible nutritious food.
- Build more Adult Playgrounds - We need to fund adult playgrounds with weightlifting machines suitable for seniors.

**9. According to the Bowery Mission, there are nearly 80,000 homeless individuals in NYC, with over 60,000 of those individuals utilizing a public shelter and 4,000 that live on the street. How would you as a Council Member help stem the tide of homelessness in New York City?**

There are two sides of this, one is ensuring low income families can afford their rent so that they don't fall into homelessness. On this topic, I have extensive plans to ensure the expansion of affordable housing, which can be found on my website. The other side of the coin is how best to house currently homeless populations.

For the latter, a model I am really excited about advocating for are the housing first and the permanent supportive housing models, both of which do similar things. Both models provide people suffering homelessness with long term stable housing and simultaneously connects them to onsite or community-based services (such as social workers, job readiness, health, and mental health services etc.). Of course, providing people a home seems the moral thing to do, but it has also been routinely shown to be an effective and financially prudent thing to do. Numerous studies of these programs show their effectiveness; rates of homelessness go down as people have long term stable housing, all





health indicators are shown to improve, and best of all it *saves* taxpayers significant amounts of money. Homeless individuals often end up in institutions (such as shelters, jails, or emergency rooms) which are often both morally abhorrent (i.e. jails) and very costly to taxpayers. By providing homeless individuals with housing and services the long-term results for the individual and for our collective money are greatly improved.

This isn't some idealistic policy; it has been tried and tested with astounding results in other places. Likely the most famous example is Utah. In 2010 the entire state of Utah decided to end chronic homelessness through housing first policies. Within five years the state had reduced homelessness by 91 percent. Utah is a conservative state, so as said the push here was as much about saving money as it was about helping folks in need. Currently, De Blasio has planned for 15,000 units of housing first units to be built over the next 15 years. I would like to see that number greatly and rapidly expanded.

**10. Our district is one of the few in Queens without a homeless shelter. What are your feelings on homeless shelters to address NYC's growing number of homeless individuals? Should a shelter be developed in this area?**

As I wrote about above, by far the most effective method for dealing with homelessness is supportive housing. While I will not take a NIMBY stance on our homeless neighbors and caring for them, as I do believe housing is a human right, I would advocate for something better than temporary shelters. As such, if infrastructure were being created in our district to help solve homelessness, I would advocate for it to be supportive units. We live here because it is a beautiful place and we feel safe here; our homeless neighbors have been coming to this area for the same reason and deserve a life of dignity as well.

**11. Our community boards are considered the first line of local government interaction. Similarly, the Council Member has a say in nominating community board members. If elected, how would you work with our community boards and strengthen them?**

Firstly, I would ensure true diversity for who I nominated to be on the board. I believe community boards need to deeply reflect the community they serve in terms of ability, race, gender, age, religion, orientation, class, industry and renter and homeowner status. In addition to nominating members who reflect the unique diversity of our district, I also think there should be city wide requirements to guarantee board diversity. Having such requirements would structurally change community boards as an institution, and guarantee representation whether I am in office or not.

We also need language justice and political education across the district to make sure folks understand what the community board does, and how they can participate.





In addition to that, I believe these three structural changes are needed to strengthen community boards around the city:

1. *Fully fund community boards.* Currently, the combined budget of all community boards is a meager .02% of the total city budget. This lack of funding poses a major impediment to boards.
2. *Adequately staff community boards.* Volunteer board members with full-time jobs and/or household duties cannot be expected to create a community plan or fulfill other charter mandated functions. All boards should be appropriately staffed and include full-time urban planners.
3. *Ensure community plans that are created have teeth and get implemented.* Section 197a of the city charter allows community boards to create plans to guide development in their district. Yet, under our current system, community planning is often an exercise in futility; boards sometimes take years to compose a plan only for the city to ignore or reject it. Even when a plan is approved, implementation is not guaranteed. We cannot allow a mayoral agency to override community plans when they are created.

**12. Bike lanes were installed along Queens Boulevard as part of Vision Zero, resulting in the removal of parking spots. Are you in favor of extending bike lanes along Queens Boulevard?**

I am committed to finishing the protected bike lane and redesign of Queens boulevard throughout District 29. I have stood in solidarity with groups like Transportation Alternatives in calling on the City to Finish Queens Blvd. Finishing the Queens Boulevard Bike Lane is crucial for cyclist and pedestrian safety. Considering the immense loss of life we have seen in recent years, providing a continuous protected bike lane is an imperative. Incentivizing biking and making it safer also has health benefits, climate benefits and financial benefits to our communities. Providing the infrastructure to make it safe, only makes our city greener and healthier. I'd also love to expand more protected bike lanes throughout the district, and would like to workshop with the community where highest needs are.

One of the major things that has gotten in the way of actually finishing the redesign is the outspoken political opposition from the current council member, Karen Koslowitz. Her central argument for opposing the Queens Boulevard redesign is that we will lose 200 parking spaces in the district, which will in turn primarily harm small businesses. I think this argument is fundamentally flawed. Firstly, it ignores the imperative we must save lives by designing safe bike infrastructure. It also denies our district and city the environmental and health benefits of implementing green infrastructure.



As for her concern for small business, creating walkable and bikeable neighborhoods has been regularly shown to improve local economies, not harm them. I absolutely recognize that small businesses are struggling; objecting to finishing QB is not the type of real support that our small businesses need right now, it is just an easy scapegoat. What small businesses really need (as mentioned above) are rent relief and commercial rent control, which I would work to pass so that we can finally put that false claim to rest.

**13. The City Council reviews certain parts of the ULURP process, including housing and urban renewal plans and zoning map changes. What are the factors that would lead you to go against the recommendations of the local community board in the ULURP process? How do you view the tradeoffs between the affordable housing that new construction can bring against the impact of potential overdevelopment?**

For me, the factors to assess when considering any new development proposal are 1) Labor standards 2) Sustainability 3) Equity 4) Affordability and 5) Community input. I would weigh each of these carefully when considering how to vote on a new development. I recently wrote an op-ed that covers the need to empower community boards more fully in city planning. You can read that op-ed [here](#).

**14. What is your long-term plan for the Kew Gardens jail?**

My long-term plan is to ensure that the Kew Gardens Jail does not get built in the first place. While I absolutely support the closure of Rikers, I do not support the creation of four new borough-based jails. The investment of 8-11 billion dollars in new jails is a deliberate choice to uphold the status quo: mass incarceration, over-policing of Black and Brown communities, and the separation of families. Obviously, the alternative for the billions of funding is to address community needs such as affordable housing and education, invest in harm reduction programs, health and human services, robust mental health services, and job training.

When the plan to create the borough-based jails was created, the daily jail population in NYC was around 9,100 people per day. The mayor set the goal of reducing that population down to 5,000 by 2026. Currently, our jail population is below 7,000 which is far ahead of the city's goals. The mayor then adjusted the total jail population goals to be 3,300 by 2026. The existing jails in NYC have a maximum capacity of 2,300 people, a difference of 1,000 people. Instead of building four new jails for 1,000 people, we can work to further reduce our incarceration rates by decriminalizing things like drug use so that fewer people are sent to NYC jails in the first place.

**15. What are your three priority budget items for our Council district?**



I'm running for budget justice and believe that we need to prioritize investing our public dollars into healthy, thriving communities. My top three funding priorities will be deep investments in climate, budget justice and labor. Some of the investments I would seek to make would be:

- 1) Right sizing our policing budget and investing in mental health services, healthcare, workforce investment, education, substance abuse disorder, homeless services, caring for our elders, and programs that address root causes to systemic issues that our city is facing.
- 2) Climate Justice - Fully fund our parks (who have seen massive budget cuts this last year); expand municipal composting; invest in bike infrastructure and mass transit (where possible); implement green infrastructure such as rain gardens; invest in renewable energy, coastal resiliency projects and electric car charging stations.
- 3) Worker Equity - Implement universal childcare; fully fund CUNY to be tuition free as it used to be, (investing in our youth is investing in our workforce); reinvest in summer youth employment; implement universal broadband; fight for and fund 3 months paid parental leave; expand healthcare coverage through NYC cares to all New Yorkers without employer based coverage; expanded hazard pay and sick leave pay; fully fund DWCP to ensure all employers are complying with sick leave laws (among others); expand funding for immigration legal counsel so immigrants at risk of deportation can have access to free quality legal counsel; expand the NYC:ATWORK program so people with disabilities have more employment opportunities.

## **16. How would you propose closing the City's budget gap?**

In general, I entirely oppose austerity as a means of dealing with budget shortfalls. We know neoliberal economic measures have facilitated one of the greatest wealth transfers in American history.

That said, in immediate and specific terms, I'm running to reprioritize our budget. In the face of the largest civil rights movement in more than fifty years, our current Council voted to fund our police department while making nearly fully nearly \$2 billion in cuts in housing, parks, education, and health and human services. A budget is nothing if not a moral document, a statement of priorities. I also am part of the No New Jails movement, and hope to entirely remove that proposal to instead invest that 11 billion dollars in social services.

In terms of new revenue streams, there are a few central options I see, aside from reprioritizing our budget. The first and most obvious is advocating that my colleagues in



the state legislature tax the rich. The second is to create a public bank, so that New York's money can grow and ultimately be invested in New Yorkers.

**17. How will you use your position to initiate a district-wide conversation about race and racial injustice?**

Virtually every policy I am pushing for intersects with racial justice in one way or another. In this way, even as a candidate I am initiating and pushing our district to routinely consider race and systemic racism in our district and city. This will only expand if I am elected. Town halls, board picks, organized rallies and my policy initiatives will all deeply reflect this priority.

**18. When filling out your ranked choice ballot, which candidate will you rank second and why?**

I haven't yet decided who I'll be ranking second. I want to better understand each candidate's platform and how they'll fight for a just future for every New Yorker. I'm looking for a candidate who will fight for budget justice, commit to reimagining public safety and investing in healthy, thriving communities, who will fight tooth and nail for working families. I'm looking for someone who will fight to end mass incarceration, expand the city's Green New Deal, take care of our elders, ensure our immigrant neighbors have the right to vote, and protect our neighborhoods from greedy real estate developers.