



# GREATER BALTIMORE COMMITTEE

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

## **CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

The Greater Baltimore Committee has identified key policy priorities to drive discussion in the 2020 Citywide Elections. The priorities are:

1. Prioritize enhanced coordination across criminal justice agencies and support evidence-based crime reduction strategies to improve public safety.
2. Implement strategic and inclusive economic development strategies to attract and retain businesses and residents.
3. Exert solid, steady leadership to stabilize Baltimore City government and create a culture of integrity, transparency, and efficiency.
4. Support education and workforce development programs that prepare Baltimore residents for family-supporting jobs in high-growth industries and create programs or initiatives to attract talent to Baltimore City.
5. Utilize policy, funding, and intergovernmental coordination strategies to enhance Baltimore City's transportation and mobility infrastructure and operations.

*Disclaimer: As a 501(c)4 organization, the Greater Baltimore Committee does not endorse candidates for public office. The information contained on this page and all engagement activities surrounding the election are for educational purposes only.*

- 1. Prioritize enhanced coordination across criminal justice agencies and support evidence-based crime reduction strategies to improve public safety.**
  - What legislative actions, if any, would you propose as City Council President to reduce crime and improve public safety in the City?**

*Restoring public safety is the major priority of the city. No other concern matters if we cannot ensure the safety of both residents and visitors of our city. As Council President there are several strategies that I would implement to address public safety: In order for us to address the city's public safety crisis, there must be coordination and collaboration throughout each stage of the criminal justice system. There must be a mechanism to convene all of our local, state, and federal law enforcement partners. These partners must be on the same page and each equally committed to the crime fight. I will advocate for the restoration of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). In the past this council was successful at making certain that the key agencies within our criminal justice system operated as partners and collaborators in developing and implementing an effective crime fighting strategy. I will place an emphasis on diversion programs that get individuals the help that they need and greatly reduce the recidivism rate. I will identify funding for the extremely successful District Court Reentry Project. Currently without city funds this program is graduating scores of candidates*

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

*into gainful employment and productive lives. In our efforts to improve public safety, it is imperative that we explore all of the technology that is available to us. I would immediately call for an audit of our current CCTV system to assess the operational status of our system. From that evaluation we would take necessary steps to enhance the current system both for public safety and sanitation enforcement. Approximately 10,000 individuals in Maryland are released from prison each year, the majority of which return to Baltimore City. These individuals return to some of the same environments where they first encountered the criminal justice system with little to no support and limited resources. Statistics show that within three years, 40 percent of those released are rearrested, and that the unemployment rate among those recently released exceeds 50 percent. If we are to ever achieve our public safety goals we must break this cycle. Similar to efforts in Washington, DC and the State of New Jersey, Baltimore needs an agency that is created for the sole purpose of supporting and advocating for the empowerment of returning citizens. Assisting them in navigating the various systems and overcoming the barriers to becoming productive contributors to their communities. The research is clear that having a job is a critical factor in lessening the likelihood of criminal behavior and maybe the most important element in the success of an individual transitioning from prison back into society. That being the case it is essential that we identify and eliminate burdensome requirements that inhibit an individual's ability to be gainfully employed. Chief among them is the unpaid child support debt with which many returning citizens are saddled. This debt should be forgiven along with the counter productive act of suspending the driver license of the person who is in the arrears.*

- **How would you allocate City budget dollars to crime reduction and public safety efforts? Please be specific regarding funding levels and programs compared to the current budget.**

*Part of determining the proper allocation of funds dedicated to public safety is making a true evaluation of the current expenditures. Presently the city allocates almost 20% or \$500 million of the operating budget to the Baltimore City Police Department. A significant financial commitment to address the public safety concerns that are the chief priority of our city. Despite that financial commitment the city is still more dangerous than it has ever been with a homicide and shooting rate that places Baltimore as one of the most violent cities in the nation. Depending on whose accounting you ascribe to, it is said that the police department is short anywhere from 400-700 officers. Patrols are understaffed and whole districts are without the coverage that is necessary on a daily basis. The result of this deficiency has been an inordinate reliance on overtime to meet the basic patrol needs. For several years the Police Department has had overtime expenditures in the tens of millions of dollars in excess of the budgeted amounts. Over the past two years, as the Vice Chairman of the Budget Committee, we have worked tirelessly to address the excessive use of overtime by the Police Department that has been a drain on the city's budget and resources. As a result of our efforts, the Department is now operating within the budget and has instituted measures to reduce fraudulent use of overtime resources. In addition to instituting this necessary fiscal oversight of the Police Department, we must also allocate appropriate resources to address the systemic issues that are a driver for the crime and violence that is far too pervasive in our city. This means funding workforce development programs that equip and prepare our citizens, regardless of zip code, for the growth industries in Baltimore and the region; supporting programs like the YO! Center that focuses on "opportunity youth" (young people between the ages of 18-24, unemployed and not in school); and investing in our Rec and Parks Department to ensure that the city's youth have positive activities that promote healthy behaviors and sound decision making.*

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

**2. Implement strategic and inclusive economic development strategies to attract and retain businesses and residents.**

- **Do you have ideas or suggestions to reform the property tax structure in the City?**

*Baltimore City's current real property tax rate of \$2.25 per \$100 of assessed value is double that of any other county in Maryland. When you hold up that tax rate in light of the high crime rate, rising water bills, struggling schools, etc. it would make one question what's the justification for remaining in the city. Many are answering in the negative by exercising their right to leave Baltimore and relocate to other parts of the region. This flight needs to be reversed and reducing the property tax rate is just one component of that. In 2011 Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake initiated a plan to reduce the tax rate by 20 cents by 2020. While that effort was admirable it was still inadequate to stem the population loss that Baltimore has been experiencing and spur any major increase of new residents. Greater reductions to the real property tax rate need to be considered while exploring new revenue streams that will reduce the city's fiscal dependence on property taxes (which currently makes up nearly a third of the city's revenues). A couple efforts that are long overdue and need to be explored immediately by the city are how we handle vacant and blighted properties and the financial drain that they place on the city. Just down the road, the DC government institutes a higher assessment on vacant properties than they do for inhabited ones. They raised the property tax rate for commercial properties from \$1.65 to \$5 for \$100 in assessed value for vacant property and to \$10 per \$100 of assessed value for blighted property. While just up the road through their anti-blight legislation, the City of Philadelphia is making great strides in revitalizing communities and returning vacant dilapidated properties to the tax rolls. These efforts would incentivize more development activity in communities throughout the city.*

- **What are your top three priorities or programs to grow Baltimore's tax base?**

*Education Inadequacies in the school system are one of the major reasons that families that have already invested in Baltimore make the decision to leave. We must have quality public school education at all grade levels. Not just for the sake of retention and recruitment of families but an educated citizenry is attractive to businesses looking to relocate and also increases the earning potential of residents. Transportation Baltimore strives to be a 21st century city but does not have a transportation system that efficiently and effectively connects residents to work, school, and commerce. Accessibility by a variety of modes is paramount to a vibrant and thriving city. Homeownership incentives A clear way to grow the tax base is to increase the numbers of individuals who are able to become homeowners. This is even more important in a city like Baltimore that has over 17,000 vacant properties. Transitioning renters to homeownership potentially stabilizes communities and increases the tax revenues generated by the city.*

**3. Exert solid, steady leadership to stabilize Baltimore City government and create a culture of integrity, transparency, and efficiency.**

- **Baltimore City is at a crossroads and in need of strong, ethical leadership. Why are you the best candidate to lead the City Council into a new decade and chapter?**

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

*Prior to being elected to the City Council in 2016, I served in Baltimore City Government for almost 20 years. I served in a variety of capacities, with leadership responsibilities over activities critical to the goals and aspirations of the city. At each juncture I have always had a reputation for my integrity and commitment to my assignment, the city and the community to whom I was accountable. I serve as an Assistant Pastor at my local church. A responsibility that I do not take lightly. I answer to an authority much higher than an Ethics Board or a Charter Amendment. My faith and my relationship with God is an important part of who I am and I have no intention on exchanging that for anyone or anything. I've spent my entire professional career serving my community. I am honored and humbled to be in a position to do that and take that duty and the trust of the community seriously.*

- **What are three actions that you would take to improve transparency and efficiency in the City Council operations and across City government as a whole?**

*Given the opportunity to be City Council President, I would prioritize increasing the scope of communication to all of Baltimore, regarding the services offered, forums hosted, and open-to-the-public meetings that are being held by the the City Council. I would also make it a priority to engage and collaborate with organizations around the city that are already achieving success in addressing the pressing issues that face our communities. There needs to be a structured and systematic means for effective and efficient collaboration between and among city and non-profit resources. Given recent issues of the lack of accountability in our city, especially regarding issues like the Ritz Carlton's missing water bills, I propose that we implement stricter management systems and more frequent independent audits of critical city functions and agencies.*

- **How would you structure the Council under your leadership to carry out the roles and responsibilities of the City Council most effectively and efficiently?**

*Presently one of the greatest deficiencies on the City Council is the lack of resources and support in order to perform detailed policy analyses of proposed legislation and initiatives. As a result many efforts are forwarded without a thorough understanding of the budgetary impacts that will be brought to bear on the city and its residents. It is imperative that the Office of Council Services perform more like the Maryland Department of Legislative Services. The Office of Council Services along with the Office of Legislative Reference must have the capacity to perform, for all members of the Council, legal and legislative research, fiscal analyses and reviews and analyses of legislation and resolutions proposed by the Administration. Without this the Council's ability to evaluate and propose strategies and solutions for the city's most pressing needs is greatly hampered.*

- **Several charter amendments have been proposed and are pending legislative review and approval.**
  - **What is your position on the composition and function of the Board of Estimates?**

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

*The City Council is currently evaluating the composition of the Board of Estimates through a series of work sessions led by the Ethics and Infrastructure Committee. I am in total agreement that the Board of Estimates needs to be restructured. In order to establish a fair and entirely unbiased system of allocating funds, rewarding contracts, and monitoring the city's purchases, it is essential that the members of the Board are elected representatives of the people that have put them into office. I am inclined to support the model that is currently in use on the State level which would mean that our BOE would be led by the Mayor, Council President and Comptroller.*

- **What is your position on granting the City Council with the authority to increase or move appropriations in budget category?**

*As a Councilman it is extremely frustrating to not have the ability to either add or remove items from the budget. While I would love to have that ability, I believe that if the City Council under the leadership of the Council President was coordinated in its priorities there is ample opportunities in the budget process for the desires of the Council to be reflected in the budget.*

- 4. Support education and workforce development programs that prepare Baltimore residents for family-supporting jobs in high-growth industries and create programs or initiatives to attract talent to Baltimore City.**
  - **Under the recommendations of the Kirwan Commission, Baltimore City stands to receive an additional \$500 million annually in State education aid by Fiscal 2030. In order to receive this additional funding, Baltimore City must increase its investment as well, by \$330 million annually by Fiscal 2030. According to Maryland Department of Legislative Services figures, Baltimore City currently spends less than 15% of its budget on education compared to a statewide average of 36%. What do you propose the City should do to meet the increased funding obligations? Please be specific in identifying areas or agencies that will see reduced appropriations as well as revenues that may be increased.**

*We must fund Kirwan. Understanding the importance of education, not only to the individual but also to a vibrant business community it is essential that we provide a high quality education for all of our youth. It is imperative. I understand that in a city with the fiscal challenges that we have, this presents a conundrum. We have to immediately perform an audit on each agency to identify waste and inefficiencies. As the Vice-Chair of the Budget Committee, I have and will continue to champion the need for the city to identify new streams of revenue and areas that have the potential for economic growth. It is difficult to say which agencies will receive reduced appropriations without a thorough analysis.*

- **Currently, 0.2% of the City's budget is dedicated to workforce development. What is your position on increased funding for workforce training and adult education programs to reduce unemployment and adequately prepare City residents for jobs in high-demand industries?**

*Our investment in talent/workforce development is directly connected to the city's economic success. When companies are choosing a new city/region to locate their business, one of their main questions is around talent and access to the full continuum of talent - entry/mid/senior level skills. If residents*

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

*aren't trained for the growing and emerging jobs in our highest growth industries then companies will leave and our city will suffer. The city has a responsibility to provide adequate funding for talent/workforce development services above and beyond its historical commitments thus far. We can't say that we prioritize residents if we don't invest in them. And that investment cannot simply be the traditional reliance on federal or philanthropic dollars alone. It takes an aligned and concerted effort to leverage all available funding, with increases when able to truly train and prepare residents. I would have to do further analysis to determine what level of funding would be appropriate to meet the workforce development needs of the city. This issue pertaining to workforce development is not solely relegated to post high school but as seeped into our public education system. We are doing an inferior job of preparing our young people for either college or career. Presently based upon State and local standards less than 25% of our high school graduates are considered to be college or career ready. That figure doesn't even include the 25% of all students that never graduate. The reality is that it's an economic imperative for any region to invest in their residents. If we don't it will negatively impact the economic growth of the city. It will negatively impact public safety. It will negatively impact the efficacy of our public education system. If 64% of a city's residents are in low-wage positions with no way to move up, it suffocates the tax base of the city and leaves few options for new high growth industries to come to the city...it creates a vicious cycle.*

**5. Utilize policy, funding, and intergovernmental coordination strategies to enhance Baltimore City's transportation and mobility infrastructure and operations.**

- **What is your position on transportation policy and funding in the City? What, if any, policy priorities do you have regarding transportation and mobility?**

*As the Vice-Chair of the Transportation Committee of the City Council, I wholeheartedly support increased transit investments in Baltimore because effective public transportation not only improves a region's economy, but it also improves traffic safety and accessibility of all of our great city to all residents regardless of zip code. In addition to my work on the Council I have been a presenter at conferences sponsored by People for Bikes and Rails to Trails. I am a member of the Leadership Council for Rails to Trails. I am a key contributor to the establishment of the Big Jump Project in West Baltimore. I organized the Druid Park Lake Drive Stakeholders Group to develop recommendations for the reconfiguring of that important thoroughfare. I organized the North Avenue Coalition to bring together key stakeholders to reinvest and reimagine that great historic street. I have and continue to be a frequent collaborator and avid supporter of Graham Coreil-Allen and his Complete Streets Design Effort. The initiative that he is leading is focused on adapting streets for shared use and safe passage among bikers, pedestrians and drivers within the Druid Hill Park area. I worked very closely with Councilman Ryan Dorsey as he advanced the Complete Streets ordinance passed by the City Council. An effort that seeks to create a commuter infrastructure which enables greater access to public transportation, reduces speeding and other dangerous driving practices, and promotes pedestrian/biker/wheelchair riders' safety. I especially focused on the community outreach efforts that were so critical to the education and acceptance of the Complete Streets concepts. The changes required for implementing a Complete Streets Design throughout our city require a level of financial investment which, given the opportunity to be City Council President, I am committed to making a priority in the city's annual budget.*

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage  
City Council President Candidate Questionnaire

**CANDIDATE: LEON PINKETT (D)**

- **Do you support enhanced investment in transportation infrastructure, including that for pedestrians, bicycles, and scooters?**

*Yes. It is critical to the health and vibrancy of our city for residents and visitors to be able to access the wealth and diversity of resources that we offer. Whether they be employment hubs, cultural centers, or destinations for education or commerce, equitable accessibility throughout our city is an amenity that should be expected of any 21st century city. That accessibility should not be dependent upon just one mode. Especially in light of the deficiencies of our transit system, we have and must continue to accommodate a variety of modes including but not limited to bikes, scooters and the like.*

- **Recently, the City Council created a Transportation Committee of the City Council. Do you support the continuation of this Committee?**

*I presently serve as the Vice Chair of the Transportation Committee of the City Council. A position that I was assigned because of the work and the focus that I have directed toward what might be, outside of public safety, the city's biggest priority. I wholeheartedly support the continuation of the Committee and its efforts to adapt streets for shared use and safe passage among bikers, pedestrians and drivers.*