



GREATER BALTIMORE COMMITTEE

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

CANDIDATE: DAN SPARACO (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?**

We're facing a complete breakdown of the city's criminal justice system, and as Council President I intend to target the structural reasons for this crisis. That's the role I believe this job requires -- the next Council President doesn't need another "plan." Very simply, we are a city that does not control our own destiny. We do not legally control our police department -- and have to beg for legislation in Annapolis to re-write decades-old police districts or for the right to discipline corrupt officers. I will advocate for local control of our police department and work to build that agency into the City Charter. But there are two other agencies critical to long-term success in the crime fight, one the city used to control. The only way we can carry out the reversal of decades of terrible policy is with a We need a unified effort across not just BPD, but Parole and Probation and the Department of Social Services. We need shared values and a shared strategy across the crime control agency, the agency that should be responsible for managing successful reentry, and the agency that needs to support families in the first place, and that has to lead on child support policies that will allow our men to

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return to stable employment, not render them permanent economic refugees. To that end I would seek increased city authority over Parole and Probation and the Department of Social Services. Finally I would consider building the Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee into the City Code and require regular reports to the Council regarding the status of its meetings.

- **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.**

I was at the GBC meeting where criminal justice expert Thomas Abt's presented his Focused Deterrence homicide reduction strategy. His estimate for implementation was \$8 million. I would allocate that tomorrow and get to work. The problem is, we are not facing a budget problem, we're facing a leadership problem, and a legitimacy crisis. This crisis was a long time in the making. Twenty years ago, I was a law student working at a civil rights nonprofit fighting against zero-tolerance policing, at the same time Baltimore was implementing it. That was a missed opportunity, because at the very same time another city whose growth has far outpaced ours as of late was experiencing a miracle – the "Boston Miracle." It was a drastic reduction in violent crime based on strategies based on research and best practices, and a core tenet of the strategy is restoring police legitimacy in the eyes of neighborhoods with the most violence, and the most policing. We had the chance twenty years ago to adopt that strategy, but we opted for the opposite approach. Again in 2014, while I was Assistant Deputy Mayor for Operations, we again tried to adopt this strategy, but we did not follow through. Now, five years after that, Mr. Abt has presented the same ideas again – Focused Deterrence – developed by the person who came here in 1999, and again in 2014, but who we rejected, David Kennedy. Chicago has put Focused Deterrence theory to work and since 2016 has reduced homicides by 37%. We have made zero progress. This isn't a budget issue.

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?**

I propose to lead a comprehensive review of Baltimore City's variety of tax incentives and credits. As I understand it, there could be over \$40 million in new credits being created at the City Council and in Annapolis. Our mix of high property taxes combined with a host of credits and incentives leads to a confused marketplace where only insiders with the best information can succeed. Tax policy in Baltimore City has to do three things, all while generating sufficient revenue to govern the city: encourage people to move here, make sure the people already here stay, and incentivize equitable investment. Sure, I would love to see us do what other cities have done – cut property taxes significantly to boost investment and population. But at the moment, the cost of ownership is not one of our most urgent problems. The urgent problems are a high homicide rate, public corruption, and a city government neither businesses nor residents trust to get things done. Cutting the price of this product is no guarantee that more people will want to buy it. We need to fundamentally right the ship first. And we need to review our long-term obligations, in particular, school funding as called for by the Kirwan Commission. Then we can make targeted, strategic choices on tax policy to deliver results on the three things I listed above – moving here, staying here, investing here.

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

Reduce homicides, end corruption and stop being a national headline for that reason, and improve the school system. If we can do these things, we will attract businesses and residents. If we don't we won't. These things will require structural change and transformational leadership. Accomplishing these three things will require a comprehensive plan for our city that answers core questions about where we are headed as a city. I am sure you are looking for more specific proposals here, but no amount of tax credits or homeownership incentives or marketing plans will retain and grow our tax base if we cannot finally address the fundamentals. I do have two more specific responses. First, I do think that targeted efforts meant to address the specific reasons people consider leaving the city at various phases of life -- completion of education, young children, retirement, etc. -- can help us retain residents. In the short term targeted interventions are possible that could ease specific burdens that become push factors driving people out of the city. Second, we need to rebuild our city's Black middle class. There are too many people who grew up in the "Black Butterfly" who cannot imagine raising their own children there because they do not believe their children will be safe and well-educated. There are thousands of people living in West Baltimore County, Anne Arundel and Howard County who would consider returning to the city they grew up in if we could solve our long-term challenges. I personally know so many people for whom this is true. We could be Atlanta on the Northeast Corridor with an aggressive, inclusive approach, and a sense of urgency.

- 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?**

I am the only attorney in the race, the only candidate who has been on the operations side of city government, and I am the only candidate who has committed to a reform platform that identifies why City Hall is failing, and what to do about it. I have consistently called for strong, ethical leadership, and have actually spoke up about it – putting my money where my mouth is. I bring change and bold ideas in a race full of more of the same. I am also the candidate looking to build a workable coalition that can actually govern the city over the next, critical four years. It won't be enough for someone to squeak out a win with just the business community's support, or just union support, or just on the grounds of unearned name recognition. We need a galvanizing vision that puts people in coalition and creates a framework for working together and compromising where we have to. The crisis our city is in demands this. In addition, I have so far been alone in taking clear positions on the variety of City Charter reforms now under consideration by the City Council. (Your questionnaire will force us all to take positions on some of these matters.) I have made clear that I want to retain an accountable mayor who is the city's chief executive – an essential component of our system, which is now at risk. It is critical that the next Council President drive the conversation on the structure of this government. I will seek to do that during this campaign, as I have before it -- through my writing, public outreach, and direct outreach to members of the City Council, while many others remained on the sidelines.

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- **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?**

First, I think it is time we abolish the Board of Estimates, an anachronism from 1898 that no major city in America still uses, and professionalize the contracting and hiring processes in City Hall. I realize that many people think the little show that gets put on every Wednesday morning makes this process "transparent," but this is a sham layered over broken, inefficient processes that take too long and are not transparent at all. There are high-quality contractors that refuse to bid on major city projects because of our process. Meanwhile, we lose tons of talent because it takes 6 months to hire them. It doesn't have to be this way.

Second, I would combine some of the resources commanded by the City Council President with those that support our small Department of Legislative Reference and create a nonpartisan, professionalized Department of Legislative Services. It is absurd that the Speaker of the House of Delegates and the Senate President in Annapolis have four or six full-time staffers while our Council President has thirty. Meanwhile, the policy process at the City Council is virtually nonexistent – major bills pass with a single, sparsely attended hearing, with no Fiscal and Policy Note providing real analysis of the pros and cons of the legislation. This is due to a lack of staff, and a lack of resources – and a lack of interest in the issue on the part of past Council Presidents, whose primary job is to wait for the chance to become mayor.

Third, I would transform the Office of City Comptroller into an Office of Government Accountability. Long ago, the Comptroller was an essential component of city government, responsible for most of its internal workings, including financial controls and human resources. But it was reduced to a largely ceremonial role when the City Charter was revised in 1964 and a proper Department of Finance was created. Ever since, that department, not the Comptroller, has been responsible for preparing the operating budget, reporting on the capital budget, ensuring budget compliance, controlling all payments and disbursements, as well as payroll and pension payments, tax collections, property assessments, tax sales, and city purchasing. What's left for the Comptroller is auditing, and we've seen the problem with this – politicians do not audit their political allies. We simply don't need this role any longer. What we do need is professionalized, nonpartisan auditing conducted by someone independent of political interest and influence.

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

The fundamental question today begged by the variety of Charter reforms now under consideration is the role of the City Council in our system of government. Again, I seek to lead the conversation on that issue. For many decades the City Council has been largely irrelevant to the direction of city government, and primarily focused on constituent services. Some believe constituent services is all the Council should do. But I believe that view has developed in the context of a low-performing city government that does not always deliver services well. And clearly, over the past four years, the Council has taken on massive policy questions, not just trash complaints. In my view, we need a strong, accountable mayor with final executive authority, a relevant City Council with the resources to provide policy and budgetary oversight, with both executive and legislative being held accountable through nonpartisan, independent policy, audits, and ethics oversight.

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On the Council, we focused committees, that are better staffed, with clear mandates. We need a series of formal milestones for all legislation – e.g., a written policy analysis – before passage to third reader. Long term, we should consider the utility of 14 very small districts – which themselves were created by fiat, not the result of careful consideration. My outlook is guided by what I see in high-performing jurisdictions – Montgomery County, New York City, Seattle, Detroit, and plenty of others. My proposals might seem radical, but only because our government just so far behind the curve.

- **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?**

The right answer is to get rid of the Board of Estimates. Not only are we the last major city in America that uses one, we already have a budget process that defines how the people's money should be spent, and contracting processes in place to do it. These are the areas we should focus improvement efforts, and in both cases we should greatly increase transparency. The proposal before the City Council to reduce the size of the BOE to just three members -- the mayor, the Council President, and the Comptroller -- is a bad idea. It's akin to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. The problems we face in City Hall are far more serious. We need to think bigger, and fix the boat. City Hall has a corruption problem that starts with elected officials sitting on the Board of Estimates awarding contracts to their own campaign donors. We just lost a mayor to exactly that behavior. Reducing the Board's size and leaving only the politicians is not the answer to that problem. This change would destroy mayoral accountability. I worked for a mayor that did not always see eye to eye with the Council President and City Comptroller, and saw first hand what can happen with they are hostile to the mayor's agenda. Neither the Council President nor the Comptroller have any operational responsibility, nor do they have any expertise relevant to evaluating major contracts or hiring. When it comes to crime and trash, people look to the mayor for solutions -- not them. Allowing the two of them to have veto power over the mayor's agenda is not responsible. In fact, the practical effect would be to turn every spending decision and every contract into an opportunity for the two lesser citywide officials to leverage favors from the mayor, who, if they refused, could not move their agenda forward.

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

My plan would give the Council the resources it needs to responsibly take on the powers that several other County Councils in Maryland have over the budget process. I would create a Department of Legislative Services to provide policy and legislative support to the Council, and an Office of Government Accountability to provide nonpartisan fiscal oversight.

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**

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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.

I am not certain that percent of total budget is the right way to frame this question, though I understand that is how lawmakers in Annapolis have framed the issue. Quite frankly, Baltimore City government has more obligations and responsibilities than the vast majority of Maryland counties – roads and snow removal, to name two – and has unique expenses accrued as a result of decades of disinvestment and regional isolation. These are no excuse for mismanagement or failures of leadership, but simply put, we have challenges that others don't, created by forces not exclusively under our control, and these have a pricetag. Our kids bear the brunt of these challenges – regional economic and racial isolation – and it is critical to keep in mind that the expenditures city government makes to maintain the city our children live in outside of school impact their ability to perform in school during the school day. It would be a significant mistake to think that gleaming new schools with all the resources they need can succeed if they are surrounded by failing infrastructure, inadequate housing, decrepit parks, high crime, trash, and a flagging business sector. Our kids need good schools, but they need a functioning city government just like the rest of us. The Kirwan Commission was a multi-year effort to analyze school funding in Maryland, facilitated in no small part by the Maryland General Assembly. Baltimore City needs a similar effort, carried out over the next two years, to analyze all of its spending and determine how we as a city will meet our obligations under Kirwan. That's the only way to answer your question – with a serious process led by serious people interested bringing people together to answer hard questions. As Council President, that will be right in my wheelhouse, and I intend to create a Commission charged with demanding that hard choices be made. In particular, we need to slowly move a large part of the \$550 million spent on police into our school system. There is, by the way, the nagging question of accountability, first created back in 1997 when mayoral accountability for city schools was taken away, and the school system was removed from the mayor's cabinet and made the parentless, quasi-independent entity it is today. Today, the mayor now appoints all members of the school board, but this act, in some sense ceremonial, does not come with meaningful oversight or responsibility. As we spend a larger and larger share of city funds on city schools, as we rightly should, this question of accountability will become more urgent.

- **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?**

We need to increase workforce development funding, but it has to be done with job creators and entrepreneurs leading the conversation. Jobs and opportunities about in the city and region, but as we all know there's a skills mismatch between the available jobs and the people who need them. I want to see more community schools open long after the school day ends – and before it begins – so they can be hubs of adult education programs. I have adopted the Job Opportunities Task Force report, "The Criminalization of Poverty: How to Break the Cycle Through Policy Reform in Maryland," as one of my guidebooks on this topic, and will champion the policies it calls for.

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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?**

I ride my bike to work almost every day in the warmer months, and regularly take the Silver bus route in colder months. Transportation is a critical issue for me, and for our city. At the policy level, we have too many competing voices within city government, not brought together into a unified vision – which is one of the reasons why no comprehensive transportation plan or vision even exists. But it's not just the absence of a grand vision. On a day-to-day basis, anyone who drives can see gaps in utility coordination and planning for helping people move around the city. This is a structural problem. There are plenty of hard working people in city government, but they're siloed off from one another. DOT has a planning department that competes with the Planning Department. DOT has a capital program for streets that struggles to coordinate with DPW's capital program covering what's under the streets. To make better use of scarce resources we need to review and reform capital planning and project delivery. For years our transportation plan was the Red Line. When I was Assistant Deputy Mayor for Operations I was one of the most vocal advocates for the Red Line in City Hall, routinely debating other members of the mayor's senior staff who were not enthusiastic about the project (because of its construction impacts on Boston Street, the complaints from Harbor East, etc.). In the late 1960s both D.C. and Baltimore unveiled comprehensive transit plans. D.C. built theirs, while Baltimore built only a fraction of ours. We pay the price for his failure of vision every day – and our poorest residents pay the highest price. D.C. built their system, like almost all other cities, with a regional authority. One of the worst things to happen for Baltimore's transit system was for it to become a creature of state government. It often feels like our buses and light rail system have no real champion. (When I moved here over a decade ago, I was stunned by how stunned my lawyer co-workers were that I took the old M15 bus down Gay Street.) The only real answer for transportation in Baltimore is a functional transit system, and for that we need a regional authority, designed to build an updated version of a comprehensive transit plan.

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

In the absence of significant new funds, we should make enhanced investments that have real bang for the buck in terms of relative cost and in terms of livability. I would focus on bus signal priority, bus and bike lane enforcement, and more investment in bike and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure. I also think we should build the 35-mile Greenway Trail Network that would connect neighborhoods across the city.

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

Yes.