



GREATER BALTIMORE COMMITTEE

GBC's 2020 Baltimore City Election Coverage Mayoral Candidate Questionnaire

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (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 are three actions that you would take in your first year to improve public safety?

In November, we announced a comprehensive crime plan that set forth 20 concrete strategies that Baltimore City has never undertaken that we have pledged to pursue to drive down violent crime. Former Councilwoman Rikki Spector wrote about our crime plan in the Baltimore Sun: "It is smart, concrete, detailed and realistic. It is tough and progressive, rejecting policies of mass incarceration and cash bail and rooted in principles of rehabilitation and restorative justice. It is the plan of a person who, as a federal and city prosecutor and deputy attorney general of Maryland, actually fought crime.... The plan is innovative and fearless, willing to do what others have refused." Veteran columnist Frank DeFelippo said that I had "put forth, no doubt, the most comprehensive crime-fighting plan of anyone, including the police department and the Justice Department." Finally, former Baltimore

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

County Police Chief Jim Johnson—whom we would expect to play a leadership role in City Hall on crime—said this: “His plan for public safety will drastically reduce violent crime. I strongly believe that Thiru’s vision for this community will make us all safer.”

Here are three key features of that plan. First, I have pledged to expand Baltimore’s camera network by using aerial surveillance to aid detectives with violent crime investigations and a rebate program to encourage residential and commercial property owners to purchase and register their cloud-based security cameras with BPD. (We advocated for this rebate program back in November before the City Council’s recent engagement on this proposal, though to be sure several individual neighborhoods—like Patterson Park—have already encouraged homeowners to purchase these cameras to improve community safety.)

Second, we will launch 12 simultaneous wiretap investigations targeting gangs and drug organizations in the city’s deadliest neighborhoods, culminating in coordinated arrests of 150-250 violent criminals. We know this strategy works not only because it has been adopted in other cities across the country, but also because it delivered measurable results in Baltimore just a few years ago in communities previously ravaged by murders and shootings such as Cherry Hill and Greenmount East.

Third, we will bring additional resources to bear and deploy them strategically to drive down crime. This means more federal prosecutions of carjackings, commercial robberies, and firearms violations and more violent crime prosecutions by the Maryland Attorney General’s office. It means recruiting 600 more police officers through a college cadet program, focusing on burglaries where forensic evidence is often potent, and going after certain murders in a newly-constituted cold case unit. And it means maintaining an anonymized database of violent repeat juvenile offenders to make sure their cases are being handled appropriately.

For the full plan, please visit ww.thiru2020.com/

- As Mayor, what steps would you take to improve coordination across federal, state, and local criminal justice agencies and with the Judiciary?

As stated above, I have pledged to refer carjackings, commercial robberies (including bank robberies), and illegal firearms cases to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for federal review and prosecution. These are crimes over which there is federal jurisdiction and referring them to the U.S. Attorney’s Office will alleviate the caseload of local police and prosecutors while ensuring these crimes are handled effectively. This will be part of an effort to convene an active working group, similar (but not identical to) the CJCC (the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council). City agencies responsible for housing, economic development, and issues related to juveniles will need to be key to this group.

As I have previously written (most recently in the Daily Record), I continue to believe it is inaccurate to blame judges for the violent crime crisis in Baltimore. Judges can do nothing about the overwhelming majority of cases that are dropped, lost at trial, or end with a plea deal. Moreover, judges have consistently issued stiff sentences in the small number of cases these days where a jury actually convicts the defendant at trial (which are the only cases in which judges have discretion to impose a sentence).

I will, however, work with the Judiciary to create a gun court in Baltimore City, where all crimes involving gun violations (from illegal possession to murders involving firearms) would be administered. This court would help promote consistent treatment of similar cases; enhanced

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

transparency as to how these cases are being handled — by prosecutors and judges; and underscore the importance of prosecuting these cases effectively.

- What are your plans to address “squeegee kids” and panhandlers in City intersections?

Squeegee kids have become, fair or not, a symbol of Baltimore’s current plight. However, they are not one monolithic group. These individuals have unique motivations and needs that prompt their decision to turn to squeegeeing. There are no less than three groups: those who squeegee to provide for themselves and their families and who would leave the corners for a meaningful job with advancement opportunities; those who squeegee or panhandle and are themselves struggling with addiction or mental illness or come from backgrounds impacted by substance abuse; and those who will attempt to continue squeegeeing regardless of attempts to divert them to a better path. Each group requires a customized approach. We will (1) ensure squeegee boys are appropriately connected with pathways to advance their education or gain secure employment with advancement opportunities; (2) identify individuals struggling with addiction, mental illness, and homelessness and connect them with appropriate services; and (3) in cases where individuals continue to turn to squeegeeing despite meaningful options, deputize community liaisons to take the tools of their trade (e.g., squeegees), just as New York City and Toronto once did, to raise the cost of doing business. The right combination of opportunities and disincentives is required to address this issue. But this issue must be addressed before one of the growing number of altercations between squeegee boys and commuters ends in tragedy and detonates the ticking time bomb that this issue currently represents.

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

- What strategies or programs would you put into place to encourage businesses and residents to move to Baltimore City?

There is no better measure of a city’s healthy than whether people are coming or going, and right now people are leaving Baltimore City in droves. This should come as no surprise: we expect families to pay twice as much in taxes for their children to have a higher chance of getting shot on their way to a failing school with no heat or air conditioning.

We will fundamentally alter this calculus by cutting property taxes in half over ten years; by dramatically reducing violent crime across the city; by guaranteeing universal pre-K for every three- and four-year-old child; and by providing debt-free higher education to all graduates of Baltimore City public schools.

- What strategies or programs would you put into place to encourage existing businesses and residents to stay and expand in Baltimore City?

As we have said above, we will reduce property taxes, cut violent crime and improve education to encourage existing residents and businesses to remain. In addition, we will alter the rhetoric around business. Too many city politicians have cast business as the enemy of Baltimore, when in fact they are key to its future. Business leaders will not be asked to foot the bill for squeegee boys; they will not be expected to rely on private security to keep their offices and employees safe; and it will not be assumed that they will send their children somewhere besides Baltimore City public schools for a quality education.

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

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

Yes. I have pledged to cut Baltimore City's property taxes in half in ten years using a plan described by former WYPR President, Tony Brandon, as "visionary and actionable." We will reduce the current property tax by \$0.11 per \$100 of assessed value each year for ten years—until it equalizes with the county rate. We will expect agencies to collectively cut \$40 million in wasteful spending, knowing there is likely hundreds of millions in waste that forensic audits would expose. Moreover, to further compensate for the risk of reduced revenue, we will raise taxes on abandoned property to prompt owners to develop the land or to sell it to someone who will. Finally, we will seize and sell uninhabited property with unpaid taxes or excessive code violations. A ten-year preset scheduled of property tax reductions will prime the market for investment, impose a level of fiscal discipline that Baltimore City has sorely lacked, and will encourage families and businesses to stick around knowing that city leaders are committed to making sense of what is currently an irrational and unsustainable tax rate.

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

Some of these programs and priorities have been mentioned above. First, we will grow the population by reducing property taxes, addressing crime, and improving our schools, which will itself organically expand the city's tax base. Second, we will raise property taxes on abandoned property (as Washington D.C. has done) in order to prompt absentee real estate speculators to develop the property or to sell the land to someone who will. Third, we will revive the program in which a home can be purchased for a nominal price (e.g. \$1) on the condition the purchaser invests at least \$100,000 to refurbish and renovate the home and commits to live there as a primary resident for at least 3+ years.

Given some of the debates unfolding in Baltimore right now, it is important to clarify what I will not do to expand the tax base—I am unwilling to raise taxes on, or renegotiate PILOTs with, our nonprofits and universities. They are anchors of our City of which Baltimore should be proud.

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 into a new decade and chapter?

Baltimore is a \$3 billion failing corporation in need of a turnaround CEO. This requires leadership from the top. It requires a leader with a deep expertise in the City's central challenge—crime—and exposure and comfort with some of the City's other significant challenges, like schools and the economy. As a prosecutor, adjunct law professor, former McKinsey consultant, son of city school teachers and product of public schools myself, I am prepared to engage on the biggest issues facing Baltimore. As a former federal prosecutor, city prosecutor, Deputy Attorney General of Maryland, and now litigation partner at DLA Piper, I have held myself and been held by my colleagues and vocation to the highest standards of ethics, professionalism, and performance. I am also the only candidate who has seen how exceptional institutions are run and managed—from the U.S. Justice Department to DLA Piper to the Harvard Law Review—and at the same time seen and successfully navigated the real challenges that uniquely exist in state and local government. Every other candidate has spent their

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

career in one of those worlds or the other. Exposure and experience in both will be critical, as I have learned, to lead Baltimore out of the present crisis.

- What are three actions that you would take to improve transparency and efficiency in City government?

I have pledged that, as Mayor, I will make three firm commitments to ensure ongoing transparency and efficiency:

- (1) I will launch a citywide forensic audit to be shared with the public within 100 days of taking office, so that the public knows what I know;*
- (2) I will host a monthly public CitiStat open to the press, with three citywide town halls and nine town halls in each police district; and*
- (3) I will have a weekly press conference on the state of crime in Baltimore.*

- 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?

Reforming the structure and composition of the Board of Estimates is not my top priority. What needs to happen immediately, however, is dramatically improving the operational practices of the Board. For example, I have pledged to make the Board of Estimates' agenda transparent and easy to comprehend, instead of the convoluted, inscrutable list of items that is currently shared with the public. I will also end the pay-to-play culture where political donations are routinely accepted with no acknowledgment of conflicts of interest, even though the contributor has significant business before the Board of Estimates and stands to profit if the Board votes in their favor. We will require disclosure of personal and financial conflicts of interest and require recusal in those cases.

- Do you think that the Baltimore City Charter should require a Chief Administrative Officer? Please explain your answer.

The Mayor cannot be responsible for running the routine day to day operations of municipal government. The Mayor's authority is rightly delegated to a number of deputies who are responsible for specific areas in which they have expertise. Whether it is termed a Deputy Mayor, City Manager or Chief Administrative Officer, there is value in having someone responsible for daily operations. But, ultimate responsibility—and certainly ultimate blame—must lie with a single person, that is, the duly-elected Mayor of Baltimore. Strong deputies will be critical but they cannot serve as a scapegoat or defense when the job isn't getting done.

- How would you structure your Administration (ie, CAO, Deputy Mayors, Chief of Staff, etc.) to provide the most efficient delivery of City services?

I would expect the front office of the Mayor to have a Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff, along with several Deputy Mayors: a Deputy Mayor for Public Safety, a Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, and a Deputy Mayor for Operations. These decisions about governance structure will

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

need to be hammered out with the aid of a transition team that will be convened promptly after the primary election.

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 is your plan to meet the increased obligation of Baltimore City? Please be specific in identifying areas or agencies that will see reduced appropriations as well as revenues that may be increased.

We will fully fund Kirwan without raising property taxes, in fact while cutting them in half over 10 years. We are the only campaign that has specifically outlined how we will pay for Kirwan's demands. We have committed to becoming the first city in America to legalize and tax marijuana without federal or state approval, earmarking that money exclusively for educational priorities, universal pre-K being lead among them. We will also explore how to require casinos to contribute to the Kirwan bill, particularly since casinos were sold to the people of Maryland on the premise that they would generate revenue for public schools.

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

Currently, workforce development in Baltimore is woefully deficient. There is little calibration between what skills are developed and the needs of the marketplace. Our efforts are largely reactive instead of proactive, and they take insufficient account of the skills deficits of at-risk populations. As Mayor, I will reinvigorate workforce development in four ways. First, we will expand vocational opportunities starting at the high school level and encourage more students who are interested in immediate employment to pursue these opportunities by partnering with specific employers while in high school. Second, a few months ago, we announced our "Court to Career" initiative. This program, modeled on the District Court Reentry Program, diverts low level offenders to apprenticeships and jobs. Under this model, workforce development is presented both as an opportunity, but also as a condition of probation. The Reentry Project boasts an impressive 5% recidivism rate, yet received no funding from City Hall or the City Council (despite repeated requests). Third, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development requires significantly greater funding so that it can perform three functions: (1) an updated assessment of the workforce needs of Baltimore industry along with a gap analysis to identify specific opportunities; (2) coordinating workforce development efforts in high schools, colleges, non-profits, correctional systems, and industry; (3) forecasting longterm workforce development needs and laying the foundation to prepare for those efforts as well. Finally, as Mayor, I will provide concrete incentives for industries to make workforce development a part of their standard operations, for

CANDIDATE: THIRU VIGNARAJAH (D)

example, giving an advantage to contractors with certified apprenticeship programs when they are working on projects subsidized or financed by the City.

- What role should the City play in attracting and retaining top talent to fill in-demand jobs in high-growth industry sectors?

Baltimore's population decline is a cause and consequence of the crisis we face. Consequently, the Mayor must treat reversing this population decline as a top priority, both in terms of recruiting new residents as well as keeping current ones. Baltimore can compete in the countrywide battle for talent by making the city safer, improving schools, and cutting property taxes. We will also create a culture of collaborative innovation in designated industries such as biotech, cybersecurity, cannabis, and culinary arts, industries that will provide a wide range of low-skill and high-skill jobs and will signal to the country that Baltimore is open for business.

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

- What are three things you would do to improve transportation and mobility in the City?

First, I would expand circulator lines to include major east-west corridors as well as other arteries that connect Downtown Baltimore to the cities outermost corners (e.g., Harford Rd, Pennsylvania Ave, etc.). Second, we will aggressively pursue the high-speed rail between Baltimore and Washington D.C. Third, we will develop and install a comprehensive pedestrian, bike, and scooter plan, which will begin to address the stubborn last-mile problem.

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

Yes. Dramatic investments in transportation infrastructure are critical for Baltimore's longterm health and will create thousands of jobs in the short term. The City that built the first leg of the American railroad should once more be a pioneer when it comes to transit initiatives.

- What is your position on the creation of a regional transit authority to oversee the transit network?

This is likely valuable but ultimate responsibility for developing a vision, obtaining funding, deploying employment opportunities, and prioritizing transit infrastructure projects should remain with City Hall. The Mayor should have no one else to blame if things fail to materialize except himself or herself. But regional coordination and authority will be important to move these projects forward.